PRE-REFORMATION YEARS

The Church of Rome dominated Western Europe until the 16th Century for 1000 years. This period was known as the Middle Ages or Dark Ages in secular history texts. The Europeans lived in spiritual, moral, and scientific darkness during this Millennium.

HOW THE WEST SHAPED THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

By the fifteenth century, the worldliness and corruption in the church including ecclesiastical taxation, absenteeism, simony, and the sale of indulgences reached its peak. Mass was conducted with irreverence and haste, in order that the celebrant might hurry off to the banqueting-table. The problem of corruption reached all the way to the papacy. Most of the popes during this time ended their careers by being placed in prison, assassinated, or at the least being deposed for one reason or another. Often the Papacy was purchased openly, being bought and sold for monetary endowments. Pope John XXIII was so openly debauched that the Council of Constance charged
him with piracy, murder, rape, sodomy and incest. The Pope’s assumed increasingly blasphemous powers and were spoken of by such titles as “Our Lord God the pope,” and it is said that, at least on one occasion, ambassadors were instructed to exclaim as they prostrated themselves in his presence “Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world.” The Vatican became incredible wealthy and in the last half of the fifteenth century it spent it upon amassing art treasures of all kinds, which can still be seen in the Vatican museums today.

The cumulative effects of these things left the Roman Church weakened by inward strife, and corruption was rife within it. With such degeneration, people began to question whether something was fundamentally wrong with the system and its claims. Rival popes claimed legitimacy until the situation was finally resolved in 1417.

The Crusades also raised questions by bringing new influence from the Muslim world and from ancient Greek philosophy preserved by the Arabs. This consequence was a loss of confidence in the church. Many such as Dante Alighieri, Marsiglio of Padua, and William of Occam now openly questioned the absolute authority claimed for the pope. The fourteenth century also saw the sudden plague of the Black Death (especially 1348-1349), when in two short years about a third of the population of Europe was dead. This led to people questioning the power of the papacy. The secularization and corruption within the Church did not go wholly unchallenged throughout this period.

**Mystics & Monks**

Mystics and monks sprang up as reactionary movements to try and reform the church. Famous mystics in the late Middle Ages, included Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), Gerhard Groote (1340-84), Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471), and the Brethren of Common Life. They argued that a person should focus inwardly for sensory experiences of religion and not so much on the outward forms of ritual. They believe you could “feel God” by experiencing Him inwardly through meditation and prayer. Hence, the name “mystics.”
Others concluded that the only way to escape such corruption was to adopt a monastic lifestyle often encompassing a life of asceticism, including both fasting and celibacy. Anthony (ca. 251-ca. 356) is usually regarded as the first monk of the desert. Some even went to extremes such as Simon Stylites (ca. 390-459), who lived atop a 60-foot pillar for over 35 years. The person who set the standard for monasticism in the West was Benedict of Nursia, whose Rule called for monastics to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Among the many monastic orders, the rule of St. Benedict (A.D. 529) became the most prominent. Indeed, Rome has over fifty organizations of men, some of which have been in existence for over one thousand years such as the Augustinians, the Benedictines, the Capuchins, the Dominicans, and so on. Luther was an Augustinian monk prior to the Reformation.

REMNANT GROUPS

There were also a number of remnant groups such as the Paulicians (Armenia), Bogomils (western Balkans), Albigenses (Southern France), Waldenses (Italy/France) etc. who tried to establish a return to New Testament Christianity.

In Ireland St Patrick established an evangelical church in the 5th century that was independent of Rome for centuries. The Waldensians were a particularly effective witness of
Evangelical Christianity. They translated the Bible into their own language and sought to worship God in the primitive simplicity of the early church.

**JOHN WYCLIFFE & JOHN HUSS**

It was not until the rise of the Pre-Reformers such as John Wycliffe (c.1330-1384) at Oxford University and also Jan Hus (1369-1415) at the University of Prague that the cracks of the Papal dominance began to shake. It was Wycliffe who, while lecturing on the Bible to his students at Oxford, began to see that the church had obscured the saving message of the Gospel. Most of his life was spent teaching at Oxford, and studying God’s Word in Oxford’s extensive library. Wycliffe was a brilliant scholar who mastered the late medieval scholastic tradition. It was while lecturing on the Bible to his students at Oxford that Wycliffe met the Saviour. It is said that, “in teaching the Scriptures to others, he learned the true meaning of them himself.”

Wycliffe began a translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English and sent out his Lollard preachers into the highways and byways of the land. He questioned Papal Infallibility, the Mass, and the authority of the Pope asserting that Christ is the only head of the Church (during
much of Wycliffe’s life there were times when more than one man claimed to be pope - one in Avignon in France and one in Rome). In 1376 Wycliffe wrote On Civil Dominion, in which he said, “England belongs to no pope. The pope is but a man, subject to sin; but Christ is the Lord of lords, and this kingdom is held directly and solely of Christ alone.”

In reaction to Wycliffe’s defiance of the Roman Church and the Pope’s authority, a Papal bull was issued against Oxford to impede him from teaching. By 1362, two years before his death, Wycliffe had presided over the production of the first English translation of the Scriptures, and had seen the light of the Gospel begin to dispel much spiritual darkness in his homeland. From England, Lollardism spread into Scotland during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. The English Lollards flourished most in the ten years after Wycliffe’s death.

John Huss, born about 1373, and Jerome (1363-1416), both of Bohemia, carried on the torch of truth from Wycliffe. Hus was influenced by the Waldensians and Wycliffe’s writings. He wrote and preached against papal indulgences, clerical abuses of power, immorality of high living within the Catholic clergy, and the veneration of the Pope. The Catholic Church at the Council of Constance (1414–1418) condemned Jan Hus, who was executed by burning (after he had come under a promise of safe-conduct). At his execution, Huss kneeled and prayed, using especially the fifty-first and thirty-first Psalms, and repeatedly saying, “Into Thy hands, Lord, I commit my spirit.”

Rome also posthumously burned Wycliffe’s books at Prague in 1410, and later his bones at Lutterworth in 1428. The followers of Hus, known as the Bohemian Brethren, joined the
Protestant Reformation when it came. They distinguished by their missionary zeal and labours. Around 1470, they published in the Bohemian language a translation of the Bible. Later in the eighteenth century many joined with a Pietistic Lutheran group to form the Moravians.

**CHANGES IN EUROPEAN SOCIETY**

The 16th century in Europe was a great century of change on many fronts. The Gutenberg Printing Press (1454) enabled Europeans to access literature. It enabled opposition to the church to mass produce literature and Bible translations.
The rise of national monarchies and subsequent rise of nationalism in the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries came at the expense of the power of the papacy. Certain nation-states began to rise up against the Church and oppose its sovereign power.

In 1493 the Rhenish provinces German peasants, angered by the heavy taxation imposed upon them by their ecclesiastical sovereigns, formed among themselves what has been called the “League of the Shoes” swearing to pay no more taxes in future no taxes and to limit the power of the priests. The crushing of the Byzantine Empire by the Muslim Turks, who captured Constantinople in 1453, made Europeans feel uncertain and vulnerable to encroaching Islam.

RENAISSANCE

The word Renaissance comes from two Latin words meaning “to be born again.” It began by a recovery in revisiting Classical Greek thinking through their writings and the regaining of epistemology. God, in His Providence, allowed the Renaissance to take effect in Europe. 1280 to 1520 is thought of as the general period of the Renaissance. Italy was the cradle of this movement, being the center of the world in the Middle Ages. The basic vehicle of the Renaissance was the arts and to a lesser degree, science. The Renaissance was basically a cultural renewal. The humanists thought classical learning and moralism was the panacea for the corruption in the Church.
Renaissance men, such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci revived the artistic styles and metaphysical values of classical antiquity. Others looked to the Holy Roman emperors or powerful Christian kings to reform the church. Renaissance scholars now believed that Western Civilization had progressed beyond the darkness of the Middle Ages, having found its inspiration and closest parallel in the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. By the mid 1400s men began to question:

(1) The Vulgate

(2) Doctrine of the RCC

(3) Writings of the Church Fathers

Also, from the emergence of the Renaissance came the rise of the Humanist scholars such as John Colet (1467-1519), Erasmus (1469 - 1536), and the grandfather of Phillip Melanchthon, Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) who sought to return to the primary sources of antiquity including the Bible. Providentially, the revival of the study of the classics was quickened by the exodus of large numbers of Greek scholars, with their manuscripts of the old Greek and Hebrew authors, from Constantinople to Italy and Germany, France and England. This was as a result of the capturing of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. At the close of the fifteenth century new courses in the Latin classics, in Greek and in Hebrew, began to supplement the medieval curriculum of logic and philosophy. In 1516, it was Erasmus who published the first Greek New Testament published side-by-side with a Latin New Testament. Prior to the Renaissance, Greek had not been widely taught in the universities of Western Europe.

This would now enable scholars who spoke Latin, like Luther, to translate the New Testament from the original Greek into various European languages. Romanist enemies have sometimes asserted that “Erasmus laid the eggs and Luther hatched the chickens” and that “Erasmus is the father of Luther.” Martin Luther soon learned from Erasmus’ Greek text that the Latin Vulgate’s rendering “do penance” in Matthew 4:17 should more accurately read, “Repent.” Erasmus dedicated his New Testament translation to Pope Leo XI, who ironically commended him for it. Little did the Roman pontiff appreciate that this work would prove key in making the
Bible accessible to the common people. As well as Luther’s German Bible and Tyndale’s English Version, from Erasmus’ Greek Text also came many other translations, such as the Zurich (Swiss) Version (1529), LeFevre's (French) Bible (1534), the Olivetan (French) Bible (1535), Laurentius (Swedish) Bible (1541), the Christian (Danish) Bible (1550), Biestken’s (Dutch) Bible (1558), de Reyna’s (Spanish) Bible (1569), the Czech Version (1602) and Diodati's (Italian) Bible (1607).
APPENDIX ONE

PROTESTANT REFORMATION MAP

EUROPE AFTER THE REFORMATION
- Lutheran
- Anglican (Church of England)
- Calvinist
- Catholic
- Huguenot centers

MUSLIM STATES