

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#16. Summary of The Church in the Fifteenth Century

The 15th century saw the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe, as well as the budding of the Protestant Reformation throughout the region. The Renaissance (14th-16th centuries) is often linked to the eventual rise of "reason over faith," but this was not necessarily so at the beginning. Therefore, the era of the Renaissance has been cursed as the enemy of Christendom by many, and heralded as an act of God's Providence by others. Both statements are true to some extent.

The Renaissance (and later the Enlightenment during the 17th and 18th centuries) was a rebirth of the arts and scholasticism that changed Europe's way of life intellectually, scientifically, and behaviorally. The idea of ad fontes ("back to the fountains" or "back to the headwaters") was a quest to return to classical antiquity in almost every area of life. The negative for Christianity was an overall marginalization of faith matters in favor of intellectual prowess. The good news for the Church was that Biblical scholars began to focus on the original Scriptural texts in Hebrew and Greek instead of the Latin translation. The result of this was a better understanding of the message of the Scriptures as cherished by the earliest Christians. There was a renewed passion to study the Scriptures and thereby understand and embrace a clearer picture of the true nature and scope of Christianity. Two men in particular changed the course of church history. We mentioned John Wycliffe in the previous chapter. Though long dead, Wycliffe would impact John Hus (Jan Huss) of Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic) and Girolamo Savonarola of Italy.

Hus was born in 1373 and became a Priest in charge of the Charles University in Prague. Through the writings of Wycliffe, he became convinced the church of his day had drifted considerably from the teachings of the early Christians. As he preached his convictions, he met with heavy opposition from religious leaders. He was excommunicated, and was offered restoration if he would renounce

his teachings. He agreed to repudiate any teaching he had espoused if he could be shown the error of his conclusions. Unable to resist the teaching of Hus, the church had him burned at the stake as an enemy of the Church in 1415.

Savonarola was born in 1452 in Florence, Italy. A Dominican Monk, he preached powerfully in Florence and seemed to operate in prophetic gifting as well. Initially offered with promotion if he would moderate his message, Savonarola eventually was imprisoned and tortured by the Inquisition, which had been established by Pope Gregory in 1232 for the suppression of heresy. Like Hus, Savonarola was burned at the stake (1498) for refusing to recant the message he believed to be the true Gospel.

The movement toward Reformation was reaching critical mass. Gerard Groote was fueling revival in the Netherlands. Other notables such as Martin Luther, Thomas a Kempis and Desiderius Erasmus were being influenced along similar lines. The Word of God was being re-examined, and confidence in its message and authority was being refined.

Both Savonarola and Hus spoke prophetically of the coming revival. Savanarokla spoke of reformation coming to his church and the city of Florence. Hus said, "if the authorities burn this 'goose' (meaning himself), God will send a 'swan' to replace me." This is generally thought to be pointing to Martin Luther.

The church in the 16th century would see the budding reformation come into full bloom!

Personal Note: Thanks to John Hus for his faithful witness. I have reports that some of his followers were driven out of Czechoslovakia into Britain near the time of his martyrdom. When one of these families anglicized their name, it became Chitty. So we have some evidence that traces my family back to the congregation of John Hus.