

PREDECESSORS OF THE REFORMATION: JOHN WYCLIF, JOHN HUS, AND GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.¹

—1 Timothy 6:10

THE HISTORICAL SETTING:

THE PRE-REFORMATION ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH.

More Than a Church. The Roman Catholic Church in the 14th and 15th centuries had become more like a government than a church. After the fall of the Roman Empire, and throughout most of the Middle Ages, central governments did not exist in western Europe. Power lay in the hands of cities and wealthy landowners. But they often lacked the resources—and the motivation—to care for the people they governed. In this political vacuum, the Church, with its vast wealth and the best-educated minds of Europe, performed many functions which we now associate with government.

For example, Church courts often settled civil disputes, and sometimes even punished wrongdoers. Schools, hospitals, and universities in Western Europe were run almost exclusively by monks and nuns. Monasteries and convents preserved thousands of ancient books, made advances in science and agriculture, and cared for society's impoverished and wretched. Church revenues supported Renaissance artists. The Church also controlled the Papal States, which included Rome and a large area of central Italy. In this region, the Church **was** the government—it even maintained an army to enforce its decrees and protect its possessions. The Church's many obligations required a great deal of money.

The Source of the Church's Ills. So where did the Church get the money it needed? Some came from bequests (property willed to the Church when someone died), from the industry of her monks and nuns, and from gifts. Some came as interest on loans made by the Church to governments and Crusaders. But a great deal of money came from tithes, which in those days were more tax than gift. The local clergy collected ten percent of all income and produce, and anyone who refused to pay faced the extreme displeasure of the government, the Church, and society in general. The local church got to keep a portion of these revenues, but the rest was divided between the overseeing bishop and the Pope in Rome. During those times when a bishopric was vacant, the Pope received the bishop's share.

Simony, Pluralism, and Nepotism. The bishop's right to receive these holy revenues was an attractive incentive to serve, and the Church took full advantage of this fact by **selling** bishoprics for a handsome price. In addition to the office's sale price, the Church received fifty percent of the bishop's income during the first year (called the "annate") and ten percent thereafter. This practice of buying and selling Church offices is known as "simony."² Not surprisingly, the Church's criteria for selecting men for Church offices too often had more to do with the size of a man's pocketbook than the quality of his religious life. Many wealthy men purchased bishoprics for their sons, to provide them with financial security. The very wealthy could afford to purchase (and receive the revenues from) more than one bishopric—a practice known as "pluralism." By the end of the 15th century, some Church offices were being auctioned to the highest bidder! Even the Popes were often selected for secular, rather than religious, reasons. Some Popes gave Church offices to their relatives (an abuse known as "nepotism"). In view of all of this, we should not be surprised to find that many high-ranking Church officials were not religious and did not believe the fundamental precepts of the Christian faith.

Indulgences. The primary catalyst for the Reformation was the "indulgence." As initially envisioned, the indulgence had nothing to do with ultimate salvation or the forgiveness of sins, but only with penance for sin. Confession of sins to a priest and the granting of absolution by the priest resulted in forgiveness of the sins and salvation from Hell. But in the Catholic view, the sinner still had to do penance for the forgiven sins. Penance was prescribed by the priest, who could require that the forgiven sinner say prayers, make a gift to the Church, perform labor for the Church or for the poor, travel to some holy place, or perform other acts demonstrating repentance. If the penance was not completed during the life on earth, the sinner had to pay for the sins in Purgatory before he or she could enter Heaven. And that is where the indulgence helped: it relieved the sinner from paying for the forgiven sins in Purgatory. An indulgence could be purchased for oneself, or for friends and family members, alive or not.

This complicated theological view of indulgences quickly became obscured by those who sold them. These men—who worked on commission—exaggerated the benefits of indulgences, so that many who purchased them believed they were buying eternal salvation, freedom from further confession, and even the liberty to sin at will in the future. Church leaders frequently did little or nothing to correct these misunderstandings, because they were also making money from the indulgences.

Church Morality. Because clergymen were generally selected for their minds or their money, the morals of the Roman Catholic clergy during the 14th and 15th centuries were often no better—and sometimes much worse—than their lay brethren.

Priests, bishops, and Popes were forbidden to marry, so most took mistresses. Many openly had children. In Rome, bribery of Church officials was routine, and both judicial and bureaucratic decisions could be influenced with sufficient money. Aeneas Sylvius, who would become Pope Pius II,³ lamented that everything was for sale in Rome. In Italy, the Church defended its possessions with military might, often employing very un-Christ-like methods. Papal troops were led into battle by bishops, cardinals, and even an occasional Pope. Many Church officials in Rome lived in opulent luxury. Monks frequently lived a similarly affluent lifestyle, took mistresses, and drank heavily. Some even neglected religious services, prayer, and charitable works.

The Babylonian Captivity and the Papal Schism. The prestige and authority of the Popes was further damaged when Pope Clement V moved the papacy from Rome to Avignon, France in 1309. Not until 66 years later, in 1377, would the Pope return permanently to Rome. The papal residence in Avignon—nicknamed the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Papacy—presented the appearance, and often the reality, that the Popes favored France.

The return of the papacy to Rome in 1377 created an even greater problem—the Papal Schism. In 1378, the French and Italian cardinals split and each elected their own pope; the Italians elected Urban VI, who resided in Rome, while the French elected Clement VII, who continued to reside in Avignon. Urban and his successors in Rome were recognized as Pope by England, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Flanders, and much of eastern Europe. The Avignon Popes were accepted by France, Spain, Naples, and Scotland. Not until 1417 was the papacy unified again.

The Infallible Church. Those who sought to correct these problems and abuses faced a formidable and dangerous opponent: the Roman Catholic Church. Reformers were usually viewed as arrogant heretics, and thus were subject to excommunication.⁴ In addition, they often faced much suffering in this life, for the Inquisition had been trying heretics since 1227, executing them since 1231, and torturing them since 1252.

THE INQUISITION.

The Inquisition was born in a time of growing alternatives to orthodox Catholicism. Some—such as the Cathari, the Bulgari, and the Albigenses—were offshoots of eastern mysticism and philosophy. Others—such as the Waldenses, the Patarines, and the “Spiritual Franciscans”—opposed the wealth, corruption, and extra-Biblical doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, and sought to return to the simple faith of the apostles. The Church perceived all such movements as

endangering the unity of believers, as well as the interests of Church leaders. And in those days, the Church did not tolerate much dissent.

Heresy. Supporters of the Church argued that since God had established the Church, those who opposed the Church were opposing God Himself. By Martin Luther's time, Papal infallibility ⁵ was accepted dogma. Only the Church was allowed to interpret the Scriptures. Salvation was thought to be available only through the Church. This combination of accepted doctrines meant one thing: the Church was always right, even when she was terribly wrong.

Those who deviated from Church doctrines were thought to be endangering not only their own salvation, but that of all who followed their lead. Furthermore, the Old Testament decreed death for false prophets, idolaters, and blasphemers. ⁶ Those in power in the Church used such reasoning to justify even the harshest measures against any views the Church perceived as heresy. And the Church generally had public support for such actions. Indeed, mobs of the faithful sometimes killed heretics before the Church had the opportunity.

Even government leaders joined in trying to stamp out heresy, for a variety of reasons, ranging from serious religious belief to suspicions that heretics were threatening the established social order. We must remember that the concept of separation of church and State, now ingrained in our Western culture, is of fairly recent origin. Throughout much of history, opposition to the State religion has been perceived as synonymous with opposition to the State—i.e., treason. ⁷

The first known executions for heresy were in 1022, when the French King Robert had 13 heretics burned at Orleans. Punishments for heresy often included death or imprisonment, as well as confiscation of all of the heretic's property. In the territories of the Holy Roman Empire (i.e., Germany), houses of heretics were torn down and their children were excluded from some prominent positions. France had similar laws.

The Birth of the Inquisition. Prior to 1227, the responsibility for the discovery, investigation, and punishment of heresy rested with the bishops and the civil authorities. Pope Gregory IX ⁸ changed this practice in 1227 by appointing a board of inquisitors ⁹ in Florence to root out and punish heretics. Gregory also sent Inquisitors into Germany in that same year. In 1229, the Council of Toulouse approved procedures intended to extend the Inquisition throughout Europe. Pope Gregory IX made further refinements in subsequent years.

The Inquisition's Jurisdiction. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII extended the jurisdiction of the Inquisition to include detection and suppression of witchcraft—which would eventually lead to the terrible witch trials of Europe and America. In 1555, the Inquisition was given authority over many offenses unrelated to heresy:

blasphemy, sodomy, simony, polygamy, rape, and violations of Church regulations. The Inquisition even enforced morality, such as suppressing nudism in art and life, censoring books which the Inquisitors deemed unsuitable for Christians, and suppressing scientific discoveries which were deemed to be inconsistent with the Scriptures.¹⁰

The Inquisition primarily directed its efforts at those who claimed to be Christians. Jews and Moslems were, for the most part, exempt from its rigors. Of course, Jews and Moslems who had converted to Christianity in order to avoid economic discrimination or forced expulsion—as in late 15th century Spain—thereby subjected themselves to the Inquisition’s authority.

Inquisitorial Procedures.¹¹ Inquisitors, drawn primarily from the ranks of Dominican monks, multiplied greatly during the years after 1227. In 1231, Pope Gregory IX made heresy punishable by death under Church law (bringing it into line with civil law in many countries).¹² Another step toward brutality and injustice occurred in 1252, when Pope Innocent IV authorized the Inquisitors to use torture. In the beginning, torture was to be used only when the accused’s guilt was certain, was to be used only once, and was to stop short of serious injury or death. However, the Inquisitors soon discarded these limitations, finding them inconvenient.¹³

Each time an Inquisitor entered a new area, he first declared a “term of grace”—that is, a period of time, often a month long, during which the Inquisitor conducted his investigation and invited residents to confess their heresies and seek forgiveness. Those who did so received lenient treatment, but were expected, as a demonstration of the sincerity of their repentance, to provide information about other potential heretics in the area. When this term of grace expired, the Inquisitor would begin making accusations and arrests.

The accused person was required to give evidence under oath—there was no right of silence. Torture was used to extract confessions, which then had to be reaffirmed three hours after the torture ceased; of course, if the confession was recanted the torture could resume. Torture was also used to induce witnesses and confessed heretics to implicate others. The methods of torture included, among others: flogging, burning, the rack, solitary confinement in small and dark cells, and denial of food or sleep. By these methods, some people lost the use of arms or legs, and others died from torture. However, some of the worst horrors of the Inquisition occurred in dark dungeons, where people were confined—and often died—in inhumane conditions.

An order by Pope Nicholas III in 1280 decreed excommunication for anyone who failed to inform Church authorities of known or suspected heretics; who helped

or defended a heretic; or who gave a heretic a Christian burial. The order also forbid laymen to discuss matters of faith, upon pain of excommunication.

Modern judicial procedures were unknown to the Inquisition. A suspected heretic could be tried even if he were absent or dead. He generally had no right to counsel, and one Pope even issued a decree barring lawyers from assisting a suspected heretic.¹⁴ Although the Inquisitors interviewed all witnesses, the accused person had no right to confront them in person or to question them. At least two accusing witnesses were usually required for condemnation, but the suspect was often not allowed to know the names of his accusers. Prior to 1261, the testimony of heretics and excommunicates was usually inadmissible, or at least viewed with great suspicion, but a papal decree in that year gave new credibility to these sources.

A suspected heretic was required to prove his innocence. However, defense witnesses were rare, since testimony favorable to an accused might subject a witness to a charge of heresy. Family members could testify against the accused, but not in his favor. Nevertheless, convincing evidence of heresy was usually required, false witnesses were often punished severely, and acquittals were not unknown. Pope Gregory IX's concern for the innocent is illustrated by his instructions to Conrad of Marburg, "not to punish the wicked so as to hurt the innocent."¹⁵

Inquisitorial Punishments. Except for those who confessed quickly and assisted the Inquisitors, condemnation by the Church as a heretic usually meant death or lengthy imprisonment. Those who refused to confess and were later convicted, and those who relapsed into heresy after confessing and repenting, were subject to life imprisonment or death. However, the Church itself rarely carried out the sentence—that was left to civil authorities, to whom the Church delivered the convicted heretic. The Church sanctimoniously instructed these authorities to avoid "all bloodshed and all danger of death." However, from the time of Pope Gregory IX, Church and State agreed that this warning was not to be taken literally, but meant only that the heretic's blood was not to be shed. Thus, the conventional method of execution was burning at the stake; mercy was sometimes extended by strangling the victim to death before his body was burned. To this penalty was often added confiscation of the heretic's property from the bereaved relatives.¹⁶ Pope Innocent IV, in 1252, decreed the penalty of excommunication upon any civil official who refused to carry out the sentence of the Inquisitors, and this order was renewed by many of his successors. Nevertheless, there are many recorded instances of officials opposing and preventing some of the excesses of the Inquisition.¹⁷

The Spanish Inquisition. Perhaps nowhere was the Inquisition's authority greater than in Spain, where the "Spanish Inquisition" became synonymous with cruelty and injustice. Inquisitors were first sent to Spain in 1232, but Ferdinand and

Isabella raised it to unprecedented levels of severity and effectiveness in 1480,¹⁸ and it wielded tremendous power there throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

Beginning in 1480, the Inquisitors in Spain were selected by the State, rather than by the Church. Thus, their purpose was as much political as religious. They solicited information from informers whose anonymity was carefully guarded, even from the accused. He remained in prison—at his own expense—pending trial, and was kept isolated from all but the Inquisitors. Even family members could not visit him.

Spanish trials for heresy were held in secret. The authorities did not tell the accused the nature of the accusations against him, but nevertheless required him to disprove them. The Inquisitors did not call any witnesses, since guilt was presumed based on the Inquisitors' previous investigations. The accused could confess any heresies of which he might feel guilty, and was also free to implicate others in his heresies. Such confession and cooperation guaranteed that the death sentence would not be imposed.

If the accused declined the Inquisitors' invitation to confess his guilt, he would be kept in chains and solitary confinement, and often subjected to torture, in an effort to elicit the desired confession. As elsewhere, torture was also inflicted on heretics, slaves, and other unwilling witnesses, to elicit incriminating information against others. Age and sex provided no protection from arrest or torture: the Spanish Inquisition's victims included girls as young as 13 and women as old as 80. But ironically, Spain was one of the most lenient European countries toward suspected witches, whom the Spanish Inquisition viewed as neurotic and deluded, and therefore as deserving of compassionate treatment.

The Inquisition in the Rest of Europe. King Louis IX¹⁹ helped establish the Inquisition in France. The Inquisition arrived in Portugal in 1531, with barbarity almost as appalling as in Spain. Charles V²⁰ imported the brutality of the Inquisition into Belgium and the Netherlands to stem the rising influence of Protestantism. His son, Philip II,²¹ continued his father's support of the Inquisition, helping to provoke the "Eighty Years War" for Dutch independence from Spanish rule.²²

Although Germany was one of the first areas to receive Inquisitors, the Inquisition encountered much resistance there²³ and never wielded the authority or the ferocity that it did in France and Spain—a circumstance which probably saved Martin Luther's life. To England's credit, the Inquisition never caught on there, although an Inquisitor did take part in the English condemnation of Joan of Arc in 1431.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Inquisition languished in Italy until Pope Paul III²⁵ restored its authority in 1542 and Pope Paul IV²⁶ made it a terror from 1555 to 1559.

Use of the Inquisition Against Protestants. After the rise of Protestantism, the Inquisition became a tool of both Church and State for suppressing Protestants in several Catholic countries. In Spain, the Inquisition's execution of 200 suspected Protestants between 1550 and 1600 effectively destroyed Protestantism there. France also waged war against Protestants, but minimized the role of the Inquisitors.

The End of the Inquisition. The Inquisition gradually declined in power and influence during the 18th century, primarily due to economics and the growing power of European monarchs. Kings who were tired of ruinous religious wars between Catholics and Protestants promoted religious toleration rather than persecution. The increasing power of the State made it less fearful of religious diversity, and therefore less willing to persecute and suppress it. Growing trade between religiously dissimilar countries also necessitated greater toleration. And advances in science and education eroded many of the superstitions and fears upon which the Inquisition had thrived.

In Portugal, King John V ²⁷ was able to restrain the Inquisition's worst excesses by requiring that accused persons be defended by counsel and that all sentences be reviewed by the King. Within another generation, the Portuguese Inquisition was required to follow the same rules as government courts, blunting much of its effectiveness. Father Gabriel Malagrida, a Jesuit missionary, has the distinction of being the last person burned by the Inquisition in Portugal, in 1761.

In Austria and Hungary, Queen Maria Theresa ²⁸ reined in the Inquisition by imposing government supervision. In Sicily and southern Italy, the Inquisition retained much of its power until the late 18th century (the last witch burnings there occurred in 1787). Napoleon abolished the Inquisition in the territories he conquered, including both Italy (1808) and Spain (1809). Though Napoleon was soon defeated, the Inquisition never fully recovered. Spain briefly revived it after Napoleon's defeat, but only until 1834.

With this background in mind, we will now focus on the lives of three prominent reformers who raged against the corruption of the Church, at the risk of their own lives.

JOHN WYCLIF (ca. 1320 - 1384)

The First English Bible. John Wyclif was born at Hipswell, in Yorkshire (northern England), near the village of Wyclif. He became a student and then a professor at Oxford, and was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest. Late in life, John Wyclif and his associates became the first to translate the entire Bible into English (1381-1394), ²⁹ in an effort to ensure that all literate Englishmen could study the

Bible for themselves. This English translation preceded the King James Bible (1611) by more than 200 years.

The Lollards. Wyclif also started the “Lollards”—a group of barefoot, traveling preachers who wore black wool, preached the Gospel in English (as opposed to the Latin of Church services), and emphasized the Bible rather than Church doctrines. Following the example of the apostles whom Jesus sent out,³⁰ the Lollards took along no money, and lived off of the food and shelter they were offered along the way. They preached wherever they could gain an audience, using tracts and sermon outlines prepared by Wyclif. The Lollards were immensely popular with the common people, but were deeply resented by Church authorities.

Wyclif the Reformer. Wyclif wrote extensively during the final nine years of his life. His many writings emphasized the Bible, rather than Pope or Church, as the ultimate authority on matters of faith. These writings were highly critical of many Church dogmas and practices. For example, he contended that salvation depends on a person’s relationship with God,³¹ and therefore disputed that either Church or priest were necessary middlemen. Similarly, Wyclif rejected the necessity of the confessional (i.e., confession of a person’s sins to a priest), preferring the New Testament practice of public confession and repentance. And he spurned as nonsense the Church doctrine of transubstantiation—i.e., that the priest miraculously transforms the bread and wine of communion into the actual body and blood of Christ.³²

But Wyclif reserved his sharpest criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church for its attitude towards money. In his writings, Wyclif attacked the wealth and corruption he saw among Church officials, as well as the various fund-raising methods they employed. He argued that the Church should be free of possessions, just as Christ counseled his followers.³³

The Political Context. Wyclif’s views on Church finances were especially popular in England, which was at war with France.³⁴ Since the papacy at that time still resided in Avignon, France, the perception in England was that English tithes were supporting the French war effort. In 1366, the English Parliament refused to send agreed payments of money to the Pope; the government hired Wyclif to defend Parliament’s decision in the court of public opinion. Wyclif forcefully argued that the Pope had no right to demand any payments from the English government or the English people, but was limited to soliciting charity.

In 1376, one of Wyclif’s strongest supporters, John of Gaunt,³⁵ proposed the confiscation of Church property and asked Wyclif to defend the proposition. Wyclif did so, arguing that the civil authorities would be doing the Church a great service by forcibly returning her servants to the poverty that Jesus advocated. In turn, John of Gaunt protected Wyclif from Church leaders’ efforts to try and execute him for

heresy. Thus protected, Wyclif went even further and recommended the separation of the English church from Rome. Thus, he anticipated the actions of Henry VIII, who would take the Church of England out of the Pope's sphere of influence in 1534.³⁶

Criticizing Church and Pope. But in 1377 England was not yet ready for such a radical step. Nor was England quite ready for Wyclif's unrelenting attacks on what he saw as evils within the Church. For example, Wyclif denounced monks for their wealth and corruption. He opposed the forcible collection of tithes. He criticized the theory of indulgences, and then scolded the Church for **selling** them, astutely asking why the Pope did not grant them out of Christian charity, without requiring payment. He also chided Church leaders who conned the people with fake miracles and lived in luxury, while they excommunicated poor people who could not afford to pay their tithes. Wyclif even criticized the Popes, pointing out that their wealth, pride, corruption, bickering, and pettiness were at odds with the teachings of Christ. Wyclif opposed the dogma of papal infallibility, and went on to argue that a Pope not only could be wrong, but that he could be so worldly that he should be removed from office for heresy. These views began to alienate John of Gaunt and some of Wyclif's other supporters.

Retirement and Death. Events in 1381 further weakened Wyclif's position. A revolt by English peasants in that year produced a conservative reaction in both the nobility and the government, and made Wyclif's radical views suddenly suspect—especially since some believed his ideas and the preaching of his Lollards had helped to promote the revolt. By order of King Richard II, Oxford expelled Wyclif in 1382. So he retired to work on his Bible translation and to write sermons for the Lollards. In 1384 Pope Urban VI ordered Wyclif to come to Rome, presumably to be tried and condemned for heresy. But the Pope's plans were frustrated when Wyclif suffered a stroke and died on December 31st of that year. By order of the Council of Constance³⁷ in 1415, Wyclif's remains were dug up and burned in 1428, and the ashes were cast into a nearby stream.

JOHN HUS (ca. 1370 - 1415)

Priest. John Hus was born between about 1369 and 1373, in the Bohemian village of Husinetz (now part of the Czech Republic). He was known as John of Husinetz, which he shortened to John Hus (or John Huss). He was raised by his mother, because his father died while Hus was still a child. At about age 20 or 21, he came to Prague, where he studied philosophy and theology at the newly-founded University of Prague. He supported himself by working in various churches. He

earned a Master of Arts degree in 1396, and became a university professor. In about 1401, he became dean of Humanities, and was also ordained as a priest.

Reformer. In 1402 he was selected as priest for the Chapel of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, in Prague—a church established in 1391 to promote Wyclif’s reformist views.³⁸ Hus excelled in this new position, becoming the most popular and most famous preacher in Prague—even serving as confessor to the Queen of Bohemia. He preached in Czech, rather than the Latin used by the Church, and encouraged his congregation to sing hymns during the worship service. Hus’ character was unimpeachable—even his enemies conceded his well-deserved reputation for purity. But he preached incessantly for moral reform in the Church, denouncing the evils he saw at all levels—from priest to Pope.

Excommunicate. Though more conservative than Wyclif, Hus was a great admirer of his English predecessor, and sympathized with many of his writings. Hus would later say, “Wyclif, I trust, will be saved; but could I think he would be damned, I would my soul were with his.” When some of Wyclif’s writings were condemned by the Church and barred from the University of Prague, Hus ignored the prohibition. For this offense, Archbishop Zbynek³⁹ excommunicated Hus and several of his associates in about 1409, and ordered that Wyclif’s writings be burned.

Exile. In 1411, Pope John XXIII⁴⁰ declared an offering of indulgences to help finance a war against Naples. Hus preached against the indulgences in Prague, opposing them both on principal and because the money was to be used for making war on other Christians. He even expressed doubts about the existence of Purgatory, a long-standing Church dogma. Hus’ ferocious attacks on the indulgences—and even on the Pope, whom Hus called a money-grubber—cost him much of his support in both the government and the University. The King of Bohemia, Wenceslaus IV, who had approved the indulgences (and received a portion of the proceeds), finally outlawed any further opposition to them. The Pope soon excommunicated Hus and placed an interdict⁴¹ on the city of Prague. The King persuaded Hus to leave Prague in October, 1412, partly for his own safety, but also so that the interdict could be lifted.

During his sabbatical, Hus wrote extensively, echoing many of the writings of Wyclif. Hus criticized simony, as well as the practice of charging fees for administration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial. He rejected the infallibility of the Pope, and held that the Pope is neither the head of the Church (which is Christ) nor the highest authority for the Church (which is the Bible). Thus, Hus argued that a Pope who fails to obey the law and spirit of Christ need not be obeyed.

The Council of Constance. In 1414, the Holy Roman Emperor, Sigismund—who was also a brother of Wenceslaus IV, King of Bohemia—invited Hus to attend a Church Council meeting at Constance (the same Council which later ordered Wyclif’s remains to be burned and scattered), in an effort to achieve a reconciliation with the Church. Sigismund offered Hus a “safe-conduct” to and from the Council, meaning that he could not be arrested. Despite the warnings of his friends, Hus decided to go.

Sometime after arriving in Constance, Hus was accused before the Council, questioned, and then imprisoned for heresy. When Sigismund protested, the Council responded that Sigismund’s safe-conduct was not binding upon the Church and could not serve to protect a heretic. Hus was badly treated in prison and twice became severely ill, almost depriving the Council of its opportunity to execute him. Meanwhile, a close associate of Hus, Jerome of Prague, came to Constance to protest the Council’s treatment of Hus. The Council quickly ordered Jerome’s arrest and imprisonment as well.

Martyrdom. After seven months in custody, Hus was tried for heresy. Anticipating Luther, Hus agreed to recant any of his “heresies” which the Council could refute with Scripture. The Council of course responded that only the Church could interpret Scriptures, and demanded that Hus recant unconditionally. Sigismund urged Hus to give in, while also informing him that if the Council condemned him his safe-conduct would be automatically revoked. Despite the urgings of Emperor and friends, Hus remained steadfast. On July 6, 1415, the Council condemned him, and handed him over to secular authorities to be burned at the stake. He died while chanting hymns to God.

A Second Martyr. Hus’ friend, Jerome of Prague, suffered a similar fate. Jerome at first recanted in a moment of weakness, but later thought better of it and reaffirmed his adherence to the writings and beliefs of Hus. In a stirring speech before the Council, Jerome accused them of acting like the Pharisees who killed Stephen, and denounced them for Hus’ execution. Jerome was burned at the stake on May 30, 1416. As the executioner started to light the fire, Jerome urged him to do so where he could see: “Come in front, and light it before my face; if I had feared death I should never have come here.” Like Hus, Jerome died while singing a hymn.

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA (1452 - 1498)

The Monk. Girolamo Savonarola was born in 1452, in Ferrara, in northern Italy. Both his mother and his paternal grandfather were devout Christians. Girolamo was attracted early to books, religion, and the writings of Thomas Aquinas.⁴² Girolamo’s father and grandfather were doctors, and they steered Girolamo in that

direction. He went to the University of Bologna (about 25 miles south of Ferrara), but was so disheartened at the immorality and contempt for religion that he encountered there that he returned to Ferrara. For a year he remained at home, praying and fasting. Then, at age 23, and against his parents' wishes, he returned to Bologna to join a Dominican monastery. For six years he devoted himself to fasting, prayer, and menial tasks, until the Dominicans decided that he had a talent for preaching and sent him back to Ferrara to spread the Gospel.

The Preacher. At first, Savonarola's preaching failed. In his native Ferrara, he had little impact. War came to Ferrara in 1481, so the Dominicans transferred Girolamo to Florence, to the Dominican monastery of San Marco. His preaching flopped there, as well; the Florentines viewed it as dry and dull. So he was reassigned to instructing novice monks, and struggled to tame his fleshly desires through fasting and self-flagellation. He also began to have visions—which he believed were from God, through His angels. He became convinced that the Anti-Christ was on the earth, and that the Second Coming of Christ would occur soon.

After five years, Savonarola emerged in 1486 as a dynamic preacher with new intensity and a stirring message. He denounced the evils and injustices he saw—especially within the Church and governments—and called the people to repentance. For about three years he preached with tremendous success in the region of Lombardy (in and near Milan, in northern Italy); then in 1489, he was recalled to Florence.

Reformer, Politician, and Prophet. Between 1489 and 1494, Savonarola's popularity among the people of Florence exploded, even as he made many enemies among city and Church leaders. His sermons denounced the exploitation of the poor by dishonest businessmen and corrupt government officials, and called for an end to tyranny. He began to prophesy, correctly predicting the dual deaths in 1492 of Lorenzo the Magnificent (the ruler of Florence) and Pope Innocent VIII. He also accurately predicted the invasion of the French in 1494 and his own violent death.

Put in charge of the monastery of San Marco in about 1491, Savonarola obtained permission from Pope Alexander VI ⁴³ to make the monastery self-governing, and then enacted many reforms which increased both its moral level and its membership roles. ⁴⁴ Savonarola also became more vocal in his criticism of the evils he saw in the Church—especially its wealth.

When the French invaded Italy in September, 1494, the ruler of Florence, Piero di Lorenzo, capitulated immediately—and was quickly deposed by the Florentine populace. In the midst of surrender and near-chaos, Savonarola was a widely-respected voice of reason, calling for calm and a return to God. Savonarola was part of a delegation that made peace with the French, in effect becoming a French ally. After the French moved on and the new Florentine government nearly

collapsed, Savonarola's popularity and influence in Florence grew even greater. He advised the ruling Council on matters of politics and economics as well as religion, urging them to adopt a representative form of government and to enact reforms in the areas of taxation, business, and morals. Some even hailed him as a prophet.

The Leader of a Revival. Savonarola used his growing influence to urge—and sometimes to shame or coerce—the people of Florence to repent and seek Christ, to live moral lives, and to give all that they could to help the poor. Dramatic changes followed. Churches became crowded. Alms for the poor increased. Some businessmen paid back those they had cheated; women dressed more modestly; many read their Bibles and Savonarola's writings. Under his influence, the people of Florence abandoned the debauchery of their annual carnival and converted it into a time of giving to the poor and singing of hymns to God.

Savonarola's Enemies. But not everyone appreciated Savonarola's reforms. Some missed the pleasures of the old immorality, now outlawed, while others missed the money they had made from it. Then there were those who had been displaced from the Florentine government and wanted their positions and their power back. The Franciscans—long-time rivals of Savonarola's Dominicans—also worked for his downfall.⁴⁵ They complained to Pope Alexander VI, who was eager to listen. The Pope blamed Savonarola for the alliance between France and Florence which had hampered Alexander's efforts to form an Italian alliance to oppose the French. Indeed, Alexander suspected Savonarola of inviting another French invasion, and not without reason. Savonarola wrote letters to the French king after his withdrawal from Italy asking him to help reform the Church and depose Alexander as Pope.

Savonarola vs. Pope. In 1495, in response to the complaints of Savonarola's enemies, Pope Alexander VI invited him to come to Rome to discuss the matter. Savonarola politely declined, claiming ill health. In October 1495, the Pope, again at the urging of Savonarola's opponents, ordered him to stop preaching. Savonarola complied. A few months later the Pope lifted this ban. After having Savonarola's writings and sermons examined for heresy—and finding none—the Pope offered to make Savonarola a Cardinal. Savonarola apparently viewed this as an attempt to buy him off—which it may have been—and instead denounced the corruption of Rome in a series of sermons that were reprinted⁴⁶ and circulated throughout Europe.

In late 1496, the Pope again tried to check Savonarola's influence by bringing the San Marco monastery under closer control of Rome, possibly intending to transfer him to a less visible location. Savonarola ignored the order, and defended his actions in a series of letters and sermons. He also elevated the level of his condemnations of Pope and Church, actually inviting excommunication and even death. Alexander obliged by excommunicating him in May, 1497. Later that same year, and in early

1498, Savonarola issued his reply, denouncing the excommunication as unjust and invalid. He preached, celebrated Mass, and administered the Eucharist—all forbidden to an excommunicate. He was universally hated in Rome.

Savonarola's Downfall. By 1498 Savonarola was also in trouble in Florence. The people blamed him when the French withdrawal from Italy in late 1495 promoted rebellion in Pisa and other cities once loyal to Florence. He was also blamed when the efforts to suppress these rebellions wrecked the Florentine economy and destabilized the government. Floods in 1496 and famine in 1497 further undermined Savonarola's support. The opposition party was elected to head the city government, and Savonarola's friends lost most of their power and influence.

In early 1498, the Pope threatened to place an interdict on the City of Florence. The new city government ordered their former prophet to stop preaching. Once again he complied. But he probably signed his own death warrant by writing the rulers of France, Spain, Germany, and Hungary, urging them to convene a Church council at which he could present proof of Alexander's corruption and heresies. One of the letters was intercepted and given to Alexander.

With Savonarola silenced, the Franciscans denounced him and began to turn the city's populace against him. When Savonarola refused to accept a Franciscan's challenge to the medieval tradition of ordeal by fire,⁴⁷ his remaining support outside of his monastery apparently vanished. He and two associates—Brothers Domenico and Silvestro—were arrested the next day, on April 8, 1498.

The Martyr. All three were subjected to torture by the Papal Inquisitors from April 9th to May 22nd. Domenico refused to incriminate Savonarola, even under repeated torture. Silvestro incriminated him so readily that his confession was of little value. Several times Savonarola capitulated under torture and confessed, only to retract his confessions after the torture ended. But after repeated efforts, the Inquisitors finally broke Savonarola's will. He signed a written confession stating that he had no divine inspiration, and confessing to pride, ambition, and attempting to depose the Pope.

Savonarola, Domenico, and Silvestro were executed on May 23, 1498. Domenico sang as he went to his death. Savonarola's last words were: "The Lord has suffered much for me." He kissed the crucifix he carried, and then was hanged along with his companions. Boys threw stones at them as they died. Then their bodies were burned, and the ashes scattered on the Arno River.

EPILOGUE.

Evil embraces the darkness, and cannot long stand the light. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Church had become corrupt. Wyclif, Hus, Savonarola, and many other early reformers brought the Catholic Church's evils into the light for all to see. In doing so, they prepared the way for Protestants such as Martin Luther⁴⁸ and John Calvin, who would lead great revivals of Christianity outside the Catholic Church, as well as Catholics such as Ignatius Loyola,⁴⁹ who would help to reform the Catholic Church from within. The strength of the western Christian churches today—both Protestant and Catholic—is in many ways the result of the efforts and sacrifices of Wyclif, Hus, Savonarola, and many others like them.

Sources:

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- (3) *Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia* (1998 Edition).
- (4) The following articles in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:
 - “Indulgences”: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07783a.htm>
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- (5) The article, “Jan Hus,” from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2002):
<http://www.hfac.uh.edu/gbrown/philosophers/leibniz/BritannicaPages/Hus/Hus.html>

Endnotes for “Predecessors of the Reformation”:

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* Bible translation.

² Simony gets its name from Simon the Magician, who sought to buy the gifts of God. See Acts 8:18-23.

³ Pope, 1458 – 1464

⁴ The Church taught that no one could be saved apart from Mother Church. “Excommunication” meant to be cut off from the Church. This practice was based on such Scriptures as Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, which encouraged the early Christians to expel from their midst those who insisted on behaving improperly. A person who had been excommunicated from the Church could not attend worship services or receive any of the sacraments, including communion. Other Christians were forbidden to associate with the excommunicate, and were often forbidden to even give him food, drink, or lodgings. Since many legal proceedings were in the hands of the Church, excommunication barred the offender from enforcing his legal rights in ecclesiastical courts. But far worse than all of this, in the Church’s view the excommunicated individual could not be saved, and therefore was condemned to eternal damnation.

⁵ The doctrine of Papal infallibility held that in religious matters God would not let the Pope make a mistake.

⁶ See, for example: Deuteronomy 13:1-11, Deuteronomy 17:2-7, and Leviticus 24:13-16.

⁷ The Roman Empire accused Christians of treason because they refused to worship the Roman gods. (For more on this topic, see the article, “Roman Persecution of Christianity,” on this web site.) Even today, large numbers of Muslims in the Middle East—and some Christians in the United States—view the separation of religion and the State as an undesirable political option.

⁸ Pope, 1227 – 1241

⁹ “Inquisition” and “inquisitors” comes from the Latin *inquisitio*—“inquiry”—which refers to the Roman practice of summoning a suspect and questioning him about an accusation against him.

¹⁰ For example, in 1633 the Inquisition imprisoned Galileo Galilei, at the age of 68, for writing in support of Copernicus’ “heretical” contention that the earth is not the center of the universe, but rotates and travels around the sun. Galileo, no doubt in fear of torture and/or death, was forced to denounce the Copernican view.

¹¹ Many of these procedures were simply adopted from the common practices of the time in many countries. The distinguishing feature of the Inquisition was that these procedures were now incorporated into a Church court, with Church judges.

¹² The *Catholic Encyclopedia* marks this papal decree as the beginning of the Inquisition.

¹³ In fairness, the primary motivation for the use of torture was not sadism or punishment. Most Inquisitors used torture only when the guilt of the accused had substantial support, so torture was viewed as an effort to save the accused's immortal soul by inducing him to confess. Confession allowed him to receive absolution—i.e., forgiveness from a priest—without which, according to Church doctrine, he would be condemned to Hell. With these presuppositions, Church officials generally viewed such torture as “merciful.”

¹⁴ Pope Innocent III issued this prohibition in 1205.

¹⁵ Quoted in the article, “Inquisition,” in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

¹⁶ The confiscated property went to the State, the Church, the accuser, or some combination of the three.

¹⁷ The punishments of the Inquisition were also sometimes lessened or even set aside on the grounds of age, infirmity, or poverty—although they could be quickly reinstated if the accused person again incurred the Inquisitor's displeasure.

¹⁸ The driving force of the Spanish Inquisition during the late 15th century was its “grand inquisitor,” Tomás Torquemada (1420-1498).

¹⁹ King of France, 1214 – 1252

²⁰ King of Spain, 1516 – 1556, and Holy Roman Emperor, 1519 – 1556

²¹ King of Spain, 1556 – 1598

²² The Eighty Years War resulted in Dutch independence from Spain in 1648.

²³ The Popes consistently required that the Inquisitors obtain the approval and cooperation of the local Bishop, and any decisions of the Inquisitor had to be made in consultation with the Bishop. Thus, the opposition of local bishops could seriously impede the ability of the Inquisitors to carry out their mission. In addition, the Inquisitor was sometimes required to consult with a *boni veri*—a group of thirty or more learned men, both laymen and priests, who would review the evidence and provide advisory decisions on both guilt and punishment.

²⁴ For more on Joan of Arc, see the article, “St. Joan of Arc,” on this web site.

²⁵ Pope, 1534 – 1549

²⁶ Pope, 1555 – 1559

²⁷ King of Portugal, 1706-1750

²⁸ Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, and Archduchess of Austria, from 1740 to 1780 (lived, 1717 – 1780)

²⁹ The project was completed about 10 years after Wyclif's death. Wyclif is believed to have translated the New Testament, leaving the Old Testament to be translated by two of his associates. The translation was made from Jerome's Latin Vulgate, rather than the Greek and Hebrew in which the Bible was originally written.

³⁰ See Mark 6:7-13 and Luke 9:1-6.

³¹ John Wyclif, like St. Augustine before him, believed in predestination of both the saved and the damned. In other words, Wyclif asserted that God had chosen every person either for salvation or for condemnation, and a person could do nothing to change that destiny. Thus, Wyclif rejected the concept of free will. (For more on St. Augustine, see the article, "St. Augustine," on this web site.)

³² Wyclif replaced transubstantiation with the doctrine of consubstantiation, which meant that Christ was somehow present in the bread and wine, even though those elements did not lose their identity or their nature. In other words, the bread and wine remained just that—bread and wine—but Christ was miraculously and truly present in those elements.

³³ See, for example, Matthew 6:19-21, 6:24-33, 19:21-24; Mark 10:21-25; Luke 12:15-34, 16:13, 18:22-25; see also, 1 Timothy 6:10 and Hebrews 13:5.

³⁴ The Hundred-Years War between England and France lasted from 1337 until 1453. This was the war in which Joan of Arc fought in 1429-1430. For more on this war and/or Joan of Arc, see the article, "St. Joan of Arc," on this web site.

³⁵ John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was a son of King Edward III, who was king of England from 1330 to 1377.

³⁶ For more on this topic, see the article on "St. Thomas More," on this web site.

³⁷ The Council of Constance met from November 5, 1414 until April 22, 1418.

³⁸ Wyclif's writings came to Bohemia in the 1380's, brought back by Bohemian students who were sent to study at Oxford. Such contacts between England and Bohemia were probably the result of, or at least enhanced by, the marriage of the English King Richard II to Anne of Luxembourg, the

sister of the King of Bohemia, in 1382.

³⁹ Archbishop of Prague, 1403-1411

⁴⁰ Pope John XXIII was one of three rivals who claimed the papacy at this time. In 1409, a group of cardinals constituting the Council of Pisa attempted to end the Papal Schism by deposing both rival Popes—Gregory XII of Rome and Benedict XIII of Avignon—and electing Alexander V. Many nations in Europe refused to recognize this action, resulting in three Popes instead of two. When Alexander V died in 1410, the same cardinals who had elected Alexander V now chose a new Pope: Cardinal Baldassare Cossa, who took the name John XXIII. He served as Pope from 1410 until 1415, when opposition to his pontificate at the Council of Constance forced his abdication. Gregory XII also abdicated, and the Council deposed Benedict XIII. The Papal Schism finally ended with the Council's election of Martin V, who served as Pope from 1417 until his death in 1431.

⁴¹ An “interdict” was an order forbidding Church officials from conducting any church services within the city. Like excommunication, it was used as a device to enforce the Pope's will.

⁴² For more on Thomas Aquinas, see the article, “St Thomas Aquinas,” coming soon to this web site.

⁴³ Alexander VI was born in 1431, in Spain. Born Rodrigo Borjas, he changed his name to Rodrigo Borgia. His uncle, Pope Calixtus III, made him a cardinal at age 25 and vice-chancellor at age 26. He typified the Church leaders of his day, who were selected for wealth and intellect, rather than piety. He proved to be an extremely able administrator.

Rodrigo became a priest in 1468, at the age of 37. He sired at least six children, only two of whom were born before he became a priest. Four were borne by a woman who was married to another man (although she was separated from her husband). In 1492, Rodrigo became Pope Alexander VI, in large part through promises to richly reward the cardinals who helped him get elected. He gave up his married mistress, but obtained another. He probably fathered two more children after becoming Pope. He sold Church offices frequently and shamelessly, but he balanced the Papal budget. He appointed family members to many high Church offices, making his son, Caesar Borgia, a cardinal at age 18. With Caesar's help, Alexander ruthlessly subdued the unruly nobles of the Papal States. Alexander and Caesar were accused of imprisoning Cardinals in order to extort some of their wealth. They were even suspected of murdering Cardinals to get even more of their money, although this is more rumor than fact. Alexander died on August 18, 1503, most likely of malaria.

⁴⁴ According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the number of monks increased from 50 to 238. Savonarola himself lived an ascetic lifestyle.

⁴⁵ For more on the Franciscans—and their founder, St. Francis—see the article, “St. Francis of

Assisi,” on this web site.

⁴⁶ Gutenberg’s printing press had been invented in about 1450.

⁴⁷ The “ordeal by fire” required both the challenger and the challenged to walk through fire, in the belief that God would not allow the just to be harmed. The challenge was accepted by another Dominican at San Marco, Brother Domenico de Pescia. However, on the appointed day (April 7, 1498), the parties quibbled over details and delayed the proceedings until darkness fell. At that point the city government cancelled the event. Although the Franciscan was probably primarily at fault for the delay and cancellation, the Dominicans were blamed. And in any event, Savonarola lost much support by refusing the challenge.

⁴⁸ For more, see the article, “Martin Luther,” on this web site.

⁴⁹ For more, see the article, “St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis Xavier,” on this web site.