

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (8)

The Medieval Church (AD476-1517) – Developments and Dissent

A. Introduction

1. The Medieval Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Rome in AD476 and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

Perhaps the best way of summarising what took place over this thousand-year period is to look at three ways the Middle Ages can be described.

It was a time of deterioration.

It was a time of development.

It was a time of dissent.

2. The Medieval Church was a time of deterioration.

The deterioration we see in this period of church history was really a continuation of a trajectory set by the Imperial Church.

The deterioration we see in this period of church history shows us why the Protestant Reformation was needed.

3. There were four main areas of deterioration:

The Leadership of the Church: With an increase in power, came an increase in abuse and corruption.

The Beliefs of the Church: A number of serious errors became core beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Mission of the Church: The opportunity was missed to take the gospel beyond the borders of Europe and worse, sought to make people Christians by force.

The Worship of the Church: The central position in worship shifted from being the pulpit and the reading and preaching of God's Word to the table and the administration of the mass.

4. But there were also a number of things that happened during the time of the Medieval Church which would prepare the way eventually for reform.

B. Positive Developments

1. Universities Opened.

Originally learning was limited primarily to those training to be parish priests in cathedral schools and in monasteries for the monks own spiritual development.

When Charlemagne became the Holy Roman Emperor, he insisted that every monastery was to have a school to teach all those 'who with God's help are able to learn', and cathedral schools were opened up to all.

With these new learning opportunities came the popular scholars whose skill and enthusiasm attracted students who wanted to hear them teach.

These scholars banded together in guilds and called themselves a universitas.

The first universities met in sheds in Oxford, cathedral cloisters in Paris, and in squares in Italy. In time they would rent rooms.

2. Scholasticism.

Alongside the beginning of universities came a method of teaching known as scholasticism.

Students would listen as two or more scholars debated a text, questioning and examining and arranging the details into a system, until they eventually arrived at a conclusion.

Some of the questions and ideas they debated might seem absurd to us, such as, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? But they actually raised important issues, like in this case, whether angels are purely spiritual or do they possess some form of physicality.

Initially the scholars had two aims: i) To show the reasonableness of the Christian faith; ii) To arrange the teachings of the church into an orderly system.

All this was done under the watchful eye of the church authorities who wanted the conclusions they reached to support the papacy.

This they did by producing two important documents.

The first was canon law. This defined the rights, duties, and powers of all people and priests within the church. It was meant to give direction about how to live as members of the church, but really it was a way for the church to control and exert power over people.

The second was a systematic statement of Christian theology.

Peter Lombard (1096-1164) produced one called, The Four Books of Sentences (Book 1: The Trinity and Providence; Book 2: Creation, Sin, and Grace; Book 3: Incarnation and Salvation; Book 4: Church Life). His teaching included the seven sacraments of the church which must be kept, and was the standard textbook until Thomas Aquinas came along.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) classic work Summa Theologica, gave Christianity a firm intellectual base. Aquinas taught that reason can prove God's existence, but full knowledge of God only comes through revelation. He came up with the concept of God as the 'first mover' or 'prime cause' behind everything else that is in existence. Whilst much of Summa Theologica is helpful, a downside is that it reinforced some of the erroneous beliefs of the Roman Catholic church such as transubstantiation.

3. The Greek New Testament Rediscovered.

No longer was the Latin Vulgate the only version of the Bible available.

With the availability of the Greek New Testament, scholars began to examine the New Testament in the original language it was written in for the first time in centuries.

They discovered discrepancies between what was written originally and what was written in the Latin translation used by the Roman Catholic church.

In 1516 Erasmus produced a new translation of the New Testament both in Greek (by comparing a number of Greek manuscripts) and Latin. Having the Greek and Latin side by side, his purpose was to show the accuracy of his translation.

Of the previous Latin translations Erasmus said: *"But one thing the facts cry out, and it can be clear, as they say, even to a blind man, that often through the translator's clumsiness or inattention the Greek has been wrongly rendered; often the true and genuine reading has been corrupted by ignorant scribes, which we see happen every day, or altered by scribes who are half-taught and half-asleep."*

4. The Rise of Nationalism.

Different parts of Europe began to see themselves as distinct from one another.

Countries formed like France and Germany and England, and they didn't like Italy telling them what to do.

5. The Papacy Discredited.

Between 1378 and 1417 there were two Popes at the same time, one in Rome and one in Avignon, and each excommunicated each other.

This created a dilemma for the different countries in Europe – which side do you choose?

Through this incident, people began to doubt who was in charge of the Roman Catholic Church.

6. The Invention of the Printing Press.

In the mid 1400s, Johannes Gutenberg, invented the printing press.

This would significantly aid the distribution of Bibles and other Christian books and tracts.

C. Positive Dissent

1. As the Middle Ages went on, concerns about the corrupt practices and mistaken beliefs within the church became increasingly common.

Gradually people began to speak out against them.

2. Peter Waldo (1140-1218).

Waldo was a merchant who after selling everything he had and giving the money to the poor, began preaching against the immorality and false teaching of the church, particular transubstantiation and purgatory.

His followers were called the Waldensians, and their beliefs included Scripture alone as the source of authority both in the church and in the life of a believer, and that people should be able to read the Bible in their own language (not just Latin).

3. John Wycliffe (1328-1384).

Wycliffe, an Oxford Professor, challenged with Scripture a whole range of Roman Catholic beliefs and practices such as the mediation of the priest being unnecessary, transubstantiation, the idea of the papacy being a political force, indulgences, worship of images, and the adoration of the saints.

He taught that only Christ was the head of the church, and emphasised that the true church consisted of those who were elect, and expressed the need for a translation of the Bible into English.

After his death, his followers known as Lollards, began to spread his teaching as well as copies of the English Bible throughout the land.

4. Jan Huss (1369-1415).

Wycliffe's teaching reached a student in Bohemia (Czech Republic) called Jan Huss.

Influenced by what Wycliffe taught, Huss from his position as rector of Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, began to preach publicly against abuses and immorality within the church, including the sale of indulgences by then Pope John XXIII to finance a crusade against Naples.

5. Now you can imagine that the Roman Catholic church wasn't too thrilled with these men and their followers speaking out against their beliefs and practices.

The Waldensians were excommunicated by the church and persecuted, with many tried and sentenced to death.

In his lifetime Wycliffe was never excommunicated. But in 1415, the Council of Constance, declared Wycliffe to be a heretic, and in 1428 his corpse was dug up, burned, and the ashes thrown into the River Swift.

Thomas Fuller: *"They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift, a neighboring brook running hard-by. Thus, this brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wicliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed the world over."*

Jan Huss was burnt at the stake after refusing to recant his beliefs.

These men, their followers, and others like them who called for reformation of the church, threatened the unity of the church and the position of the Pope, so the Inquisition was created to convert by deliberate and prolonged torture the heretic (those in the church who denied the teachings of the Catholic church) and execute those who refused to return to the faith.

6. With these positive developments and positive dissents, the stage was set for what took place when a German Monk took a mallet and hammered into the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, his "95 theses".

F. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. We can thank God for the developments that began during the Medieval Church which have continued to benefit the church today:

For men and women who continue to show the reasonableness of the faith.

For scholars and theologians who train gospel workers in Bible Colleges and write books and commentaries that help us to understand God's Word.

For systematic theologies which summarise in an orderly manner what the Bible teaches.

For Bible translators who have and continue to translate the Bible into the language of different countries.

For the printing press (and now the internet) that enables Bibles and Christian books and tracts to reach people all over the world.

2. We can be challenged by the bravery and example of Waldo, Wycliffe, Huss and their followers who were willing to make a stand and speak out against false teaching.

They spoke out primarily against false teaching on the central beliefs people need to believe in order to be saved.

They spoke out against errors that actually affected the people they were ministering to, not issues taking place on the other side of the world (which is what is so often done today).