

Christianity in the Medieval Ages

I. Summary Overview

- A. Periodization in history is “an artificial mechanism to organize the God-guided order of history into manageable segments” (Earle Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, p. 159). When did the Middle Ages begin? Some date the beginnings of the Middle Ages with the battle of Adrianople in 378, others with the sack of Rome in 410 or the fall of the last Roman emperor in 476, and still others with Pope Gregory I (590).
- B. Medieval Christianity is characterized, in part, by the rise of monasticism and the papacy, conflict with Islam and the lives and works of several noteworthy theologians.

II. Medieval Monasticism

A. Beginnings

- 1. Motives for monasticism
 - a. Reaction to the church-state alliance after Constantine which provided the church with worldly favor, wealth and prestige.
 - b. An expression of the ideal Christian life of humility, self-sacrifice and prayer.
 - c. An escape from the uncertainties of turbulent political and economic times to life in a stable, predictable community.
 - d. A response to Scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 7:8 (“it is good for them to remain single as I am”) and 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (“pray without ceasing”).
 - e. Neoplatonic influences that viewed the Christian life as movement from the material, carnal world to a purer spirituality.
- 2. Early monasticism in Egypt
 - a. “It is impossible to tell who was the first monk – or nun – of the desert.... Monasticism was not an invention of an individual, but rather a mass exodus, a contagion, which seems to have suddenly affected thousands of people” (Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, pp. 138-39).
 - b. Jerome and Athanasius wrote about monks of the desert. Jerome’s life of Paul and Athanasius’s life of Anthony give support and credibility to a solitary, ascetic way of life.
 - c. Pachomius is associated with the organization of communal monasticism.
 - i. Established a clearly defined hierarchy of superiors.
 - ii. Created rules for the economic and devotional ordering of the monastery.
- 3. Martin of Tours (317-397)
 - a. Bishop of Tours who practiced the monastic life.
 - b. “The *Life of Saint Martin*, written by Sulpitius Severus, was one of the most popular books in western Europe for centuries and was one of the most influential elements in the shaping of western monasticism” (Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, p. 147).

B. Religious Orders of the Medieval Period

- 1. Benedictines founded (c. 529) by Benedict of Nursia (Italy).
- 2. Cluny (France) founded (909) by Duke William III of Aquitaine.
- 3. Cistercians (France)
- 4. Dominican Friars founded by Dominic (1170-1221)
- 5. Franciscan Friars founded by Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

C. Rule of Benedict

- 1. Benedict (c. 480-550)
 - a. Educated at Rome where he was repelled by the low moral standards.
 - b. Chose a life of solitary religious devotion and attracted followers.
 - c. About 525 moved to Monte Cassino where he established a monastery and composed his *regula* or Monastic Rule.

2. The Rule
 - a. Stresses the life of prayer, work and service. Prayer was the organizing activity of a monk's day; corporate prayer was practiced eight days a day. There were also periods assigned for private prayer.
 - b. The study and copying of Bibles and other books became an important activity as well as the memorization of the Psalms.
 - c. Calls for strict discipline but avoids harshness and extreme asceticism.
 - d. Supports the more important instructions with theological reasons.
 - e. Demands permanence of monks to the monastery they initially join.
 - f. Insists on instant obedience to the Rule and to the abbot.
3. Influence of Benedict's Rule
 - a. Eventually became the standard for monastic life in the West.
 - b. Promoted prayer, sincere spiritual devotion, and the study of Scripture during times of church corruption and intrigue.
 - c. Served in the reform and renewal of the monastic movement in Cluny.
- D. Evaluating monasticism
 1. What is the value of physical discipline in dealing with sinfulness?
 2. Is withdrawal from the world a superior form of spirituality? What spiritual advantages did monks have over the "ordinary Christian"?
 3. Does the monastic life tend to highlight or obscure the grace of God?
- III. The Rise of the Papacy
 - A. The term *papa* or "pope" was originally used of high church officials of all kinds. However, its stricter use as applied to the bishop of Rome "prevailed at least from the pontificate of Leo the Great (440-61). After the eleventh century, the title *papa* was used exclusively for the bishop of Rome" (Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, p. 111).
 - B. Growth in the authority of the bishop of Rome (See Mark Noll, *Turning Points*, pp. 110-117)
 1. The tradition that Rome was the place both Peter and Paul died as martyrs enhanced the prestige of the bishop of Rome.
 2. Victor (189-98) was influential in setting the date for Easter.
 3. Bishop of Rome recognized as an arbiter in decisions made by local councils (343).
 4. Damascus I (366-384) commissioned Jerome to produce a standard Latin edition of the Bible.
 5. After Constantine moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople, the bishop of Rome assumed political and economic influence and power.
 6. Leo I, whose *Tome* was important to the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon and his role in defending the city of Rome against invading barbarians, enhanced the standing of the bishop of Rome.
 7. Gregory I (590-604) was a reformer, negotiator, biblical commentator, author (*Life of Benedict*) and defender of the city of Rome.
 8. The coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III (800).
 - C. The Great Schism of 1054
 1. Theological (*Filioque* clause) and ecclesiastical (when to celebrate Easter and the iconoclastic controversies) quarrels and disagreements over the centuries contributed to the final break.
 2. The patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, condemned the Western Church for using unleavened bread in the Eucharist. Pope Leo IX sent Cardinal Humbert and two other delegates to resolve the dispute. "The differences of opinion widened as the discussions went on. On July 16, 1054, the Roman legates finally put a decree of excommunication of the patriarch and his followers on the high altar of the cathedral church of Saint Sophia. The patriarch was not to be outdone, and thereupon in synod he anathematized the pope of Rome and his followers....From this time on the Roman

Catholic church and the Greek Orthodox church went their separate ways. This mutual excommunication was not removed until December 7, 1965, by Paul VI and Athenagoras” (Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 198).

- D. The height of papal power
 - 1. Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand) (c. 1023-85)
 - a. Claimed papal supremacy over temporal rulers
 - b. Asserted and upheld the sole authority of the church to elect clergymen against the efforts of lay investiture by Henry IV, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.
 - 2. Innocent III (1161-1216)
 - a. Believed that he was “the vicar of Christ” on earth and that civil authorities were subject to him in all matters; believed that the state was subject to the church.
 - b. Through an interdict on the nation of France, forced King Philip Augustus to send away his third wife and to receive back his second, who he had taken a dislike to and had forced French bishops to annul the marriage.
 - c. Forced John of England to accept his appointment to archbishopric of Canterbury, but only after he placed England under an interdict.
 - d. Secured the election of the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1212.
 - e. Instigated the Fourth Crusade which resulted in the conquest of Constantinople and a Latin kingdom in the east under his control. This kingdom lasted until 1261.
 - f. Called the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 in Rome, which declared transubstantiation a dogma.
 - E. The decline of papal power
 - 1. The pontificate of Boniface VIII (1294-1303) – religious and political struggles with Philip the Fair of France in which Philip was able to exert greater power and authority.
 - 2. The Babylonian Captivity of the papacy (1309-1377) – Clement V transferred the papal court to Avignon, where the papacy was under the influence of the French monarchs.
- IV. Conflict with Islam
- A. Islam spread from Arabia (622) to Syria and Palestine (638), then to Egypt (642) and across North Africa (695) and into Spain (711). In 732 the Moslem armies were defeated by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours.
 - B. Primary motive for the Crusades was religious, the liberation of the Holy Lands from the control of Muslims. “There were numerous crusades throughout the medieval period. *Crusades* most commonly refers to several huge military expeditions from Western European nations between 1095-1291 whose purpose was to open the biblical lands to Western pilgrims. The earliest and best-known efforts to reach Palestine came by way of Constantinople. The Crusades succeeded in temporarily securing a Latin kingdom, but eventually the Muslim sultan Saladin defeated their armies” (John Hannah, *Charts of Ancient and Medieval Church History*, chart 118).
 - C. Eight crusades over about 200 years.
 - D. Consequences of the Crusades
 - 1. Increased mistrust and ill-will between Christians and Moslems.
 - 2. Weakened feudalism in Europe. What is feudalism? Earle Cairns defines it as “a system of political organization based on possession of land for which one gave military and other services to the lord who granted possession of the land. The local lord gave good government in the immediate area where he owned land. Until nation-states could emerge in England, France, and Spain in the late Middle Ages, this was the only way in which justice and order could be maintained during the period of weak centralized authority after the decline of the Roman Empire, the failure of the Merovingian kingdom, and the breakup of Charlemagne’s Empire” (*Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 186).
 - 3. Increased wealth in Italian cities through trade with Near East.
 - 4. Strengthened papal power since it was the popes who called for the crusades.

5. Promoted the veneration of relics.
 6. Occasion for the founding of military orders like the order of Saint John of Jerusalem and the Templars.
- V. Theologians of the Medieval Church
- A. Scholasticism
1. What is scholasticism? “A theological method that developed in the medieval schools...beginning in the twelfth century, but reaching its apex in the thirteenth and fourteenth....As most earlier theology, Scholasticism based its work on the authority of written texts, to which it then applied reason – particularly, Aristotelian logic....Thus the method developed of posing a question, giving a series of arguments and quotations leading to one answer, and another series in the opposite direction, then offering a solution, and finally responding to the objections raised by the arguments that would seem to prove the opposite of the solution” (Justo Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms*, pp. 156-57). Earle Cairnes writes: “Scholasticism may be defined as the attempt to rationalize theology in order to buttress faith with reason. Theology was to be treated from a philosophical point of view rather than from a biblical point of view. The data of revelation were to be organized systematically by the use of Aristotelian deductive logic and were to be harmonized with the newly discovered philosophy of Aristotle” (*Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 226).
 2. Why scholasticism? The introduction of the works and philosophy of Aristotle and the interest in the use of philosophy in the study of theology.
 3. What was the aim of scholasticism? “...the Scholastics were not so much seeking truth as they were trying rationally to organize a body of accepted truth so that truth, whether it came by faith from revelation or by reason from philosophy, might be a harmonious whole....For the Scholastics the data or content of their study was fixed, authoritative, and absolute. The content of their study was the Bible, the canons and creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the writings of the fathers of the church. The question that they wished to settle involved whether or not the faith was reasonable” (Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 228).
- B. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) – “faith seeking understanding”
1. Born in northern Italy. At twenty-seven became a monk in the Abbey of Le Bec in Normandy.
 2. Served as prior (superior ranking next to the abbot of a monastery) and then abbot at Le Bec. Became archbishop of Canterbury in 1093.
 3. Wrote *Why God Became Man* (*Cur Deus Homo*). J. Van Engen summarized the argument of Anselm’s most influential theological work: “Setting aside all knowledge of Jesus Christ, Anselm attempted to produce necessary reasons for the coming of a God-man and his atoning sacrifice. The injury dealt to God’s honor by man’s fall into sin required man himself to render satisfaction to an upright God; yet only God himself could adequately make amends. Hence the God-man whose innocent sacrifice potentially made satisfaction for all men. Anselm may have aimed his argument partly at Jews, for their criticism of an incarnate God had become very vocal in his day. But its greatest impact was upon Christians. His ‘satisfaction’ theory of the atonement effectively refuted early medieval notions of the devil’s ‘rights’ over fallen mankind and also displaced earlier Eastern emphases upon Christ as victor” (“Anselm of Canterbury,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 53). G. Bromiley criticizes Anselm for his decision not to expound the biblical teaching directly and for the sometimes weakness in his logic and argumentation. Positively, he writes: “Anselm sees and states clearly the interrelation of incarnation and atonement. He also sees and states the relation of both to creation. The objective work of God in reconciliation receives convincing exposition....If it is objected that Anselm does not really work out his argument in a vacuum, this misses the point that he is not trying to

construct his own autonomous view of man's nature and destiny but rather to show the rationality of the Christian message to which he adheres by faith. This he does with no little cogency and clarity" (*Historical Theology: An Introduction*, p. 180). See also Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, p. 173 for an evaluation of Anselm's doctrine of satisfaction.

C. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74)

1. Born in Naples and raised in an aristocratic family.
2. Educated in the abbey of Monte Cassino and the University of Naples.
3. Became a Dominican (1244) and studied under Albert the Great.
4. Sought to integrate the natural philosophy of Aristotle with the revelation of the Bible.
Wrote *Summa Theologiae*.
 - a. Consists of three thousand articles and over six hundred questions in major sections and "intended to be a systematic exposition of the whole of theology" (Cairns: 232).
 - b. Organized under three parts: the existence/nature of God, the nature of man, and Christ as our way to God.
 - c. Faith and reason: All truth is from God and so is one. No conflict between faith and reason. Revelation makes truths known that cannot be known by reason, but which reason can grasp. Wrong to use reason as basis for faith, but it is right to understand what one has believed.

Forerunners of the Reformation

- I. Growing dissatisfaction with the Roman church
 - A. Loss of respect for the clergy.
 1. Immoral practices because of insistence on celibacy.
 2. Corrupting influences of wealth.
 - B. The loss of respect for the papacy.
 1. The Babylonian Captivity (1309-77)
 - a. Pope Clement V, a Frenchman who was chosen by the cardinals in 1305, moved to Avignon, a town on the border of French territory, in 1309. E. Cairns states, *"In the eyes of the people of Europe this put the pope under French control even though Avignon was not technically French territory. Except for a brief period between 1367 and 1370, the papal residence was maintained at Avignon until 1377 and was dominated by strong French kings"* (Christianity Through the Centuries, p. 241).
 - b. Catherine of Siena (1347-80) urged Pope Gregory XI (1329-78) to return the papacy to Rome, which he did in 1377.
 - c. A total of seven popes maintained the papal residency at Avignon during this period.
 2. The Great Schism (1378-1417)
 - a. Urban VI elected pope, but soon fell into disfavor with the cardinals who elected him.
 - b. Then, the same body of cardinals elected Clement VII in 1378 to replace Urban VI. Clement moved the papal residency to Avignon while Urban VI remained in Rome.
 - c. Both Urban VI and Clement VII claimed to be the legitimate pope and Europe divided over who to follow: Clement VII (Avignon) supported by France, Spain, Scotland and southern Italy; Urban VI (Rome) supported by Northern Italy, Germany, England and Scandinavia.
 - d. At one time, three popes claimed to be the rightful leader of the Roman church (1409).
 - i. Council of Pisa called to end the Avignon-Rome schism.
 - ii. The council deposed both existing popes and elected Alexander V.
 - iii. The popes at Avignon (Benedict XIII) and Rome (Gregory XII) refused to recognize the council's decision.
 - iv. Situation not resolved until the Council of Constance (1414-18) forced the resignation of all claimants to the papacy and elected Martin V.
 3. Papal taxes
 - a. *"The now-powerful rulers of national states and the strong middle class that supported them resented the drain of wealth from the national treasury to the papal treasure. This was especially true of the rulers of England and France. During the long period of the Captivity in the fourteenth century, the English hated to pay money that they thought would only go to England's enemy France because the pope's residence was in territory dominated by the French king"* (E. Cairnes, Christianity Through the Centuries, p. 241).
- II. Efforts to Reform the Church
 - A. The Conciliar Movement (1409-49)
 1. Impetus for reforming councils was the Great Schism of 1378 and the precedent of the ecumenical councils from 325 to 451.
 2. Premise: A universal church council has more authority than the pope.
 3. Councils
 - a. Council of Pisa (1409)
 - i. Deposed both Benedict XIII (Avignon) and Gregory XII (Rome) and appointed Alexander V. Benedict and Gregory refused to recognize the council's decisions resulting in three popes.

- ii. In less than a year Alexander died and the council elected John XXIII, but he was unable to end the schism.
 - b. Council of Constance (1414-18)
 - i. Called by Emperor Sigismund of Germany. The three rival popes resigned and Martin V was elected as pope.
 - ii. Condemned the teachings of John Wycliffe and burned John Hus at the stake.
 - iii. Called for future councils to deal with problems.
 - c. Council of Pavia (1423)
 - i. Called by Martin V. Moved to Siena because of the plague.
 - ii. Accomplished little.
 - d. Councils of Basel and Ferrara (Florence) (1431-49)
 - i. Martin V called for the council but died shortly after the council gathered.
 - ii. Eugene IV elected pope. Attempted to dissolve the council but the council refused to adjourn. Emperor Sigismund intervened and Eugene his decree to dissolve the council.
 - iii. Constantinople asked for help against the Turks and declared a willingness to rejoin the Western church if the council would move closer.
 - iv. Eugene attempted to move the council to Ferrara. Most of the council refused, but some did assemble at Ferrara so that now there was two rival councils. Because of the plague, the Ferrara council moved to Florence in 1439.
 - v. Council at Basil grew weaker as members left. Declared Felix V as pope. Council dissolved in 1449 and Felix gave up his claim to the papacy.
 - vi. In 1460 Pius II condemned any appeals to future councils.
- B. Mysticism
1. Strong in Germany and the Low Countries
 2. Characteristics
 - a. A personal approach to God
 - b. Seeking union and immediate apprehension of God through contemplation and visions.
 - c. Renunciation of the world and its corrupting influences.
 - d. Personal devotion to Christ.
 3. Dangers
 - a. Authority of experience over the Bible.
 - b. Minimization of doctrine.
 - c. Pantheistic view of God
 4. Causes
 - a. Reaction against the rationalistic tendencies of Scholasticism.
 - b. Reaction against a corrupt church.
 5. Latin mystics
 - a. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) – Stresses the contemplation of the humanity of Jesus as in “Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee”
 - b. Catherine of Siena (1347-80) – Campaigned to have the papacy returned to Rome from residence in Avignon. Claimed to have mystical visions but had “learned enough theology to avoid the errors of other mystics who had been condemned by the church” (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, p. 335). Made a saint of the Roman Church and a “doctor of the church” in 1970 by Paul VI.
 6. German mystics
 - a. Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) – Dominican who “taught that the aim of the Christian should be the union of the spirit with God” (E. Cairnes, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 243).
 - b. John Tauler (1300-61) – Follower of Eckhart and associated with the Friends of God.

7. Dutch mystics

- a. John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) – Influenced by the writings of Eckhart.
- b. Gerald Groote (1340-84) – A leader of the Brethren of the Common Life, an order of laymen who devoted themselves practical service and teaching.
- c. Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) – Member of the Brethren of the Common Life and author of the *Imitation of Christ*.

C. Reformers

1. John Wycliffe – “Morning Star of the Reformation” (1329-1384)

- a. Born in the village of Ipreswell; lived during the Avignon papacy; little known of his early years.
- b. Studied and then spent most of his career teaching at Oxford; received Doctor of Theology in 1372.
- c. Served on a commission of the English government to settle disputes between the king and Pope Gregory XI.
- d. Wrote *Of Civil Dominion* (1376) in which he argued that ecclesiastical property was given to the church as a trust from God. If church leaders abuse their role then the civil authorities have the right to take the property and give it to another who would serve God rightly.
- e. Attacked the authority of the pope by insisting that Christ is the head of the church and that the Bible was the sole authority for the believer. Argued with Augustine that the true church is not the church hierarchy, but rather “the invisible body of those who are predestined to salvation” (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, p. 347).
- f. Spoke out against monasticism, the sale of indulgences, baptismal regeneration and transubstantiation. Argued that Christ was spiritually present in the elements.
- g. Completed the first translation of the New Testament from Vulgate into English in 1382. OT completed by Nicholas of Hereford in 1384.
- h. Declared a heretic by many at Oxford and was imprisoned for a short time. Retired to his parish in 1381 and died in 1384. “*Since he died in the communion of the church, he was buried in consecrated ground. But the council of Constance later condemned him, and his remains were disinterred and burned. His ashes were then thrown into the river Swift*” (Justo Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, p. 348).
- i. The Lollards, lay preachers who were Wycliffe’s disciples, spread his teachings throughout England.
- j. The Roman church forced Parliament to pass a statue making the death penalty the punishment for preaching Lollard ideas.
- k. Wycliffe’s ideas were taken by Bohemian students studying in England to Bohemia, where they influenced John Hus.

2. John (Jan) Hus (1373-1415)

- a. Born in Bohemia; ordained as a priest in 1401; became rector of the University of Prague in 1402. Also, preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel.
- b. Debated the writings of Wycliffe with German faculty at the University of Prague.
- c. Denounced the immoral and luxurious lifestyles of many priests; claimed that Christ alone is the head of the church and only God (not priests) can forgive sins; that no one could declare as doctrine a teaching that is contrary to Scripture, and that only the Bible was to be obeyed.
- d. Archbishop of Prague obtained a papal decree “ordering that preaching should take place only in cathedrals, parish churches, and monasteries. Since the chapel of Bethlehem did not fall in any of these categories, the papal decree practically amounted to silencing Huss” (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, p. 349). Nevertheless, Hus continued preaching.

- e. 1410 summoned to Rome to answer for disobedience and he refused to go; 1411 Hus was excommunicated.
- f. Huss preached against the sale of indulgences used to finance the pope's (John Paul XXIII) military expedition against the king of Naples. The pope excommunicated Hus again and placed Prague under an interdict. Hus left Prague to preach in neighboring churches and in the open air.
- g. In 1415 Huss was summoned to the Council of Constance to defend his teachings; promised safe conduct by Emperor Sigismund but when he arrived he was arrested and confined in a cell. The council condemned the teaching of Wycliffe. Hus was also condemned for supporting those teachings.
- h. Hus was burned at the stake as a heretic on July 6, 1415. Bohemians vigorously supported Huss, and from about 1420 to 1431 resisted five attempts of military suppress by the Catholic Church and Emperor Sigismund.
- i. In 1999 Pope John Paul II apologized to the Czech people for the death of John Hus.

III. Cultural Changes

A. The Renaissance and Humanism

- 1. Rediscovery of classical literature and artistic expression in Italy during the fourteenth century that eventually spread to the rest of Europe.
- 2. "In a broader sense the Renaissance may be defined as that era of cultural reorientation in which people substituted a modern secular and individualistic view of life for the medieval religious and corporate approach to life" (E. Cairnes, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 253).
- 3. Interest in history, arts, literature, architecture and other human achievements; a focus on life in this world and on the individual.

B. The Biblical Humanists – Promoted the study of the Bible in Greek and Hebrew and the historical-grammatical method of interpretation.

- 1. John Reuchlin (1455-1522) – studied in Italy and produced a Hebrew grammar and dictionary.
- 2. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) – published a Greek NT in 1516.

C. Rise of Nation-States

- 1. Growth of a middle-class that wanted a share in political life.
- 2. Weakened the power of the papacy as England and France asserted itself over and against popes.

