

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#15. Summary of The Church in the Fourteenth Century

Did you know the church had its own period of "Babylonian Captivity?" At least that is how a period of intrigue in the 14th century has been described by many historians. The original use of the term came from an Italian poet named Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374). As Christendom entered the new century, the tension between Popes and Kings escalated into what essentially became an ecclesiastical civil war.

Pope Boniface VIII (ruled from 1294-1303), who had ties to powerful Italian nobility, resisted King Philip IV of France (ruled from 1285-1314), who had strong control over the priests who served in the territory of his French Kingdom.

When Boniface died in 1303, he was replaced by Pope Benedict XI. The new Pontiff did not serve long either (many historians believe he may have been poisoned). His successor was Clement V, a priest who had served in France and was more sympathetic toward King Philip and his authority over the Church in France. The poet Petrarch referred to Avignon as an immoral place, "the sewer of the world." In his classic writing known as The Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri's section called "The Inferno" placed Pope Boniface VIII in the Eighth Circle of Hell, a level of punishment reserved for those who allowed and encouraged the selling of offices in the church to the highest bidder. This is called Simony, based on Simon the Magician in Acts 8.

One of Clement's first mandates as Pope was to move the Papal seat of power from Rome to Avignon in France. As a result, for seventy years (about the duration of the original "Babylonian Captivity"), the French kings essentially controlled the Papacy and the church. The church, already confused and divided over the sense of her calling, was now turned upside down and lost her way in large measure.

In 1376, Catherine of Sienna, a nun and mystic within the Catholic church, appealed to Pope Gregory XI concerning what she described as "the sins of Avignon." Gregory returned to Rome, once again establishing the Papacy there, but he died a year later. The process of selecting the new Pope resulted in increased confusion and continued controversy. Urban VI was finally selected to replace Gregory, but unhappy priests withdrew to Avignon and selected Clement VII to rule in opposition to Rome. This era is known as The Papal Schism that marked the early 15th century.

In spite of intrigue and carnality, this era gave rise to a mighty leader named John Wycliffe (1320?-1384), who was a professor at Balliol College in Oxford University. Disagreeing with many expressions of the Catholic Church, Wycliffe pointed Christians back to the Scriptures alone as the source of authority concerning faith and Christian living. In 1382, he translated the Latin Bible into the English of his time in order to give the people of England the Scripture in their own language. His followers became known as the Lollards, who stressed a return to Bible preaching, a denial of the Papacy itself, and disagreed with the doctrine of Transubstantiation concerning the Lord's Supper. He also had tremendous influence on the development of pre-reformers like John Huss of Czechoslovakia, who was martyred in 1415.

Wycliffe often was hauled into ecclesiastical court proceedings. Unable to be silenced, he continued his work, earning the title "The Morningstar of the Reformation." A case can be made that few people were as hated in his time as much as John Wycliffe. After his death by stroke in 1384, Wycliffe was buried in honor and laid to rest - or so it seemed. During the Council of Constance (1414-1418), he was condemned as a heretic. Though Wycliffe had been dead 30 years, in 1415 he was excommunicated, his remains disinterred, burned, and then cast into the River Swift. Little did the church know that she was about to see a resurrection of truth that many thought had been lost forever. Just as the Law of Moses was rediscovered in Josiah's day, vital reformation truths would find its way into the life of Christ's Church because of the ministry of Wycliffe, Huss, and others like them.