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Chapter One

The Church That Got Reformed

It is too simplistic to say that prior to the Protestant Reformation the Roman Catholic Church was corrupt and Luther revolted. We must also learn the details about the corruption, and how it spread and affected the events that took place during that period.

The political climate in the 15th Century was so different from ours in the early 21st Century that, even when we read the words, we have trouble contemplating what it was like. It was the end of the era of Middle-Age feudal society, where one strongman could control a large territory and keep it under his influence. It was becoming common for groups of these feudal lords to band together to begin protecting a greater expanse of land. Many of these groupings were of peoples of similar ethnic heritage and the growth began what we now recognize as a “national state.” Thus, the political climate was in flux and the art of “statesmanship” was just beginning.

The geographic and economic climates were intermingled and centered on Spain and Portugal, the two nations leading the way in global exploration. This resulted in a great expansion of trade and the influx of massive amounts of gold and silver brought back from the New World. As one would expect, those who became the “new rich” were far less committed to their more rural heritage, which inevitably resulted in the growth of cities where trade and business could be more easily conducted.

The world was undergoing its greatest changes in the areas of culture and intellectual interests. The 15th Century saw the growth of the Renaissance. One of the results was the advent of a movement known as Christian Humanism. Leaders of the movement taught the necessity of modern people to be concerned about morals—something that half a century earlier was much less emphasized. Another result was a growing interest in classical languages, especially Greek and Hebrew. Of course, this led to the reading of the older manuscripts of the Bible, initially just to better understand the language.

It will be my general policy throughout this book to focus more on the stories of people than on movements and theories. I firmly believe that the study of central historical figures is the best way for people today to understand history. People are what interests us most today, and it is in understanding people that we get the clearest picture of the Roman Catholic Church of this period, that is, the Church that got reformed.

Trying to find a starting place in a study of history is always difficult, but in this case, there is one person who stands head and shoulders above his peers over the course of several centuries and thus becomes the perfect person with whom to start. A priest known as Bernard of Clairvaux was certainly the greatest religious force of the 12th century—if not for several centuries. He was born in France into a family of wealth; his dad was a knight. His mother was the strong religious influence on her son as she was, even more so than other mothers among her peers, deeply religious.

Bernard clearly had inherited his father's leadership skills. When he was 20 years old, he persuaded 30 of his friends to join a monastery with him. A few years later as a young priest,

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he was able to raise the needed resources to start his own monastery in the town of Clairvaux, France. His monastic life was the proper choice for Bernard. He wanted no part of the politics of a secular life, of which he was personally acquainted. He, like his mother, had developed a deep piety that—one can tell from his writings—was based on his own personal love for Jesus, so much so that two of the great Reformers that we will study soon, Luther and Calvin, both commented in their writings that they felt that Bernard was a “true evangelical.”

Bernard was not only a man of prayer; he was also a man of action. He was a major player in the Roman Catholic Church of his era. One of his former students at the monastery in Clairvaux became Pope Eugene III and Bernard was able to exercise great influence. In fact, a close study of the Church in the 12th Century sees Bernard at the center of the solution of several major problems. From this involvement, he saw very early on the damage that was being done to the Church as it grew so quickly to great wealth, and most of his writings contain warnings on this specific problem.

Although they began in the late 11th century, the series of planned invasions known as the Crusades carried on to the 13th Century and thus paralleled the time frame in which we are beginning our examination of the Church that got reformed. While the Muslim world of the time clearly had the greatest culture and trade of the age, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church were focused on only one thing: to take back the Holy Land from the “infidels”.

The Patriarch of Constantinople (the city in Turkey we now know as Istanbul) was the closest to the situation at the beginning and he contacted Pope Urban asking for help. After some consultation with other archbishops, the Pope decided

that it was important for the Church to take the leadership in Europe and to use military force to “free” Jerusalem. Pope Urban began preaching the rationale for the First Crusade, and thus for the series of seven major war efforts, during the next 200 years.

Of the seven Crusades, only two could be considered successful in any way. The war was not won, but the most important outcome of the Crusades was not its effect in the Middle East of that day (although we may be feeling some serious effect of the Crusades in our day and age). The most important outcome was the growth of the power of the Papacy (a word regularly used to refer to the rule of Popes in the Church). The growth of the Papacy was symbolic of growth of Europe’s status and power in the world.

Although earlier Popes were guilty of abusing the power of their office, we will focus on the best known and perhaps the most outrageous in the exercise of his power. As a young priest and even as a cardinal in the Church, Innocent III had been a man of personal humility and piety. Once he became Pope, however, he adopted an extremely high conception of the office and under him, it reached the very peak of power.

His power had effect in every major government in Europe. He held the power to dictate who would be heir to the German throne. When the King of France illegally divorced his wife, Innocent III stopped all religious services throughout the country until the King obeyed his edict and took his wife back. When King John of England did not want to appoint the Pope’s choice for Archbishop of Canterbury (the highest ranking priest in the then totally Roman Catholic country), the Pope excommunicated the King! It would have been impossible to keep his throne without being Catholic, so he gave in to the Pope’s pressure and made the appointment. (As an interesting

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aside, this is the same King John, who was pressured by his people to sign the Magna Carta and began the process of developing democracy in the English-speaking world.)

Innocent III strongly centralized power within the Roman church hierarchy and actually made all decisions himself. The conquest of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade even gave him power for a period of time over the Eastern Orthodox Church (which had divided from the Roman Church just over 150 years earlier). The Popes who came after Innocent III tried to maintain his power, but were unable to because they could not stand up to the level of his great leadership ability and his personal piety.

At the end of the 13th Century, a pope named Boniface VIII came to rule in Rome. He went beyond even Innocent III's views and practices. He saw himself as the ruler of all kings—all governments were to be in submission to the Church. He threatened to excommunicate any king who taxed Church property or priests. He declared that no one could possibly go to heaven unless he or she was a member of the Roman Catholic Church. He declared that all kings and worldly powers were subject to spiritual power, and that he, Pope Boniface VIII, represented that power on earth.

Finally, he came to a major showdown with King Philip of France over the arrest of a bishop. In order to exercise as much power as possible against the Pope, King Phillip called the first French States-General, a major meeting including clergy, nobility and common people. It was the first national assembly of its kind in Europe. The States-General upheld the action of the King and brought charges of heresy and immorality against the Pope. To create one of history's great cliffhangers, Philip had his troops kidnap the Pope just before he issued an order of excommunication against the King. The

Pope died just a month later, and the Papacy quickly went downhill from this point. Clearly, this conflict changed the swing of the pendulum and marked the important rise of nationalism versus the Papacy.

The Pope who followed Boniface lived less than a year. His successor was a Frenchman, who took the name of Clement V. Clement came from a wealthy family and was understandably spoiled; he pretty much got his way throughout all his life. Unlike Bernard, who also came from a family of wealth and stature, Clement developed grave moral faults, especially in the area sexual sins. Because of his spiritual weakness, he quickly fell under the power of King Philip who had developed a great deal power in his battle with Boniface.

The clearest illustration of King Philip's power was his demand that Clement move his offices from Rome to a town in southeastern France on the Rhone River, Avignon, in 1309. Understand that every nation or large people group had its own archbishop, and the archbishop of Rome had become the "leading" archbishop and ultimately the Pope of the entire Church. For the Pope to move out of Rome, meant that the archbishop of Italy had moved to France!

This move solidified King Philip's power over the Roman Catholic Church. For the next 70 years, all Popes were Frenchmen. Each of them was under the total domination and political power of the King of France. The government heavily taxed churches, as well as the people through their church, to support the civil government. Anyone desiring to be a priest, a bishop, or any other kind of church official had to pay the equivalent of one year's wages to the civil government. Because of the 70 year period of his situation (paralleling the 70 years that Israel was in captivity in Babylon), this period of

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history is known as the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy. It lasted until 1377.

As if this situation weren't bad enough, ultimately a total schism came in the Papacy. One French Pope (named Gregory XI), during a period of several political upheavals in France and Italy, decided to move the headquarters back to Rome. He died shortly after the move. The people of Rome demonstrated in vast numbers, and demanded that the Papacy stay in Rome; they physically threatened harm to the cardinals who were gathered there for the election of the new Pope. Demonstrating not one whit of backbone, the Cardinals quickly elected an Italian as the new Pope. Trouble was, in the haste of the election, they picked a scoundrel who everyone—French, Italian, whoever—very soon wanted to get rid of.

Four months later, the very same Cardinals gathered and, breaking centuries of precedence, voted to declare their first choice void since it had been dictated by mob violence. They then quickly voted a Frenchman as the new Pope. This not only failed to solve the problem, it created an even greater problem. Now there were *two* Popes, both elected by the same College of Cardinals. The Italian Pope was acknowledged by the people of Italy, Germany, Scandinavia and England. The French Pope was acknowledged in France, Spain, Scotland, Sicily and part of Germany—an approximately equal number of supporters for each one.

Getting rid of this new problem was not easy. Cardinals on both sides agreed that something had to be done, so they decided to call a meeting with representatives from both the French and Italian camps. After much difficulty and political maneuvering, a "Council" (as these church meetings had been called historically) was held in the Northern Italian town of Pisa

in 1409. Neither Pope was present; they both denied the right of the Council even to meet.

The Council did not deal with the tough issues of needed reform in the Church. All they were able to accomplish was to find a compromise candidate...and they elected him Pope! Now there were *three* Popes—Italian, French, and the Council's Pope!

Finally, into this void of power stepped a man with great leadership and vision, a secular leader, a fellow named Sigismund. He was the King of Hungary and of Bohemia and ultimately became the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. His plan also was to call a Council to meet on the issue, but to ensure that everyone's interests were represented.

The Council was held in the town of Constance, located on a lake that borders on the area that we know today as West Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The Council of Constance was the most brilliant and largely attended gathering of the entire Middle Ages. More people than cardinals attended. All kinds of leaders—Church, government, business, and laity—were there.

After carefully examining the issues, the Council exerted its authority over all in the Church, including all three competing Popes. It deposed the current Conciliary Pisan Pope, who was named John XXIII. (His title was picked up a couple of decades ago by a real Roman Pope.) He, too, had used his power for his own benefit and had become totally corrupt and immoral.

The Italian Pope, utilizing some quick judgment, voluntarily resigned his position. The Council at length convinced several of the nations that were part of the coalition supporting the French Pope (Spain and Scotland) to withdraw their support,

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and he was finally deposed. In 1417, three years after the Council of Constance started, it elected one new Pope. He was a Roman cardinal, and thus demonstrated that the German and Italian leaders had finally subdued French power. This marked the beginning of the Renaissance Papacy.

This series of continuing fiascos concerning the Popes was terrible, but the corruption did not exist only at the top. Not only did the popes become degenerate, but also corruption was also rampant throughout the clergy. Very few priests could read. Most of them were not answering a spiritual call, but rather had purchased the rights to their office, thinking it to be a pleasant lifestyle. On top of their personal degeneration, they would even resort to religious practices far from those promoted by the Church—they practiced witchcraft and devil worship. During this period, a series of plagues spread through Europe that brought on great spiritual depression among the people. Their priests were not equipped to deal with the problems.

We learn from biblical principle that when the church has weak and evil leaders, the entire church is affected. Thus, with bad priests, the result was bad people, and the evil was even deeper among the people.

As horrible as all this sounds, we must not think that everyone in the Roman Catholic Church was bad. We must remember this was still the true Church of Jesus Christ, and God always promises to keep a remnant of true believers. Among this remnant, a few men stand out as “pre-Reformers.”

To find the first of these, we have to look as far back as 300 years before the Reformation. In the French city of Lyons, lived a leading, wealthy merchant named Peter Waldo. Well after he had amassed his fortune, around the age of 40, Peter underwent a conversion experience. While mourning the death

of a close friend, Waldo began to read the Bible. At about the same time, he heard a traveling minstrel singing a religious song. Peter was led to speak to a priest about the major spiritual change in his life.

Peter Waldo visited his parish priest, who for whatever motivation (knowing that his parishioner was one of the wealthiest men in the area), counseled him with the words of Matthew 19:21. *“Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’”* Inexplicably, Waldo took the advice literally. He gave his wife and children a trust fund on which to live. He repaid all the prior interest he had earned in business and he sold everything else he had (which was still a bunch) and gave it directly to the poor of the city.

Peter then left town and started a life as an itinerant preacher. Since he had no money left, he had to live as a beggar. His old friends disowned him, some believing he had lost his mind. But he quickly made many new friends. Many of the poor people of Lyons, who had benefited from his gratitude to them, became his traveling companions and even started to preach with Waldo. Although they were very hard to find (since Rome did not want their parishioners to read the Scriptures—that was the responsibility of the priest—if he could read!), Waldo was able to obtain copies of parts of the Bible translated into French, mostly the Gospels.

Very quickly, Waldo became well known in the region. Thus, he came to the attention of the local bishop. Being confronted with a layperson, who was preaching and distributing copies of the Bible translated into the local language (both of which were outlawed by Rome), he banned him from the diocese. Peter and his band took to the

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mountains where his preaching among the small towns and rural regions became even more famous. Ultimately, this situation came to the attention of the Pope.

Waldo was summoned to a council meeting before the Pope himself to answer charges. In a mixed verdict, the Pope approved the group's vows of poverty but said they could not preach any more. Returning to France, Peter and his followers decided they must follow God and not man, and resumed their itinerant preaching of the Bible. However, they worked hard to stay out of the scrutiny of the Church, so not much is known about Waldo after that. One later Pope did find the group to be heretics, *in absentia*.

There were signs of the growth of groups of Christians who identified themselves as Waldensians, especially in the mountain area of Northern Italy. There are even a handful of small churches yet today in New York City and in rural North Carolina who identify themselves as Waldensians. Whatever his true history turned out to be, one thing is for sure: Peter Waldo was the very first of the pre-Reformation reformers in the Roman Catholic Church.

The next early Reformer worthy of note is John Wycliffe. He lived about 150 years before the Reformation. He was a teacher and scholar in England who had been greatly influenced by the realism of St. Augustine's writings (which was very different from the reigning philosophy of his day and age). Like so many others in the Church at that time, Wycliffe became a priest through his political connections rather than through his spiritual calling to the office.

Once in the Church, Wycliffe became aware of the depth of corruption within the Church and began speaking out, especially in the area of wealth. He was teaching at Oxford at the time and began publicly teaching on the problems in the

Church. His antidote was to require vows of poverty. Needless to say, the “higher-ups” in the clergy didn’t much care for Wycliffe and his views. The Bishop of London summoned him to his office and ordered him to stop teaching those views, but he was not punished because of his great public popularity throughout England.

Wycliffe then began to write pamphlets expressing his views, to which he added his view (learned from Augustine’s writings) that the Bible must be the ultimate authority in the Church, rather than the Pope’s. He went so far as to write that any Pope who grasped worldly power and was eager for taxes is by presumption not among God’s elect and therefore is the Antichrist. The more he read of the Bible, the more he became opposed to the traditional Papacy.

Wycliffe next became convinced that the common people in England should be able to read the Bible themselves in their native tongue. As in the rest of the world, the Bible was generally only available in Latin. Only priests (or at least some of the priests) were able to read Latin. Wycliffe himself translated the New Testament into English, and as you would expect, it was widely received and appreciated throughout the country. He also recruited a group of disciples, known as “poor priests” although none of them were actually recognized priests, who went throughout the country, living under vows of poverty. This vow required them to beg for sustenance, to walk barefoot, clad in long robes with staves in their hands, wandering two-by-two, preaching the gospel. They become known as Lollards (a pejorative name given the group, as the root meaning of the word is “*to mutter*”).

The institutional church waited until they knew Wycliffe was near death before officially declaring him a heretic. When Wycliffe died of natural causes in his own parish, most of his

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followers were forced to flee to Europe. They settled in a section that was then called Bohemia; it is the area we now know as the Czech Republic. Their descendents would become major players in the Reformation that would follow more than 100 years later.

The next important early Reformer was Jan Hus. He lived about 100 years before the Reformation. Hus was born in the area of Bohemia and may well have been influenced by followers of Wycliffe, although we have little historical proof. Hus completed college and immediately went into the priesthood. He was never as radical as Wycliffe had been, but certainly followed the same heritage. Hus became the rector of a great university during the period when Bohemia became a powerful, independent country. From this position, he began to advocate the authority of Scripture over Popes and Councils, as well as the preaching of the Word of God to all the people.

Through an interesting providence of God (there are no real coincidences in God's work, are there?), the Council of Constance (the one that finally solved the three-Pope crisis) dealt with Wycliffe's heresy at the same time. They decided that Wycliffe's teaching was so terrible that they had his body exhumed from its grave and then burned as a sign of their judgment that he was in Hell. Then, they sent for Hus!

Being a fairly wise person, Hus understood what was going to happen...but he went to meet with the Council anyway. There, under severe questioning, he held to his principles, knowing that if he recanted he would be safe. Nevertheless, Hus proclaimed that the Word of God was of higher authority than the word of the Council, and he was condemned and burned at the stake. As early as 100 years before the Reformation, people were already dying in defense of the concept that would become known as *Sola Scriptura* (the

Scriptures alone)—one of the great Reformation principles still followed today.

There is one other significant event also worth looking at; it started at about the same time as Hus lived. Beginning with the Council of Pisa (the one begun to figure out what to do with the two-Pope crisis) and continuing with the Council of Constance, a movement developed—known as the Conciliary Movement—to continue to advocate removing power away from one man or a small group of men and give it to a representative body of the people. While its origins were within a religious context, the principles were transferable to the sphere of government.

A scholar named Marsiglio of Padua (who is not well known in secular history) began to write extensively on this subject. He was a student of Aristotle and learned in his studies that power should be vested in the people. That is, the people should decide who should rule over them, and this should be true in both the State and the Church. (This, of course, became one of the foundational principles of Presbyterian Church Government!) Marsiglio went so far as to deny the supremacy of Peter among the Apostles (which was a central tenant in the Roman Catholic teaching leading to the establishment of the Papacy).

While this was a philosophical position of tremendous potential, Marsiglio lacked any real zeal or personal leadership, so few followed him. This movement was successful in solving the crisis in the Papacy, but it also sought to stifle all teaching that was contrary to current Church traditions. As you can already sense, the Roman Catholic Church at the beginning of the 16th Century was ripe for being known historically as the Church that got reformed.