5. The High Middle Ages: from 1000-1500

Introduction

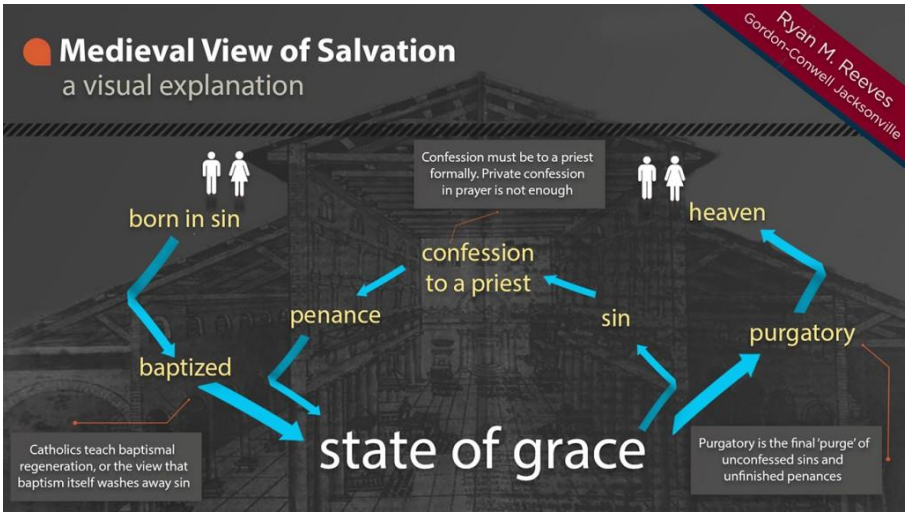
Some acknowledgements as we begin: as ever let me mention my dependence on Capitol Hill Baptist Church and on Garry Williams' lectures in producing this material. I've also drawn on Mike Reeves' book *The breeze of the centuries,* Ros Clarke's *The church under construction,* and Marian Raikes' booklet on spiritual growth called *Presenting everyone mature.*

As begin let's PRAY and then listen to God's Word:

Matthew 11:25-30, At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; [26] yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. [27] All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. [28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

1. The Medieval Scheme of Salvation

By the END of the Middle Ages what was it that bothered Martin Luther and the Reformers in the 1500s so very much about the Roman Catholic church? Here's an infographic depicting the Medieval Catholic scheme of salvation which controlled the lives and destinies of all people everywhere:



What did the Medieval church teach?

- Original sin. All people everywhere were born with a sinful nature. On account of this we actually commit sins.
- Baptism at the hands of a priest automatically removes original sin. It brings a person into a state of grace. They are infused with righteousness. However, this "grace" can go up and down – and indeed be lost. This "righteousness" will ebb and flow. Why?

- Sin means that a person falls from this state of grace. They must confess their sins to a priest who alone is able to pronounce forgive, instruct them to perform certain religious works (penance), and restore them to a state of grace.
- If you die having committed a mortal sin (they had two categories of sin: mortal and venial) you would be irretrievably damned. If you die in a state of venial sin you will go to purgatory, potentially for thousands of years – on account of all those sins you did not confess and all those penances you did not adequately perform.
- Your time in purgatory can be lessened by the purchase of indulgences by your surviving relatives: these were church certificates declaring "time off" from purgatory. It was this that prompted Luther on 31 October 1517 to begin a formal protest against the church. But behind indulgences lay a structure of church authority and false teaching that obscured Christ and hid the doctrine of salvation alone, by Christ alone, through grace alone, to the glory of God alone.

That's where we end up – theologically – by the end of our period. In our session today we're going to take a look at some key events in the period 1000-1500. And we're going to look at the question of truth and error in this period. And it'll help us understand: how did we get into this mess!

2. Key events from 1000-1500

(a) Kings and the Church in 1000AD

How "dark" was it in the year 1000AD? The early Middle Ages (from c.500-1000) are often called the Dark Ages. These were the years following the fall of Rome. Was everything Dark and Bad? No. But a lot certainly began to go wrong: in politics and government, and in the church. So that, by 1000AD, all was certainly not well.

The Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, died in 814. The Empire came under extreme pressure. Vikings attacked from the north, Magyars from the east, and Saracens (Muslim pirates, from the south). Charlemagne's heirs included (listen to their names!) Louis the Child, and Louis the Lazy – clues that all was not well.

It was a dark time for the Roman church. For example, Pope Stephen VI dug up his predecessor, put him on trial, convicted him, and threw his body into the River Tiber.

In 962 King Otto I of Germany was crowned Emperor. There then followed the biggest problem of the Medieval period: namely the relationship between church state. We've thought about this previously: how does the church relate to government when persecuted… and then when it is in a position of relative strength. This relationship got a lot thornier – and explains in part why the Medieval church became as corrupt as it did.

(b) The investiture controversy and church-state conflict

This was the age of feudal lords. And this period saw the feudalization of the church and lay control of church authority and appointments. Lords and kings sought to acquire power over the church. Sometimes lay rulers sought power over the church to reform it. But in the long run this move corrupted the church immensely and mostly it was a blatant grab for power and money. As a result, lay people commonly appointed clerics – sometimes even popes.

People came to OWN church offices. “Simony” was rife: this was the practice named after Simon Magus in Acts who thought he could purchase gospel power from the Apostle Peter. Ecclesiastical offices were bought and sold. (One example: Pope Benedict IX was a debauched reprobate. He became pope at the age of 12. He resigned at one point to sell the papacy to his grandfather whom he deposed).

The period from 1000-1500 saw great conflict between emperors and popes. There was open warfare. When kings were weak they would be made to kneel in submission before a pope. (In 1076 Pope Gregory made Emperor Henry IV stand barefoot in the snow for three days before being allowed inside to kiss the papal foot!) But when kings were strong they’d wage war – and often be excommunicated as a result.

The 4th Lateran Council (1215) was part of the so-called “Consiliar” movement, in which the church sought to impose order via church councils. This council attacked corruption and worldliness in the church – it sought to impose some discipline on the clergy. But it also endorsed and formalized the heretical doctrine of transubstantiation.

(c) Conflict within the church

There wasn’t just serious conflict between kings and emperors *and* popes and clerics. Amid the church’s decline into rampant corruption there was also bitter internal dispute.

In the late 1300s there were at times as many as three rival popes – based at Avignon, Rome and Pisa. This was the era of men like Pope Sixtus IV (d.1484) who appointed 6 of his own nephews as Cardinals and murdered at least two of the Medici family with whom he had fallen out. There was Pope Alexander VI (d. 1503), who was a member of the notorious Borgia family, whose children (note: celibacy!!) all benefitted from his papacy in different ways).

(d) Growth of Monasticism

This period saw the growth of Monasticism: we’re not now talking of hermits, but the increasingly influential communities that we began to look at last time.

Key names here would be: Cluniacs, Cistercians (e.g. Bernard of Clairvaux), Franciscans (Francis of Assisi, d.1226), and Dominicans (Dominic Guzman).

What was Monasticism about? We gave a brief assessment of positives and negatives in our last session. For now let me just mention two features.

The Dominican – beggar friars – were founded explicitly to challenge heresy, which was defined as deviation from Catholic dogma.

Overall, by 1500 it was the universal view that Monks and Nuns were the most spiritual members of society. They were even known as “the religious”, over and above local parish priests. There was a clear two-tier spirituality. Feudalism gripped everyday life – everyone was “owned” by someone else. But even in the church the same rigid hierarchy was observed.

(e) The Crusades

One of the most striking outworkings of the idea of “Christendom” was the crusades. These were Christian expeditions undertaken to end Muslim rule in the city of Jerusalem.

In 638, Jerusalem was seized by Muslim forces. It was initially the holiest Islamic city (before the conquest of Mecca), and a mosque was built there. Later, the Dome of the Rock was constructed as the centre of Muslim worship in the city. At first, Christian worship continued peacefully alongside the Islamic worship.

In the 11th century, Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem began to be persecuted, and the Church of the holy Sepulchre was destroyed. It was later rebuilt and pilgrims allowed back, but Christians began to question whether it was right for this place to be under Muslim rule.

In 1095, Pope Urban II called for Christians to band together into an army to march to the Holy Land. The idea swiftly caught hold and even before the official crusade was launched, 40,000 men, women and children went on the People's Crusade in 1096. From then until 1291 there were nine crusades and many more minor expeditions, including the Children's Crusade.

Why did Christians engage in these wars?
(i) to save the holy land from the infidel. Some people genuinely believed in the cause and went to fight because they thought it was their Christian duty to protect the Holy Land from unbelievers.
(ii) to protect national interests. Political alliances with the Byzantine empire made it an astute move for some Europeans to send troops to support them against the invaders.
(iii) to earn favour with the church. At a time when the church itself was so politically powerful, fighting in the crusades could confer wealth and status on those who returned.
(iv) to do penance for sin. Penance for confessed sins could involve the recital of prayers, pilgrimage, and even fighting in the crusades.

What were the consequences of the Crusades? Here's one minor (and humorous) result: in the Middle Ages a man might bathe once a year. However, the crusaders discovered Muslims who – for religious reasons – bathed regularly. Some of the crusaders adopted these practices on returning to England, and were promptly accused of having converted to Islam.

More seriously, the results of the Crusades were mainly malign:
(i) vast amounts of bloodshed. This was true of all sides, but was tragically true of those who claimed to be Christians. It has left a legacy and an "idea" in the Middle East that remains to this day. It was the cause of division among people groups – not just Muslims, but perpetrating terrible mistreatment on Jewish people.
(ii) it led, indirectly, to the Inquisition. What one might call the Crusading mindset was extended formally to include violent opposition to any enemies of the church wherever they might be found. Pope Innocent III established the Inquisition, which was used to oppose Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, heretics, or fellow Christians the pope deemed hostile.
(iii) it exposed the west to Muslim scholarship and the ideas of Aristotle. Greek philosophy had largely been lost to the west. But Muslim scholars became an important resource in passing Aristotelian philosophy on to the likes of Thomas Acquinas.

Let's turn now to the question of truth and error in the High and Late Middle Ages.

3. Truth and error in the High Middle Ages

(a) The Scholastic movement

Up to about 1100 it was common for theology to be done in the monastery. But around this time something new came on the scene: secular *schools* of theology, where learning would be done through debate. These *schola* would give birth to *scholastic theology.*

Technically, scholasticism is just a form of learning. It isn't distinctively Roman Catholic. Following the Reformation great Reformed Scholastics would emerge: men like John Owen in England and Francis Turretin in Geneva. It's a highly precise way of arguing: it asks careful questions, it draws careful distinctions about what you do and don't mean, it tends to be polemical (we affirm *this,* we deny *that*).

But in the Middle Ages Catholic scholasticism did acquire its own content. It very much bore the stamp of Catholic doctrine (which you'd expect) *and* of pagan Greek philosophy (in particular the influence of Aristotle).

Two giants need mentioning here: Anselm and Aquinas.

Anselm (d.1109) was Italian. He wanted a quiet monastic life. But William the Conqueror invaded England. And his son forced Anselm to become Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anselm's motto was "faith seeking understanding." By this he meant that he would use un-aided human reason to prove the truths of the Christian faith, *without ever* having to fall back on the Bible. He thought he could prove God's existence, attributes, Triune being, the incarnation and Jesus's death on the Cross by pure reason.

His most famous works were the *Proslogion* (The Address) and *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God became man). He was most famous for his proof for the existence of God. Like many in his day he disliked the physical and the bodily – not least under the influence of the philosopher Plato. He denied a penal and substitutionary atonement (unlike, for example, Peter Abelard – d.1142 – who held to an objective view of the atonement).

Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) was also Italian. He became a Dominican, to his family's horror (they kidnapped him and imprisoned for a year. They stuck a scantily clad woman into his cell, hoping she'd encourage him towards a more promising career!). He was a fat man, needing two chairs to sit on! He was known by contemporaries as the "dumb ox." But he was a long way from being dumb.

His life's work was to fit Aristotle's philosophy into Christian theology. The result was his massive *Summa Theologiae.* At the Council of Trent his book was placed on the altar alongside the Bible. He is still regarded in the Catholic Church as the "angelic doctor."

Like Anselm he had a high view of human reason. He believed we can reason God from the world that he has made. Famously he came up with five proofs for the existence of God. The first is this: because we observe change in the world, there must be a primary and unmoved mover.

But though we know God exists, Aquinas was adamant we cannot know what God is *like.* We can only say that God is *not.* (Aquinas was an *apophatic* theologian, strongly influenced by the 5th century Pseudo-Dionysius).

For Aquinas *grace* was given to change us, so that we might be enabled to merit eternal life. And grace is given in such a way that it does not violate human freedom. Rather, it is only by co-operating with God's grace that human habits change. (Compare the Reformers doctrine of imputed righteousness and irresistible grace).

For Aquinas the Cross was not a substitutionary atonement. The key move was in fact the incarnation, which he believed would have happened with or without the fall of man. The Word became *flesh.* And so, it was the fleshly activities of the church – especially the sacraments, which were now numbered as seven – that were regarded as extensions of God's grace and even extensions of the incarnation.

(b) Catholic calls for Reform

By the end of the Middle Ages there was a clear perception of corruption in the church. But that wasn't the only thing that moved people to cry out for reform. There were other crises.

Plague struck, and in the mid-1300s killed 1/3 of the population of Europe. It contributed to a great sense of hopelessness in the face of death and eternity.

There were new practical programmes for spiritual advance. Thomas a Kempis (d.1471) wrote the hugely popular *Imitation of Christ.* But whilst popular piety recognized that all was not well, their answer offered Christ only as a model to copy – and not as a mediator who saved. There was an emphasis on good works. There was little of a Gospel of grace.

In 1470 Dietrich Kolde published *The mirror of a Christian man.* It was a huge success, running to 19 editions. It was part of a growing popular Christian revival movement. But these were its last words:

> There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy. The first troubles my spirit, because I will have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all. I do not know where I will go."

It's sheer despair – for it has no savior and no hope. (Contrast it, for example, with the opening lines of the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism which radiates hope because of Christ).

May I mention a small side-application:
I am always worried when I encounter Protestant Christians who read works of Medieval or Catholic piety – be it Francis of Assisi, Thomas A Kempis, Julian of Norwich, the Celtic Christianity industry, Ignatian spirituality, and so on. Usually someone in a church like ours would read books like that because they have a desire to go deeper in their experience of God. And it's not all bad. But it is a seriously poisoned well from which to drink. If we want depth – if we want a deep and affective pool of piety to help us mature and grow we have the Puritans! More on them in a few weeks time. Be careful from which well you drink!

(c) Persecuted movements – and roads to the Reformation

Not everyone during the High Middle Ages was on board with the Roman Catholic project.

The *Cathars* or Albigensians were around from around 1100-1300. They opposed certain Catholic doctrines, but were themselves heretics: they were gnostic dualists, and among other things denied the incarnation. They were defeated by Catholic preaching – and by the Inquisition.

But who were the good guys?

At Worms in Germany (where Martin Luther was tried) is a memorial to Luther. At the base of the statue are four figures – heralds of the reformation.

Peter Waldo (d.1218), leader of the Waldensians or poor men of Lyons. They were condemned in 1184. They affirmed the sole authority of Scripture and the role of the laity in the church, they denied transubstantiation the immorality of the church. Centuries later the Waldensians would help John Calvin get the Bible translated into French.

John Wycliffe (d.1384), the great Oxford professor and "morning star" of the Reformation. He opposed papal authority, he rejected transubstantiation (albeit for philosophical reasons, not scriptural), and began the work of Bible translation. His followers, the Lollards, continued that work. They were condemned.

Jan Hus (d.1415) was the Bohemian martyr who was took Wycliffe's teaching to central Europe.

Girolamo Savonarola (d.1498), a Renaissance Friar who denounced evil in the church and called for renewal. (He's the most obscure of the four).

(d) **Back to the Bible!**

During this period, Bibles were rare and extremely expensive. They had to be hand-copied by scribes and took many hours to produce. A copy of part of the Bible such as the book of Psalms, or the four gospels, would be a gift suitable for a king. Most Christians, therefore, would never have access to a Bible, and since literacy rates were low, would not have been able to read one if they had.

In addition to these problems, the main translation of the Bible used in the Medieval period was the Latin translation made by Jerome in the late 4th century, even though Latin was no longer commonly spoken.

Small sections of the Bible were translated into English by various monks and other scholars. In the 7th century, Bede began a full translation. In the 10th century, the gospels were translated into Old English in the beautiful edition known as the Lindisfarne Gospels, and in the 11th century an Old English translation of most of the Old Testament was produced. During this time, translations in other European languages were also made.

However, in 1199 Pope Innocent III banned all unauthorized versions of the Bible in an attempt to prevent heresies from spreading. In some parts of Europe this ban was overlooked, but in other places it was rigorously enforced. John Wycliffe's translation of the Bible into English in 1383 was later banned. Wycliffe died of natural causes but was later declared a heretic, and his remains

were exhumed and burned. All his works were banned and burned and a Synod declared that any lay person's attempt to translate Scripture was heresy.

The invention of printing in the 15th century meant the Bibles could now be produced in greater numbers and at a more affordable price (though still far beyond the reach of most ordinary people).

In God's providence the intellectual movement we call The Renaissance played its part in the re-discovery of Bible truth. The sub-movement which we term "Humanism" advocated a return *ad fontes* – to the original sources. Gone were Medieval commentaries which obscured the originals. For the first time in centuries men turned back to the Bible *and* to the early church fathers.

Well known among Christian humanists is Erasmus of Rotterdam. He's best known for his satire, *In praise of folly,* which mocked the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church. He rejected scholasticism in favour of personal piety (he thought they were opposed). He never broke with Rome. But he was crucial in working to understand the original Bible manuscripts.

Erasmus and Lorenzo Valla corrected some massive mistranslations in the Latin Vulgate Bible. Here's just one crucial example: in Matthew 4:17 Jesus announces the coming of the kingdom. The right response is Μετανοεῖτε (Gk: Metanoite). The Latin Bible translated this as "Do penance" (Poenitentiam agite). But the Greek verb *metanoia* means "repent" – it is a change of mind.

Also we note Luke 1:30, where Mary no longer was said to be "full of grace" (a divine reservoir to be tapped), but merely "You have found favour with God."

The work of Erasmus and Valla would become a weapon for Luther in his 1516 German New Testament.