

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 13

The Renaissance



DaVinci
Self Portrait

The word literally means "new birth."

Dating from 1350-1650 it marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world. It has

become a glorified age today with the most gifted and able today defined as Renaissance men. It is an explosion of knowledge, arts and culture, producing people like Gutenberg, Erasmus, Copernicus, Galileo, Machiavelli, Magellan and the other great explorers, Henry VIII, the Borgias, Michelangelo, Bernini, Raphael and, perhaps the greatest of the age, Leonardo daVinci.

It will help sever the attempted unity between religion and science, even between religion and culture. The age of humanism began here and it rules western civilization to this day.

Changing Times Lead to Changes in Religion

The Power Shift Between Church and State

We briefly discussed in the last lesson the papal move to France in the first half of the 1300's. It came to be referred to as The Babylonian Captivity. This 68-year period under the thumb of the king of France weakened the pope's power. It was followed by The Great Schism (1378-1417). During this time there were two competing popes. Arbitration was unsuccessful. Recalling the role of counsels in earlier times, the college of Cardinals convened in 1409 at Pisa. They deposed the two sitting popes and appointed a third. Neither of the first two would step down. So, for a while, there were three popes. Another counsel convened in 1414 and the matter was solved. But this moved the balance of power within the church from the pope to the college of cardinals and their councils.

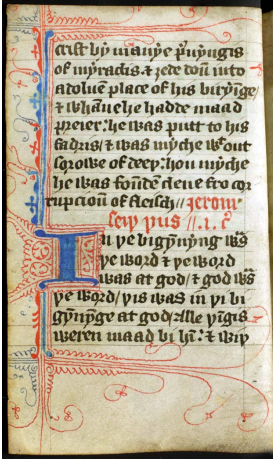
Although the papacy will later reassert itself, it is much weaker than before. The nation-states and their rulers continue to take back control of their lands and money from the church and weaken the church's position.

The Renaissance - From God-centered to Man-centered

The society itself is beginning a period of great change. A return to studies of the great Greek philosophers and writers resulted in a greater secular emphasis on the natural world and man himself. The glory of man and his ideas were emphasized over scripture. The Renaissance emphasized secular views over religious, and individualistic views over corporate (that is, the church). The rise of the universities contributed to this, also.

The Renaissance begins as a movement among the Italian upper class. It will slowly trickle down to lower classes. Its influence is among the rich and powerful. Church leadership is being strongly influenced by cardinals and bishops trained in secular universities. Eventually they rise to become popes who are more interested in the secular. Rome itself becomes a center of Renaissance thought. The church becomes a major patron of the arts. It is during this time that the papacy and college of cardinals degenerates into the worst kinds of immorality, assassinations and accumulations of

John Wycliffe



Genesis 1:1-3; John 1:1-3
from a Wycliffe Bible

Called The Morningstar of the Reformation Wycliffe is the earliest influential voice of the Reformers. Preceding Luther by over a century, his ideas and writings greatly influenced the priest of Wittenburg and all the great Reformers to follow him.

great wealth. It is no wonder that, at this point in church history, yet another movement arises calling for spiritual reform.

The Influence of Early Reformers

The Mystic movement we studied previously had its influence upon many, leading people to seek a more direct and deeper spiritual relationship with God. But there were those who very much wanted to reform the organized church itself. The level of corruption in morals, politics and finance led to men like John Wycliffe, John Hus, and Savonarola rethinking their views on the church and the Bible. Their lives coincide with the beginnings of the Renaissance and their efforts lay the groundwork for the Reformation.

John Wycliffe (1329-1384)

Wycliffe spent most of his life studying and teaching at Oxford University in England. His earliest efforts at reform called for the elimination of immoral clerics, ending church ownership of property (though not its use) giving it to the nobles and the state. Wycliffe had influential supporters that kept the church from touching him. After watching the disgusting failures of the church in the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism, he began to champion more radical changes. By 1379 he was challenging the pope's authority, claiming Jesus as the only head of the church. He championed the authority of the Bible over the authority of the church urging it to return to the New Testament pattern. He would later oppose the doctrine of transubstantiation which would have greatly weakened the power of the priest.

Wycliffe's belief in biblical authority led him to translate the Bible from Latin into the common tongue. He completed the New Testament in 1382. His friend Nicholas Hereford finished an Old Testament translation by 1384. These were handwritten manuscript passed throughout Europe. Over 150 of these manuscripts remain to today testifying to how many must have been made over five centuries ago.

Wycliffe's message was carried throughout England by lay preachers called Lollards. But his views also spread over to the continent through foreign students attending Oxford. The church in Rome as well as England strongly opposed Wycliffe and he was eventually removed from his teaching position at Oxford. He lived out his days nearby condemned by the church but exercising what influence he could.

John Hus (1373-1415)

John Hus was one of the men in Europe who was influenced by the teachings of Wycliffe. He studied at the University of Prague and later taught there. He called for the same reforms as Wycliffe and enjoyed the protection of the emperor. He was called to the Counsel of Constance in 1415 to defend his views. The emperor

Execution of Savonarola



In 1498 Savonarola's claim to perform some miracles was challenged by another friar who challenged to walk across coals. At the appointed day Savonarola stalled for several hours until a heavy rain extinguished the coals. He lost credibility and was later condemned, along with to compatriot friars, hanged and then burned. His ashes were scattered in the Arno river to prevent their preservation by his followers.

had guaranteed safe passage and protection. However, the church forced the emperor to remove this protection by threatening him with excommunication. The result - Hus was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake. But, as with Wycliffe, his ideas and writings would live on and influence reformers to come.

Savonarola (1452-1498)

Savonarola was a Dominican monk who grew up in northern Italy. Assigned to Florence he began to preach reform of the church excesses. But he also preached against the great excesses of the upper classes in Florence a center of banking and the arts. He believed himself a prophet and predicted a Cyrus would come from the north and destroy the city because of its sins. An invasion by the French king was taken to be fulfillment of his prophecy. Savonarola led a delegation who negotiated terms that spared Florence and he was hailed a hero. The terms included the end of the Medici family's iron rule of the city. With his newly gained power he initiated reforms that supported the poor and working class. He called for burning of vain possessions, including gold baubles, cosmetics, mirrors, expensive dresses, playing cards, books and secular art (called the bonfire of the vanities). He appointed young people to patrol the streets pointing out immodesty and other wrongs.

His opposition to and defiance of the pope led to an interdict upon the city, which closed all churches and forbade the distribution of the sacraments. The people turned against him and he was condemned and hanged. Yet his calls for a purer life and cleansing of the church would be his legacy to those of like beliefs who came after him.

However, the efforts of these men, and others like them, made it clear reform of the church could not be accomplished from within. Reform would have to come from those willing to break from Rome and strike out on a new path.

Conclusion

So many parts are coming together to effect great religious upheaval: The many problems in the church - the Great Schism, heavy papal taxation, the extreme moral and spiritual degradation in its hierarchy - were at the forefront. The rise of the power of state governments and their chafing under church rule, the secularizing of society in the Renaissance, the translating of the Bible into the common languages of the people, and the rise of early reformers giving voice to the cries of the poor, downtrodden and spiritually frustrated - all contributed to an upheaval in both church and society. Times are changing. The Reformation is about to begin in earnest and will change the course of western civilization.