

(Christian History) 9. Ideas of Reform and an Early Example of Reform

by David Guzik

The sermon explores the ideas of reform and an early example of reform through the Valdensian movement, highlighting the importance of returning to the Bible and the New Testament model.

Scripture: Acts 4:19

Topics: "Church Reform", "Holy Spirit"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of reform in the church and the need for change. He mentions an early example of a reform movement led by Joachim of Fiore, a Cistercian monk. Joachim divided church history into three ages and anticipated a new work of God coming in the period of God the Holy Spirit. The speaker emphasizes the prophetic approach to reform, highlighting the idea that God is doing a new thing. He also describes the characteristics of godly people, such as humility, modesty, and honesty in their trade.

Transcript

In this particular lecture, what we want to do is look at some important ideas and examples, especially an early example of a Reform movement. Again, we're working our way through these different periods of church history, the Apostolic Church, the Early Church, the Christian Empire, and now we're coming up into the time where we're starting to think about the Reformation, which was an absolutely amazing time, both from a spiritual and a historical perspective, but it's very important for us to understand the things that led up to the Reformation. Now, for a long time before the Reformation, people noticed that the church was corrupt and needed change.

All these things we've been talking about in the last several lectures, they were no surprise to people, right? People weren't blind. It's not as if people thought everything was great with the church and nobody could imagine the need for reform. People saw the need for reform, and through the history of the church there have been two basic, and I should say different, approaches to reforming the church.

One is what we might call the prophetic approach to the reform of the church. The prophetic approach to reform usually calls the church to change because of a new word from God. It tends to emphasize the supernatural message and probably a supernatural messenger.

An example of this prophetic approach to reform is a man named Joachim of Fiora. He lived from 1145 to 1202. He was a Cistercian monk who wanted to reform the church, and so he divided church history into three ages of 40 generations each.

The period of God the Father bringing the law, the period of God the Son bringing grace, and then the period of God the Holy Spirit bringing the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He anticipated that the period of the Son of God would expire around the year 1260, and so he encouraged the church to reform and be ready for the new work of God coming in this coming period of God the Holy Spirit. But you kind of sense the idea behind the prophetic approach, it's like, hey, God's doing a new thing, there's going to be a new thing launching, let's get ready for it.

It has that kind of attitude. But then there's another approach to reform which we can call the apostolic approach. This calls the church to change by coming back to the teachings and the standards of the apostles.

It is really the emphasis of a back to the Bible message. It's not calling the church to a new revelation, but back to the old standards, as I said before, back to the church of the apostles. And I have to say, in one sense, and I mean this in a very minor sense, the idea of the apostolic approach to reform is founded on a romantic delusion.

And the romantic delusion is that everything was sweetness and light and purity and wonder in the days of the apostles. We shouldn't deceive ourselves. The apostolic church definitely had its own problems.

Yet there's no doubt at all that the apostolic church was a huge improvement over what came after it. Generally, you have to say that the apostolic church, of course, today would be a huge improvement compared to the general condition of the church today. And so we don't give ourselves the romantic illusion of trying to say that the apostolic church was perfect, but yet it is a very valid and good approach to reform to say, let's get back to the Bible.

Let's look back to the book of Acts. Let's look to the New Testament model for how we should conduct church and what we should focus on. Now, you have to say something here.

In the medieval Roman Catholic church, their general attitude was that they had improved on the church since the apostles. If you were to talk to the medieval Roman Catholic church about going back to the apostolic church, in general, their immediate response would have been, that's a step backwards. Look at how much more power, look at how much more influence, look at how much more wealth, look at how much more property, look at how much more priests, look at how much more territory, on and on and on.

They would go on and say, and they had generally thought that they had improved upon the apostolic church, which, of course, we would regard that as a tremendous, tremendous deception. Well, people saw this, of course. People were dissatisfied with the state of the church, and as we discussed in our previous lecture, you have this consistent phenomenon, not only in the medieval times, but actually much earlier than that, these movements that you might call the pilgrim church or the believer's church, these groups of right-on, born-again believers that basically circulated outside of the institutional church.

Now, I want to talk about one more of those movements in this lecture now and really focus on them as sort of an early example of reform, and this group would be the Valdenzis, and to look at them as an example of an early reform movement. They were founded by a man named Peter Valdo, or sometimes

he's called Valdez, with a V. He lived probably, we don't know for sure, the exact dates of his birth, but we're confident in the general region. It would be the second half of the 12th century, generally, 1140 to approximately 1218.

Peter Valdo was a successful and rich merchant in the city of Lyon, France. One day he heard a wandering minstrel tell the story of Alexis. Now, of course, Alexis is not a biblical figure, but it's just sort of one of these songs that the wandering minstrel would go around and tell as sort of a medieval form of street entertainment.

And Alexis had the story of a man who gave up everything to be a follower of Jesus, and then he died in poverty and neglect. Sort of a Francis of Assisi story, but not exactly, because Francis of Assisi didn't die in poverty and neglect. Well, he died in poverty, but the point of the story of Alexis was sort of to tug on your heartstrings.

Here's a man who gave up everything to be a follower of Jesus, yet he died in these tragic circumstances of poverty and neglect. Well, Peter Valdo was struck to the heart by the story. You see, he was a successful merchant, but he had been making his money by using a lot of dishonest business practices, and it just convicted him to the heart.

And so he went to a priest to learn how to live like Jesus. And can you just imagine this man? This convicted businessman, he's wealthy, he's successful, he's got some standing in the community, but he hears this story, and for whatever reason, I mean, just the moving of the Holy Spirit, his heart is struck. And he says, I've got to get right with God.

Where's the priest? I need to ask him, how should I live like Jesus? And this is what the priest said back to him. He said, well, listen, if you want to live like Jesus, you should do what Jesus told the rich young ruler to do. If you want to be perfect, go sell what you possess, give to the poor, you'll have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me.

That's Matthew 19, 21. Well, Peter Valdo set out to do just that. He said, listen, I'm going to nakedly follow a naked Christ, and I'm going to forever regard myself as a pilgrim on this earth, and never regard any one place as my home.

So what did Peter Valdo do? Well, he did something that was kind of interesting, sort of in the footsteps of Priscilla and Maximilla way back in the Montanus movement. He basically left his wife and his family. He provided his wife with an adequate income.

He placed his two daughters in a cloister, in a nunnery, and then he proceeded to give the rest of all of his wealth to the poor people in the city. He took some of his coins, and he threw them in the street, you know, just for whoever would take them. And this is what he said.

He said, friends, fellow townsmen, I am not out of my mind, as you may think. Rather, I am getting vengeance on these enemies of my life for God. He meant the money.

You know, I'm getting revenge on these enemies of my life for God, because I've served the creature more than the creator. Here's a man who wants to radically get right with God. But that wasn't all.

I think if it would have ended there, it would have just been another sweet story. You know, a guy who would be sort of like a junior Francis of Assisi. But one thing that really distinguished Peter Valdo and the

Valdenzes was their emphasis on the Word of God.

Because what Valdo did was, apparently, he still had some money left, or he did this before he gave all his money away, but he hired two priests to translate the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament from Latin into the common language of the day, which they would call the vernacular, right? So he says, okay, you know, the Latin, nobody can read that Bible, only the priest can read that Bible. Here, priest, I'll give you money, you translate the Bible into our common language. And so using those common language Bibles, he began to teach other people.

And people used to flood into him, people began flooding into him to hear the Word of God. Poor people, simple people, who were following his example of voluntary poverty and becoming imitators of Jesus Christ and his apostles. And what would he do? He would teach them the text of the New Testament in their own language.

And he was rebuked for this. But when they rebuked him for this, because it was forbidden to teach the Bible in the common language, it was forbidden for someone who was not a priest, not a cleric, to do what he was doing. But whenever Valdo was rebuked, he just basically said to those people, shove it.

I'm going to do it. I'm going to insist on what the Bible says, and this is the truth of God. I'm going to continue on doing it.

You know, a very important reason for the dynamism and the success of the Valdensian movement was their translations of the Bible into the common language. It's absolutely staggering to see how much the people of this movement loved the Bible. In the Valdensian circles, laymen, for the very first time in the Middle Ages, were face to face with the Bible.

The scriptures were memorized by the Valdensians, and it was not unusual for the ministers among the Valdensians, you know, the leaders among them, to have memorized the entire New Testament and large portions of the Old Testament. One person who was a critic of the Valdensians said that he saw laymen, not leaders, not ministers among them, but laymen who were so into the Word of God that they could repeat by heart large sections of the Gospels, and especially everything that Jesus said and did. And they could repeat them continuously with hardly one single wrong word as they recited them.

And so what Valdes did, or Peter Valdo did, was he took these things that were popular among monks, you know, the vows of poverty, this idea of a full-on commitment to Jesus Christ, and he said, no, this is for the common man. Now if you remember, this is one of the things we discussed in reference to the monastic movement several lectures ago, and one of the weaknesses of the monastic movement, right? One of the weaknesses of the monastic movement was that it basically said, if you really want to be committed to God, go into the cloister. If you really want to be committed to God, you can't be a normal person, you have to be a monk or a nun.

Peter Valdo shook all that up. He said, no, the common people are supposed to learn the Word of God. The common people are supposed to live these lives of sacrifice and devotion unto the Lord.

Well, how was the Valdensian movement received by the Roman Catholic Church? Well, at first, it was received somewhat positively. Pope Alexander III, his dates are 1159 to 1181, he praised the Valdenses for their dedication to poverty. But he said, now listen, you can only preach in any particular area if you get the approval of the bishop in your area to preach.

But you know what? The local bishops would never approve. Therefore, the Valdenses were always getting into trouble for preaching the Word of God. So his followers would go out two by two after the apostolic pattern.

They would go out into the the marketplaces, they would teach and explain the scriptures. And if opportunity came up, which I don't know how often it did, but if the opportunity came up, they would speak in churches. Soon, the Valdenses adopted sort of a distinctive form of dress.

You could tell who the Valdenses were because they wore sandals. It was just sort of a distinctive thing that they did. And the idea of unordained, unofficially trained layman preaching the Word of God without permission struck the bishops and the archbishops as a very, very dangerous thing.

And so repeatedly, all over the area, the activities of the Valdenses were banned. You see, Peter Valdo and his followers, they felt themselves to be loyal members of the church. They didn't think of themselves as some sort of revolutionary movement.

Let's overturn the Roman Catholic Church. No, they thought of themselves as lifting up Roman Catholicism, as benefiting people spiritually. But they also really felt committed to their call to preach.

And so the Valdenses themselves appealed to Rome. And Rome considered the matter in the year 1179. Two of their representatives appeared during the course of the Third Lateran Council, and they asked for papal permission to be traveling preachers.

They presented samples of their scripture translations as evidence of their work and faithfulness to God. Now, when they were investigated, the scholars despised the Valdenses. You know why they despised the Valdenses? Because they didn't know the minute details of medieval theology.

Now, remember when we took these very, very brief looks at Anselm and Thomas Aquinas? You see how deep those guys would think and how carefully and with what great complexity they would approach a subject. To be a scholastic theologian in the medieval days, to be what they called one of the schoolmen, man, you had to commit yourself full time to the study of theology. And they despised the Valdenses because they didn't know all these intricate things about medieval theology.

And this is what an English member of the commission sneered to the Valdenses. He said, shall the church give pearls to the swine, leave the word to idiots whom we know to be incapable of receiving it. Water ought to be drawn from the well and not from puddles in the street.

Moreover, there was the danger of the priestly caste being displaced. They now begin with extraordinary humility because they have not found a firm footing. But if we let them in, they will throw us out.

You see the whole attitude of the institutional church against this godly, beautiful movement of the Valdenses. First, they despised them because they weren't properly intellectual enough. They were just simple people who loved the word of God.

And by the way, might I say that this tendency has not died out in the church today, right? You will still find many, many people who despise people who just have a simple love for the word of God and want to preach the word of God without a sophisticated theological education. Now, I'm not saying that to build up the idea of ignorance. We put no great price on ignorance, right? We don't value ignorance.

People who are teachers should be educated people. But when you look at the Valdensian movement, they were educated. And what were they educated in? The word of God.

Let me tell you something. Those Valdensians knew their Bible far, far better than most every medieval theologian, certainly the people who were opposing them at this third Lateran Council. And I tell you this because in those days, in medieval times, even up into the Reformation times in the Roman Catholic Church, someone could become a doctor of theology with hardly knowing the Bible at all.

Because when you studied theology, you didn't study the Bible. You studied the writings of theologians. And so the Valdensians were educated.

We value an educated ministry, but it has to be educated in the word of God and not necessarily through more customary channels. Listen, God can use those more customary channels as well, right? We don't despise them, but we don't limit the work of God to them. Now, listen, the Valdensians did not want to leave the church.

They did not want to be as rebels. They just simply thought that they must obey God rather than men. And so they continued their work and they did not wait for the approval of local bishops to go around and do their traveling work of preaching in local villages and communities.

Therefore, in the year 1184, they were formally condemned as heretics by Pope Lucius the third, and they were placed under an eternal anathema. You know what that is, right? A curse. They were placed under an eternal curse.

You got to admit, that's a pretty heavy thing, right? When the Roman Catholic Church says, you're not just under a curse, you're under an eternal curse. And so eventually they made a complete underground structure rivaling the institutional church, but it was formed along their own lines. They allowed laymen to hear confessions, to forgive sins or to pronounce forgiveness of sins, to give communion, and eventually to ordain church leaders.

You see, I want you to understand, these Valdensians were not anarchists, right? They weren't saying there should be no structure, no institution within the church. They did not want to leave the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, they were kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church, and then when they were kicked out, they basically formed their own underground institutions.

Later on, the Council of Valencia in the year 1229 forbade men who were not priests to read the Bible. I want to say that to you again. Roman Catholic Council of Valencia in 1229 forbade men who were not priests to read the Bible, and they said all scripture portions or prayer books for the common people had to be in Latin, not in native languages.

Matter of fact, you should know this, that at this time in the Roman Catholic Church they have, which by the way they still have this, the Index of Forbidden Books. They have a list of forbidden books. At this time in the medieval church, the Bible was put upon the Index of Forbidden Books.

That's how seriously they wanted to keep the Word of God away from the common people. It's very interesting to see what the prosecutors of the Valdensians said against them. This is what a German prosecutor, his name was Peter von Pilsdorf, who wrote about 1300, he said, this is how you can identify a Valdensian.

How do you know who they are? Well, this is how you can do it. He says, they are recognizable by their customs and speech, for they are modest and well-regulated. In other words, they're humble godly people.

You can pick them out, right? You know who the Valdensians are. Look for the godly people in the group, and that's who they are. He said, they take no pride in their garments, which are neither costly nor vile, right? They don't dress in rags or they don't dress in riches.

He said, they do not engage in trade to avoid lies and oaths and frauds, but they live by their labor as artisans. Their teachers are cobblers. They're chaste.

They're temperate in meat and drink. They do not frequent taverns or dances or other vanities. They restrain themselves from anger, and they're always at work.

They teach and learn and consequently pray but little. Again, they supposedly go to church and confess and commune and attend sermons, but this is in order that they may catch the preacher in the words that he says. They are known by their modesty and precision of speech, avoiding offense and detraction by light speech and lies and oaths.

I mean, isn't that amazing? What a credit to the Valdensians that these are the criticisms that are brought against them. They're godly, humble, wonderful people is basically what he's saying, and so you can always pick them out in a crowd. Here's another inquisitor or prosecutor of the Valdensians.

It says that he drew up a long list of reasons for the success of the dissenters. He noted that the heretics, both men and women, old and young, never ceased to learn and teach. The workman, busy by day, applied himself to learning in the evening.

A convert with as little as 10 days of membership went out to teach others. One swam in an Austrian river in the dead of winter to reach a man whom he wished to convert. He says, therefore, we can blame the negligence or the laziness of the Catholic teachers who are not so zealous for the truth of their faith as these faithless heretics are for their false misbelief.

Isn't it amazing that he would look at these godly, devoted, orthodox, biblical people and call them faithless heretics for their false misbelief? Peter von Pilsdorf, that German prosecutor that I mentioned before, he railed against the Valdensians, and at the same time showed how corrupt the clergy was in his day. Listen to this. He says, quote, he says, you bark against the priests of the church.

He's talking to the Valdensians. You bark against the priests of the church, saying they're fornicators, tavern hunters, dicers, forgers. Dicers means gamblers.

Forgers. And you cast in their teeth many other vices. What then? Are they on that account not priests? God forbid.

For even as every man's goodness does not confer priesthood, so also does his wickedness not take it away. Therefore, the worst man, if he is a priest, is more worthy than the holiest layman. Where is the layman so holy that he would dare to handle with his hands the venerable body of Christ? You see what this guy was saying? He was saying, you say that the priests are, that they're fornicators, that they're drinkers, that they're gamblers, that they're cheaters.

And he says, and you're right, but they're priests, and that makes them better than you. Again, just to make the accusation is to condemn its own accusation. So the first edict against the Valdensians came out in Spain, a decade after the papal ban in 1184.

King Alfonso of Spain ruled that anyone who dared to give shelter or to give food or drink or even to listen to the Valdensians would be punished by the confiscation of all their property and prosecuted for offending the king. The heretics themselves could be punished in any form except death and mutilation. Three years later, they changed the edict demanding death for the Valdensians by the burning of Valdensians believers wherever they could find them.

And so these Valdensians basically withdrew from a lot of common society because it was too dangerous for them there, and they basically began to populate the mountain valleys of the Alps. These true believers would gather sort of in these hidden and obscure mountain valleys, and so they would get together with them and they would just simply gather in these more distant obscure places and live out their Christian lives. This is another inquisitor, a guy named David of Augsburg, and what he said against them.

He said, The sect of the poor men of Lyon and similar ones are the more dangerous the more they adorn themselves with the appearance of piety. Their manner of life is to outward appearance humble and modest, but pride is in their hearts. Though they have claimed to have godly men among them, David protested, we have infinitely more and better than they, and such as do not clothe themselves in mere appearance, whereas among heretics all is wickedness and owned by hypocrisy.

You know, I find it very interesting that they can never point to specific wrongs that the Valdencis have done, right? They just throw out names, hypocrites, heretics, dangerous, over and over again, but they never point out anything wrong that they've actually done. Well, they were persecuted severely. As a matter of fact, in Strasbourg in 1212 the Dominicans had already arrested 500 people who belonged to the churches of the Valdencis, and these were people of all classes, noble priests, rich and poor, men and women.

The prisoners said that there were many like them in Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Bohemia, and so forth. 80 of them, including 12 priests and 23 women, were given over to the flames. Their leader and their elder named John declared as he was about to die, we are all sinners, but it is not our faith that makes us so, nor are we guilty of the blasphemy for which we are accused without reason, but we expect the forgiveness of our sins and that without the help of men, and not through the merit of our own works.

Yet, nevertheless, Valdencian congregations survived. By the mid-1200s there were flourishing congregations in Austria, and even more so in Bohemia and Moravia. In 1245 Pope Innocent IV described the sect, this is what the Pope said about the Valdencis in 1245, he said they were widely and firmly established and they embraced not only the simple people but also princes and rulers.

In the 14th century they expanded throughout Germany, Hungary, and Poland, and by the end of the 1300s the Valdencis had a list of the practices of the Roman Church that they disagreed with. Now again, I want you to see that they were a very stubborn movement in that they couldn't be eradicated, right? They tried to get them, they tried to persecute them, but through their tenacity and through their natural growth in spreading the Word of God they persisted. But these at the end of the 1300s were the objections that the Valdencians officially raised against the Roman Catholic Church.

First of all, they objected to privileges of rank, in other words clerical prerogatives, you know that you get some special status because you're a priest or a monsignor or bishop or archbishop or whatever. They rejected the title of Pope, churchly incomes and endowments. They rejected the councils, the synods, and the ecclesiastical courts.

They rejected clerical celibacy and monasticism. They rejected the idea of catechetical instruction. You know what that is, to instruct somebody with a catechism? It's where basically they have to memorize answers, right? You say, well, example, a famous line from the Westminster Catechism is, what is the chief purpose of man? That's the question that you would ask.

And a person would memorize the answer, the chief purpose of man is to glorify God and to live with Him forever. I think that's the answer, I can't remember it exactly. But it's to learn things in a question and answer form.

The Waldensians were more into learning the Bible than sort of learning this question and answer form of theology. They rejected the mystical interpretation of scripture, pilgrimages and processions, candles, organs, bells, spires, canonical hours, the Latin liturgy, the cult of images, relics, purgatory and prayers from the dead, and all acts of worship not specifically directed by the Bible. Now again, you can see that they taught the priority and the sole authority of the scriptures in the common language.

When it came to violence, they practiced non-resistance, and they opposed the shedding of blood and capital punishment. They didn't take oaths, and this stand was often used by their accusers to identify them. You know, if you had somebody who was suspected of being a Waldensian, you would try to make them take an oath, and if they refused to take the oath, then you could identify them.

Now what's interesting is, first of all, the Waldensians did not develop into a full scale Reformation movement, right? They sort of stayed their own isolated group, which survived and grew somewhat, but it never really challenged the Church, because the Church was successful enough in persecuting them, and basically pushing them underground and outside of the society. This is why the Waldensians never really became a movement that challenged the Roman Catholic Church, because the Roman Catholic Church was able, through their persecution, through their attacks against the Waldensians, to either push them underground, or to push them to obscure geographical places where they couldn't really be a threat. They continued faithful even after the Reformation, and they were still persecuted, since even in Reformation times, they lived in countries that were still predominantly Roman Catholic.

Now it's interesting, just recently, a fellow I know in Germany, he was telling me about his girlfriend, and we were just talking about things, and he was saying that his girlfriend, I believe on her mother's side, comes from a Waldensian family. The Waldensians still identify themselves today as a religious group, as a group sort of passed down through the generations. And so I was sort of asking him, well, can you tell me anything about their theology? You know, what do they believe today? And he said, sadly, they've become very liberal in their theology.

They're no longer the same, as far as I know, right? I mean, I could be wrong. If there's some Waldensian person in church today, and would greatly object to what I'm going to say right now, well, please forgive me. I just must confess, I'm not as well-informed on your movement as I should be.

But from the small indications I have received, it would seem that they've given up on this beautiful tradition of loving the Bible, and knowing the Bible forward and backward, and just being simple preachers

of the simple message of the Bible. They've taken a course that's far more theologically liberal. Well, again, this is to show you a couple things.

First of all, to re-emphasize the point that we made, I think, fairly clearly last night in our lecture on the Pilgrim Church, or the Believer's Church, that there were definitely godly movements outside the stream of the Roman Catholic Church. But also to show you this, that if the Roman Catholic Church could effectively put them outside the stream of culture, then they wouldn't seriously challenge the Roman Catholic Church, right? And so they basically did this by shunning them, by terrible persecution, right? By violence, by pushing them outside of the region geographically, they were able to effectively combat what essentially were these Reform movements. And so it sort of leads us to the question, what was different about Martin Luther and the German Reformation? Well, it's a fascinating question.

But to answer it, you're going to have to wait until tonight's lecture when we discuss the Waldensians in terms of some other Reformers, such as John Wycliffe, John Hus, Desiderius Erasmus, we'll talk about them this evening, and what made them different than Martin Luther. What I want to discuss with the last part of this particular morning lecture is some of the cultural and intellectual factors that sort of influenced Western society towards the Reformation. You see, many people date the Reformation as starting when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.

And that is a fair date, because it was a dramatic event. But both spiritually and historically, the foundation for the Reformation was being prepared for centuries before, from the early 1300s, again, 200 years before Martin Luther ever nailed the 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg. By the way, there's some historical contention as to whether or not he ever actually nailed the 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, but we'll talk about that more when we talk about Martin Luther.

200 years before that, there were important forces and dynamics at work within European society that sort of prepared the ground for the Reformation. I would sort of liken it like this. You know, we see how the Roman world was prepared for the coming of Jesus and the spread of the gospel, right? With the Pax Romana, the peace, the infrastructure for travel--we talked about this in our very first lecture--the common language, Greek, the trade, the religious pluralism.

Well, even as the ground was sort of prepared for that, I would say that at least from a historical perspective, and you could probably say from a spiritual perspective as well, the ground was prepared for this very significant event of the Reformation that happened in Germany in the early 16th century. So, the first of these cultural and intellectual factors in sort of preparing the ground for the Reformation in Western Europe was the Plague and the Black Death. The Plague and the Black Death--well, let me come to the proper slide here--the Plague and the Black Death were absolutely catastrophic events for Europe.

It's hard to describe how great of a blow it was. Bubonic Plague first struck Europe in the year 1347, and for centuries after that, the shadow of the Plague darkened Europe. In 1347, the Black Death killed--are you ready for this?--about one-third of Europe.

I mean, can you imagine that? Can you imagine the entire population of Western Europe, one-third of Europe, dead within a matter of months because of this tremendous Plague? It is said that people lived in the shadow of this Plague, and during the 15th century, Europe could be described. Therefore, what the Black Plague did was it sort of made Europe what you might call a death-oriented society. But it was amazing how it spread all over the place.

What the Black Plague did was it shook up Europe. It introduced huge changes. You can just imagine the changes that came into Europe economically, right? What happens when one-third of your workforce is eliminated? What happens when one-third--because it didn't just strike peasants, right? It also struck noblemen.

You can imagine the cultural and economic but also spiritual changes. That is an extremely traumatic thing for a generation or a series of generations to go through. Even the people who survive live the rest of their life affected by it and wondering when it's going to return.

Because there wasn't just one Plague. It sort of came in recurring waves throughout Europe. And you see how the Plague went all over Western Europe at different times, at different places.

There were certain pockets where the Plague had very little or no effect. Perhaps it's unexplainable as to why, but it spread in a radical measure all over Europe. And so this was something that really sort of was a jolt to the system of Europe, right? You start rethinking very fundamental things when a catastrophe like this happens.

It sure does this. It sure wakes you up and makes you think about heaven and hell a lot more, doesn't it? All right, so the Black Death. Secondly, we can say that there was the Muslim threat or the Muslim and Turkish threat to Europe.

The Turks captured Gallipoli in modern-day Turkey in 1354 and they continued to spread towards Europe. In the late 15th century, under Sultan Muhammad II, there were spectacular territorial gains and the Muslims actually invaded Italy at the heel of it. In Italy, coastal cities south of Rome might be at any time raided at night by the Turks, who would just sail in, sack a city, and carry off the prettiest girls for the Sultan's harem.

That's how they did it. They would just raid these cities, they would sail in, they'd loot, they'd pillage, they'd steal, they'd kill, and they'd kidnap the best women for their leaders back home. And so this was a constant threat.

You can imagine this shadow of these outside invaders all over the place. People lived in fear of the Muslim and Turkish threat to Europe. A third factor that sort of prepared the ground was the Renaissance and the revival of learning.

You see, beginning in the early 1300s, there was an increasing interest in the Latin and Greek classics. I think it's very interesting that although from the time Rome fell in the 5th century all the way up until the 1300s, they lived with the haunting memory of what Rome was and how they didn't have the same empire and the same civilization that they once had. But what's interesting about that is that at the same time, many of the real literature and accomplishments of Rome began to be forgotten.

And so when they sort of rediscovered Roman and Greek culture with the Renaissance, do you know what the word Renaissance means? It means rebirth. When they discovered these ancient classics again, it was like an intellectual revolution. Renaissance means new birth or new learning.

And the restoration and the publication of all these classical Latin and Greek texts had a very powerful result. I'll tell you this. One of the things that it did was it got people interested in the Greek New Testament.

You see, in medieval times, the focus was on the Latin New Testament, the famous Vulgate translation by Jerome. And that's what everybody studied. Everybody, the common people didn't study it, but as much as the monks or whatever did study, they studied the Bible in Latin.

But there's some very interesting things in the Latin Vulgate. There's some very interesting things that sort of, they're translated in ways that give it a Roman Catholic spin. I don't know if Jerome did it intentionally or not, but it's just the way that it was.

Well, when you start going back to the Greek New Testament and seeing some of the discrepancies, it really changes your perspective. And so this had a powerful effect on the intellectual class in Europe. So again, the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, that was in 1453, it caused the flight of educated Greeks to the West, right? Because it wasn't safe for them to stay in these Muslim lands anymore.

So they carried with them priceless manuscripts carrying old Greek literature, long forgotten in the darkened West. Soon, Greek professors were teaching in the universities of Italy, for example, the languages that gave them the key to these treasures of knowledge. And from there to, for example, Oxford in England, the study of Greek spread rapidly.

So this rediscovery of the ancient languages with the ancient learning, this whole amazing educational Renaissance had a huge impact upon the Reformation. You see, one of the ideas of the Renaissance was the Latin phrase, *ad fontes*, which means to the source, right? Go to the source. Now, when you translate that thinking over to Christianity, what do you say? You say back to the New Testament, right? To the source.

Don't tell me what the church says. Don't tell me what the Pope says. Don't even tell me what the council says.

Let's go *ad fontes*, in Latin, back to the source. And this was a huge sort of philosophical and intellectual foundation for the later Reformation. Okay, number four, a huge factor was the invention of the modern printing press and the resulting media explosion.

You mean at this time of the invention of the printing press, it provided the means by which this new knowledge that was sort of exploding throughout Europe through the Renaissance, the printing press made it possible for this knowledge to be disseminated. The first printing press was invented by Gutenberg. He developed the whole idea of movable metal type in the year 1445.

Again, that's only about 60 years, 70 years before Martin Luther did his thing with the 95 Theses. 1445 at the city of Mainz. By the way, you know, where I live in Germany, it's not very far from Mainz, and they have a wonderful Gutenberg Museum there that I haven't yet visited, but I hear it's really spectacular, and I really have that on my list to make a visit of that sometime.

Well, anyway, Gutenberg kept the technique a very closely guarded secret for, oh, something like about 20 years, not quite 20 years. But then the city was attacked, it was plundered, and the printers were dispersed of Mainz. The printers of Mainz were dispersed all over Europe.

Within 20 years after that, the invention of printing with movable type had spread everywhere throughout Europe. By the time Luther was born in 1483, printing was well established throughout Europe. And again, this media explosion.

The Reformation would not have been able to carry its ideas nearly as widely, nearly as popularly, without the media explosion prompted by the printing press. You know, we think of a media explosion of our own day with the Internet, right? I would say that the invention of the printing press was a more dramatic and more influential phenomenon than the creation of the Internet, at least as far as media goes, because it did something that just didn't exist before. I'm not trying to put down the Internet or put down its significance, but I think if I had to compare the two, I would say the invention of the printing press was even more significant.

Fifthly, there was the discovery of the new world. You know, the discovery of America by Columbus in 1492 and the discovery of the solar system by Copernicus in 1514 also gave great enlargement to men's minds and activities. You know, you can only imagine what it would have been like to live at this time and to discover that there was literally a whole new world that you didn't know anything about.

I mean, wouldn't that just blow everybody's mind? That there was a whole new world and it wasn't just like some ice patch up in Antarctica or in the Arctic Circle somewhere, right? That there was actually a whole new part of the globe that was great that nobody had ever This expanded people's minds tremendously. You know, one example of this is Spain in this whole period of exploration with their great explorers, including, although the Italian tie was there, but talking about Columbus being sort of in that line of great explorers. Spain had as its motto, they would engrave it on coins and official seals.

The motto, and I don't remember the exact words in Latin, I think it's Ne Plus Ultra, which means basically nothing beyond. And their idea was Spain's the ultimate, right? There's nothing beyond us. We're the top dogs.

There's nothing beyond. But then Columbus discovered the new world and this whole thing opened up. So what did they do? They changed the motto from Ne Plus Ultra to Plus Ultra, which basically means more beyond.

Because they realized their whole worldview had changed. You can imagine how it would just expand people's minds to discover that there were things about the world that they never knew before. And then finally, the sixth and another very important factor in this, of course, was the spread of biblical knowledge.

You see, because of the Renaissance, because of the printing press, because of the continued development of Western society, people began to study the Bible more and more. And when they did, it showed a very strong contrast between Jesus and his teachings on the one hand and utterly corrupt Christendom on the other. By the end of the 15th century, 98 complete editions of the Latin Bible had been printed.

You know, we have our own explosion of Bible translations today in our own generation. Well, it was that way in the years before the Reformation having to do with the Latin Bible. And there were many larger numbers of portions being printed.

The Archbishop of Mainz renewed the edicts forbidding the use of German Bibles. But in about 12 years, 14 editions of the German Bible had been printed, and four editions of the Dutch Bible, and many large number of scripture portions. There was just a radically increasing interest in the Bible and a spread of biblical knowledge.

Now, part of this was the growth and the influence of a group called the Brethren of the Common Life. Again, sort of like the Waldensies, except not as radical as them, but sort of like the Waldensies, they were basically a non-monastic revival movement that stressed the individual's personal commitment to God and their own life experienced with him. They successfully established a network of schools throughout the Netherlands and northwest Germany in the 15th and early 16th century.

They were started by a man named Gerhard Grote, a Dutchman who expressed the principle of his teaching when he wrote this. He said, the root and study and the mirror of life must be in the first instance the gospel of Jesus Christ. He thought that learning without godliness was more of a curse than a blessing.

And so his teaching was excellent. Notable students of the Brethren of the Common Life were Thomas Akempis, who afterwards wrote the book Imitation of Christ, and then a guy we're going to talk about later on tonight, Erasmus. In these sort of schools that they set up all over, again, to educate not just monks but more common people, they taught Latin and some Greek, and they taught the children to sing simple gospel songs, and adult classes were also carried on in which the gospels were read in the local language.

So what I want you to see is that from this period of there being very, very little of biblical knowledge in the Middle Ages, that began to change in the last couple years, a couple hundred years, I should say, before the Reformation, and this was an important foundation for this work that would follow.

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