

CHAPTER 7

BEGINNING OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The early fifteen hundreds are the eve of the Protestant Reformation. For the Western church, the sixteenth century is the most important historically since the apostolic age. For three centuries prior to this the church fought the corruption of the popes (e.g., in fifteenth century, councils in Pisa, Constance, Basel). The papacy was now stronger than before, especially in Italy. There were no widespread devotional movements. Printing with moveable type had just started, and Luther aided it greatly. Politically, the nations were more independent, making it harder for the pope to control events in Europe.

A. The papacy

1503, Alexander VI died; son Caesar very ill, demanded 100,000 gold ducats immediately, got them; another pope (Pius III) ruled for one month, died of illness

1. Julius II (1503-1513)

Cardinal Rovere; warrior-pope; nephew of Sixtus IV, enemy of Rodrigo Borgia; powerful cardinal for thirty years, exiled from Rome for last ten years

Most able and active pope since thirteenth century; more honest, but gruff; built up treasury; kept illegitimate children out of papal palace

Rode in front of armies; freed Papal States from Naples; helped drive French out of Italy

Started fifth Lateran council (1512-1517)

Hired Michelangelo for various projects, including statue of self on horse (later melted for bullets), statue of Moses, Cistine Chapel ceiling

After died, satire (probably by Erasmus) was published, *Julius Excluded from Heaven*

2. Leo X (1514-1521)

Son of Lorenzo de Medici; had been cardinal when fourteen years old; now pope at 38 years old

Pleasant man, no enemies; not concerned with religion

Quote by Sarpi (Roman Catholic historian): “Leo would have been a perfect pope, if he had combined with his other good qualities a moderate knowledge of religion and a greater inclination to piety, for neither of which he showed much concern.” (Schaff *HCC* 6:495)

Terrible manager, squandered wealth Julius had accumulated; had to sell more offices, etc.; put papacy near bankruptcy—“impoverished three pontificates—that of Julius, his own, and his successor’s”

Letter to his brother shortly after becoming pope: “Let us enjoy the papacy, for God has given it to us” (Schaff *HCC* 6:479; cf. movie *Martin Luther*, which charitably but inaccurately quotes Leo, “God has given us the papacy; let us enjoy it, and employ it to his glory while we live.”)

Preoccupied with life-style and artistic projects, not interested in extreme wickedness or in war; no notice of Luther until indulgence sales went down; excommunicated Luther during his final year as pope

B. Erasmus (1466-1536)

*Greatest Christian humanist; wrote the best Latin since Augustine; edited many Greek and Latin classics and church fathers

Illegitimate son of Dutch priest; educated by Brethren of the Common Life; became monk, then secretary to a bishop

Traveled to England, met John Colet, who interested him to apply his learning to the NT and early Christianity

Did most of his work in Basel; first best-selling author in history of printing; satires *In Praise of Folly* (six hundred editions, now reprinted), and perhaps *Julius Excluded from Heaven*

Most important work:

Greek NT; four editions during his life

In a hurry to publish; had only a few late manuscripts; translated from Vulgate back into Greek where no Greek manuscript available (including last six verses of Revelation, other verses in Revelation, question in Acts 9:6)

In 3rd edition added poor reading from 1 John 5:7-8; 3rd edition became basis of “Textus Receptus” and basically of KJV of 1611

Production and publication of Greek NT, even though from inferior manuscripts, was a great breakthrough for biblical studies and a great encouragement for the Reformation

Later opposed Luther, wrote *The Freedom of the Will* (answered by Luther’s *The Bondage of the Will*)

Three evaluations of Erasmus:

Promoted reforms in the Roman church

Precursor of rationalism

Forerunner of Luther (“Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched”)

Was left behind by subsequent events of the Reformation

C. Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522)

German humanist and Hebraist; studied under Brethren of the Common Life; studied law at various universities

Erasmus called him “the triple-tongued” (Latin, Greek, Hebrew)

Wrote *Rudiments of Hebrew*, opened OT up to European scholars; defended himself against the Inquisition for using Jewish books; nearly condemned, but had powerful friends

Later opposed burning Luther’s books at Ingolstadt, but never became a Lutheran

Philip Melanchthon was his grandnephew

D. Corruption of the church

Well-known for three centuries; gospel hidden; theory of united church from old Holy Roman Empire; pope now the “Pontifex Maximus,” the bridge to heaven; these were the major failings of the church; the following were symptomatic but more widely recognized:

1. Simony

Often oldest son of nobleman became civil officer, second son entered church (e.g., Leo X second son of Lorenzo; another example—Albert, Archbishop of Mainz, in *Martin Luther* film)

2. Pluralism

Note Albert again, held three archbishoprics at once; Leo X had twenty-seven church appointments when he was elected pope, the first of which he held at the age of seven

3. Absenteeism

A natural result of #2

4. Worldliness

Churchmen literate, thus hired by rulers and other wealthy individuals for jobs requiring reading and writing

Popes, cardinals, bishops, etc., lived in luxury; thus Reformation got twenty year start—popes not concerned

E. Superstitious additions from the Middle Ages

(Nearly blotted out the gospel entirely)

1. Mariolatry

Mary hears better, more sympathetic

2. Worship of saints

Their super-abundance of good works (“works of supererogation”) had supplied a “treasury of merit” for sinners

3. Worship of relics

E.g., Erasmus visit to tomb of Thomas à Becket (Schaff *HCC* 6:741)

4. The mass

Name comes from last part—dismissal; claims to be repetition of Christ's sacrifice; "the greatest influence to hold people away from the gospel and to enslave them" (Allan A. MacRae)

*Religion (man does God's will) became magic (God forced to do man's will)

F. Claims of ecclesiastical authority

1. Special powers of the priesthood

Especially the mass; all the sacraments; interdict a mighty weapon for the popes

2. Papal infallibility and power

Idea of infallibility growing and commonly accepted, not official until 1870; already considered heretical to oppose the pope

Church the only interpreter of Scripture

Church should have power over the nations (cf. situation developing in America)

3. Indulgences

Originally to mitigate earthly penance; Sixtus IV applied them to Purgatory; Tetzel was selling them for Albert and Leo X

G. Monastic orders

Most were rich and corrupt, controlled much land; often the most fanatic defenders of Roman Catholic power; provided much material for scholars

H. Dangers facing reformers

Inquisition still in force; note fates of

Wycliffe (after he died)
Hus
Jerome of Prague
Savonarola

I. Spiritual situation

Many in Europe saved; Luther published their works; not a large separate body (possible exception of Waldenses); not clear expression of gospel; most loyal Catholics superstitious, not saved

In general, gospel more widespread in northern Europe than in southern and eastern Europe; precursors to Reformation—their memory lived on—Wycliffe, Hus, Savonarola

J. Political situation

Theoretically, Holy Roman Empire for all Europe; actually, emperor trying to control Germany and Italy—small sections

Maximilian of Hapsburg, emperor when Reformation began; ruled Austria, friendly; married Mary, daughter of duke of Burgundy; his son married daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain; they had son, Charles V

When Maximilian died in 1519, contest for next emperor; Pope Leo X played all sides

Charles V made emperor, twenty years old; Charles had inherited Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Naples, Sicily, Americas; spent most of his life fighting Turks (and Protestants when possible)