

The Forerunners of the Reformation

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Abstract

The plague, abuses in the church, and mysticism constitute the background for considering forerunners of the Reformation. They should not be viewed as directly causing the Reformation, but as anticipating in various ways reformational concerns. While some advocated practical reforms (e.g., Jan Hus and Savonarola), others developed theological reflection (e.g., the Brethren of the Common Life). Conciliarism, another reform movement through councils, ironically by its failure, propelled the cause of the Reformation. Finally, humanism, by its return to the sources and Scripture, paved the way as well. In conclusion, it is observed that the division between forerunners and Reformers sometimes is not very definite.

Because the Reformed witness is rooted in Scripture, elements of its biblical emphases appear in the ancient and medieval eras of the church. This reality has led to the consideration of those leaders and theologians who anticipated the concerns of the Protestant Reformers. These have been designated forerunners of the Reformation, particularly those who ministered in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries just prior to the birth of Protestantism. Like the early Protestant Reformers, the forerunners developed their biblical witness within the medieval church that was under the sway of the Pontiff of Rome. In fact, both Reformers and forerunners confronted the Papal See that emphatically proclaimed that none could be saved unless he was a member of the Roman

Church. This can be seen in Pope Boniface VIII's 1302 encyclical, *Unam Sanctam*.¹ Thus, whether prospering or perishing, Christendom, in the millennium of the Middle Ages, was under the hegemony of the Roman Church.

The church nearly perished in the late medieval era due to the scourge of the Black Death: "Everywhere is woe, terror, everywhere. ... I am not mourning some slight distress but that dreadful year 1348, which not merely robbed us of our friends, but robbed the whole world of its peoples."² Petrarch's report of the Plague's carnage reveals that 1348 did not end the tsunami of suffering. He laments, "And if that were not enough, now this following year reaps the remainder, and cuts down with its deadly scythe whatever survived that storm. Will posterity credit that there was a time when ... almost the whole earth was depopulated? ... *Can it be that God has no care for the mortal lot?*"³ The Plague's reduction of medieval Europe evoked desperate acts of self-flagellation and escalated hostility toward Jews.⁴ Medieval society barely survived the "deadly scythe."

Yet death in this Dark Age not only came *upon* the church but sometimes also came *from* the church. On July 6, 1415, sixty-six years after the Plague subsided and six hundred years ago this year, the Czech Jan Hus, a forerunner of the Reformation, was burned as a heretic by the Council of Constance. Yet in the midst of such medieval suffering and persecution, there were glimmers of light. Learning, including biblical studies, was facilitated by the revolutionary invention of the printing press.⁵

I. The Need for Reform in the Medieval Church

Along with and emerging from the physical carnage of the Plague, there were also symptoms of spiritual decay in the church. Records from the

¹ Carter Lindberg, ed., *The European Reformations Sourcebook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 10–11.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 3–4.

⁴ Jean de Venette wrote in his *Chronicle* for the year A.D. 1349: "Stripped to the waist, they gathered in large groups and bands and marched in procession through the crossroads and squares of cities and good towns. There they formed circles and beat upon their backs. ... As a result of this theory of infected water and air as the source of the plague the Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting wells and water and corrupting the air." Ibid., 4.

⁵ Jakob Wimpfeling (1450–1528) explained the power of the printing press: "In the year 1440 ... Johannes Gutenberg rendered a great and well-nigh divine blessing to the whole world by the invention of a new kind of writing. For this man was the first to invent the art of printing in the city of Strasbourg. From there he went to Mainz where he successfully perfected it. ... Many prominent and famous men have praised the art of printing. ... 'O Germany, you are the inventor of an art more useful than anything from the ancients for you teach how to copy by printing books.'" Ibid., 6–7.

mid-1300s onward indicate that the church confronted various abuses. Simony, for example, was the purchasing of church offices. And during this era, the creation and legitimization of indulgences appeared. The theological grounding for the sale of indulgences was established by Pope Clement VI's *Unigenitus Dei Filius* (January 27, 1343) through his declaration of the reality of the church's treasury of merit.⁶ The purchase of indulgences was subsequently recognized as a means of shortening sinners' sufferings in purgatory by Pope Sixtus IV's *Salvator Noster* (August 3, 1476).⁷

The omnipresent realities of disease, death, superstition, and ethnic hostility weakened and compromised the church, facilitating the rise of avaricious royalty and clergy.⁸ This crisis of values became widespread and was depicted by a well-known mythical account of "Reynard the Fox" (1498).⁹ On the cusp of the Reformation, humanist scholar, Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536) parodied clerical and papal corruptions in his best-seller, *Praise of Folly* (1509).¹⁰

Allegorical biblical interpretation, as developed by Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349) in his *Interpretation of the Bible*, was the hermeneutical norm.¹¹ Personal merit in salvation was broadly embraced and explained by a theology of "doing what is in one" or doing one's best as seen in the writings of Gabriel Biel (d. 1495).¹² Some in the Augustinian tradition countered this

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid., 11–12.

⁸ *The Reformation of the Emperor Sigismund* (c. 1438) describes some of these social woes and proposal for reforms; see Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 5.

⁹ Selections of this text are found in Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Erasmus stated that "the deadliest enemies of the church" are "these impious pontiffs who allow Christ to be forgotten through their silence, fetter him with their mercenary laws, misrepresent him with their forced interpretations of his teachings, and slay him with their noxious way of life!" Desiderius Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* and *Letter to Maarten Van Dorp, 1515*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 96, 110; cf. Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 16, "On the first level, one receives the literal historical sense mediated through the meaning of the words; on the second level through the meaning mediated by the matter itself, one receives the mystical or spiritual sense which in general is threefold: (1) If the matters denoted by the words are related to what is to be believed in the New Testament, then one retains the allegorical sense. (2) If they are related to what we should do, it is the moral or tropological sense. (3) If, however, they are related to what we may hope for in the future blessedness, then it is the anagogical sense ... Thus 'The letter teaches what happened; allegory teaches what you should believe; the moral sense teaches what you should do; the anagogical sense teaches to what you are to strive.' ... With God's help I will remain with the literal sense."

¹² Biel explains: "You ask what it means for a man to do what is in him. ... From this we can now say that he does what is in him who, illumined by the light of natural reason or of faith, or of both, knows the baseness of sin, and having resolved to depart from it, desires the divine aid [i.e. grace] by which he can cleanse himself and cling to God his maker. To the one who does this God necessarily grants grace—but by a necessity based on the immutability of his decisions, not on external coercion." Ibid., 17.

by arguing for God's sovereign grace as the source of man's salvation. Representative works are Thomas of Bradwardine's (d. 1349), "Of God's Case against Pelagius" (1344), and Gregory of Rimini's (d. 1358) "Of the Commentary on the Sentences."¹³

Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* did not overlook the theologians as an additional group in need of reform. Indeed, he writes, "Then there are the theologians, a remarkably supercilious and touchy lot," who "interpret hidden mysteries to suit themselves: how the world was created and designed; through what channels the stain of sin filtered down to posterity; by what means, in what measure and how long Christ was formed in the Virgin's womb; how in the Eucharist, accidents can subsist without a domicile." They even ask, "Is it a possible proposition that God the Father could hate his Son? Could God have taken on the form of a woman, a devil, a donkey, a gourd, or a flint-stone?" He then identifies them by name, "These subtle refinements of subtleties are made still more subtle by all the different lines of scholastic argument, so that you'd extricate yourself faster from a labyrinth than from the tortuous obscurities of realists, nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Ockhamists and Scotists and I've not mentioned all the sects, only the main ones."¹⁴ Thus, by means of sarcasm, Erasmus calls them to account.

II. *Mysticism and Medieval Piety*

In the midst of the challenges of the era, a mystical piety gained ascendancy. Medieval *Mystics* left a legacy that impacted the Reformers.¹⁵ The leading mystics included Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), Johannes Tauler (d. 1361), an anonymous work entitled, *The German Theology*; Ludolf of Saxony (d. 1371); Geert Groote (d. 1384); Gerard Zerbolt (d. 1389); Thomas à Kempis (d. 1471); and Johannes Busch (d. 1480).

How did these mystics describe the Christian life? Johannes Tauler, for example, called for a life of detachment in the Holy Spirit: "What, then, does true detachment ... really mean? It means that we must turn away and withdraw from all that is not God pure and simple ... This degree of detachment is imperative if one wishes to receive the Holy Spirit and His gifts. It is essential to turn totally to God and away from all that is not God."¹⁶ The *Theologia*

¹³ See Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); Gregory of Rimini: *Tradition and Innovation in Fourteenth-Century Thought* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

¹⁴ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Radice, 86–88; cf. Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 22–23.

¹⁵ Ray C. Petry, ed., *Late Medieval Mysticism*, LCC 13 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957).

¹⁶ Johannes Tauler, "Sermon Extract," in Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 17.

Deutsch (late fourteenth or early fifteenth century) urged a God-centered biblical faith by turning from selfishness and sin to the true light of divine love.¹⁷ An emphasis on the imitation of the life of Christ also appeared in works such as Ludolf of Saxony's (d. 1371) *Vita Jesu Christi*, and Gerard Zerbolt's (d. 1398) *The Spiritual Ascents*.¹⁸ Best known is Thomas à Kempis's (d. 1471) *The Imitation of Christ* that modeled a vital trust in the goodness and power of God in the troubles and temptations that threatened the helpless pilgrim:

O God, I feel uneasy and depressed because of this present trouble.
I feel trapped on every side, yet I know I have come to this hour,
so that I may learn that you alone can free me from this predicament.
Lord, deliver me, for what can I do without you, helpless as I am?
Lord, give me patience in all my troubles. Help me, and I will not be afraid ...
No matter how hard it is for me, it is easy for you, O Lord.¹⁹

Whoever and whatever the forerunners of the Reformation may be construed to have been, they labored in a motley milieu of mysticism, debate over grace and merit, allegorical biblical interpretation, and growing concerns over clerical abuses. The Protestant Reformers were aware of these late medieval forerunners and the cultural, ecclesiastical, and theological forces they encountered throughout the stormy fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

III. *What Was a Forerunner of the Reformation?*

Even before the Protestant movement appeared, a spirit of Catholic Reformation had begun and was gaining momentum.²⁰ The leaders of these

¹⁷ "The Scriptures, the Truth, and the Faith proclaim that sin is nothing but a turning away on the part of the creature from the unchangeable Good toward the changeable. ... It should also be pointed out that eternal bliss is rooted in God alone and nothing else. ... In other words, bliss or blessedness does not depend on any one created thing or on a creature's work but only on God and His works. ... The illumined ones are guided by the true Light. They do not practice the ordered life in expectation of reward." *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸ Ludolf of Saxony writes, "The sinner, who already believing in Christ and reconciled to him through penance, shall strive with greater care to adhere to his physician and come to him in trustful relationship. ... Thereby he takes very good care that he does not read superficially of his life, but rather he shall follow it step by step through the day. ... Also, he shall so read the life of Christ that it is consulted for the power of imitating him." Gerard Zerbolt, after advising meditating on death and the frailty of life, writes, "See how great is the ascent ... from fear to hope; so great also is the distance within this ascent and the work of climbing. But he who has advanced well thus far is drawing nearer to purity and charity, though he still has some steps to ascend." *Ibid.*, 19–20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ On Catholic Reformation, see Guy Bedouelle, *The Reform of Catholicism, 1480–1620*, trans. James K. Farge, Studies and Texts 161 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008); Gaston Bonet-Maury, *Les précurseurs de la Réforme et la liberté de conscience dans les pays*

movements are often identified as forerunners of the Reformation. To what extent did medieval churchmen, theologians, and their movements develop concepts of theology and piety that anticipated or paralleled the questions and concerns of Protestantism?²¹

The Protestant faith was committed to “sola Scriptura” and to the gospel defined by “solus Christus,” “sola gratia,” and “sola fide.” These theological tenets were at the heart of the Reformers’ efforts to restore the church to a biblical character. Such explicit slogans, however, were hardly dominant in the medieval theologians. What then were the characteristics of a “forerunner”? Is it even accurate to use the term at all? Heiko Oberman, for example, defends the concept of forerunner with certain qualifications. First, “One of the reasons why a historian may be suspicious of the use of the term forerunner, while operating freely and frequently with its Latin equivalent ‘antecedent,’ is its possible causative connotation.” He adds, however, that, “We do

latins du XIIe au XVIe siècle (1904; repr., Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1969); Pierre Imbart de la Tour, *Les origines de la Réforme*, 4 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1905–1935); George V. Jourdan, *The Movement towards Catholic Reform in the Early XVI Century* (London: Murray, 1914); Peter Iver Kaufman, *Augustinian Piety and Catholic Reform: Augustine, Colet, and Erasmus* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982); Francis Oakley, “Religious and Ecclesiastical Life on the Eve of the Reformation,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 5–32; John W. O’Malley, *Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform: A Study in Renaissance Thought*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

²¹ There are helpful anthologies of the forerunners of the Reformation, Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform: From Wyclif to Erasmus*, LCC 14 (London: SCM, 1953); Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: Illustrated by Key Documents*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966); and Gustav A. Benrath, ed., *Wegbereiter der Reformation* (Bremen: Carl Schunemann, 1967). For good general surveys of the forerunners of the Reformation, see Craig D. Atwood, *Always Reforming: A History of Christianity since 1300* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 7–77; Steven E. Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 73–181; G. S. M. Walker, *The Growing Storm: Sketches of Church History from A.D. 600 to A.D. 1350* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961); and David Boorman, “Reformers before the Reformation,” in *Adding to the Church* (Huntingdon: Westminster Conference, 1973), 82–99. On the topic, see also Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1983); “Thomas Bradwardine: un précurseur de Luther?” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuse* 40 (1960): 146–51; Peter Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 51 (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Carl Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation: Principally in Germany and the Netherlands*, trans. Robert Menzies, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1874, 1877); Alister McGrath, “Forerunners of the Reformation: A Critical Examination of the Evidence for Precursors of the Reformation Doctrines of Justification,” *Harvard Theological Review* 75.2 (1982): 219–42; Joseph C. Reagan, “Did the Petrosians Teach Salvation by Faith Alone?” *Journal of Religion* 7 (1927): 81–91; W. Stanford Reid, “The Growth of Anti-Papalism in Fifteenth Century Scotland” (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1944); “Long Roots of the Reformation,” *Christianity Today* 7.1 (1962): 30–32.

not feel that it should be the task of the historian of ideas to establish causal connections in the historical succession of these ideas. Rather, his goal should be, by drawing on these antecedents as illuminating parallels, to place ideas in their context and point to their particular characteristics and their changing structures.” Second, “To take Luther’s doctrine of justification as the sole standard by which to identify a Forerunner limits the Reformation to this one issue and betrays a dangerous bias of confessionalism.” By contrast, “Other aspects of his thought, such as the understanding of the relation of Scripture and Tradition, the doctrine of the Church, theology of the sacraments, and the methods of biblical exegesis, have their antecedents.”²² Thus, for Oberman, a “Forerunner” in his unique historical context parallels Reformation teaching without being identical with it, nor being identified as the necessary impetus for the Reformers’ teachings.

Gordon Leff observes that theological parallelism was also present within the forerunners themselves. Within the divergent pre-Reformation critiques of the Catholic Church, there were similar elements that seem to harmonize the disparate strands. He writes, “heresy was born when heterodoxy became, or was branded, dissent; and more specifically when the appeal—common to the Waldensians, Franciscan sects, English Lollards and the Hussites—to the bible and to the evangelical virtues of poverty and humility, became, or were treated as, a challenge to the church.”²³

Carl Ullmann suggests various ways of comparing and contrasting the common efforts of the forerunners with themselves as well as the Reformers.²⁴ He suggests the following three traits of the forerunners:

- i. *Balancing Thought with Action*: “We find, and in a greater or less degree proportioned to the extent of their influence, a perfect unity and mixture of conviction with action,—of theological thought with ecclesiastical practice.”²⁵
- ii. *Establishing Truth and Refuting Error*: “The Reformers unite the thetical with the antithetical, position and opposition, in beautiful proportion. The same feature is likewise conspicuous in their true precursors, although some of these labour more to establish positive truth, some rather to refute error.”²⁶
- iii. *Opposing Scholasticism by Biblical Theology*: “In fine we may also trace another difference. It was the authority of a living scriptural theology in opposition to the scholasticism of the previous age which the Reformation was the means of asserting. There were, however, two ways leading to this scriptural theology, one mainly scientific, and another mainly practical, the way of the school, and the way of life.”²⁷

²² Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 38–39.

²³ Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relationship of Heterodoxy to Dissent, c. 1250–c. 1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 1:3.

²⁴ Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, 1:11–13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Ullmann also notes that the forerunners, much like the Reformers, advanced their agenda by engaging differing levels of theological sophistication from the popular to the scholarly:

In this manner we may classify the precursors of the Reformation, beginning from below, into those that roused and animated the lower orders, such as Gerard Groot, and the Brethren of the Common Lot,—the practical Mystics such as Thomas à Kempis,—the learned philologists such as Agricola, Reuchlin, and Erasmus,—and the theologians properly so-called.²⁸

For Oberman, the forerunners did not so much point beyond themselves as participate in an ongoing dialogue by asking the same kinds of questions that the Reformers would take up as well.²⁹ If the concept of the forerunner is historically viable, who were the primary exemplars?

IV. Leading Examples of Forerunners of the Protestant Reformation

Several primary forerunners have been identified. Here we summarize the contributions of the Waldensians, Savonarola, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and a few of the theologians of the Brethren of the Common Life.

1. The Waldensians

An early example of a medieval era church body that anticipated the Protestant Reformation is seen in the Waldensians, founded by Peter Waldo who died around 1206.³⁰ Leff writes about the “thirteenth and fourteenth centuries” Waldensians that “there were variations” among them, “but on the main points they agreed: namely that [they] set themselves up as an alternative church with their own lore and hierarchy ... we find a deep-seated sense of their apostlehood; there is here, as elsewhere, a hint of apocalyptic

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Forerunners of the Reformation are therefore not primarily to be regarded as individual thinkers who express particular ideas which ‘point beyond’ themselves to a century to come, but participants in an ongoing dialogue—not necessarily friendly—that is continued in the sixteenth century. It is then not the identity of answers but the similarity of the questions which makes the categorizing of Forerunners valid and necessary.” Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 42.

³⁰ For a short introduction, see Euan Cameron, “The Waldenses,” in *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period*, ed. G. R. Evans (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 269–86. Their subsequent leaders and major theological writings included Durandus von Huesca (1190); Die Edle Belehrung; Das Bekenntnis Des Johannes Leser (1368); Die Lehre der Waldenser zu Mainz (1390); Bericht uber die Lehren Osterreichischer Waldenser (1398); Verhor des Waldensers Matthaus Hagen (1458); Anschluss Markischer Waldenser an die Bohmischen Bruder (1480).

feeling in the not uncommon designation of the Roman church as the whore of Babylon and all obeying her as damned.³¹

Thus the distinctive beliefs of the Waldensians in distinction to Rome can be summarized,

- *Church Decrees*: "The Waldensians dismissed all ecclesiastical decrees and sanctions as worthless, as well as denying any authority to ecclesiastical laws of fasting, feast days, and so on."
- *Sacraments*: "They rejected all the sacraments of the Roman church. The power of the keys (remission of sins) came direct from God; and it was granted to them, as it had been to the Apostles, to hear the confessions of those wishing to make them, and to absolve. The eucharist could only be performed by one not in sin; and since all not of their sect were sinners, this power was reserved to the Waldensians alone. It could be carried out by any just person, even a layman or a woman. Their own ritual was reduced to a minimum. Communion was made only once every year."
- *Purgatory*: "They denied purgatory which, with true penitence, they held belonged to this life. This rendered otiose all prayers and alms for the dead and the intercession of saints who could not hear their prayers in heaven. The soul went immediately to heaven or hell."
- *Holy Days*: "In the same way, they observed only Sundays and the Virgin's feast day."
- *Church Leadership*: "In their way of life they constituted a separate church, divided between simple believers and superiors, whom they were bound to obey as if they were Catholics; acceptance into the sect entailed the promise to obey. Their superiors had to observe evangelical poverty, chastity, and the absence of individual possessions. They lived from alms and abstained from manual work."
- *The Life and Piety of the Clergy*: "They would sometimes enter Catholic churches. They would recite the Lord's prayer thirty or forty times each day; it was their only prayer because they averred that all the others, including the *credo*, had been composed by the church, not God. These superiors (or *perfecti*), as the Apostles' successors, were pledged to a life of missionary wandering, taking the word of the evangel to the villages and holding conventicles in houses. To be received into this elect, they had to undertake a special oath."³²

We thus find in these core beliefs hints pointing to views later developed by other forerunners and Protestant Reformers.

2. Savonarola, a Preacher of Reform

The late Middle Ages produced several preachers of reform but the best known is Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498).³³ Savonarola was born in Ferrara

³¹ Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 2:457.

³² *Ibid.*, 2:456–57.

³³ Some of the prominent reforming preachers beside Savonarola included Militsch of Kremsier (d. 1374), "On the Antichrist" (1367); "Letter to Pope Urban V"; Matthew of Janow (d. 1393), "Rules of the Old and New Testaments"; Henry Kalteisen (d. 1465), "Preaching to the Council of Basel" (28. October, 1434); Jacob of Juterbog (d. 1465), "Die sieben Zeitalter der Kirche" (1449); Dionysius der Kartäuser (d. 1471), "Zwei Offenbarungen" (before 1461 and 1461); Hans Bohm, Der Pfeifer of Nilashausen (d. 1476), "Bericht über seine Predigt" (1476); Johann Geiler of Katersberg (d. 1510), "Synodalpredigt" (13. April, 1482); Johannes

in 1452, earning a Master of Arts degree at the University of Ferrara. At twenty-three, he became a Dominican in the Observant monastery in Bologna. He was marked by deep learning and was appointed a teacher in the monastery of San Marco in Florence, which he left after two years. When he returned to San Marco in 1490, however, he had discovered an apocalyptic preaching skill. He claimed that this ability arrived around the time of his departure from Florence in 1484. He rose to be a powerful preacher from 1494 to 1498, and was considered the dominant leader of politics in Florence. His preaching led him to become an open and severe critic of the papacy. As a powerful politician with rising political enemies and as an opponent of the pope, his days were numbered.

Eschatological worries appeared among the fifteenth-century Italians, precipitated by actual and threatened invasions of Italy by the king of France. Thus Savonarola preached on January 13, 1494[5]:

Finally, I will conclude: I have been crazy this morning, this is what you will say, and I knew you would say it before I came up here. God willed it so, yet I say—and take this as my conclusion—that God has prepared a great dinner for all Italy, but all the dishes are bitter. I have given only the salad, which was a bit of bitter lettuce. Understand me well, Florence: all the other dishes are yet to come, and they are all bitter and plentiful, for it is a grand dinner. Thus, I conclude, and keep it in mind that Italy is now on the verge of her tribulations.

O Italy, and princes of Italy, and prelates of the Church, the wrath of God is upon you, and you have no remedy but to be converted! ... O princes of Italy, flee the land of the North; do penance while the sword is not yet out of its sheath, and while it is not yet bloodied, flee from Rome! O Florence, flee from Florence, that is, flee from sin through penitence and flee from the wicked!³⁴

In the context of impending invasion, Savonarola launched a movement of repentance in order to recapture the humble lifestyle of the apostles. He

Trithemius (d. 1516), “Ansprache uber die Kirche and uber den Benedictinerorden (1. September, 1493). For literature on Savonarola, see Girolamo Savonarola, *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498*, trans. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, Italian Literature and Thought Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); John C. Olin, ed., *The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola: Reform in the Church, 1495–1540* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1–15; Josef Nolte, “Evangelicae doctrinae purum exemplum: Savonarolas Gefängnismediationem im Hinblick auf Luthers theologische Anfänge,” in *Kontinuität und Umbruch: Theologie und Frömmigkeit in Flugschriften und Kleinliteratur an der Wende vom 15. zum 16. Jahrhundert: Beiträge zum Tübinger Kolloquium des Sonderforschungsbereichs 8 “Spätmittelalter und Reformation”* (31. Mai–2. Juni 1975), ed. Josef Nolte, Hella Tompert, and Christof Windhorst (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1978), 59–92; Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494–1545*, Oxford-Warburg Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge and Paul, 1959); David Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

³⁴ Savonarola, *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola*, 75.

confronted the demonic forces he perceived at work in Florence which he interpreted as the rising resistance of antichrist to the Christian faith. He was successful for a time in uniting the city due to his skills in dialogue and diplomacy and the looming crisis. But by 1497, his calls for repentance rose to a fevered pitch, with children leading in the gathering and burning of possessions deemed to be sinful that were harbored in the homes of the people of Florence.³⁵ His “Prayer to God for the promises made by Him to the city of Florence” on the occasion of “the Bonfire of Vanities” on February 1497 exudes spiritual passion and repentance:

Who does not know that, because of the sin of Your rebellious people,
 You have prepared as a revenge famine, plague, and sword?
 Oh, make Your flail turn to gladness for the good, for transgressors to justice, that is,
 wrath and fury. ...
 Open Your fount and rain down, generous Jesus, that grace which may restore to You
 Your beautiful Florence. We in this new age, having made a gift of body and of mind,
 Now give to You our hearts. Since You, Lord Jesus, have chosen us through Your grace,
 Inflame our hearts now with Your love.³⁶

Ultimately, his fiery preaching and prophecies symbolized by the “bonfire of Vanities” led him to the fires of martyrdom. Savonarola was assaulted on Ascension Day in 1497 while he preached. In May, Savonarola, the forerunner, Reformer, and prophet of Florence was excommunicated by the pope and was burned at the stake in June 1498.³⁷

3. John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe of Oxford, England (ca. 1330–1384) anticipated major concerns of the Protestant Reformation.³⁸ These included the worldliness of

³⁵ For a dramatic description of this, see *Ibid.*, 244–58, 315–62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 244–45.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xv–xvi.

³⁸ On Wycliffe and the Lollards, see William Gilpin, *The Lives of John Wicliff, and the Most Eminent of His Disciples; Lord Cobham, John Huss, Jerome of Prague, and Zisca* (London: Printed for J. Robson, 1766); Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984); “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards,” The Geoffrey Chaucer Page, <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/varia/loollards/lollconc.htm>; J. Patrick Hornbeck, Stephen E. Lahey, and Fiona Somerset, eds., *Wycliffite Spirituality*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 2013); Gustav A. Benrath, *Wyclifs Bibelkommentar*, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 36 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966); A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York, 1509–1558* (1959; repr., London: The Hambledon Press, 1982); Gillian R. Evans, *John Wyclif: Myth and Reality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); Louis Brewer Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983); Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Anne Hudson, *Studies in the Transmission of Wyclif's Writings*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS907 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2008); Stephen

the clergy and the pope, the supremacy of the Scriptures over the church's teachings and traditions, as well as a non-transubstantiation view of the Lord's Supper. Accordingly, he is often called the "Morningstar" of the Protestant Reformation.³⁹

While teaching at the University of Oxford during 1376–1379, he raised several criticisms of the church. He insisted that the church had no legitimate role in matters of state. Moreover, he taught that clergy who failed to follow the biblical standards for their offices lost their spiritual authority. To aid common believers to follow Christ rather than blindly to follow corrupt spiritual leaders, he began the translation of the Bible from Latin into English. He also rejected the classic Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation. In fact, he claimed that the Bible gave no warrant for the pope's claim to be the ultimate authority of the church. He also condemned indulgences as blasphemous and totally bereft of biblical warrant. Wycliffe writes "On Indulgences":

I confess that the indulgences of the pope, if they are what they are said to be, are a manifest blasphemy, inasmuch as he claims a power to save men almost without limit, and not only to mitigate the penalties of those who have sinned, by granting them the aid of absolution and indulgences, that they may never come to purgatory, but to give command to the holy angels, that when the soul is separated from the body, they may carry it without delay to its everlasting rest. ... This doctrine is a manifold blasphemy against Christ, inasmuch as the pope is extolled above his humanity and deity, and so above all that is called God—pretensions which ... agree with the character of the Antichrist.⁴⁰

Wycliffe's teaching consequently raised the ire of Pope Gregory XI, who in 1377 commanded the imprisonment and trial of Wycliffe. But he was largely spared from prosecution except for a brief imprisonment due to his political allies in England. With the pope's death the following year, and the

Lahey, "Wyclif and Lollardy," in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. Evans, 334–54; Ian C. Levy, ed., *A Companion to John Wyclif: Late Medieval Theologian*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 4 (Boston: Brill, 2006); Kenneth B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London: English Universities Press, 1952); Geoffrey H. W. Parker, *The Morning Star: Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); Richard L. Poole, *Wycliffe and Movements for Reform* (New York: AMS Press, 1978); W. Stanford Reid, "The Lollards in Pre-Reformation Scotland," *Church History* 11.4 (1942): 269–83; Wendy Scase, "Lollardy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15–21; Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, eds., *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003); John Stacey, *John Wyclif and Reform* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); Herbert B. Workman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 2 vols. (1901–1902; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1978); *John Wyclif: A Study in the English Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).

³⁹ John Wycliffe, *Tractatus de Trinitate*, ed. Allen Dupont Breck (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1962).

⁴⁰ Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 15.

subsequent division of the papacy into the two warring factions of the Great Schism, he was able to complete his ministry peacefully in Lutterworth until his death in 1384. His bones, however, were exhumed as a result of the condemnation of the Council of Constance. A contemporary chronicler wrote: "They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus the brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; and they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine which now is dispersed the world over."⁴¹

Wycliffe's followers in England were dubbed the "Lollards," a word that suggests a "whisper" as in a "lullaby" or perhaps meaning a "mutter." This seems fitting since they continued Wycliffe's teachings but did so with caution given the rising danger of persecution from the church. While operating largely under cover, the Lollards advanced Wycliffe's reformation concerns. In fact, they seemed to have gone beyond Wycliffe's teaching, anticipating some of the distinctives of the English Puritans. Thus, the Lollards emphasized that the main task of a priest was to preach the Bible, a Bible that should also be translated into the language of the people so that they could read and study it for themselves. The reforms launched by John Wycliffe produced leaders such as John Purvey (d. ca. 1407), William Thorpe (d. 1407), Sir John Oldcastle (d. 1417), and William Taylor (d. 1423). In 1395, the Lollards issued *The Twelve Conclusions* wherein they criticized a broad range of Catholic practices such as vestments, the celibacy of priests and the vows of chastity by nuns, pilgrimages, confession to priests, and the veneration of images. The English Reformation was buttressed by the stories of early English *martyrs* and other heroes of the faith through the work of John Foxe's martyrology.⁴²

⁴¹ Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner's, 1910), 5.2:325.

⁴² On the English Reformation, see A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2nd ed. (London: Batsford, 1989), 46–60; "Heresy and the Origins of English Protestantism," in *Reformation Studies*, History Series 9 (London: Hambledon Press, 1982), 363–82; Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004). On Foxe, see John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, 8 vols., ed. George Townsend (repr., New York: AMS Press, 1965); Patrick Collinson, "Truth and Legend: The Veracity of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs," in *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse, Britain and the Netherlands 8 (Zutphen: De Walburg Pers, 1985). One of the forerunners of the Reformation in England was the humanist John Colet. See John B. Gleason, *John Colet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Peter Heath, *The English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1969); Johnny Pressley, "John Colet and the Bible: Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1989).

4. Jan Hus

Czech Jan Hus (d. 1415) was condemned by the Council of Constance that had been called to settle the Great Schism—the split of the Roman Church into three popes each claiming to be the rightful head of the church. Hus, influenced by John Wycliffe’s writings, was on his own terms a keen advocate for reforms in the church.⁴³ He denounced the conduct of the pope and clergy and their immoral and extravagant lives. Hus declared that Christ was the true head of the church and that God alone could forgive sins. He insisted that no pope or church leader had authority to create a doctrine if it was inconsistent with the Word of God. In fact, a true Christian could not obey a priest if the clergyman’s command was against the Scriptures. Thus, Hus anticipated Luther’s proposed reforms of the medieval church.

The works of Wycliffe were brought from Oxford by Jerome of Prague. He introduced them to Hus, who served as a professor of philosophy at Prague University. Hus had preached at the Bethlehem Chapel since 1402, a ministry center that had already developed a reformational character. A prominent pulpit graced the Chapel where the preaching was to be done in Czech. The emphasis there was on reaching the laity through a humble Christianity marked by poverty, rejecting the pomp and extravagance of Rome. Wycliffe’s criticism of papal worldliness resonated with Hus, especially since in Hus’s time there had been two contending popes from 1378, and then from 1409 there had been three. Hus viewed the Great Schism as a vast scandal for Christendom.

⁴³ Some texts by Hus and his followers include Jan Hus, *De Ecclesia: The Church*, trans. David S. Schaff (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1915); “The Bohemian Confession (1575/1609),” in James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th in English Translation: Volume 3, 1567–1599* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 401–28; “Four Articles of Prague” (1420); Jan Hus, *Magistri Iohannis Hus Polemica*, t. 22, ed. Jarosla Eršil, *Corpus Christianorum, Continuation Mediaevalis* 238 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); Herbert B. Workman and R. Martin Pope, eds., *The Letters of John Hus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904). On Hus, besides the article in this journal and the references cited there, see Petr z Mladenovic, *John Hus at the Council of Constance*, trans and ed. Matthew Spinka (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), which provides an eyewitness account and letters; Matthew Spinka, *John Hus’ Concept of the Church* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966). For works on the Hussites and Hus’s impact, see Winfried Eberhard, “Bohemia, Moravia and Austria,” in *The Early Reformation in Europe*, ed. Andrew Pettegree (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23–48; Thomas A. Fudge, “Hussite Theology and the Law of God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. Bagchi and Steinmetz, 22–27; *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998); Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Matthew Spinka, *John Hus and the Czech Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941); Z. K. Zeman, *The Anabaptists and the Czech Brethren in Moravia, 1526–1628: A Study in Origins and Contacts* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969).

The crisis of the Great Schism reached a crescendo for Hus when one of the three contending popes sought to finance his struggle to gain the ascendancy in the church by selling indulgences in Prague. Jan Lochman explains,

[Huss] contrasted the actual lifestyle of the power-hungry ‘Constantinian Church’ with the biblical vision of the apostolic community of disciples following Jesus, the ‘poor king of the poor’. Huss’s resolute opposition to the indulgence preaching sponsored by the Pope proved the critical turning point in his struggle. In 1412 the *Curia* placed the city of Prague under the ban because of Huss. He left for southern Bohemia but refused to discontinue his reformatory work ... He also continued his writing and finished a series of important works in Czech and Latin, among them his great work *De Ecclesia*.⁴⁴

Hus’s *The Treatise on the Church* issued a call for a biblically purified church led by a godly pope, rather than a “legate of antichrist.” For him, “It is clear that the pope may err, and the more grievously because, in a given case, he may sin more abundantly, intensely and irresistibly [than others]”; in fact, “to rebel against an erring pope is to obey Christ the Lord.”⁴⁵

To resolve the ongoing tensions between the three vying popes, the Council of Constance was called in 1414. As a leader calling for ecclesiastical reform, Hus was invited to Constance to make his case in defense of his views. In spite of the potential danger, Hus went having been given a promise of safe conduct from Emperor Sigismund. Lochman explains,

In 1414 Huss decided to defend his cause before the Council of Constance. He made thorough preparations and drafted a series of papers to enable him to counter the charges against him. He did not get a fair hearing, however. ... Huss was prepared to be corrected by the council, but only if it convinced him by arguments drawn from Holy Scripture. Even when physically weakened, Huss refused to recant. As a “heretic” he was burned at the stake on 6 July 1415.⁴⁶

His student and friend, Jerome of Prague, also travelled to Constance to defend his teacher, and he too was arrested. The following May, he was burned at the same place as Hus. To prevent any relics from being preserved from these heretics, the Council ordered Hus’s ashes dumped in the Rhine. Similarly, the Council ordered that John Wycliffe’s body be exhumed, burned and the ashes poured into a neighboring river.

⁴⁴ Jan Milič Lochman, “Huss, John (c. 1370–1415),” in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 266.

⁴⁵ Hus, *De Ecclesia*, trans. Schaff, 87, 208, 211; cf. Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 15–16.

⁴⁶ Lochman, “Huss, John,” 266.

The Hussite movement continued in spite of attacks from Rome.⁴⁷ The Hussites, also known as the Taborites, produced leaders such as Peter von Mladonowitz (d. 1451), Jerome of Prague (d. 1416), Jacob of Mies (d. 1429), Nicholas the Pilgrim (d. 1459), Jan Rokycana (d. 1471), and Peter Cheltschitzky (d. ca. 1465). Some of the key documents of the movement are “The Four Prague Articles” (1420), “The 76 Articles of the Taborites” (1422), “The Inquisition’s Articles Against Peter Turnow” (1426), and “The Taborite Confession” (1431). Ultimately, Rome was forced to co-exist with the Taborites. One of their key distinctives became “communion in both kinds,” or, the laity partaking of both the bread and the wine in the Communion service. For this reason, they also have been known as the “Ultraquists” meaning that they partake of both elements in the Eucharist.

5. *The Devotio Moderna and the Theologians of the Brethren of the Common Life*

During the 15th century, there developed in northwest Europe a movement called the *devotio moderna*.⁴⁸ It emerged from the Brethren of the Common Life. This was a movement of laymen and priests who insisted on a simple life as may have been lived in the early church. The *devotio moderna* emphasized the importance of Bible reading. Their focus was to teach the Bible and to care for the poor. Thomas à Kempis’s emphasis on a biblically based personal relationship with Christ as advocated in his *Imitation of Christ* reflected the concerns of this movement. Erasmus’s education in the 1470s in the Netherlands was influenced by the concerns of the *devotio moderna*.

Three theologians of reform were closely associated with the Brethren of the Common Life (or Lot). These were John Pupper of Goch (d. 1475), John Ruchrath of Wesel (d. 1479), and Wessel Gansfort (d. 1489).⁴⁹ John of Goch

⁴⁷ Cf. Bamber Gascoigne, “History of the Reformation,” HistoryWorld, <http://www.history-world.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?groupid=227&HistoryID=ad03&track=pthc>.

⁴⁸ For introductions to this movement, see John Van Engen, ed., *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1988); Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance: A History of the “Devotio moderna”* (New York: Century, 1925), 440–74; Regnerus R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

⁴⁹ See Gustav A. Benrath, *Reformtheologen des 15. Jahrhundert: Johann Pupper von Goch, Johann Ruchrath von Wesel, Wessel Gansfort* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1968); Dennis R. Janz, “Late Medieval Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. Bagchi and Steinmetz, 5–14; Edward W. Miller and J. W. Scudder, *Wessel Gansfort: Life and Writings*, 2 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1917). For other developments in Late Medieval thought, see Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 29–57; “Theological Light from the Medieval Era? Anselm and the Logic of the Atonement,” in *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian and*

emphasized the need of reformation in the church and in medieval theology. John of Wesel critiqued the conduct of the clergy and the indulgence system. Wessel Gansfort was the best theologian of the three having been trained by the Brethren of the Common Life. The Brethren of the Common Life, with their emphasis on biblical study and practical Christian living, sought to harness and improve the mystical spirit of their time to improve the church.⁵⁰

Ullmann distinguishes Hus, Jerome of Prague, and Savonarola as primarily concerned with “ecclesiastical action” from John of Goch, John of Wesel, and Wessel Gansfort as focused on “theological research”: “The former work with greater power and apparent effect, and their lives possess a higher degree of dramatic interest; the latter are more retired and move within narrower circles, but their labours are of greater theological consequence.” Further, “In the struggle with the prevailing domination, the former often manifest a degree of eccentricity; the action of the latter is more spiritual and concentrated.”

Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464), the great biblical commentator, who still recognized biblical allegorical interpretation but wrestled with the plain meaning of the text, was a product of the school program of the Brethren of the Common Life and studied at Heidelberg. His insights on the conciliar debate actually anticipated some of the reasoning on man in a state of nature that was later made famous in the 1600s by philosopher John Locke. Nicholas writes,

Since by nature all men are free, any authority by which subjects are prevented from doing evil and their freedom is restrained to doing good through fear of penalties, comes solely from harmony and from the consent of the subjects, whether the authority reside in written law or in the living law which is in the ruler. For if by nature men are equally strong and equally free, the true and settled power of one over the others, the ruler having equal natural power, could be set up only by the choice and consent of the others, just as a law also is set up by consent.⁵¹

In essence, he, like Locke, argued that natural law and reason establish the foundation of human government.

To these individual forerunners, who anticipated the Reformation, we must add the internationally significant reforming movement represented by the medieval church councils. This movement and its advocates established the ecclesiastical movement denominated Conciliarism.

Reformed Heritage. In Honor of Dr. D. Clair Davis, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), 69–93.

⁵⁰ Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, 11–13.

⁵¹ *De concordantia catholica* 2.14, cited in George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, rev. ed. (New York: Holt, 1950), 319.

V. Schism, Conciliarism, and the Necessity of the Protestant Movement

The crisis of the Great Schism referenced above in the discussion of Jan Hus compelled the church to resolve three competing claims for the papal office.⁵² Ultimately, each papal claimant was forced to resign. However, Pope John XXIII escaped from the Council of Constance but was re-arrested. He was officially deposed on May 2, 1414. Among the seventy charges leveled against the erring pope were heresy, simony, misusing church funds, moral turpitude inclusive of fornication, adultery, incest, sodomy, poisoning Pope Alexander V and his physician, and even denying the immortality of the soul. He was convicted on 54 of the charges!

The leading Conciliarists included William Durandus (d. 1330), Conrad of Gelnhausen (d. 1390), Matthew of Crakow (d. 1410), Dietrich of Nieheim (d. 1418), Pierre D'Ailly (d. 1420), Gregory of Heimburg (d. 1472), and Andreas von Krain (d. 1484). Scholastic theologians such as William of Ockham (d. 1349) contributed to the Conciliar debate with his *Dialog over the Authority of the King and of the Papacy* (1342) and *Tractate over the Authority of the King and the Papacy* (1347).⁵³ The political issues that emerged in the medieval era were addressed especially by Jean Gerson (d. 1429) and Marsilio of Padua.⁵⁴

In 1324, Marsilio of Padua (d. 1342) wrote *Defensor Pacis*, which outlined a vision of ecclesiastical power that was not vested in the clergy but in the people. Although deemed heretical, it launched the debate over ecclesiastical

⁵² On Conciliarism, see C. M. D. Crowder, ed., *Unity, Heresy and Reform, 1378–1460: The Conciliar Response to the Great Schism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977); Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Christopher M. Bellito, eds., *The Church, the Councils, and Reform: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008); John N. Figgis, *Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414–1625*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 31–54; Francis Oakley, *Natural Law, Conciliarism and Consent in the Late Middle Ages: Studies in Ecclesiastical and Intellectual History* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984); Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory: The Contribution of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism*, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 81 (Leiden: Brill, 1998); *Ockham, the Conciliar Theory, and the Canonists* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

⁵³ *Ockham: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner, Nelson Philosophical Texts (New York: Nelson, 1962).

⁵⁴ See Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 287–328; Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100–1625* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 362–547; Matthew S. Kempshall, "Ecclesiology and Politics," in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. Evans, 303–32; Jeffrey B. Russell, *Dissent and Reform in the Early Middle Ages*, *Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Brian P. McGuire, ed., *A Companion to Gerson*, *Brill's Companions to Christian Tradition* 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

power and popular sovereignty within the church. Some of his controversial tenets are: “The general council of Christians or its majority alone has the authority to define doubtful passages of the divine law, and to determine those that are to be regarded as articles of Christian faith”; “The gospels teach that no temporal punishment or penalty should be used to compel observance of divine commandments”; and “The other bishops, singly or in a body, have the same right by divine authority to excommunicate or otherwise exercise authority over the bishop of Rome.”⁵⁵

Conciliarism as the best solution to the Schism was advocated in the *Opinion of the University of Paris* (1393): “If the rival popes, after being urged in a brotherly and friendly manner, will not accept either of the above ways [resignation or arbitration], there is a third way which we propose as an excellent remedy for this sacrilegious schism. We mean that the matter shall be left to a general council.”⁵⁶ Pierre D’Ailly defended this approach in his *Conciliar Principles* (1409): “The Church in certain cases can hold a general council without the authority of the Pope.” He then goes on to list several scenarios in which this would apply. For instance, “if there were several contenders for the Papacy so that the whole Church obeyed no single one of them, nor appeared at the call of any one or even two of them at the same time—just as is the case in the present schism.”⁵⁷ These theories in favor of a Roman Church led by councils were put into practice by the Council of Constance, the body that condemned Wycliffe and Hus. Thus, in its decrees *Haec Sancta* (May 6, 1415) and *Frequens* (October 9, 1417), Constance declared:

This holy synod of Constance ... declares that this synod, legally assembled, is a general council, and represents the catholic church militant and has its authority directly from Christ; and everybody, of whatever rank or dignity, including also the pope, is bound to obey this council in those things which pertain to the faith, to the ending of this schism, and to a general reformation of the church in its head and members.⁵⁸

The council also compared the church to a garden to advocate frequent councils, “A good way to till the field of the Lord is to hold general councils frequently, because by them the briars, thorns, and thistles of heresies, errors, and schisms are rooted out, abuses reformed, and the way of the Lord made more fruitful.”⁵⁹ Thus, at Constance the principles of Conciliarism were clearly in control.

⁵⁵ Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13–14.

Ultimately and ironically, the Protestant Reformation and its rupture from Rome became inevitable due to the failure of Conciliarism. Subsequent popes did not want to be held accountable to regularly occurring councils. So Pope Pius II proclaimed in *Execrabilis* (January 18, 1460):

An abuse, at once execrable and unheard of hitherto, has appeared in our day to the effect that certain persons, imbued with the spirit of rebellion zealous not for wiser judgment but to escape from sin already committed, have presumed to appeal to a future Council from the Roman Pontiff ... we condemn such appeals and reprobate them as erroneous and damnable. ... If, however, anyone shall do anything to the contrary ... let him *ipso facto* incur the sentence of execration and incapable of absolution, save by the Roman Pontiff and at the point of death.⁶⁰

In the same spirit, Pope Leo X averred in *Pastor Aeternus* (March 16, 1516): “The pope alone has the power, right, and full authority, extending beyond that of all councils, to call, adjourn, and dissolve the councils. This is attested not only by the Holy Scriptures as well as the statements of the Holy Fathers and our predecessors on the throne at Rome.”⁶¹ Luther’s subsequent call for a Church Council to hear and debate his theology was thus *prima facie* heretical in the eyes of the pope and his church. The Reformers were compelled to turn to the magistrates for help in their reformation program and thereby established by necessity churches outside the pale of the Roman hierarchy. Protestant churches were birthed by forces of reform begun by forerunners in the medieval era who had long advocated reforms that would not be countenanced by the entrenched papal system.

VI. The Humanists and Desiderius Erasmus as Forerunners of the Reformation

A critical movement that anticipated the Protestant Reformation and helped secure its success was that of the humanists. Their scholarly labors and knowledge of the original sources of church history as well as biblical texts supported and sustained the efforts of the Reformers. The origins of the humanists grew out of the Renaissance that had begun even before the period of the forerunners. The leading Humanists of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries included Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457), Marsilio Ficino (d. 1499), Rudolf Agricola (d. 1485), Jacob Wimpfeling (d. 1528), Johannes Reuchlin (d. 1523), Ulrich von Hutten (d. 1525), François Rabelais (*ca.* 1483–1553), and Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536).⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² For introductions to the relationship between Reformation and humanism, see James D.

Here are the contributions of a few humanists toward reform. François Rabelais's *On Education* set out a high standard of original language mastery.⁶³ Lorenzo Valla's *The Falsely Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine* undercut the papacy's claims for political temporal power.⁶⁴ Ulrich von Hutten's *Letters from Obscure Men* (1515) satirized the legalistic traditional piety of Medieval Catholicism.⁶⁵ However, the prince of them all was Desiderius Erasmus who intensified the humanists' commitment to the importance of Scripture for true Christianity.⁶⁶ Erasmus lampooned the church in his *Praise of Folly* as noted above by his excoriating critiques of the clergy and theologians. And not even the papacy escaped his exhortations: "Then the supreme Pontiffs, who are the vicars of Christ: if they made an attempt to imitate this life of poverty and toil, his teaching, cross, and contempt for life, and thought about their name of 'pope', which means 'father', or their title of 'Supreme Holiness', what creature on earth would be so cast down?"⁶⁷

Tracy, "Humanism and the Reformation," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 33–57; Albert Hyma, *Renaissance to Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951); and Augustin Renaudet, *Préreforème et Humanisme à Paris pendant les premières guerres d'Italie: 1494–1517*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie d'Argences, 1953). For Erasmus's thought, see Erika Rummel, "The Theology of Erasmus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. Bagchi and Steinmetz, 28–38; Matthew Spinka, *Christian Thought, from Erasmus to Berdyaev* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 1–22.

⁶³ "Therefore, my son [Pantagruel], I beg you to devote your youth to the firm pursuit of your studies and to the attainment of virtue.... It is my earnest wish that you shall become a perfect master of languages. First of Greek, as Quintilian advises; secondly, of Latin; and then of Hebrew, on account of the Holy Scriptures; also of Chaldean and Arabic, for the same reason; and I would have you model your Greek style on Plato's and your Latin on that of Cicero. ... At some hour of the day also, begin to examine the Holy Scriptures. First the New Testament and the Epistles of the Apostles in Greek; and then the Old Testament, in Hebrew. ... It befits you to serve, love, and fear God, to put all your thoughts and hopes in Him, and by faith grounded in charity to be so conjoined with Him that you may never be severed from Him by sin." Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 21–22.

⁶⁴ Valla speaking about the "Donation of Constantine [early medieval fictional narrative legitimating papal authority over emperor]" asserts, "I maintain that Constantine not only made no such Donation, and not only that the Roman pope can make no regulations on it, but what is more that if both be true this double papal rule is terminated due to the crime of the possessor, for we see that the decline and the devastation of the Italians and many of other countries have flowed from this source alone. If the water source is bitter, so also is the stream; if the root is impure, so also are the branches. ... But if the stream is bitter, then one should plug the source; if the branches are impure the cause comes from the roots." Ibid., 22.

⁶⁵ "You charged me to write you oft, and propose from time to time knotty points in Theology, which you would straightway resolve better than the Courticians at Rome: therefore, I now write to ask your reverence what opinion you hold concerning one who on a Friday, that is on the sixth day of the week—or on any other fast day—should eat an egg with a chicken in it?" Ibid., 24.

⁶⁶ John C. Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus with the Life of Erasmus by Beatus Rhenanus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), 9.

⁶⁷ Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Radice, 108; cf. Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 23.

Erasmus's cure for the failures of the church was a return to the study of the Scriptures in their original languages. Erasmus wrote *The Paraclesis*, the preface to his Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament, which was originally published in February 1516.⁶⁸ It is his classic call for knowledge of the Bible and thus is also an expression of biblically committed humanism. He writes,

Let us all, therefore, with our whole heart covet this literature, let us embrace it, let us continually occupy ourselves with it, let us fondly kiss it, at length let us die in its embrace, let us be transformed in it, since indeed studies are transmuted into morals. ... If anyone shows us the footprints of Christ, in what manner, as Christians, do we prostrate ourselves, how we adore them! But why do we not venerate instead the living and breathing likeness of Him in these books? If anyone displays the tunic of Christ, to what corner of the earth shall we not hasten so that we may kiss it? Yet were you to bring forth His entire wardrobe, it would not manifest Christ more clearly and truly than the Gospel writings ... These writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself, and thus they render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes.⁶⁹

Erasmus began work on his Latin New Testament in 1512. However, the Complutensian Polyglot of 1514 under the leadership of Spanish Cardinal Ximenez was the first New Testament printed in Greek but its publication only occurred in 1522 due to waiting for the completion of the Old Testament and the approval of Pope Leo X. Only 600 copies of the Polyglot were printed. Along these humanistic efforts in Spain, the history of Spanish Reformation, which is often overlooked, is receiving increasing attention.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 91; James K. McConica, *Erasmus*, Past Masters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45–49.

⁶⁹ Erasmus, "The *Paraclesis*," in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, ed. Olin, 105–6.

⁷⁰ For an assessment by one of the foremost scholars, see A. Gordon Kinder, "The Reformation and Spain: Stillbirth, By-Pass, or Excision?" *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 1 (June 1999): 100–125; and Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). The influence of Erasmus on Spain was significant; see for instance the classic work, Marcel Bataillon, *Érasme et l'Espagne: Recherches sur l'histoire spirituelle du XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Droz, 1937); and John E. Longhurst, *Erasmus and the Spanish Inquisition: The Case of Juan de Valdés* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1950). Juan de Valdés was one of the most important early Spanish Reformers. Some of his writings are found in Juan de Valdés, *Valdés Two Catechisms: The Dialogue on Christian Doctrine and the Christian Instruction for Children*, ed. José C. Nieto, trans. William B. and Carol D. Jones (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1981); and George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation and Evangelical Catholicism as Represented by Juan de Valdés*, LCC 25 (London: SCM, 1957), 295–394. Studies on Valdés include José C. Nieto, *Juan de Valdés and the Origins of the Spanish and Italian Reformation* (Geneva: Droz, 1970); Caros Gilly, "Juan de Valdés: Übersetzer und Bearbeiter von Luthers Schriften in seinem Diálogo de Doctrina," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 74 (1983): 257–306 [who offers a different assessment of Luther's influence than Nieto]; J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *Juan de Valdés, réformateur en Espagne et en Italie, 1529–1541*

Thus, Erasmus's 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament was the first to be published, and his work proved to be very influential.

Erasmus explained his desire for the Greek New Testament:

But one thing the facts cry out, and it can be clear, as they say, even to a blind man, that often through the translator's clumsiness or inattention the Greek has been wrongly rendered; often the true and genuine reading has been corrupted by ignorant scribes, which we see happen every day, or altered by scribes who are half-taught and half-asleep.⁷¹

His second edition appeared in 1519, which was the edition used by Luther to translate the New Testament into German. 3,300 copies of the two editions were sold.

Erasmus's third edition was in 1522 and was likely the basis of Tyndale's 1526 translation of the English New Testament. His fourth edition appeared in 1527 and his fifth was published in 1535. He dedicated his Greek Testament to Pope Leo X. Ultimately Luther and Erasmus separated due to their debate over the bondage of the will. Yet Erasmus did not ultimately escape the criticisms of the Catholic Church. He was critiqued by Catholic monks who famously claimed: "Erasmus had laid the egg, and Luther had hatched it."⁷²

Erasmus died in a sort of Reformation "purgatory." In Basel, while visiting his collaborator and Protestant friend Oecolampadius, Erasmus suddenly fell ill. Although apparently loyal to the Catholic Church, he did not request the last rites and was buried in the Basel Minster, a Protestant church.

VII. Conclusion: The Forerunners Transition to Reformers

As the Reformation approached, forerunners were at work. And thus there is a point when the forerunners became the first wave of the Protestant revolt against Rome. Johannes von Staupitz (d. 1524) in his *Sermon Extracts* (1516) criticized indulgences and pointed to Christ for salvation.⁷³ Sebastian Brant

(Geneva: Droz, 1969); Daniel A. Crews, *Twilight of the Renaissance: The Life of Juan de Valdés* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Philip E. Hughes, "Juan de Valdés: Spanish Reformer," *Reformed Journal* 22.2 (1972): 18–20; and Seth L. Skolnitsky, "The Dialogue of Doctrine: A Preliminary Survey of the Theology of Juan de Valdés" (M.A. Honors Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1982).

⁷¹ Erasmus, "Letter to Dorp," in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 71, *Controversies*, ed. J. K. Sowards (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 26; cf. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* and *Letter to Maarten Van Dorp, 1515*, trans. Radice, 165.

⁷² Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*, 16.

⁷³ "It is beyond doubt that the person may attain forgiveness of his sins by a true, honest contrition even without all the indulgences that he can avail himself of. ... The mercy of God is without measure and infinitely great. ... Christ has opened to us the well of God's righteousness." Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 21.

(d. 1521) published *The Ship of Fools* “For profit and salutary instruction, admonition and pursuit of wisdom, reason and good manners: also for contempt and punishment of folly, blindness, error, and stupidity of all stations and kinds of men.”⁷⁴ His “contempt and punishment” clearly had the Roman Church in mind as the titles of some of his poems reveal: “Contempt of Holy Writ,” “Of Beggars,” and “Of the Antichrist.”⁷⁵ Open complaints against Rome began to appear. Jacob Wimpfeling in his *Grievances of the German Nation* (1515) listed his grievances with a direct allusion to the Hussites,

It is not that we deny our debt to Rome. But we ask: Is Rome not also indebted to us? ... [O]ur compatriots crowd the road to Rome. They pay for papal reservations and dispensations. ... Is there a nation more patient and willing to receive indulgences, though we well know that the income from them is divided between the Holy See and its officialdom? Have we not paid dearly for the confirmation of every bishop and abbot? ... Let therefore the Holy Apostolic See and our gracious mother, the Church, reduce at least the most severe of the taxes she has placed on our country. ... Such a reduction of our tribute might well prevent the outbreak of violent insurrection of our people against the Church.... It would not take much for the Bohemian [Hussite] poison to penetrate our German lands.⁷⁶

And thus the boundary between the forerunners and the Reformers disappeared. The words of Staupitz were soon the concerns of Luther. Similarly, the Reformation in France would have forerunners like Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Guillaume Briçonnet who would impact the young Calvin.⁷⁷ Peter Martyr's Reformation faith began a Reformation movement in Italy that was due in part to an early gospel witness of Juan de Valdez, a Reformer who emerged from the Spanish and Italian contexts.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 7–8.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9–10.

⁷⁷ On Lefèvre, see Philip E. Hughes, *Lefèvre: Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Guy Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d'Étaples et l'intelligence des écritures*, Travaux d'humanisme et Renaissance 152 (Geneva: Droz, 1976); Henry Heller, “The Evangelicism of Lefèvre d'Étaples,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972): 43–77; Richard Stauffer, “Lefèvre d'Étaples, artisan ou spectateur de la Réforme?,” in *Interprètes de la Bible: Études sur les réformateurs du XVI^e siècle*, Théologie historique 57 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980). On Briçonnet, see Guillaume Briçonnet and Marguerite d'Angoulême, *Correspondance (1521–1524)*, *Années 1521–1522*, Edition du texte et annotations par Christine Martineau et Michel Veissière avec le concours de Henry Heller, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 141 (Geneva: Droz, 1975); Lucien Febvre, *Au cœur religieux du XVI^e siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: S. E. V. P. E. N., 1968), 145–71; Henry Heller, “The Briçonnet Case Reconsidered,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 2 (1972): 223–58.

⁷⁸ On Martyr, see Peter Martyr, *Early Writings: Creed, Scripture, Church*, trans. Mariano Di Gangi and Joseph C. McLelland (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994); and Mariano Di Gangi, *Peter Martyr Vermigli, 1499–1562: Renaissance Man, Reformation Master* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993).

At last, the prayer of forerunner Thomas à Kempis was answered by the gospel of free justifying grace:

O God, I feel uneasy and depressed
because of this present trouble.
I feel trapped on every side,
yet I know I have come to his hour,
so that I may learn that you alone
can free me from this predicament.
Lord, deliver me,
for what can I do without you,
helpless as I am?
Lord, give me patience in all my troubles.
Help me, and I will not be afraid,
no matter how discouraged I may be.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 20.