

**Popes, Bishops, Deacons, and Priests:
Church Leadership in the Middle Ages**

by

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Introduction

In January of 1077, at the apparent climax of what became known as the Investiture Controversy, Henry IV, the stubborn German Emperor, stood barefoot in a hair shirt in the snow outside the castle of Canossa, Italy, begging the pope, Gregory VII for clemency. During the course of the quarrel, Henry had attempted to depose the pope, and the pope responded by excommunicating the emperor and those bishops that sided with him. Historians seem to agree that Henry's repentance was not all it seemed, and he was actually trying to win back his people and weaken the pope's hand. In a sense, however, the motive behind why Henry did what he did is less important than the fact that, by the eleventh century, the church had come to figure so prominently, and the pope had ascended to such a position of both secular and ecclesiastical influence. That such a conflict between emperor and pope existed and had to be dealt with personally by the emperor himself bears testimony to the power that had come to reside with the Bishop of Rome.

The purpose of this paper is to survey the growth of the church offices, in particular the papacy, from their biblical foundations, through to the end of the Middle Ages. In the process, the paper will pay attention to the development of traditions, the deviations from Biblical command and practice, and those who recognized the deviations and sought to do something about them. The paper will conclude with an assessment of the clergy just prior to the Reformation, comparing what it had become to the way it originated in the New Testament.

Background: The Early Church

The Forms of Leadership in the Early Church

The New Testament speaks of four types of church leader, the ἐπίσκοπος (“overseer”), the πρεσβύτερος (“elder”), the ποιμήν (“shepherd” or “pastor”¹), and the διάκονος (“deacon”).² Of these four, it appears that three of them can be equally applied

¹ The English word “pastor” is itself simply the Latin translation of ποιμήν.

²See Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-5; 3 John 1

to the same office holder: the ἐπίσκοπος, the πρεσβύτερος, and the ποιμήν.³ For brevity, this paper will use the term “elder” to refer to all three.

The office of deacon was established first in Acts 6, where a dispute over the daily distribution to widows resulted in the setting apart of certain men to oversee this matter of practical care, leaving the apostles to devote themselves to preaching. Further references to the office of deacon in the New Testament elaborate on the qualifications for deacon (1 Timothy 3:8-13), or simply mention the deacons along with the overseers as among the recipients of an epistle (e.g., Philippians 1:1). It is interesting to note that the main difference between the qualifications for “overseer” and deacon in 1 Timothy 3 is that the “overseer” must be “able to teach” (v. 2). This further emphasizes their role in dealing with the practical aspects of ministry within the body of God’s people, as exemplified in Acts 6.⁴

The office of elder is very clearly a position of church leadership and oversight. As Paul was leaving Ephesus, he gathered together the elders of the church to address them, warning them: “Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”⁵ They were to be watchful because of “savage wolves” that will attack the flock. It was clearly their job to watch over the people entrusted to them, to guide them and teach them.

From the writings of the early church fathers, it is evident that the separation of the bishop’s office from the body of elders was a gradual process. Documents from the

³For example, in Titus 1:5-9, Paul says that he left Titus in Crete so that he would “appoint elders in every city...” and goes on to describe some of the qualifications of such men. He continues his discussion, however, by referring to the “elder” as an “overseer.” See James R. White, “The Plural-Elder-Led Church,” in Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (eds.), Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity (Nashville, Tn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), pp. 269-279. Also, Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity Volume I: Beginnings to 1500, 2nd Printing (Peabody, Ma: Prince Press, 1997), p, 116, where he states that “[I]n at least several of the local churches there was more than one bishop and the evidence seems to support the view that at the outset in some and perhaps all of the churches the designations of ‘elder’ and ‘bishop’ were used interchangeably for the same office.”

⁴ It is interesting that in Acts 7, Stephen, one of the deacons chosen in chapter 6, shows himself quite capable of handling God’s Word. However, his primary ministry was practical service.

⁵Acts 20:17-38. Notice the three aspects of the ministry, elder, overseer, and pastor, are all referred to in this one passage, and all with respect to the same office: the elder.

end of the first and beginning of the second century show a situation where there existed churches operating under bishops and deacons, and churches operating with elders and deacons under a single bishop. For example, 1 Clement, which is actually a letter not from a single bishop but from the church of Rome to the church at Corinth, assumes the existence of only bishops (plural) and deacons in the church⁶:

So, preaching both in the country and in the towns, they [the apostles] appointed their firstfruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops [ἐπισκόπους] and deacons [διακόνους] many years ago... (42.4)

For it will be no small sin for us, if we depose from the bishop's [ἐπισκοπῆς] office those who have offered the gifts blamelessly and in holiness. Blessed are those presbyters [πρεσβύτεροι] who have gone on ahead, who took their departure at a mature and fruitful age... (44.4-5)

Now, then, who among you is noble? Who is compassionate? Who is filled with love? Let him say: "If it is my fault that there are rebellion strife and schisms, I retire; I will go wherever you wish, and will do whatever is ordered by the people. Only let the flock of Christ be at peace with its duly appointed presbyters [πρεσβυτέρων]." (54.1-2)

You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the revolt, must submit to the presbyters [πρεσβυτέροις] and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart. (57.1)

These passages indicate a plurality of bishops and elders, and it seems reasonable to assume that the same office is assumed by both designations, given the amount of respect accorded to both. The only other office mentioned is that of deacon. It seems clear, therefore, that there was at this time (95-97 A.D.) a plurality of bishops/elders in the Corinthian church. It can be reasoned that there was also a plurality of bishops/elders in the Roman church too, since the epistle simply states it is from "the church of God which sojourns in Rome," and uses the first person plural throughout.

The Didache, dating from around the same period, provides instruction, among other things, on installing church leadership:

⁶The following quotations from Michael Holmes (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Books, 1999).

Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons [ἐπισκόπους καὶ διακόνους] worthy of the Lord, men who are humble and not avaricious and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. (15)

Once again, only the offices of bishop and deacon are mentioned, and both in the plural. It seems, therefore, that at least at the close of the first and beginning of the second century, the biblical example of bishops/elders and deacons was still normative.

The epistles of Ignatius to their various recipients reveal a change in ecclesiastical organization. Ignatius consistently refers only to a single bishop in each church to which he writes, as well as mentioning deacons and elders. In his epistle to the Ephesians, he refers to their bishop, Onesimus, and their deacon, Burrhus, who needs to be subject to the bishop and the “presbytery” (πρεσβυτερίος).⁷ When writing to the Magnesians, Ignatius mentions the bishop Damas, the elders Bassus and Apollonius, and the deacon Zotion. He exhorts the deacon to submit to the bishop and elders, and the elders to submit to the bishop, since in so doing, they are really submitting to the “bishop of all,” the Father of Jesus Christ.⁸ To the Trallians, Ignatius says that to submit to the bishop is to live in accordance with Christ, and that they should be subject to the presbytery and respect the deacons. Interestingly, in this passage, he pictures the bishop-elder-deacon relationship as akin to the Father, Son, and the apostles: the bishop is like the Father, the deacons are like Christ, and the elders are like the council of God and the apostles. Most importantly for this study, Ignatius then states boldly that without these offices no band can be called a church.⁹ Addressing the Smyrnaeans, he says that the church should follow the bishop as Christ followed the Father, and they should follow the presbytery as they would the apostles. The deacons should be respected as they would the commandment of God.¹⁰ It is evident from the letters of Ignatius, therefore, that the

⁷Ephesians 1-2. The fact that Ignatius is writing to the Ephesians is of particular interest, since, as noted above, it was only some forty or fifty years previously that Paul had gathered the Ephesian elders (not the single bishop) to deliver his parting admonitions.

⁸Magnesians 2-3.

⁹Trallians 2-3.

¹⁰Smyrnaeans 8.

church structure where a bishop presides over elders was known by the early second century.

The point also needs to be made that there was not a sudden change from one model (elders and deacons) to another (bishop, elders, and deacons). This is illustrated by comparing Ignatius' letter to Polycarp, where he exhorts him to pay attention to the bishop, and obey the presbyters and deacons, and Polycarp's subsequent letter to the Philippians, where he instructs the Philippian church regarding the character of deacons and presbyters, making no mention of an office of "bishop." One can surmise from this that there was no bishopric in the Philippian church. Hence, there was a gradual move over time from the rule of the presbytery over the congregation, to the rule of the single bishop over one or more congregations.

The Growth of Roman Primacy in the Early Church

While it is nowhere mandated in the New Testament that any church or churches should have authority over any other church, political and sociological factors caused such hierarchical structures to develop. The church at Jerusalem, being the first church as such (Acts 2), was originally the main center of activity (see Acts 9, 11, 15, Romans 15:25-31; 1 Corinthians 16:2-4). As the oldest of the churches, there was a natural respect for her. The church in Rome soon also began to gain some prominence, being located in the capital city of the Empire. According to tradition, both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome, further adding to the prestige of the city for the church. First Clement appears to be an epistle from the church in Rome addressing issues within the Corinthian church, as if the Roman elders would have some influence in resolving the situation. Later in the second century, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, would further claim authority for the church in Rome.¹¹

¹¹In his apologetic work *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus sets forth the argument that true doctrine has been preserved and passed down from church to church by a traceable succession of faithful leaders going back to the original Apostles. Hence, if anyone teaches something that is not part of that Apostolic tradition, that teaching is erroneous. To make his case, instead of enumerating all the bishops of all churches, he focuses on "the greatest, the most ancient church, the church known to all men, which was founded and set up at Rome":

"For with this church, because of its position of leadership and authority, must needs agree every church, that is, the faithful everywhere; for in her the apostolic tradition has always been preserved

The Quartodecimen Controversy of the late second century decided the debate over the dating of Easter in favor of the Roman standard. Victor, bishop of Rome insisted this across the entirety of the church, East and West, thus elevating the prestige of the Roman See.¹² In the fourth century, Pope Damasus, as a result of being forced to stand trial before a civil court, petitioned the emperor Gratian that he be exempt from such proceedings, and indeed that he should be able to hear appeals from bishops and have the civil authorities enforce any papal sentences. His purpose was to establish order and authority in the western church, and while Gratian denied the former request, he permitted the latter, which only helped to give credence to papal primacy.¹³ Indeed, while popes in the past had appealed to Matthew 16:18 as the basis of their authority, it was not until Damasus that the text became the central biblical foundation for the primacy claim.¹⁴

The Bishop of Rome was still far from unanimously holding a position of unqualified deference and infallibility. It is interesting to note that in the period leading up to the barbarian invasion of Rome, the strongest leadership in the church often came from elsewhere, and papal decisions were frequently questioned. Victor's attempts to push the Roman dating of Easter onto the eastern church was rejected, and when he broke off communion with churches that would not conform, Irenaeus protested on the grounds that such a long-standing difference should not be a cause of dissention.¹⁵

For further insight into the position of Rome in the early centuries of the church, one only has to consider the fact that Pope Sylvester did not attend the critical Council of Nicea, but sent a couple of elders in his place. Furthermore, at that council, the leading voice of orthodoxy came from Alexandria, where Athanasius, at the time an elder in that

by the faithful from all parts." (Irenaeus, *Ad. Haereses*, III, quoted in Henry Betenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 68-69).

¹²Latourette, p. 137; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1967; reprint Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 237.

¹³Frend, pp. 219-220.

¹⁴Chadwick, p. 238.

¹⁵Latourette, p. 137.

church, stood firm against the Arian heretics. Pope Liberius later excommunicated Athanasius, and signed a creed that was described by Jerome in the fifth century as “heretical.”¹⁶ When Christians in Callinicum burned a synagogue, the emperor Theodosius’ punishment was to order the local bishop to pay for its restoration. It was Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who managed to force the emperor to withdraw the order by threatening to withhold the Eucharist.¹⁷ And when the same emperor punished the Thessalonians for the murder of one of his senior officers by massacring 7,000 men, women, and children in the circus, it was, again, Ambrose who chastised him.¹⁸ In the early fifth century, Pope Zozimus, wooed by Caelestius, was persuaded to vouch for the orthodoxy of the Pelagian cause, and it was only when violence at the hands of Pelagius’ supporters threatened the peace of the empire and the emperor banished Pelagius and Caelestius, that Zozimus was forced to condemn them. Even going into the seventh century, Pope Honorius I was condemned for his support of the Monothelite heresy—indeed the Council of Constantinople in 680-681 named him among others as an “instrument of the Devil.”¹⁹

By the time of the fall of Rome, the pope had positioned himself as a first among equals. While the See of Rome shared apostolic status with Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, Caesarea, and Alexandria, the growing divide between East and West left Rome as the only apostolic See in the West, which further helped to bolster the authority of her bishop. Rome’s status was initially elevated when Constantine moved the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople, moving the church out from the emperor’s shadow.²⁰ With the fall of Rome, and the eventual deposition of the young emperor Augustulus in 476, there was a leadership vacuum in the West—one that was naturally filled by the Bishop of Rome.²¹

¹⁶Frend, p. 156.

¹⁷Chadwick, p. 167.

¹⁸Frend., pp. 183-184.

¹⁹ Latourette, pp. 284-285.

²⁰Latourette, p. 186.

²¹Carl A. Volz, *The Medieval Church: from the Dawn of the Middle Ages to the Eve of the Reformation*, (Nashville, Tn: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 13.

The Church Offices in the Middle Ages

The Barbarian Invasion

Whether or not Alaric's siege of Rome and Rome's eventual fall truly constituted the demise of the Roman Empire is a matter of historical debate. What is beyond dispute is the fact that the invasion of barbarian hordes into formerly Roman occupied territory, and their eventual ousting of Emperor Augustulus, marked a change in the western world.

By the close of the fifth century, western Europe was divided between various Germanic tribes: the Vandals, the Visigoths, the Burgundians, the Franks, and the Ostrogoths. It is a testimony to the reach of the gospel that the majority of these groups professed some form of Christianity; on the other hand, it is a testimony to the persistence of heresy that for the most part they were Arian, and it was through these groups that this ancient heresy lived again in Europe, at least for a short time. Some eventually converted to the orthodox views of the natives (e.g., the Spanish Visigoths, who proclaimed the biblical faith at the Third Council of Toledo in 589); others persecuted their conquered non-Arians (e.g., the Vandals in Carthage). The extent to which the religious views of these groups were held with any degree of sincerity is open to question. Indeed, it was not unknown for conversion to Christianity to have more of a political motive, especially when no outward change accompanied the profession of faith.²²

When the Ostrogoths took Italy, they established their capital in Ravenna, leaving the bishop as the highest authority in Rome. By the end of the sixth century, of all the invading tribes only the Franks and the Visigoths remained, with the Bishop of Rome holding both ecclesiastical and secular power in that city.

Leo I ("the Great")

Leo I came to the papal throne in 440, and was present when Attila the Hun, and then the Vandals, attempted to take over the city. He first confronted Attila and

²²The pagan Franks who occupied Gaul converted to Christianity, and even invested heavily in the church. However, their barbarous attitude persisted, making one wonder whether the conversion was to help establish rule over the Gauls, and the gifts to the church either a sign of goodwill, or tokens of appeasement to the Christian God.

persuaded him to spare the city. He was not as successful with the Vandals four years later, however he did dissuade them from massacre and mindless destruction.²³ On both of these occasions, Leo I exalted himself beyond his role as bishop and became Rome's ambassador and protector, a position he believed he inherited from Peter and Paul, who had, in his mind, replaced Romulus and Remus, the fabled founders of the Rome.²⁴ Indeed, for Leo, the Roman See has primacy because its bishop is the "Vicar of Peter," in that the bishop of Rome stands in the line of Peter and carries the same apostolic authority as Peter: whenever Leo wrote or taught, he believed that his words carried the same weight as those of the Apostle, as if Peter himself were writing or speaking.²⁵ This is a doctrine that was quickly and widely accepted,²⁶ and would be developed later. Not surprisingly, Leo's Tome, written for the Council of Ephesus in 431 to address the Monophysite controversy, was delivered with the expectation that it would be endorsed. When it was delivered to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, he insisted that it be adopted without dispute, as if his word was *de facto* the final word, given his position as the vessel of St. Peter. The Council of Chalcedon actually adopted the Tome because of its consistency with established standards of orthodoxy, but that hardly mattered to Leo. For the Roman bishop, Chalcedon itself received its validity by virtue of his ratification of its decisions.²⁷

In 518, the emperor Justinian captured Italy and brought the Roman See under the jurisdiction of the East. This situation did not last long: in 568, the Lombards invaded North Italy, releasing Rome from Byzantine control, and allowing Gregory the Great to establish Roman independence and re-assert papal primacy.

²³Chadwick, p. 243.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid, p. 244.

²⁶R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London, UK: Pelican Books, 1970; reprint, London, UK: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 94.

²⁷Chadwick, p. 244.

Toward the end of the sixth century, the city of Rome faced a number of challenges, not least among them a plague that took the life of Pope Pelagius II, famine, and the threat of Lombard invasion. When Gregory was voted bishop of Rome by acclamation in 590,²⁸ he brought to the office considerable skills as an administrator, and a well-formed vision of the role of the church and its officers, and his own role as head of the primary See.

Gregory mobilized the Roman church to take care of feeding the city’s poor, presiding over the distribution of meat, wheat, vegetables, wine, fish, and clothing on the first of each month and every feast day.²⁹ He also repaired and maintained church property, managed church estates to the extent that they were actually able to generate more revenue, and confronted the Lombards, eventually negotiating a peace between them and the emperor.³⁰

In this latter capacity, Gregory displayed his view of the papal role as one of care and responsibility not only for Rome, both the city and the church, but for all the churches under his care, especially those in Italy, Gaul, and Spain. He attempted reform in many areas of the church, including the monasteries which he rid of morally or spiritually lax abbots, addressed the issue of monks wandering from monastery to monastery, and made sure that there was sufficient distance between male and female monasteries. On the other hand, he provided for the monasteries, not just in terms of financial support, as noted earlier, but also in freeing them from their obligations to their bishops, allowing them a great deal of autonomy on internal secular issues.³¹

²⁸His acceptance was reluctant: he pleaded to the eastern emperor to overturn the people’s choice, and went into hiding for seven months before succumbing to the will of the populus (William R. Cannon, History of Christianity in the Middle Ages: from the Fall of Rome to the Fall of Constantinople (New York, Ny: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 39).

²⁹ Ibid. Gregory himself inherited great wealth from his father, much of which he used to found monasteries, giving the remainder of his fortune to the poor (Latourette, p. 337).

³⁰Latourette, p. 338.

³¹Ibid. p. 339.

With regard to the conduct of the clergy, Gregory composed his Pastoral Rule, in which he described his ideal of the life of the pastor and gave rules for preaching.³² However, his admonitions to clergy were not confined to his own See: he ordered the opposition of the Donatists by the African bishops, directed Augustine's missionary endeavor to Britain giving instruction on how to organize the church there, and encouraged and rebuked emperors and leaders to the extent he believed it necessary to order and further the work of the church.³³

Gregory believed strongly in the concept of the primacy of the papal See, and his actions betrayed his conviction that as the bishop of Rome, he had both authority and responsibility for the church at large. To Gregory, the order on earth mirrored the heavenly order: God is supreme over all things in the heavenly realm, so likewise the pope is God's vicar, governing terrestrial affairs.³⁴ When John the Faster, the Patriarch of Constantinople gave himself the title "Ecumenical Patriarch," Gregory took exception and called on him to renounce it. In a letter to John, he said "I know not what bishop is not subject to the Apostolic See."³⁵ On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in his advice to Augustine regarding the liturgy of the English church, responding to a question of Augustine's concerning the customs of the various churches, Gregory encourages the bishop to

make a careful selection of anything that you have found either in the Roman [Church] or [that] of the Gauls, or any other Church, which may be more acceptable to Almighty God, and diligently teach the Church of the English, which as yet is new in the faith, whatsoever you can gather from the several Churches.³⁶

³²Cannon, p. 40. He quotes Gregory as saying that "the living word moves the heart more than a reading, which requires an intermediary."

³³Ibid., p. 41.

³⁴Volz, p. 102.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Epistle xi.64 quoted in Bede's History of the Church, i. 27, cited in Bettenson, p. 152.

It is clear, then, that at the end of the sixth century, Gregory I, while holding to the primacy of Rome and the authority of the bishop of Rome over all other churches, did not insist upon Roman customs in all churches, but, at least in this instance, was prepared to let the bishop of the English church discern for himself which customs of the various churches would best suit his efforts.

It is also clear that while Gregory did involve himself in the affairs of state, his primary concern was the welfare of the churches under his care. There had not really been a conflict between church and state to this point. In the period immediately following Constantine, the two powers had existed side-by-side, with only occasional clashes. After the fall of Rome, there was no competing power in the West, so the pope was able to assume control, and Gregory's administrative gifts helped lay the foundation of the ecclesiastical machinery that would come to fruition centuries later. The eastern church had not had to suffer a barbarian invasion, and so the eastern emperor was still on his throne, and the Patriarch of Constantinople represented the eastern churches, which for the most part were autonomous institutions. The relationship between emperor and bishop continued to develop almost as it had from the time of Constantine.³⁷

The Donation of Constantine

An indication of the attitude toward the pope in the West during the eighth century is given by a document circulating at the time known as the "Donation of Constantine." This work purported to be a letter written by the emperor Constantine to Pope Sylvester around 315 granting to the pope various powers and privileges that established papal authority over all other churches, and even imperial power in Rome, Italy, and other western provinces. That the document is a forgery is patently clear, and may well have been clear to its readers at the time, but that is really not the point. As Southern points out,³⁸ there were very few historical records around at this time, but the ideas that people had with regard to the way things have always been and, therefore, should be were very certain. These ideas may well have very flimsy foundations in fact,

³⁷Latourette, p. 278.

³⁸Southern, pp. 92-93.

but nevertheless it was common practice to draw up documents supposedly from these bygone days that set forth a picture of how things are to give them a sense of historical weight and merit. This was especially important when it was not just ideas of privilege and status, but actual claims to physical land or property. “Forgeries, like art, brought order into the confusions and deficiencies of the present.”³⁹

The fact, therefore, that the “Donation of Constantine” has the emperor giving Rome, Italy, and the western provinces along with pre-eminence over the four other patriarchal Sees says much more about the power ascribed to the papacy in the mid-700’s than about Constantine’s attitude toward the bishop of Rome.

It is interesting to note that the concern of the Donation seems to be less upon whether the church or the state has supremacy over temporal affairs, and more upon the claims of the pope, particularly over the eastern patriarchates. In the eighth century there was no emperor in the West, so it can be argued that the issue of church versus state would have been irrelevant. Indeed, the document takes for granted the emperor’s power to grant authority to the pope, which certainly would have been accepted since the time Constantine. This attitude was soon to change.

On Christmas Day, 800, the concept of papal primacy took a symbolic leap forward when Leo III, Bishop of Rome, crowned Charlemagne emperor. While, from the pope’s perspective, this act established the authority of the papacy over the secular ruler, it perhaps served more to create a rival for temporal power.⁴⁰ This was an issue that would plague the church for centuries, with some rulers willing to accept papal authority, and others not. In 962, for example, the emperor Otto I asserted that while the pope crowned the emperor, the emperor had oversight over papal elections.⁴¹

³⁹Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.99.

⁴¹Ibid. p. 100. It is interesting to note that Otto I was Emperor during the pontificate of John XII, perhaps the most notorious of that series of popes that have come to be known as the “pornocracy,” due to their licentious and immoral lifestyles. Otto had been crowned by John, but once he was Emperor, he used his Carolingian right to revoke John’s consecration. It was while at the verge of war with the German ruler that John died, bringing an end to this sordid chapter in papal history. This situation may be why Otto so vigorously defended the right of the emperor to oversee papal elections. See Cannon, p. 134.

To shore up the papal claim to supremacy, popes made use of the “Donation of Constantine,” especially from the time of Leo IX (1049-54) onwards. One of the problems, however, with using the Donation in any official church capacity was the fact that it was essentially a secular document, having been supposedly written by Constantine, and no secular document was supposed to have binding authority within the church. Nevertheless, Leo and his successors used it to establish papal government, and the principles laid forth in the Donation were expanded upon by Gregory VII:

the pope can be judged by no-one;
the Roman church has never erred and never will err till the end of time;
the Roman church was founded by Christ alone;
the pope alone can depose and restore bishops;
he alone can make new laws, set up new bishoprics, and divide old ones;
he alone can translate bishops;
he alone can call general councils and authorize canon law;
he alone can revise his own judgements;
he alone can use the imperial insignia;
he can depose emperors;
he can absolve subjects from their allegiance;
all princes should kiss his feet;
his legates, even though in inferior orders, have precedence over all bishops;
an appeal to the papal court inhibits judgement by all inferior courts;
a duly ordained pope is undoubtedly made a saint by the merits of St Peter.⁴²

The Investiture Controversy

After a series of incompetent popes between Adrian II (867-72) and Benedict V (964), the need for papal reform became clear, and by 1000, it was evident that a greater degree of discipline needed to be imposed upon the clergy as a whole, and the papacy in particular.⁴³ German emperors appointed and deposed various popes, but the reform of the church began under the watch of Leo IX, a German pope appointed by King Henry III.

⁴²Gregorii VII Regisrum, in E. Casper (ed.), M. G. H. Epistolae Selectae ii, pp. 201-8; quoted in Southern, p. 102.

⁴³Volz, p. 73.

Leo's reforms were both organizational and moral: breaking ties with Rome by appointing cardinals from across the Alps, spending little time in the city himself, and seeking to stop the practice of simony, and of clerical marriage.⁴⁴ He did not have any problem with the concept of lay investiture, i.e., the ordination of clergy by secular rulers, and so never sought to stop it, despite the implications of granting the king authority to bestow office to a priest, bishop, or even pope.

In 1059, Pope Nicholas II changed the way popes were elected to office. In his decree, he ordered that the pope was to be selected by the cardinals,⁴⁵ with the assent of other cardinals and the people of Rome, whenever the cardinals deemed it necessary. The candidate for the papacy must, if possible, be from the Roman clergy, and is able to exercise full power even if his enthronement is delayed. This certainly was not popular among the rulers, but the subsequent couple of popes were chosen this way, despite Henry IV's attempt to install an anti-pope to rival Nicholas' successor,⁴⁶ thus establishing the pattern from that point on.

The antagonism between pope and German emperor continued through the reign and policies of Pope Alexander II. Upon his death, a priest by the name of Hildebrand, the most powerful person in the papal curia, was seized upon by a Roman mob and forcibly installed as pope. As Gregory VII, Hildebrand set about a program of reform, also attempting to punish simony and bring an end to immorality among the priesthood, decrees that were not well received. At a Roman Synod in 1075, Gregory VII openly opposed lay investiture, that no clergyman may receive investiture from an emperor, king, or any other lay person. He also promulgated his *dictatus papae*, a list of twenty-seven opinions that consisted of far-reaching claims for the pope, including the sole authority to depose bishops and emperors, and universal primacy over the whole church.

⁴⁴Simony, or the practice of selling church offices, was frequently abused. Clerical marriage was a problem because married priests have children who may later lay inheritance claims to church lands and property, and robbing bishops the right to distribute these benefices as they please.

⁴⁵Technically, the "cardinal-bishop." The cardinals were the pope's main advisors, and they came in three ranks: cardinal-bishops, cardinal-priests, and cardinal deacons. See Volz, p. 75.

⁴⁶Henry's anti-pope, Honorius II was in office for three years, until a German synod recognized the pope's choice, Alexander II, thus deposing the anti-pope. See Cannon, p. 158.

⁴⁷Volz, p. 78.

His main targets were England, France, and Germany, but Germany was by far the worse offender and it was naturally from Germany, therefore, that the strongest reaction came.

Henry IV had come to the German throne at a young age, and by the time he was twenty had incurred the wrath of many of his subjects, not least the Saxons who had led an uprising that Henry defeated, and the taxpayers who shouldered an increase to replenish the royal coffers. The last thing he needed was to be stripped of one of the greatest powers he had to maintain alliances and keep his throne: high ecclesiastical appointment. Gregory's overtures to Henry, while strict, were not without compassion. He assured him that in return for his obedience Gregory would do all he could to help heal wounds and assure Henry of his throne.⁴⁸ Henry's initial response appeared encouraging, but the sequence of events that followed, including the kidnapping of the pope by some of Henry's supporters, revealed his true intentions.

In defiance of Gregory's injunction against lay investiture, Henry appointed bishops to the Sees of Fermo and Spoleto, and invested the Archbishop of Milan.⁴⁹ Letters were exchanged between the two in which Gregory warned Henry to submit to papal rule, and Henry, in response, called Gregory a "false monk," and commanded him to "come down from the papal throne and be damned through all ages."⁵⁰

Gregory ordered Henry to appear before a synod to answer for his actions; Henry called for Gregory to be deposed, and summoned a council of German bishops to issue the order. Gregory responded to this by means of a papal bull excommunicating Henry and releasing those subject to him. Furthermore, he placed an interdict on Henry's kingdom.⁵¹

The seriousness of a papal interdict is hard for modern society to grasp. Given the centrality of the church to most of Medieval Europe, to be denied the benefits of the sacraments and attendance at church services was a grave punishment. Henry found

⁴⁸ Cannon, p. 164.

⁴⁹Volz, p. 78.

⁵⁰ Cannon, p. 165.

⁵¹ Ibid.

himself with a revolt on his hands, and it would take a politically astute move on his part not only to make peace with the pope and in turn settle his people, but also regain the upper hand in the conflict.

In 1077, Henry resolved the situation by presenting himself barefoot and penitent for three days before Gregory at Canossa, where the pope was staying. While it was against his political interest to do so, Gregory, in his perceived role as “Vicar of Christ,” granted Henry forgiveness. With his position restored and disaster averted, Henry returned to Germany, consolidated his power, and deposed Gregory. Though it seemed as if Henry had won, Gregory had sowed the seeds of the papal government of the later middle ages.

The whole controversy was eventually settled at the Concordat of Worms in 1122, where Henry V and Pope Callistus II came to agreement that the election of bishops should be by the church canons, and the bishop’s investiture should be by the archbishop. Callistus conceded to the king the right to be present at the election and to bestow upon the bishop his temporal duties.⁵² In practice, this meant that if the emperor or king objected to the pope’s choice, he could refuse secular investment or refuse to hold the election. However, the candidate would always be the choice of the church, and the king or emperor could only approve or disapprove the chosen man.⁵³

As far as France was concerned, after some resistance from Philip I, and a period of excommunication for his troubles, Philip eventually made peace with the church and submitted to her.⁵⁴

In England, William the Conqueror controlled Sees while supporting ecclesiastical reform. His successor, William Rufus, defied the papacy, kept Sees open to use their revenues for the state, and refused to declare a choice between Pope Urban II and the anti-pope, Guibert. Henry I succeeded William, and he concluded the Concordat

⁵²Volz, p. 81.

⁵³Cannon. p. 182.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 179.

of London (1107) which stated that although someone appointed to an ecclesiastical See had to swear allegiance to the state, the church made the choice of office holder.⁵⁵

It seemed as if the relationship between the church and the secular rulers had finally been determined. However, things are never that simple, and while the investiture struggle had come to an end, the power and influence of the papacy was only just beginning to grow.

The Development of the Papal Court

Until the mid-twelfth century, the bishop of Rome saw himself as the Vicar of Peter, or the one who not only represents the great apostle, but speaks with his voice of authority. As the claims of papal authority increased, this title was expanded to that of Vicar of Christ: the pope's authority was now that of Peter's Master, even though the position he occupied was considered that of Peter.⁵⁶

With increased power came responsibility, and work. Since the pope's command was law, there was a sharp increase in the number of councils meeting to discuss issues. The pope appointed legates who would represent him at local councils, and even the palaces of kings and princes,⁵⁷ and report their proceedings to him. He would also decide issues at ecumenical councils convened by him, wherein bishops from numerous churches would gather. The pope also found himself conducting lengthy correspondence as part of the business of church government, and many of these letters survive to paint a picture of the bishop of Rome increasingly caught up in the day-to-day running of the church.⁵⁸

Since the pope had great temporal and spiritual authority—at least in his own estimation and that of many within the church at the time—he was able to pass on many benefices. These were benefits, especially to monasteries, who, for their faithful service and donations could receive, for example, freedom from local control, meaning that they

⁵⁵Ibid, p. 182.

⁵⁶Southern, p. 104.

⁵⁷Volz, p. 97.

⁵⁸Southern, pp. 108-9.

could appeal directly to the pope without having to go through their local bishop. The pope was also the dispenser of justice, deciding disputes, providing rules to govern the Christian life: rules for baptism, confirmation, confession; rules for priestly attire and education, and so forth.⁵⁹

At the height of its power, the machinery of ecclesiastical government ran in such a way that anyone could benefit from it if they knew how to play the system. Members of the clergy well-versed in church law and policy would help secular authorities get what they wanted in return for ecclesiastical advancement, which such rulers could provide. Since the pope also gained from such arrangements, he usually did not object. It may appear that this was a corrupt system; however, as Southern points out, the problem with it was not so much corruption, but domination by secular motive.⁶⁰ This would be inevitable given the amount of attention that would have to be paid by the papal court to raising funds to support its bureaucracy. Not only did the system give rise to an unbalanced focus on financial income, but it also provided an environment that encouraged secular ambition and in-fighting.⁶¹

It says something about the efficiency of the papal machinery in Rome that the pope could move his residence to Avignon for seventy-two years without the need to be in the capital city for business to continue. From 1309-1377, successive popes exercised their power and amassed funds which were spent on lavish living and imperial wars with Germany, all while under French influence.⁶²

Latourette points to this so-called “Babylonian Captivity,” where the pope resided away from Rome, as a sign of the decline of the papacy.⁶³ Justification for this can be seen not only in the loss of prestige the office incurred as a result of the opulent spending and over-taxing of the period, but also in the fact that only a few years after the pope

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 113-115; Volz, pp. 95-96.

⁶⁰Southern, p. 131.

⁶¹Latourette, p. 488.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 489-90. Latourette notes that while Avignon was not in France, it was overshadowed by France, and indeed, all the popes during this time were French.

⁶³Ibid., p. 488.

returned to Rome, the western church split, with one pope in Rome and another in Avignon. As Cannon observes, there was no doctrinal, liturgical, or administrative principle at stake in this division: it was based purely on national prejudice.⁶⁴ The college of cardinals, the body of papal advisors who were also responsible for selecting successors to the papal throne, had bowed to the wishes of the Roman people by installing an Italian as bishop. However, their choice, Urban VI, turned out to have a rancorous nature that did not conduct itself graciously toward the mostly French cardinals. These French cardinals gathered at Anagni where they nullified Urban's election and chose a Frenchman, Robert of Geneva, as Pope Clement VII in his stead. He was installed in Avignon, bringing about a divided papacy in the West.⁶⁵ In response, Urban VI appointed a new college of cardinals.⁶⁶ Allegiance to the two popes was split among the various European nations, and when it was clear that the two sides would not reconcile,⁶⁷ a group of theologians from the University of Paris took on the task of effecting unity.

The scholars that met promoted the theory that when the papacy fails to fulfill its purpose, a greater council must step in to correct the situation. They observed that councils were used by the ancient church to establish ecclesiastical order, and since a similar situation existed at that time, it was necessary to call a council that would be superior in authority to the pope.⁶⁸ Regardless of the fact that current papal theory had established the pope as the highest authority in the church, and that the pope alone had authority to summon a council,⁶⁹ in 1409 fourteen Roman and ten Avignon cardinals called a general council at Pisa. However, far from bringing clarity and reconciliation,

⁶⁴Cannon, pp. 295-296.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 296-297.

⁶⁶ Latourette, p. 627.

⁶⁷It would have been easy to reunite the western church under one pope when Urban VI predeceased Clement VII. However, instead of making Clement pope over all the West, the Roman cardinals appointed a new pope; the same happened at Avignon at Clement VII's passing. Three Roman popes and two French popes later, the divide remained. See Cannon, p. 297.

⁶⁸Latourette, p. 628; Cannon, pp. 297-8.

⁶⁹Latourette, p. 628.

under the shrewd guidance of Balthasar Cossa, the Council of Pisa deposed the two existing popes and elected Pierre Philargis to the papacy. Philargis died a year later, and so Cossa himself became Pope John XXIII.⁷⁰ There were now three popes, all properly elected by a legitimate college of cardinals, and all claiming to be the rightful heir of Peter.

In the end, it took a council convened the old-fashioned way—at the request of a secular ruler—to bring the Great Schism to an end. Sigismund, newly-elected German king and eventual Holy Roman Emperor, brought together cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots, scholars, clergy, and laity to decide the issue. Voting was by nation to avoid domination by any one large party. John XXIII, the Pisan pope, claimed ill-health and left the proceedings before the council deposed him. Gregory XII, the Roman pope, resigned with honor, but Benedict XIII of Avignon refused to step down, so the council declared him a heretic and deposed him. The council elected Oddone Colonna to be Pope Martin V, bringing to an end the division.⁷¹

The council also sought to bring reform to the church and the papacy through a series of decrees that established the primacy of the pope under normal circumstances, but asserted the supremacy of the ecumenical council to which the pope must submit. Various checks against financial abuse within the papacy and curtailing papal authority were also passed by the council, as well as an order for councils to meet on a regular basis to ensure the continuance of consiliar theory.⁷²

Consiliar theory seemed as if it would work, but in practice the papacy either feared the council and worked around it, or fought against it, or completely ignored it. While it succeeded in uniting the church under one pope, it failed in its attempt to break papal power. Indeed, the popes asserted the old claims of papal primacy and managed to regain ascendancy against divided and ineffectual councils.⁷³

⁷⁰Cannon, p. 298.

⁷¹Latourette, p. 630.

⁷²Latourette, p. 631.

⁷³Ibid., p. 635.

One aspect of papal authority that should be mentioned at this point is his role not only as spiritual and secular leader, but also as military campaigner. Papal blessings of military endeavors were by no means a novelty in eleventh century Europe—the pope gave his blessing to Duke William of Normandy’s invasion of England in 1066, for example.⁷⁴ However, when it came to responding to the rapid and violent expansion of Islam in the East, the pope took a more active role.

The Muslim military assault against the church had begun during Mohammad’s lifetime, but it progressed in earnest after his death. Damascus fell in 635, followed by Jerusalem in 637, Antioch in 638, along with Tripolis, Tyre, Caesarea, and fifteen other cities. In less than ten years, North Africa was in Muslim hands, and Islam reached as far west as Carthage. By 678, the Eastern Empire had been reduced to “a shadow of its former self,”⁷⁵ though Constantinople stood firm. Charlemagne managed to curtail European advancement; however, three of the four major eastern Sees were now in Muslim hands, and the fourth, Constantinople, eventually found itself surrounded by Muslim neighbors.

The Muslims were not politically centralized, and were, therefore, as open to conquest by competing Muslim tribes as to non-Muslim invaders. In 1055, the Seljuk Turks captured Baghdad, and began a series of conquests culminating in the capture of Jerusalem in 1079. Within twenty-five years, the Turks were nearly upon Constantinople, and the eastern emperor Alexius I called out to the West for assistance against the invaders. At the Council of Claremont in 1095, Pope Urban II rallied the troops at his disposal to fight against the encroaching menace. He encouraged participation in the crusade against the Turks with promises of papal protection of property in their absence, and the granting of plenary indulgences for those who fell in battle. These, joined with the prospect of visiting sites of Biblical significance, which the threat of violence from the Seljuk Turks had until now prevented, and also the

⁷⁴Duke William specifically petitioned Rome, making his case to Pope Alexander II, and, according to William of Poitiers, he obtained “a banner as a pledge of the support of St Peter.” See Peter Rex, *Harold II: The Doomed King* (Stroud, UK: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2005), pp. 207-8.

⁷⁵Cannon, p. 70.

opportunity to perform acts of heroism for the faith, roused the people and precipitated an enthusiastic response. The First Crusade succeeded in freeing Jerusalem and setting a papal representative as Latin patriarch of the city. It also established a Christian presence in the Holy Land. Of all the crusades, this was the only one that came anywhere close to achieving its objectives.⁷⁶

The subsequent Crusades were largely failed attempts to maintain the ground won by the first. By the time of the fourth Crusade in 1202, Jerusalem and much of the Holy Land was back in Muslim hands. Pope Innocent III's attempt to recapture these lands was foiled by the Venetians who convinced his armies to travel to Constantinople. While in Constantinople, the Latin forces pillaged the city for three days, and forced the Byzantine church to adopt Latin rites and the western pope. This situation remained until the Greeks drove them out in 1261; but arguably, the eastern church never recovered, and it is possible that the eventual fall of Byzantium in 1453 was made possible by this campaign.⁷⁷

The Crusades ended with the Muslim capture of Acre, the last Christian stronghold in the Middle East. While the pope had not been involved in all the Crusades, he certainly instigated them, and showed a willingness to take up the sword in what he believed to be a just cause.

Indulgences

One of the most blatant examples of the papal claim to authority in his role as Vicar of Christ is perhaps in the granting of indulgences. The doctrine of indulgences has developed over time,⁷⁸ but in the eleventh century, when indulgences were first known to be granted, it was simply "a substitute for all other penances" that would "ensure immediate entry into heaven."⁷⁹ This was originally granted by Pope Urban II in 1095 to

⁷⁶Volz, p. 85.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 86.

⁷⁸"Indulgences," in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds.), The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.700.

⁷⁹Southern, p. 136.

those who pledged themselves to the First Crusade, such that anyone who fell in battle could have this assurance of eternal rest. After this time, they were reserved only for special occasions, although as time went on, they became more frequently offered as an encouragement to make a pilgrimage to Rome, or to bring relief to someone on their death bed, or even for no particular reason except that the requester had confessed their sin and repented.⁸⁰

While it is true that indulgences were often granted as a genuine response to a heartfelt cry for help, they were also often granted to help extend papal influence and to raise money for the church.⁸¹ The importance of indulgences with regard to the rise of the papacy, however, is more in its expression of the pope's "plenitude of power," or the depth of power available to the pope as Christ's Vicar. Through over-use and abuse, the indulgence lost some of its value later in the medieval period;⁸² however its practice continued through the Reformation and remains a part of the Roman Catholic Church to this day.

Bishops, Elders, and Deacons

From what has been observed regarding the church officers prior to the medieval period, it is apparent that the office of bishop became separated from that of elder, and the bishop took on the role of overseeing all the churches within a diocese. During the middle ages a church government model developed with the pope as the head of all churches, archbishops serving provinces from significant cities, bishops ruling over dioceses, and then presbyters, rectors, or priests⁸³ who had charge over a parish, the basic ecclesiastical unit of organization.⁸⁴ Large churches with multiple priests would often form priestly communities called *collegia*, out of which many early universities grew.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 139.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 140.

⁸²Indeed, the notion that one could pay for an indulgence as a way out of having to go through the sacramental system of confession and penance was appealing to many people. The church, to her shame, was only too willing to oblige, and even extended the giving of indulgences to the dead, so for a fee the bereaved could gain relief for their loved one. See Cannon, p. 302.

⁸³In time this person might also be called the *curatus* because he had the care of the souls (*cura animarum*) in his parish. Latourette, p. 524.

The role of deacon seems to have continued very much unchanged since the earliest times.

Gregory the Great, in his book Pastoral Care, said that the bishop should be a teacher and guide for souls, humble, self-searching, meditative, and devoted to preaching, teaching, and admonition, shunning external occupation, a minister—in short, “a Christian writ large.”⁸⁵ Bishops were expected to visit all the churches and monasteries under their care once every three years, as well as conduct baptisms, preach, receive confessions, arbitrate disputes, keep court, attend church councils, write devotional and theological treatises, and keep up with the revenues of the diocese.⁸⁶ However, with the advent of Charlemagne and the interplay of the secular state and ecclesiastical affairs, the bishop became an instrument of government, conducting the affairs of church, but under the guidance of the ruler. Also, just as it was the ruler’s task to support the bishop and uphold his authority, likewise the bishop was expected to help the ruler in his task, particularly when it came to supporting warfare.⁸⁷ Of course, it served the emperor’s purpose for the bishop to attend primarily to his ecclesiastical duties since that helped to promote an orderly society.

The functions of the bishop were increasingly delineated by the imperial court, and the regulations grew in their detail. By the end of the ninth century, the bishop had upon his shoulders a tiresome load of responsibilities, but had also gained an indispensable position in the eyes of the secular rulers, who relied upon his support more than that of anyone else. With this power, the bishop began to express notions of

⁸⁴Carl A. Volz, The Church of the Middle Ages: Growth and Change from 600 to 1400 (St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 48. Originally the parish was a rural area essentially equal to the land on and around the manor.

⁸⁵Southern, p. 172.

⁸⁶ Volz, The Church of the Middle Ages, pp. 46-47.

⁸⁷Southern, p. 174. If the bishop held land requiring feudal services, he would also be required to lead knights into battle, collect taxes, and give counsel (Volz, The Church of the Middle Ages, p. 48).

superiority to the crown: “bishops consecrate kings, but kings do not consecrate bishops,”⁸⁸ which would have grave consequences later.

The work of the parish priest was to provide religious instruction, administer the sacraments, and care for those under his charge spiritually and morally.⁸⁹ While there were those who fulfilled their duties admirably, there were many who did not, and the records provided by the episcopal inspections reveal priests who married, had mistresses, and were avaricious. A large number of parish priests were not familiar with Latin to understand the services they conducted, and were even less familiar with the Bible they were supposed to be teaching.⁹⁰

Given the rampant illiteracy of the time, the work of preaching became more important. The bishop was originally supposed to provide oral instruction, but this became more the domain of the parish priest, and, with the rise of mendicant orders, friars. Some bishops even provided their priests with sermon outlines and books of sermons which served both to help the priest who was, perhaps, not well equipped for the task, and also gave the bishop a means of controlling what was being preached.⁹¹

The *vicar* was a resident clergyman filling in, or substituting for the parish priest, fulfilling his duties, at a fraction of the cost of a “real” priest.⁹² It was not uncommon for cathedral canons—priests serving in a cathedral—to hire other priests to take their place in the parish, doing their parish work. This practice led to church legislation mandating that a priest spend at least one third of the year residing in his parish.⁹³

⁸⁸ Hincmar of Rhiems, quoted in Southern, p. 176.

⁸⁹ Latourette, p. 525.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 527. Latourette notes that in 1281, John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury, had his synod command the local priests to preach each quarter on the articles of the faith, the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins, the seven principal virtues, and the seven sacraments.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 525.

⁹³ Volz, *The Church of the Middle Ages*, p. 49.

It seems for the most part that Europeans accepted the pope as the Vicar of Christ, and for most the situation between the church and the government was simply a fact of life. People were willing, for example, to embrace the idea of indulgences if, for a small amount of money, it provided them with a short-cut through the penitential system and gave assurance of salvation. Not everyone was pleased with the state of the church, however, and from the twelfth century, increasing numbers rose up to complain about the various abuses, and particularly, the disregard for biblical standards in the conduct the pope, his priests, and the church as a whole. The following groups were probably the most notorious objectors, and all played a part in foreshadowing the coming Reformation.

The Waldensians

In 1176, a rich merchant from Lyons named Peter Waldo became dissatisfied with his wealth and struck with the brevity of life. Taking to heart Jesus' command to the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-26), he paid off his debts, provided for his family, then gave the rest of his wealth away and began a career as an itinerant preacher, begging for food to sustain himself. He soon gathered followers who adopted his lifestyle, calling themselves the "Poor Men of Lyons."⁹⁴

Eventually they caught the attention of the Archbishop of Lyons, who commanded them to stop preaching since they did so without ecclesiastical authority. They appealed to the pope who permitted them to preach if the bishop of that diocese gave them permission to do so. Dissatisfied with this compromise, the Waldensians continued to preach without regard to the church authorities. Eventually, in 1184, the pope excommunicated them for their disobedience. Regardless of this, they continued, believing that they were to obey God's call to preach rather than man's command to desist. Much to the church's displeasure, their numbers grew.

The Waldensians memorized large portions of vernacular translations of the Bible, and taught that Rome was corrupt and was not to be regarded as the head of the church. They permitted women to preach, denied the efficacy of—or need for—prayers

⁹⁴Latourette, p. 451.

for the dead, and believed that purgatory was the trials of this life, that oaths and law courts were prohibited by Scripture, that any layman could hear confessions and administer the sacraments, and that the taking of life for any reason is contrary to God's law.⁹⁵ In short, they denied the legitimacy of the pope and the entire ecclesiastical structure of the time, which was built upon many of the tenets they rejected. Their desire was to return the church to a purer model of life and practice based upon the New Testament.⁹⁶

The church fought back by instituting a counter-group called the *Pauperes Catholici*, or "Poor Catholics," who, with the blessing and guidance of the church, copied the practices (not the beliefs) of the Waldensians. This helped to win some back to the church and encourage others not to leave.⁹⁷ Having been branded as heretics by the church, both the ecclesiastical and civil authorities could use whatever measures necessary to eliminate them. Those that survived the persecution went into hiding, and did not emerge again until the Reformation.

Wyclif

John Wyclif (1325-1384) was a master at Oxford University who first gained notoriety for his political views regarding ecclesiastical endowments, specifically that they should be given to the government for distribution to the poor and used for the good of all society. As a result of this, he gained favor with the crown, but made an enemy of the church.⁹⁸

It was, however, the Great Schism between the Italian and French popes during the latter part of the fourteenth century that drew his attention more to the blatant abuses in the church and stirred him to address them. He referred to both popes as "limbs of

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 452.

⁹⁶Cannon, p. 222.

⁹⁷Latourette, p. 452.

⁹⁸Cannon, p. 304.

Lucifer”⁹⁹ and went on to propagate doctrines that not only undermined the authority of the church, but helped paved the way for the Reformation.

At the core of Wyclif’s beliefs was that of the supreme authority of Scripture. As God’s word, it is infallible and the sole source of truth, such that every issue of belief and practice within the church should be derived directly from its pages. The message of salvation through Christ is communicated by God in His word, and so it is necessary for people to read and study it. To that end, he commissioned scholars from Oxford and elsewhere to translate the Bible from the Vulgate into the English of his day.¹⁰⁰ Nothing else is necessary to understand Scripture, according to Wyclif’s view. While plain passages may be plainly understood, obscure passages may be clarified by the plain passages: Scripture is its own interpreter. Scripture does not need masses, fastings, prayers to saints, tradition, and papal decretals to support its message, or clarify its meaning.¹⁰¹

Wyclif’s followers, known as “Lollards,” were largely ordinary people¹⁰² who found in Wyclif a voice for their dissatisfaction at the church, and agreed with his views on prayers for the dead, the rule of the church, and also his objection to transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, and the veneration of images, among other things.¹⁰³ Since Wyclif and his followers were very vocal concerning their views, they attracted the attention of the clergy, and found themselves accused of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381,¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹Volz, *The Church of the Middle Ages*, p.164.

¹⁰⁰Cannon, p. 305.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²The term “Lollard” is possibly derived from the Middle Dutch word *lollen* or *lullen* meaning “to sing,” and was used in a derogatory way to mean “a mumblor of prayers.” It was presumably intended to signify those who were uneducated, or at least untrained. See “Lollardy” in Cross and Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 834; also the Wikipedia article “Lollardy” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lollards>).

¹⁰³Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 210-211.

¹⁰⁴Latourette, p. 665. Since the Peasants’ Revolt was primarily a protest against taxation, the likelihood that the Lollards were behind it is very slim. However, they probably were an appealing scapegoat to an institution looking for a way to discredit and destroy them.

and ultimately the objects of persecution.¹⁰⁵ They were able to avoid annihilation, however, and even experienced somewhat of a revival in the latter part of the fifteenth century, eventually becoming a part of the Reformation movement of the sixteenth century that they had helped to birth.¹⁰⁶

Wyclif did not meet with a martyr's death but succumbed to apoplexy while at his rectory at the age of fifty-nine.¹⁰⁷ The Lollards suffered under a series of Parliamentary acts between 1401 and 1409. The Council of Constance in 1415 officially condemned Wyclif, ordered the burning of his writings, and had his bones exhumed from holy ground. This final act took place in 1428: his remains were burned and the ashes scattered into a nearby stream.¹⁰⁸

Hus

John Hus (1373-1415) was dean of the faculty of philosophy of the University of Prague. He subsequently served as the University's rector, and then as rector and preacher in the Chapel of Holy Innocents of Bethlehem in Prague. The city of Prague was gaining a good reputation at this time, and the University was one of the most prestigious in Europe. After the marriage of King Richard II of England to Anne of Luxemburg, sister of the Bohemian king, ties between the two countries were strengthened, and it was not uncommon for students at Prague to spend time at Oxford. It is perhaps through this channel that the writings of John Wyclif came to Prague, and eventually found their way to Hus.¹⁰⁹

At the outset, Hus did not agree with Wyclif on every point. He had already expressed concern over the purity of the church, and held the view that Christ is the rock upon which the church is founded, not Peter. He also recognized that the pope is not

¹⁰⁵ Volz, *The Church of the Middle Ages*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁶ Latourette, p. 666.

¹⁰⁷ Cannon, p. 307.

¹⁰⁸ Latourette, p. 666.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 667.

infallible, and there have been popes that were heretics.¹¹⁰ However, he affirmed his orthodoxy in his views on transubstantiation, the administration of the mass, and indulgences.¹¹¹

Hus' more controversial opinions found a following at the university, especially since he encouraged the reading of Wyclif. He gained the support of his peers and of the queen, who made him her confessor and even attended his preaching.¹¹² The church leadership of Prague was not as tolerant of Hus, and the Archbishop managed to have most of Wyclif's writings burned. Hus objected to this action and, despite being excommunicated, lodged an appeal with Pope John XXII, the Pisan pope.¹¹³

Pope John XXII had launched action against the King of Naples, and in support of this venture he was selling indulgences. The indulgence trade in Bohemia was thriving when Hus came out against both the pope's military action, and the selling of indulgences to sponsor it.¹¹⁴ In 1412, Hus fled Prague having been excommunicated for his refusal to recant, and fearing that the city would suffer a papal interdict if he stayed. He began to espouse Wyclif's views on the church and its government, and called upon the state to step in and address the abuses and immorality in the church.¹¹⁵

Hus was persuaded to present his case before the Council of Constance declaring that if he was convicted of heresy, "I do not refuse to suffer the penalties of a heretic."¹¹⁶ Even before there was a hearing, Hus was imprisoned, tried, and condemned. On July 6, 1415, he was burned at the stake and his remains cast into the Rhine.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Cannon, p. 308.

¹¹² Latourette, p. 668.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.; Cannon, p. 308.

¹¹⁵Cannon, p. 308.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 309.

¹¹⁷Latourette, p. 669; Cannon, p. 309.

The Hussite cause did not die with John Hus. Two factions arose: the Calixtines who wanted to stay joined with Rome but with the conditions that there be free preaching of God's Word, the serving of both the bread and wine at communion to the laity, a moral reform of the church, and the stripping of wealth from the clergy. The Taborites held to the beliefs that Wyclif had proclaimed with regard to the Bible and the church, and as such wanted a complete break from Rome. After a period of fighting, in 1434 the two sides compromised. Later elements of these two groups, along with some Waldensians formed the *Unitas Fratrum*, which became the Moravian Brethren.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

If one looks solely to the Scriptures to build a picture of what the church should look like, how it should function, and how it should be organized, it is difficult to argue that the church of the late medieval period is far removed from the church of the first century. Only by insisting on the validity of external sources of authority, and appealing to the inability of the church, and particularly the bishop of Rome, to be led astray, can one possibly come to the conclusion that the church at the eve of the Reformation was the church that Christ and His Apostles envisioned during the New Testament period.

While Gregory I has managed to maintain a reasonably biblical view of the bishop's responsibilities, by the mid to late Middle Ages, the bishop, the overseer of the flock, who lays down his life for his sheep and does not lord his authority over them, had become a tool of the government, or, in the papal expression of the office, had become an autocrat, often power-hungry, and more often too concerned with the affairs of governing and ruling than to be worried about the concerns of the souls under his care. "Shepherding the flock" seems to have been far from the mind of the latter medieval popes.

Even if one were to grant the office of the pope, though no such office is prescribed in Scripture, what that office came to represent cannot in any respect be compared to the demands of the overseer in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. It is little wonder that Wyclif, Hus, and eventually Luther took exception to the selling of indulgences; the

¹¹⁸ Latourette, p. 669; Cannon, pp. 309-310; Volz, *The Church of the Middle Ages*, p. 166.

blasphemy of assuming for oneself the authority of Christ is something that not even Peter himself would dare to have done. Indeed, rather than exalting himself above all other bishops and leaders, ecclesiastical or otherwise, Peter regarded himself as a “fellow elder” (1 Peter 5:1). The Apostle goes on to exhort his fellow pastors to

“... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.” (1 Peter 5: 2-3)

As for the church herself, what became of her toward the end of the middle ages was certainly a product of her leadership. Widespread ignorance of biblical doctrine clearly helped the church to exert power over the people, and it helps to explain the superstition that flourished to the extent that people as a whole would unquestioningly accept such doctrines as indulgences, veneration of the saints, and the various beliefs attached to the Virgin Mary.

The attempts at reform through the Waldensians, Wyclif, Hus, and others, however, show that there were those who recognized that the church had strayed far from her moorings. It is interesting to note that one of the main features of these pre-Reformation reformers is a deep knowledge of, and love of, Scripture. These people placed the authority of Scripture above all other authorities, and made the study and proclamation of the Word of God their highest call. It was their knowledge of Scripture that gave them the intellectual tools to understand the errors of the Roman church, and also the emotional strength to face persecution and death for what they knew was right.

The fundamental error of the medieval church was her undermining of Scriptural authority. The Bible had become a tool to justify the practices of the church instead of the anvil upon which doctrine and practice are beaten into conformity. By assuming the mantle of Christ’s Vicar, the pope had presumed to speak for Christ regardless of what His Word actually said. In this way, the papal bureaucracy was able to grow, and the ministry of the church turned into a self-serving vehicle for its own propagation. Somewhere along the way, the gospel message of salvation through faith in Christ was lost; only submission to the pope and adherence to ecclesiastical law mattered.

There is much that the modern church can learn from an examination of this period. Indeed, even within the twenty-first century Protestant church one can see echoes of the abuses of the medieval period: the selling of “healing”; the growth of mega-churches whose leaders frequently entangle themselves in the world, and who turn a blind eye to the worldliness in their own congregations; the desire to seek solutions to problems within the world and within the thoughts of men, and not in the mind of God expressed in His word. It is only when the church and her leadership is founded upon the Word of God, and places Christ as her head, that the kind of abuses seen in the Middle Ages can be avoided.