



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 28 – Failing Attempts at Church Renewal

The church of the West was in definite need of drastic reform. The popes, the bishops, and the abbots of monasteries were all striving for greater power and wealth. Even the monks needed reform, because they rarely followed the *Rule* of Benedict, which was supposed to be their guide. In 909 AD a new monastery was started in a place in France called Cluny, north of Lyon, and a reforming monk named Berno was put in charge. This monastery was largely independent of influence from both the church and the state. Berno and succeeding abbots insisted on obedience to the *Rule* of Benedict.

The six abbots who followed Berno were able leaders and reformers. Their example spread the reform to other monasteries. The monks of Cluny and other similar monasteries spent much of their day reading Scripture together with prayer and praise. Although Benedict's *Rule* included manual labor, this part of the rule was neglected. After reforming hundreds of monasteries, the Cluniacs believed that it was their role to reform the corrupt leadership of the church. One of the main problems in those days was simony, the selling of church offices for money. Popes became wealthy through such simony, and those who gained leadership through their financial payments were hardly fit to be spiritual leaders. Secular rulers also used their influence to appoint church leaders who would do their bidding.

The Cluniacs wanted the entire church under the pope to be run like one of their monasteries, independent of outside control, where obedience to the abbot, the bishop, or the pope would be unquestioned, and where simony and the influence of secular rulers would not be tolerated. One of the requirements of the reformers was complete celibacy by all the clergy, including the monks and the nuns as well as priests, bishops, and all higher church officials. In requiring celibacy the reformers were not reforming according to God's will, but against God's will (see, for example, 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and 1 Timothy 4:1-5). The enforcing of this rule of celibacy has led to many grievous sins ever since that time and especially so, it seems, in our own time.

Individual monks were required to give up their property and live a simple life. But the monasteries themselves gradually became more wealthy through the gifts of people who believed that giving gifts to the monasteries would help them gain salvation. As the monasteries became rich, the monks became lazy and no longer had to work, but they lived off the generosity of others. The bishops, the archbishops, the cardinals, and the popes themselves all accumulated property and wealth for themselves and their churches. In fact,

many of the church leaders were also secular rulers, including the pope himself. The pope became the secular ruler of the Papal States, which was a large portion of present-day Italy.

Since the monasteries inspired by Cluny's example gradually became more wealthy, other reformers, such as Peter Damian and Robert of Dulesme, came up with stricter policies to encourage the practice of poverty. Robert founded a new monastery at Citeaux (also north of Lyon), and these reforming monks were known as Cistercians. The most famous of the Cistercians was Bernard of Clairvaux, who joined the monks at Citeaux when he was 23 years old. He later founded a new monastery at Clairvaux (southeast of Paris). Bernard wanted to spend his time meditating on Scripture, but he became such an influential preacher and teacher that he was asked to arbitrate in many disputes in both the church and the state. The popes and other leaders asked for his opinions, and he was the moving force in all kinds of necessary reforms. In his studies he concentrated on the humanity of Jesus and emphasized His sufferings in the passion history. Many years later Martin Luther was fond of quoting Bernard of Clairvaux and his words of devotion to Christ, although Luther certainly disagreed with the monastic ideals of the Cistercians. The Lenten hymn "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" is considered by many to have been written in its original version by Bernard of Clairvaux. This hymn became one of the best-known of all Lutheran hymns in its German translation.

Were the Cluniacs and the Cistercians able to reform the papacy? The Holy Roman Emperor Henry III (who ruled from 1039-1056 AD) wanted the bishop Bruno of Tour (who was known as a reformer) to assume the papal throne under his authority. The monks Humbert and Hildebrand accompanied Bruno to Rome. Humbert had already written a strong pamphlet against simony. Hildebrand was a friend of Pope Gregory VI, who had attempted to reform the church before his death. Bishop Bruno took the name Leo IX as pope in 1049 AD. Together with his friends and allies, Leo IX attempted to abolish simony – not only in Italy but in Germany and France. He succeeded in removing several officials from office who had been guilty of simony. He also tried to enforce clerical celibacy, but many disobeyed his orders.

Leo IX was followed by Victor II. Victor II was the actual ruler of both the church and the empire for a time, since he was the guardian of the young emperor Henry IV.

Several years later, in 1059 AD, Pope Nicholas II called a synod that determined the way future popes were to be elected. They were to be elected by the cardinals, who had been named as cardinals by previous popes. The next pope, Alexander II, was elected by the cardinals.

The next pope was Hildebrand himself, who took the name of Gregory VII. He continued the attempt to abolish simony and enforce clerical celibacy throughout the church of the West. Pope Gregory VII found support in England from William the Conqueror, but he was opposed by the French king, Philip I, and by the French clergy.

Emperor Henry IV (who ruled from 1056 to 1106 AD) had had one of the popes as his guardian when he was a child, but now that he was an adult, he was concerned that the papacy was becoming too independent. When Henry IV deposed the bishop of Milan, Pope Gregory VII ordered the emperor to appear in Rome or he would be deposed. The emperor then deposed the pope, and the pope responded by declaring the following: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, by the power and authority of Saint Peter, and for the defense and honor of the church, I place King Henry...under interdict, forbidding him to rule in any of the kingdoms of Germany or Italy. I also free from their oaths any who have sworn or would swear loyalty to him. And I forbid that he be obeyed as king" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 287).

Emperor Henry IV responded to this order by traveling to Canossa in 1077 AD and begging the pope to forgive him. Gregory could hardly claim to be representing Christ if he did not forgive him, and therefore he rescinded his previous order. But this did not erase the hostility between the pope and the emperor. Pope Gregory VII supported Henry's rival for the throne and excommunicated Henry once more. But this time Henry's allies succeeded in naming Clement III as pope. King Henry IV then invaded Rome and Pope Gregory VII had to flee and live the rest of his life in exile.

Pope Clement III did not retain power very long. He was replaced by Pope Urban II, who attempted to continue the policies of Gregory VII. But the pope soon found it necessary to excommunicate the king of France, and he also continued to meddle in the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire in Germany. When Henry V became the new emperor and Paschal became the new pope, they tried to work out a compromise between the papacy and the empire. But their agreement did not last, and again the emperor invaded Italy, and the pope had to flee.

After Pope Paschal died, the cardinals elected Pope Gelasius II, but the forces of the emperor imprisoned him, and he too had to flee, this time to France. The next pope, Calixtus II, was related to the emperor, and finally the pope and the emperor agreed to the Concordat of Worms in 1122 A.D. The attempt was made to leave church affairs in the hands of the church, and the empire's affairs in the hands of the empire. The reforming popes succeeded in gaining their two chief objectives: the outlawing of the practice of simony and enforced clerical celibacy.

The power of the papacy continued to grow, and no serious attempt was made to rein in the lust for power and wealth that prevailed among the bishops, the cardinals, and the pope. The bishops ruled like secular authorities, having luxurious courts and controlling armies. From top to bottom the church was obsessed with earthly glory and earthly riches. The monastic ideal, however, involved celibacy, obedience, and poverty. Celibacy and obedience were observed to a large extent, but poverty was almost non-existent among the leaders of the church.

Questions:

1. What evidence is there that the church needed reform in the tenth century?
2. What is simony, and what makes simony a problem for the church?
3. In what way is enforced clerical celibacy contrary to the will of God?
4. What reforms did the Cluniacs and the Cistercians desire?
5. Why did Martin Luther often quote the words of Bernard of Clairvaux?
6. What are the names of the popes who attempted to reform the church?
7. What is the significance of the meeting at Canossa in 1077 AD?
8. What kind of power did Pope Gregory VII claim for himself?
9. What was accomplished by the council called Pope Nicholas II?
10. What was accomplished by the Concordat of Worms?
11. What did the attempted reforms fail to accomplish?
12. How can we know that there were still true believers in Christ during this period in history?

