

Session 2

The Medieval Church and the Reformation

Introductory Thoughts

No Christian Is an Island

In evangelical individualism people think of their personal relationship with God in isolation (“Just me and Jesus”) and forge their destiny apart from any church authority. While holding relatively low opinions of history, traditions, and the church, they turn to the experiences of self and isolate themselves from their brothers and sisters in the faith. True spirituality is perverted as it becomes a quest for inner stimulation rather than growth in biblical knowledge and the application of truth in community. Healthy Christians do not live in isolation.

~ Michael G. Moriarty. *The Perfect 10: The Blessings of Following God’s Commandments in a Post Modern World*, pp. 52-53.

Session Outline

I. The Medieval Church

Protestantism itself, we may well remember, began with the monastic experiences of Martin Luther. Once Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer, Menno Simons, and other leaders of the Reformation concluded it was necessary to break from the Roman Catholic Church, they drew support for their theology first from Scripture, but then immediately from the writings of monks. Luther and Calvin, especially, returned repeatedly to the work of Augustine (354-430), who had been not only a learned theologian, busy bishop, and energetic polemicist but also the founder of a monastic order. In fact, Luther began his biblical study and theological reflections as an Augustinian monk.

The breadth and depth of monastic influence in the church can be sketched quickly by observing the lineage of attitudes and actions that have been approved by almost all Christians everywhere. If we read the Scripture in our native languages, we benefit from a tradition of biblical translation inspired by the monk Jerome (ca. 342-420). If we sing together the praises of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we follow where the hymn-writing monks Gregory (ca. 540-604) and Bernard of Clairvaux led the way. If we pursue theology, we inevitably find ourselves indebted to the monks Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-74). If we pray for the success of Christian missions, we

ask for blessing upon enterprises pioneered by the monks Patrick (ca. 390-ca. 460), Boniface (680-754), Cyril (826-69) and his brother Methodius (ca. 815-85), and Raymond Lull (ca. 1233-ca. 1315). If we are interested in the past record of Christianity in English-speaking areas of the world, we cultivate a historical concern begun by a monk, the Venerable Bede (ca. 673-735). If we glory in the goodness that God imparted to the created world, we follow where the friar Francis of Assisi (1181/82-1226) blazed the trail. Monasticism was never a perfect answer to the question of how to live the Christian life. Its impact, nonetheless, cannot be underestimated. And that impact has been largely for the good.

~ Mark A. Noll. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997, pp. 85.

A. The Monastic Rescue of the Church: Benedict's Rule (530)

1. Written in order to guide monks to holiness and correct many of the abuses of the time
2. Benedict was a renowned preacher, a deep mystic, a popular figure of his time that played a major role in politics and ecclesiastical renewal. Also seen as a prolific songwriter! (*O Sacred Head, Now Wounded*)
3. Benedict of Nursia (in Italy) dramatically impacted monasticism with his famous Rule, which emphasized discipline and zeal for the things of God, curbed the abusive notion of monasticism that led to Gnostic and Docetic views, and emphasized the centrality of Scripture and prayer in the Christian life. It also linked religious experience with work, study, and other commonplace acts.
4. The rule has provided direction, encouragement, and inspiration for those taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for 1500 years.

5. It is important to recognize the power of the role of monasticism in the history of the Church: “The rise of monasticism was, after Christ’s commission to his disciples, the most important—and in many ways the most beneficial—institutional event in the history of Christianity. For over a millennium, in the centuries between the reign of Constantine and the Protestant Reformation, almost everything in the church that approached the highest, noblest, and truest ideals of the gospel was done either by those who had chosen the monastic way or by those who had been inspired in their Christian life by the monks” (Noll, *Turning Points*, p. 84).

B. Gregory I and the Papacy (590-604) and the Western Church

Three great names dominate the age of monastic theology: Augustine, Gregory and Benedict. Augustine, the greatest of the Latin fathers, wrote shortly before the disintegration of the Western Empire and summed up much of the teaching of the earlier fathers of the church. Pope Gregory I, the greatest of the monastic theologians in the Dark Ages, was a much-loved master of the spiritual life. Indeed, J. Leclercq could state that ‘in the realm of theological analysis of the Christian experience, nothing essential has been added to Gregory the Great’. The Augustinianism of the Dark Ages was by and large the teaching of Augustine as filtered through Gregory.

~ A. N. S. Lane, “Monastic Theology.” J. I. Packer and Sinclair B. Ferguson.
New Dictionary of Theology. Electronic ed.
 Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, © 1988, pp. 441-42.

1. Born 540 in Rome, able leader, forefather of the modern day papacy, crafter of the papal dominance, died 604.
2. Increased missionary activity to Germany and Ireland: especially known for his commissioning religious missionary order folk (monks) to go share the Good News in pagan England, which work was pioneered by Patrick (circa 389-461); *it was he who sent Augustine to England to become the first archbishop of Canterbury.*

3. He taught a blend of Augustinianism and Catholicism, which dominated the Middle Ages.
4. The Church in the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Church): submissive to the powers of the state

C. The Seven Ecumenical Councils

1. The First Ecumenical Council of Nicea (325): settled the Arian heresy, establishing the deity of Christ
2. The Second Ecumenical Council was the First Council of Constantinople (381) established the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. (These first two have been traditionally linked together by the so-called Nicene, or Niceno-Constantinopolitan, Creed, and it is clear that these have been embraced by virtually all the major branches of the Christian Church.)
3. The Third Ecumenical Council was held at Ephesus in 431, which resolved the Christological issues raised by Nestorius.
4. The Fourth Ecumenical Council was held at Chalcedon in 451 condemning the Christology of Eutyches (c.378–454), establishing that Jesus was one divine person in two natures, one human and one divine. (Ultimately the Egyptian and Syrian churches separated, for they held to the position of *monophysitism*, i.e., that Christ had only one nature, which was divine.)
5. The Fifth Ecumenical Council was the Second Council of Constantinople (553) which sought to resolve the monophysite controversy (i.e., it affirmed that the human nature of Christ was not “independent,” but received its