

**Church Leadership?  
Biblical Authority?**

**A Pair of Errors in the Pre-reformation Church**



**Early Church History  
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## **Church Leadership? Biblical Authority?**

### **A Pair of Errors in the Pre-reformation Church**

Many historians place the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses in Wittenberg, Germany. However the actual start of the movement began much earlier. One could supply a host of reasons as to how the reformation was conditioned by political, social, economic, moral and intellectual factors that had been building for hundreds of years. Although for this writer it is important to note that it was above all a religious movement led by men interested in a genuine reform of the Christian churches policies and practices, not for self promotion but for the greater care of God's people.

Through this essay, the two basic problems of the pre-reformation Church will be provided and examples of historic events which highlight these errors will be explored. The actions of those that sought to reform the Church and correct these flaws, will also be given along with some background on these individuals.

The first major problem in the early church was found in the corrupt leadership of man rather than the headship of Christ. This fact is illustrated by Pope Boniface VIII's struggle with the king of France, which resulted in the pope's humiliation and untimely death in 1303. The papacy was subsequently located in Avignon, France for an approximately seventy-year period known in history as the Avignon Papacy or the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy (1303-77). Efforts to restore the papacy to Rome at

first only resulted in a division known as the Great Schism. Rival popes claimed legitimacy until the situation was finally resolved in 1417.

Such scandalous affairs in the highest leadership of the Roman Catholic Church led to increasing corruption and a loss of confidence in the church. Many questioned the absolute authority claimed for the pope. Others increasingly called for a reform of the church in “head and members.”

The years leading up to 1517 were also plagued by moral corruption and abuse of position in the Roman Catholic Church. The priesthood was guilty of several abuses of privilege and responsibility, including simony (using one’s wealth or influence to purchase an ecclesiastical office), pluralism (holding multiple offices simultaneously) and absenteeism (the failure to reside in the parish where they were supposed to minister). The practice of celibacy which was imposed by the church on the priesthood was often abused or ignored, leading to immoral conduct on the part of the clergy. Secular-minded, ignorant priests corrupted their position by neglect or abuse of power. Little was done to hide these actions and many priests in fact flaunted their high position and wealth. During the fifteenth century the worldliness and corruption in the church reached its highest point.

Other examples of this applied to Pope Clement V (1305-1315), the first of the Avignon Popes, who nearly exhausted the papal treasury with high living and various schemes. He centralized the Curia and increased the number of benefices which the Pope alone could manage. Since these were sold off to the highest bidders, the Pope had control of more money than ever. Martin V, whose election ended the Great Schism and returned the papacy to Rome (1447-1455), was a spiritual man by all reports but engaged

in lavish spending in support of the arts and the restoration of churches on a grand scale. Calistus III, a Spaniard (1455-1458), began selling indulgences to support his crusade to liberate Constantinople from the Turks. Sixtus IV (1471-1484) also had a desire to launch crusades. He was notorious for nepotism and nearly bankrupted the Papacy by his lavish generosity to his own family members and his military schemes. Although he began as a Franciscan, he reigned and lived as a prince. One of his nephews whom he made a Cardinal, became Julius the II (1503-1513) whose famous project, the grand St. Peter's Basilica, was to be supported by a grander use of the system of indulgences.

Among those who spoke out for a reform of the church was the Dominican Giralamo Savonarola (1452-1498) of Florence, Italy. This fiery preacher spoke out against the corrupt morals of the city's leaders and the abuses of the papacy. The people were won over to Savonarola's cause in Florence, but because of religious rivalries and political circumstances, the movement was short-lived. Savonarola was hanged and burned for heresy in 1498.

During the late Middle Ages, several other movements arose that challenged the basic doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Many of these movements were officially condemned by the church as heresy and were severely suppressed. It is important to note that these reformers were seeking to correct the leadership of the church and solve the second the major problem of the early church. This need was for the church to view scripture appropriately and use it wisely in the training and growth of God's people.

The Albigensians arose in southern France in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The Abigensians (also called Cathari) held to a strict dualism similar to the ancient Gnostics. Most notably they held the New Testament to be the sole standard of

authority – a challenge to the authority claimed by the pope. The sect became the object of a terrible campaign of persecution when Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against them in 1204.

A movement known as the Waldensians was probably founded in the eleventh century by Peter Waldo. Traveling preachers known as the Poor Men of Lyons emphasized the study and preaching of the Bible. They translated the New Testament into the vernacular, rejected the Catholic doctrines of the priesthood and purgatory and advocated a return to the Scriptures as the only authority in religion.

In England, John Wycliffe (1324-84), a well-known professor at Oxford, also challenged the authority of the papacy. During the Avignon Papacy, he argued that all legitimate dominion comes from God and is characterized by the authority exercised by Christ on earth – not to be served but to serve. During the Great Schism, Wycliffe taught that the true church of Christ, rather than consisting of the pope and church hierarchy, is the invisible body of the elect. He promoted the study of Scripture over the tradition of the church. He taught that the Scriptures ought to be put into the hands of the elect, and in their own language. Wycliffe thus provided an English translation in about 1384.

Wycliffe was eventually condemned for heresy, but his influence continued. His followers, called “Lollards,” spread his teachings as an underground movement in England. They rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, the veneration of images, clerical celibacy and other Catholic doctrines as abominations. They were an important influence in England on the eve of the Protestant Reformation.

Another early voice calling for reform was John Huss (1369-1415), a Bohemian preacher and scholar. Influenced by Wycliffe’s writings, Huss argued that the true church

was not the institution as defined by Catholicism, but the body of the elect under the headship of Christ. He insisted the Bible is the final authority by which the pope or any Christian is to be judged. Huss was burned for heresy in 1415, about a century before Luther's stand in Wittenberg.

Each Reformers' high view of scripture and passion for its dissemination to God's people displayed the need for more than just reformation in the early church, but restoration as well. There were other factors at work in this period that also highlights the need of the church leadership to heighten their view and use of scripture, one of which was the Renaissance.

The Renaissance greatly affected the popes of the period. Many of the "Renaissance Popes" such as Julius II (1441-1513) were humanists who were more interested in classical culture and art than in spiritual concerns. Some, such as Alexander VI (1431-1503), lived notoriously wicked and scandalous lives. Leo X (1475-1521), the son of Lorenzo de' Medici and pope when Martin Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses, once said that God gave him the papacy so he would "enjoy it."

The Renaissance also contributed to the coming Reformation in other, more positive ways. The invention of the moveable type printing press by Johann Gutenberg in about 1456 provided a medium for the spread of ideas. Renaissance scholars north of the Alps shared many of the same interests – a love for ancient sources, an emphasis on the human being as an individual and a belief in the rational abilities of the human mind. These "northern Christian humanists," however, were less interested in the classical past than in the Christian past. They applied the techniques and methods of Renaissance humanism to the study of the Scriptures in their original languages, as well as the study of "church

fathers” such as Augustine. Their chief concern for human beings was for their souls. Their emphasis was ethical and religious rather than aesthetic and secular.

The result of this emphasis was an interest in a return to the Scriptures and restoration of primitive Christianity. The Biblical humanists pointed out the evils in the church of their day and called for internal reform. Perhaps most influential was Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536), known as the “prince of the humanists.” Erasmus used his broad scholarship to develop a text of the New Testament in Greek based on four Greek manuscripts available to him. With the help of the printing press, Erasmus published the first printed Greek text of the New Testament in 1516. The ability to study the Bible in its original languages encouraged more accurate comparison of the church of their day with the church of the New Testament. Martin Luther, for example, made immediate use of Erasmus’ Greek text. He soon learned that the Latin Vulgate’s rendering “do penance” in Matthew 4:17 should more accurately read, “repent.” Such insight contributed to a growing realization that the sacramental system was not supported by Scripture.

While many factors combined to eventually make the Protestant Reformation possible, it was above all a common belief in returning to the sole authority of the Bible that defined the movement. This belief can be seen as a reaction to the problems of the early church which was clearly twofold.

First, the focus in the monasteries as well as in the Church hierarchy turned from imitating Christ as the savior of the poor and weak, to the gaining of affluence and power. Corruption became deeply embedded within the Church's most powerful leadership positions and the concerns of the Church turned away from spirituality to the defense of corrupt members and the retention of wealth enjoyed by the papacy.

Secondly, Bibles were expensive and rare. They could be accessed only in libraries and wealthier churches. The only laymen to have Bibles were nobles and the very rich. Biblical instruction was conveyed to the masses through paintings and windows and in commemorative events composed of processions and dialogues.

There were two kinds of religious experience in the pre-reformation church, those who heard and were grasped by the biblical message of grace and Good News, and those who formed a “popish religion” as largely a matter of superstition. The reformers brought a sense of deeper spiritual things and they sensed the need to feed a deeper spiritual hunger. While many in priestly positions found themselves compelled to support the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed rather than to tend to the spiritual needs of real human beings.

Nothing short of God’s Word delivered in the appropriate tone of Christ would have met the needs of the early Church. Thus there are no greater and more glaring errors in the pre-reformation Church than the lack of Christ-like leadership and an appropriate hermeneutical approach and accountability to God’s word.