

Reformation Church History

Session 2—Forerunners, Indulgence Controversy and Luther

- I. **John Wycliffe** (1329-1384)—has been called the *Morningstar of the Reformation*.
 - A. Entered Oxford 1345, by 1370 was its leading philosopher and theologian.
 - B. His life roughly parallels the *Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy* (1309-1377) and the *Hundred Years War* (1338-1453).
 - C. Wrote several volumes on civil and ecclesiastical authority; said popes are not necessary for the administration of the church and that worldly popes should be deposed. Politically, with the papacy in Avignon and England at war with France, Wycliffe enjoyed the protection of John of Gaunt (Duke of Lancaster) despite his radical views.
 - D. He oversaw the translation the Vulgate Bible into English and in so doing foreshadowed such Reformation principles that the Bible is should be available in the vernacular and ought to be the final court of appeals for authority, not church, pope or council. Wrote *The Truth of Holy Scripture*. In it he says:
 1. Scripture is free from error or contradiction, containing the whole of God’s revelation, therefore sufficient.
 2. Church tradition, pope and other sources are not necessary for salvation, since Scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation. All other authority must be tested by Scripture as the ultimate norm.
 3. The Bible should be made available to all, laity as well as clergy.¹

¹ A.N.S. Lane, *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, Ed. Woodbridge, Moody Press, Chicago, 1988, p. 176.
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- E. In three major areas of the medieval church Wycliffe found no biblical or spiritual justification: indulgences, transubstantiation², papal authority.
- F. Wycliffe died in 1384. His teaching was condemned at the Council of Constance in 1415 and in 1428, his were exhumed and burned.

II. John Hus (1372-1415)

- A. Bohemian (present day Czech Republic) reformer.
- B. Ordained priest in 1400, then became dean of the University of Prague.
- C. The marriage of Anne, sister of King Wenceslaus, to Richard III of England, promoted contact between Bohemia and England.
- D. Hus confessed himself to be a disciple of Wycliffe, translated some of his works. Preached powerfully against clerical abuses. Said that Christ, not Peter is the foundation of the Church; that some popes had been heretics; attacked indulgences
- E. Hus was excommunicated and Prague placed under the interdict by John XXII.
- F. King Sigismund of Bohemia summoned Hus to the Council of Constance to be tried, promising him safe conduct. But he was betrayed, imprisoned, tried and burned, 1415. Charged with propagating the heresy of Wycliffe.³
- G. Faced martyrdom with great fortitude, became a national hero.

² Transubstantiation, the miracle of the incarnation in the mass: strengthened the papacy. Why? Because the pope headed the hierarchy of clergy who alone could perform this miracle. The doctrine was not officially accepted till Lateran IV (1215). Acceptance of Aristotelian metaphysics was necessary for a clearer understanding of it. The doctrine was reaffirmed at the Council of Trent (1545). The sacrifice of the mass effectively undermines the doctrine of justification through faith alone because Christ must be continually sacrificed, indicating that his work of redemption was never finished.

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VI, p. 371.
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III. Savonarola (1452-1498), moral reformer

- A. Started out studying medicine at Bologna, then became a Dominican. Opposed worldliness in the church.
- B. In Florence in 1491, attained great influence, preaching in the manner of an OT prophet, calling for repentance.
- C. Three years later Florence was attacked by the French. During the attack, Savonarola continued preaching and unexpectedly the French King and armies left. Savonarola was credited with the victory.
- D. As he preached righteousness there was a dramatic and observable change in the city. The annual carnival (like Mardi Gras) in Florence was called off in 1496 and again in 1497.
- E. Pope Alexander became enraged when Savonarola would not appear before him.
- F. He was excommunicated and Florence was threatened with the interdict. Savonarola appealed to the kings in England, France, Spain to call a council to examine the pope, but to no avail.
- G. As rival powers ascended in Florence he was tried, hung and burnt as a heretic.

IV. The Indulgence Controversy⁴

- A. An indulgence is “The remission by the Church of the temporal penalty due to forgiven sin, in virtue of the merits of Christ and the saints.”⁵

⁴ To understand Luther’s 95 Theses, we must first grasp the concept of **indulgences**, which in turn requires some knowledge of the **RC sacrament of penance**, as well as **purgatory**, the place where one expiates venial sins and is purged from temporal sin. Implied here is that every sin deserves two kinds of punishment: eternal punishment (which is satisfied by Christ) and temporal punishment.

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Ed. F.L. Cross, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 700.
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- B. "In the early Church, esp. from the 3rd C, the intercession of confessors and those awaiting martyrdom was allowed by the ecclesiastical authorities to shorten the canonical discipline of those under penance; and when canonical penance came to be considered a substitute for temporal punishment in purgatory, the transition was easy to the belief that the prayers and merits of the saints availed to shorten such punishment itself, even for sins which did not require canonical penance."⁶
- C. "In the Roman Catholic Church, [indulgence] refers to the remission of all or part of the debt of temporal punishment owed to God due to sin after the guilt has been forgiven. This grant is based on the principle of vicarious satisfaction, which means that since the sinner is unable to do sufficient penance to expiate [atone, satisfy, make reparation for] all his sin, he is able to draw on the spiritual treasury formed by the surplus merits of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints."⁷
- D. This controversy had its roots in the monetary corruption that characterized the RC Church of the late Middle Ages. According to Roland Bainton, the corruption of the practice went back to the time of the Crusades. If one participated in a crusade, the bishop could grant an indulgence, releasing the person from temporal punishment. Eventually, the authority to grant was reserved to the pope. The practice was gradually extended to those who did not go to fight in a crusade, but paid another to go in his place. Then, further extended to those who supported charities, including the construction of cathedrals, bridges, etc.
- E. By the time of Luther, indulgences were being used for release from purgatory, for the forgiveness of the guilt of sin and for raising revenue. "Strictly speaking, they were not sold, but given,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robert G. Clouse, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Ed. Douglas, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1978, p. 508.

yet the giving was precisely timed to coincide with contributions graded on the ability to pay.”⁸

- F. **Purgatory:** “According to RC doctrine, it is the place or the state of temporal punishment where those who have died in grace expiate their unforgiven venial sins and undergo such punishment as is still due to forgiven sin, before being admitted to the Beatific Vision.... At the 4th Lateran Council (1215) the doctrine of Purgatory received approval. Official teaching on Purgatory was further defined at the Councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439)....”⁹
- G. The **Treasury of Merits:** This idea implies salvation by works, in that the saints are regarded as having more merit than they themselves need for salvation. Combined with the merits of Christ and Mary (BVM), the *Thesaurus Meritorum Sanctorum* had such abundance that it could never be exhausted. From this treasury the pope could draw and make transfers to those whose accounts were deficient.¹⁰ Pope Clement VII declared that the treasury exists (1343). Pope Sixtus IV officially declared indulgences could be extended to those already dead and in purgatory (1476).
- H. Roman Catholic **sacrament of penance:** this is the heart of medieval Catholicism. Penance is the second plank of salvation for those who have made shipwreck, which is the loss of grace. The sacrament of baptism provides grace but may be lost due to subsequent sin. Penance provides a way back. It involves:
1. *Contrition*—sorrow for sin
 2. *Confession*—to a priest
 3. *Satisfaction*—priest assigns certain acts to be performed

⁸ Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the 16th Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1952, p. 13.

⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, op. cit., p. 1144-1145.

¹⁰ Luther later commented that if the pope had such powers, why did he not exercise it and release everyone from Purgatory.

4. *Absolution*—granted by the priest upon performance of acts assigned. For sins not fully satisfied, time must be served in purgatory.
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- I. “Indulgences were an important issue for Luther because they touched on the heart of Christian faith, namely, the forgiveness of sins. The medieval church taught that sins were ordinarily forgiven through the use of the sacrament of penance. Sins could be forgiven immediately by God through a perfect act of contrition, but who could be sure that he or she had achieved a perfect sorrow and regret for sin? The sacrament of penance required three acts on the part of the Christian. First, he must make an act of contrition. There must be genuine—even if not perfect—sorrow for sin. Second, he must confess his sin orally to a priest. Third, he must perform some satisfaction or work to show his sorrow and indicated some payment for sin.” (Nichols)
 - J. The 95 Theses – October 31, 1517
 1. In posting these, Luther was doing nothing out of the ordinary. It was an academic exercise. They were written in Latin.
 2. They were copied, translated into German and distributed widely.
 3. Luther was not even challenging the concept of indulgences, just their abuse. They contain nothing about justification.
 4. The 95 Theses do not deny the pope’s power, but acknowledge his authority. There is no rejection of the sacrament of penance. There is no rejection of indulgences.