

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Pre Reformation Revival, 1300-1500

Revival is that sovereign work of God in which He visits His own people, restoring and releasing them into the fullness of His blessing.

Robert Coleman

After Pentecost, the Christian message was preached throughout Europe. Both peasants and kings responded to the message as nation after nation declared itself Christian. As the gospel spread, so did the influence and power of the Christian church.

The church extended its reach until it exerted great power in the areas of social life, education, politics, and economics. Perhaps its increased economic power led to its downfall, but ultimate power corrupts ultimately. After many of the clergy became corrupt, the people in the pews grew cold in the love of God, and many in the established church became corrupted throughout much of the Middle Ages.

## A Survey of Medieval Awakenings

A survey of what was done to awaken the church will lead us to the Pre-Reformation Revivals. The historical records of the Middle Ages are less abundant in revivals than in later centuries, but there are some indications that God intermittently poured out his Spirit during this period. While records of local church revivals don't exist, there are records of several movements in the medieval church that have some evidences of revival movements.

Most revivals in that era took the form of movements among the religious orders of monks, nuns, and friars, in which believers sought to separate themselves from a corrupt world in order to pursue holiness. Evangelical sects tended to separate themselves and seek a return to the apostolic Christianity of the early church.

### Early Monastic Leaders

Monasticism was an early response to perceived corruption in the church. Initially, becoming a monk was an individual affair, and monks lived a solitary existence. Anthony (ca. 250-356) is usually viewed as the first monk, but Pachomius (292-346) was the first to organize a monastery. He did so in about 320 at Tabennisi, Egypt, with a dozen other monks. Soon, some 7,000 monks were part of his movement in Egypt and Syria.

The best-known leader of Western monasticism was Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480-543). Shocked by the vice he saw openly practiced in Rome, Benedict withdrew to live as a hermit in a cave east of the city. In 529, he began what is now known as the Benedictine Order with the founding of the monastery of Monte Cassino.

The monastery itself continued until it was destroyed during World War II. Benedict's rules of life and discipline became a guide for monks throughout Europe and were in near-universal use there by the time of Charlemagne.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, the monks of Ireland took the gospel from their monasteries on the Emerald Isle throughout northern Europe. Among the best known of the Irish monks was Columba, who established a monastery on the island of Iona, which became the base from which he evangelized the Scots. One of his students, Aidan, followed his example when he established a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne as the base from which he evangelized the people of Northumbria (northern England).

In 909, Duke William of Aquitaine gave a charter to the Benedictine abbot Berno of Baume to establish a new monastery at Cluny in eastern France. Under the terms of the charter, the monastery was to be free of all secular and episcopal control. Berno and his immediate successor, Odo, proved to be capable leaders, causing many Benedictine monasteries to reorganize to be more like the monastery at Cluny. The monks of Cluny

were marked by their financial integrity and sexual purity and became the center of much social reform in the region. By the middle of the tenth century, nearly seventy monasteries were under the control of the abbot of Cluny.

### **The Franciscans**

In the early thirteenth century, the Franciscan order was established in Italy by Francis of Assisi, who was converted during an illness. He abandoned his previous pleasure-seeking lifestyle and adopted one marked by poverty, chastity, and obedience. His order was formally established in 1210 and quickly became popular. About 1215 a young woman named Clare established a companion order for women named the Poor Clares.

During his lifetime, Francis preached the gospel across Italy and as far away as Spain and Egypt. Along with the Dominicans, an order of preachers, the Franciscans provided the principal missionary movement of the day.

### **The Waldensians**

About 1176, Peter Waldo, a rich merchant of Lyons, France, was impressed with the claims of Christ as he read a translation of the New Testament. He liquidated his assets, keeping only what he felt was necessary for the care of his family, and established a group known as “the Poor in Spirit.” These Waldensians, as they came to be called, sought to preach the gospel as laymen, but were forbidden to do so by the pope except when they were invited to do so by the clergy. When they refused to stop preaching, the Waldensians were formally excommunicated in 1184. They continued to exist as a hidden church until granted liberty centuries later.

The Waldensians believed that people should have the Bible in their own language and that the Scriptures should be the final authority in matters of faith and practice. They went out to preach two by two, following the example of Christ, who sent his disciples out in groups of two. As this lay movement grew, they eventually established their own churches and clergy.

Others sympathetic to the Waldensians were known as “friends,” but continued their affiliation with the established church. Where possible, these friends worked as evangelicals within the established church. When they were no longer able to do so, many formally identified with the hidden church.

### **John Wycliffe**

For several years, John Wycliffe carried on a campaign among academics and ecclesiastics in England, calling the church to return to its biblical heritage, but the church began condemning his teachings as heresies and errors. In 1382 Wycliffe’s disciples broke with a long-standing tradition of the church and translated the entire Scripture into the English language. It was the first time in a thousand years that the whole Bible had been translated into a European language, though portions of it had often been translated into various vernaculars. Armed now with the Bible in their own language, the poor priests of

Wycliffe, called Lollards, took the message of the gospel to villages scattered throughout England.

Wycliffe died two years after the Lollard Revival began in England, but his teachings continued to promote revival in the following generation. Early in the fifteenth century, it was estimated that one of every two men in England embraced the teachings of John Wycliffe. This estimate seems a bit hyperbolic-by that time the term Lollard had come to mean anybody dissatisfied with the church. The Lollard movement was subjected to an intense persecution, which included the exhumation of Wycliffe's bones to be burned for heresy. Still his followers multiplied. In 1523, the Renaissance scholar Erasmus described the Lollard movement as "conquered, but not extinguished."

### **John Hus**

Despite the condemnation of Wycliffe's books as heresy, they continued to be widely read, even as far away as Bohemia. As the church burned Wycliffe's books in the streets of Prague, the popular Bohemian preacher John Hus began preaching the same truths from his pulpit. The masses quickly followed Hus, enabling him to make significant social reforms in his nation.

Hus also felt the brunt of ecclesiastical persecution and was martyred for the cause of Christ on his fifty-sixth birthday. The seed sown in Hus' preaching took root, however, giving birth to the Bohemian Brethren. For centuries they continued as an underground church, hidden away in rural villages until they found refuge on the estates of Count Zinzendorf

### **Girolamo Savonarola**

In one of the more dramatic attempts to revive and reform the Catholic Church in this era, an Italian priest called for reforms in central Italy. Girolamo Savonarola challenged corruption in both the church and state from his pulpit in Florence. He began preaching the same year Martin Luther was born. His ministry was often better received in rural Italian villages than in Florence itself.

When the ruler of Florence tried to silence the bold preacher, he failed. Even his critics recognized that Savonarola possessed an unusual spiritual power. Revival swept through Florence under his ministry, transforming the city and reforming autocratic laws into democracy. In fact, Savonarola wrote the basis for a system of city government that was copied throughout Europe.

But Savonarola's attacks on the corruption of the church would not be ignored. Like Wycliffe and Hus before him, the Italian preacher was condemned. He was hanged in the public square in 1498.

Some might want to place the pre-Reformation revivals farther down the list of the ten greatest revivals ever. But they are placed eighth because of the opposition they faced, the price they paid, and the seed planted that ultimately took root to grow underground.

Eventually, the work of God burst through the ground in the ministry of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

### Wycliffe and England's Lollard Revival (1382)

Almost two centuries before Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the Wittenburg Castle church door, the poor priests who followed John Wycliffe were preaching the evangelical message and calling for reforms in the corrupt church throughout the villages of England. Historians looking back call Wycliffe the “morning star of the Reformation” because his teachings were prototypical of those of the later reformers.

Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire about 1330 and trained for the priesthood at Britain's historic Oxford University. In 1372, he became a Doctor of Divinity and joined the Oxford faculty. Two years later, King Edward III appointed him rector of the parish of Lutterworth. In addition to his duties pastoring the Lutterworth church, Wycliffe also exercised a significant degree of influence within Britain's royal court.

Wycliffe served as the clerical advisor from 1376 to 1378 to John of Gaunt, who effectively governed England until his nephew, Richard II, came of age in 1381. In 1377, the king and Parliament of England turned to Wycliffe for advice as to whether it was lawful to withhold traditional payments from Rome. When Wycliffe agreed it was, he alienated himself from church authorities. Pope Gregory XI issued five edicts against him, but none had any serious effect. In 1381, Wycliffe retired from government service to Lutterworth, where he remained during the final years of his life.

While consistently describing himself as a loyal churchman willing to subject himself to the pope, Wycliffe was also openly critical of the various abuses of the church. Wycliffe also held that the Scriptures alone were the ultimate authority in all matters of doctrine and practice. The application of that principle led to a host of differences between Wycliffe and the established church. He claimed that even the pope could not be trusted if his statements were contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture.

For his part, Pope Gregory XI strongly condemned Wycliffe. In 1382, a church council presided over by the archbishop of Canterbury condemned twenty-four specific doctrines of Wycliffe, ten as heresies and fourteen as errors.

While some historians have sought to attribute Britain's Peasant Revolt of 1381 to Wycliffe and his teachings, it's unlikely he had much to do with it. To that time, Wycliffe's writings had been circulated only in academic and ecclesiastical circles, so it's doubtful that many in the general population had any understanding of his views. Probably many were even unaware of his existence. However, all that was about to change.

In 1382, Wycliffe's disciples translated the Bible into English. Prior to Wycliffe, those who wished to read the entire Scriptures had first to learn Latin. As the use of English in church services was not approved by the established church, Wycliffe organized his own itinerant preachers to take his Bible directly to the people of England. The first English sermon preached by a Lollard appears to be that of Nicholas Hereford at St. Frideswide's on Ascension Day, 1382. It was the beginning of a movement that resulted in a turning to God among the common people throughout England.

Wycliffe's "poor priests" endured hardship and took the gospel throughout England's scattered villages. His critics began describing the men as "Lollards." Various explanations have been given for why the term was applied, but probably the term was based on a Dutch word for "mumblers." Others argue that the term was based on the Latin word meaning "tare," a French term describing "hypocrites," or an early English word referring to the "idle." The various suggested roots of this term reveal something of the hostility of the established church toward this movement.

Intense persecution swept through England, directed at those who adhered to Wycliffe's views. The intensity of that opposition endured far beyond Wycliffe's natural life. The English reformer died on December 31, 1384, as a result of a stroke. Forty-four years later, the pope ordered his bones to be exhumed and burned as the remains of a heretic. His ashes were scattered in the Thames River. Yet even as the river carried his ashes to the sea, the order of poor priests he'd founded continued to carry his gospel across the country and the continent of Europe.

The influence of Wycliffe extended beyond his life. In the first thirty years of the fifteenth century, the Lollards continued to spread the message into parts of England that hadn't been reached during Wycliffe's life. After a series of church condemnations of Wycliffe as a heretic, the movement became increasingly lay-led, especially strong in the eastern counties of Britain.

Following the death of Wycliffe, Sir John Oldcastle of Herefordshire continued the movement. Although his "Lollardy" was well known, his position and wealth protected him from official sanction until 1413. At that time he was arrested, tried, and sentenced as a heretic, but he managed to escape from the Tower of London cell in which he was being held. Oldcastle continued to lead the movement from various hiding places until he was finally captured, condemned by Parliament, and executed in 1417. Under Sir John's leadership, many British leaders believed the Lollard movement was becoming stronger than the established church itself.

Despite the intense persecution, the teaching of Wycliffe and the Lollards continued to be held by many Christians throughout Britain and on the European continent. The seeds of the evangelical gospel had been widely sown and had taken root. They would sprout again with the coming of a later reformation.

### The Burning of John Hus (1415)

Crowds filled the meadow on the edge of Constance, Bohemia, to witness the execution that had been anticipated for months. The popular Bohemian preacher was tied to a stake with seven moist thongs and a rusty old chain. Broken pieces of wood and straw were piled against his body. Then the marshal gave the condemned man one more chance to recant and preserve his life.

"What errors shall I renounce?" John Hus asked. "I know myself guilty of none. I call God to witness that all I have written and preached has been with the view of rescuing souls from sin and perdition, and therefore most joyfully will I confirm with my blood the truth I have written and preached."

A burning torch ignited the dry straw at the base of the pile. Hus prayed as the flames surrounded him on every side. By the time the fire burned out, the body of Hus had been consumed, but the burning of Hus didn't extinguish the movement he led. As his ashes were scattered in the Rhine, the influence of the martyred leader grew.

Born July 6, 1369, in Husinec, South Bohemia, John Hus was an unlikely candidate for heroism. Not a particularly brilliant student, he persisted in his studies, eventually graduating from Prague University. It was in the pulpit, first as rector of the university and then later at the Bethlehem Chapel, that Hus first attracted attention.

Hus was deeply committed to personal morality and urged others to follow his example. When he addressed the sins of the rich, his preaching became a source of irritation to political leaders. The complaint of an aristocrat to the king prompted the king to urge the archbishop of Prague to warn the popular preacher. The archbishop responded, "Hus is bound by his ordination oath to speak the truth without respect of persons." When Hus later addressed the vices of the clergy, the archbishop found himself complaining to the king, only to be reminded, "Hus is bound by his ordination oath to speak the truth without respect of persons."

Hus' preaching gave Bohemians a controlling influence in the administrative affairs of Prague University, but Hus was more than a social reformer. He began preaching the views of Wycliffe even though the English reformer had been condemned by the Council at Black-Friars, England. The public burning of Wycliffe's books in Prague did not dissuade him. Remaining true to his ordination oath, Hus was soon addressing the sins of the pope.

When John XXIII launched a military campaign against the king of Naples, he financed the campaign with the sale of indulgences. As sales began in Prague, Hus declared his opposition in no uncertain terms. "Let who will proclaim the contrary; let the Pope, or a Bishop, or a Priest say, 'I forgive thee thy sins; I free thee from the pains of hell.' It is all vain, and helps thee nothing," he declared. "God alone, I repeat, can forgive sins through Christ."

Hus' message was as quickly embraced by the people as it was opposed by church authorities. In 1412, Hus conducted a public funeral for three young men beheaded for challenging the sale of indulgences. That action thrust him into leadership of the reform movement and placed his own life in jeopardy. He took refuge in the Castle of Kradonec and continued to encourage reform, preaching to crowds in the fields and writing two significant books.

Hus' first book, *On Traffic in Holy Things*, restated his opposition to the sale of indulgences, suggesting that the pope was guilty of simony. His second book, *The Church*, challenged the popular concept of "the Holy Catholic Church," claiming that the true church was composed exclusively of those predestined to heaven. Hus suggested that the moral failings of many religious leaders in that age, even the pope, might indicate that they were not members of the true church. This second book undermined the authority of the

established church, which had already been weakened by the Great Schism between East and West.

Under pressure from Sigismund, king of the Romans and Hungary, Pope John XXIII convened a general church council at Constance in 1414 to restore order to Catholicism in Europe. Over 50,000 religious and civic leaders gathered to bring an end to the Great Schism. Hus attended to present his views, having been promised “safe conduct” and a free hearing by Sigismund.

Hus quickly learned Sigismund’s letter of safe conduct would not be honored. John XXIII imprisoned him in a dungeon on an island in the Rhine River. Three and a half months later, Hus was moved to the tower of a castle on Lake Geneva. During his imprisonment, John XXIII was deposed and replaced by Martin V. The change in popes did not alter his fate. His views were examined by the council and condemned.

On July 6, 1415, Hus finally appeared before the council to give his defense, but the decision had already been made. His views had been condemned by the council in Hus’ absence. His fifty-sixth birthday was to be the day of his death. When the sentence was pronounced, Hus prayed for his accusers: “Lord Jesus Christ, pardon all my enemies, I pray thee, for the sake of Your great mercy! You know that they have falsely accused me, brought forward false witnesses and false articles against me. Oh, pardon them for Your infinite mercies’ sake.”

### Revival in Florence, Italy (1481)

Girolamo Savonarola began his career as a preacher in 1452, the same year Martin Luther was born. While unknown to many people today, Savonarola was a significant forerunner of the Protestant Reformation that later swept Europe and the world. He was a man of deep piety and protracted prayers, a powerful pulpiteer with a voice like thunder so that people shook with conviction when they heard his sermons.

Savonarola preached that all believers made up the true church, the body of Christ. He was best known for preaching God’s judgment and vengeance upon sin. His Bible was covered with notes that came to him as he studied the Scripture, and his sermons were expositions of the Word of God. He had visions of ecstasy, and made many predictions about the future—most of them came true—and many agree that he was the man God used to bring great revival to Florence, Italy.

Savonarola was by no means just an emotional preacher. Early on, he became an earnest student of Aristotle and the great philosophers; then he studied the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, which challenged his thinking about God. Concerning his visions he said:

They came to me in earliest youth, but it was only at Brescia that I began to proclaim them. Thence, was I sent by the Lord to Florence, which is in the heart of Italy, in order that “the Reformation of Italy might begin.”

As a young man, his intense devotion to Jesus Christ became evident. He spent many hours in prayer and fasting and knelt at the church altar for long periods of time.



Savonarola's soul was deeply troubled by the sin, worldliness, and vice that he saw everywhere in Italy, but his concern was not just over such filthy sins. He lashed out as well at luxury, splendor, and wealth that dragged people away from God.

At the age of twenty-three, Savonarola submitted himself to a Dominican priory because St. Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican, but he didn't ask to become a friar. He wanted to be a drudge, to do the lowest forms of servant work in the convent. He spent much of his time fasting, praying, and leading a quiet life. Only later in life did he become a friar.

At twenty-nine, he was sent to the priory of St. Mark's in Florence, considered the most beautiful and cultured city of Italy. Ruled by the de Medici family, Florence had been shaped by the Renaissance as had no other city in Europe. Many of the citizens knew Greek and Latin and read the classics. Savonarola expected the Florentines to lead a more pure and noble life because of their culture and intelligence, but was utterly disappointed in their corrupt life and passion for festivals, entertainments, and worldly displays.

At St. Mark's, he was made instructor of the novices, a task that he would consider his main calling for the rest of his life. When he began preaching, his sermons were filled with a strong sense of approaching judgment and the vengeance of God upon the sins of the city. The cultured people paid little heed to Savonarola. When he traveled to outlying districts, however, his sermons were better received in the small villages, where people were uneducated and more trusting.

Savonarola was sent to Reggio D' Emilia, Italy, and there his preaching was so "white hot" and eloquent that he made a great impression on the people. Returning to Florence with a greater reputation, he began delivering his sermons at the little church of the Murite Convent. Here he began to pray and wait upon God for a direct revelation from heaven.

One day while talking with a nun, he suddenly saw a vision in which heaven opened and all the future calamities of the church passed before his eyes. The vision charged Savonarola to announce God's judgment to the people. From that moment on, he was filled with a new unction in preaching, and his voice denounced sin so effectively that people staggered out from the small church, dazed, bewildered, and speechless. People broke into tears while he preached. Sometimes the congregation couldn't hear his preaching because of the sobbing and weeping of people repenting of sin.

Records tell us that when Savonarola was engaged in prayer, he frequently fell into trances and lost all touch with the world about him. On Christmas Eve, 1446, while seated in the pulpit, he remained unmoved for five hours; the people waited patiently all during this time, for they knew he was receiving a message from God. As he sat in the pulpit, his face appeared illuminated to all the church. There seemed to be a beam of light from his eyes, as though from heaven itself.

In 1484, Savonarola was sent to preach in the region of Lombardi, and when he returned, the citizens of Florence had greater confidence in his mission. His fame continued to spread over all Italy. Returning to Florence, he began teaching the Book of

Revelation to the friars in the garden of St. Mark's. But the laymen begged for admittance to his lectures because he preached the Word of God, and his fame was still increasing.

Often people arose during the middle of the night to line up at the front door of his church to make sure they got a seat. Others climbed the iron grating and clung there for hours to see and hear him preach. Because of his fame, Savonarola was transferred to the larger Duomo Cathedral Church of Florence. However, when taking this new charge, he predicted that he would be there only for eight years, which proved to be accurate.

One account described his great popularity this way:

People came along the streets, singing and rejoicing and listening to the sermons with such interest that when they were finished, the people thought he had scarcely begun. Savonarola seemed to be swept onward by a might not his own, and carried his audiences with him. Soon, all of Florence was at the feet of this great preacher.

Lorenzo de Medici, ruler of Florence, tried every way possible to silence the young preacher, but could not.

For his part, Savonarola predicted that within a year, three people would die: Lorenzo, the pope, and the king of Naples. It all came to pass as he predicted.

Two years later the new king of France, Charles VIII, invaded Italy and sacked Naples. As he advanced on Florence, Savonarola cried for the people to repent of their sins in order to save themselves from destruction, and they did. Then Savonarola went out to meet Charles and begged him to spare Florence, which he did. Savonarola also predicted that if Charles didn't leave Florence, he would incur the vengeance of God. Charles left.

During the French invasion, the government of the de Medicis collapsed and the people came to Savonarola wanting to know what kind of government they should adopt. Through his sermons, Savonarola outlined a form of democracy, similar to our representative form of government. He preached that the new government should have a just form of taxation, do away with torture, pass laws against gambling, and institute a court of appeal for those who were tried unjustly. The new laws of Florence became a model for many other cities throughout Europe and eventually influenced the entire world.

The revival in Florence became so great that even the hoodlums gave up singing their filthy songs and began singing hymns. The children went from house to house gathering all types of items people had acquired from carnivals, sinful entertainment, and other kinds of wickedness, bringing them to the piazza to be burned. The sinful articles that were burned formed an octangular pyramid some 60 feet tall and 240 feet in circumference at the base.

Nevertheless, this triumph was short-lived. Pope Alexander IV excommunicated Savonarola for refusing to stop publicizing his prophecies, and the preacher had made

many enemies in Florence. The people ultimately turned against him and imprisoned him. Finally he was hanged in the public square in Florence.

### A Summary of the Pre-Reformation Revivals

A history of the Christian church includes both a survey of triumphs accomplished by the people of God and a survey of corruption and unbelief when God's people didn't follow the truth. The church was barely born when the greed of Ananias and Sapphira manifested itself, even when God was working miracles among his people.

From the apostles onward, there was a struggle between the forces of corruption and the forces of good, but too often sin won out, and the churches staggered onward. Throughout the Middle Ages, after the dissolution of the Roman Empire and the domination of barbarian peoples, perhaps the brightest lights were in the monasteries.

Outside the Catholic Church, the influence of evangelical sects such as the Waldensians, the Lollards, and the Brethren of the Common Life grew.

A few reformers stood out at the end of the Middle Ages. Their message of light pointed many toward the coming Reformation and, in fact, these reformers laid the foundation for the Protestant Reformation: they included John Wycliffe in England, John Hus in Bohemia, and Girolamo Savonarola in Italy. The greatness of their revival is not measured by what they accomplished, but by what was accomplished by those who followed their example.

1-1-2000

## The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever: from Pentecost to the Present

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