

The Catholic Church, the Middle Ages, and Scripture [one]

1. Nothing happens in isolation. While the Bible is being handwritten, copied, and moving into our current set of 66 books there were a lot of political and religious changes going on.
2. The early church was organized on the synagogue system: [two] local areas formed gatherings – churches/ekklesias – where each man took turns reading, men and women shared stories and needs, and the work of community took place. As the church spread, it entered new places where the Jewish way of thinking hadn't been established and where it didn't seem right or natural to them (think of imposing democracy on countries that aren't ready for it and how that has backfired on us).
3. In some areas, while all men were equal, some were more equal than others (shades of Orwell and Animal Farm). Eventually, these men gained more and more power over their local faith community. When questions of doctrine and ritual arose, these men began traveling to meet with each other. At these meetings, naturally, there was another round of “king of the hill” where the men from powerful, rich, and populous areas were considered more powerful – and their opinions weightier – than those from lesser areas (or dioceses).
4. In scripture, the terms “elder”, “bishop”, and “presbyter” are all the same. The term “pastor” traditionally means a teaching elder or a man who is both the teaching minister and an elder. These terms are elastic and have never been nailed down as much as we pretend they are. Over the years, some elders became bishops – single rulers over a church and, eventually, single rulers over the churches in an area. These men became more and more powerful but didn't really come into their own until Constantine made the Christian church the official church of the Roman Empire.
5. Constantine wanted the church to be united so he called synods [three] – official gatherings of the bishops – to settle church doctrine on matters such as the nature of Jesus, the Trinity, and more. He needed a controlled, predictable, and formal church to match his controlled, predictable, and formal government structure. This was the death of the synagogue system

at least until the Protestant Reformation and, even then, relics of the Roman system would remain.

6. With the full backing of the Roman government with its rule by iron fist, the Church now exercises rigid control over who was or who was not a Christian and what a church could or could not do. As the Roman Empire suffered a series of setbacks and invasions, the church grew in power. As the center of power moved back and forth between Rome and Constantinople, a tug of war over who was in supreme control of the worldwide (catholic) church was waged. [four] A lot of this can be read in a fascinating and disturbing book called “Vicars of Christ” by Peter De Rosa [TWO].
7. A note to our Catholic friends: we love you. You aren’t responsible for your history any more than anyone in the room is responsible for the slaughter of Native Americans and forcing them on reservations. Still, history is history and we have to cover some of this to understand what happens next to our Bible.
8. When the Roman Empire sputtered and went dark, [five] the church rose in power...but in two centers. The Orthodox Church – also known as the Eastern Church – was centered in Constantinople. It’s head, also in Constantinople, has power and respect but nothing like the single person rule the Pope of Rome has. The Pope considers himself Christ’s representative on earth, the Vicar of Christ, the father of the church. The pomp and grandeur of the Roman Empire didn’t go away; it just went under new management.
9. If you went to Catholic school or if you read much of their literature, you know that the Roman Catholic Church takes credit for preserving the Bible. For historians, that is a highly questionable claim. The fact is that the Roman Church locked down the Bible – literally. [six] It was locked down and inaccessible to the common people. And should they ever be able to sneak in and look at it, they wouldn’t be able to read it as Latin had become a dead language. And they’d be illiterate unless they went to Catholic schools and were a part of the Catholic church.

- 10.** Think of the world as it was in Europe for over a thousand years. If you weren't in good standing with the church, you were essentially dead for you would be kicked out of your job, your community, and your rights – such as they were – were taken from you.
- 11.** Stained glass windows were the multiplex of the time. You would see religious saints ascending but you would also see pits of hell where demons tortured those who weren't faithful to the church. You had to baptize your children quickly – and that baptism had to be done at a certain place, by a certain person, using a certain strange language in a certain religious rite. Should that baby die unbaptized, it would forever float in the dark empty place called limbo, crying for its mother for eternity. The horror of that image drove people to the church...
- 12.** But before the priests would baptize the baby, the parents had to agree to come under the church's control and a gift of money or goods had to be made. Marriage was only legal if it, also, started with submission to the priests and church. Again, it had to be done in a certain way, by a certain man in a certain language or you would face civil and criminal charges (remember the Kennedys?). And should you die, you had better die while you were in good graces with the church or you would not be buried in consecrated ground; allowing demons access to you and your body forever.
- 13.** And it went on and on: priests controlled the bedroom. By this time, their doctrines had forced them to deify Mary, make her a virgin forever, make her virgin born as well, forced priests out of the marriage market, etc. Sex, to the church, was only for procreation and, even then, there was an element of shame about it. Better to be a celibate nun or priest.
- 14.** They controlled all entertainment, education, publishing and most rulers in Europe. If you wanted to read or engage in law or commerce you had to speak Latin. However, most people couldn't speak Latin...and a large number of priests and bishops were illiterate (latest estimate I've read, at least half were unable to read). The Inquisition was launched to ferret out disloyalty to the church. The church became a vast empire and the Bible was in their hands. It was kept in the hands of church officials and in it was in Latin, only.

- 15.**In that sense, they kept the bible safe: safe, sound, hidden and unread. Until the 1960's Catholics were not given permission to read the Bible on their own. Then, the rule was relaxed to allow some reading, but not much.
- 16.**The church controlled all access to Jesus, somewhat becoming a blend of pagan mystery religions and the OT temple system. You could not pray to Jesus unless you did so in the way of the church and with their blessing. And the only contact you could have with Christ was at communion and that was closely guarded so that only those approved could approach the priest and receive the wafer directly from the hand of the priest, never letting it touch your skin. The wafer was said to be (after the prayer of the priest) the body of Christ. If you didn't get that contact, you were done.
- 17.**The richest people in almost any area were the bishops and archbishops. They routinely had more wealth than kings, though kings seemed to constantly be pushing back in a tug of war with the church. And the church was always looking for more ways to make money (even now, money has to be exchanged for prayers for the dead, baptisms, funerals, etc.).
- 18.**Some priests were disturbed by this (and they were usually the ones who could read and who read the Bible) but they had no voice. And then the Catholic church became even more greedy. They stepped up the Inquisition, demanded nearly constant warfare (Crusades, Teutonic Wars, etc.), and started the sale of indulgences. [seven]
- 19.**For those of you who do not know what an indulgence is, it was a way to buy forgiveness for your sins or for your relatives who were stuck in purgatory. If you wanted their souls to find relief, you had to pay for their sins in monetary terms. The church published a list of sins and the costs involved in having them forgiven. Those simple sins such as lying or raping a virgin (both cost the same...) had a fixed price. Others could be negotiated up or down. Rather than trying to convert the various coins of the age into similar dollars and cents, I am using a ratio system as a quick comparison. Google "Tetzel" and "indulgences" if you want to know more.

- 20.**And here's the kicker: you could buy forgiveness before you committed the sin. This outraged a lot of people but they had no power to resist (arms were generally kept by the church and the rich nobles but common people were forbidden to own or bear them).
- 21.**But then something happened that started the crack in the wall controlling the common people. It started, oddly enough, with a comet in the sky. The year was 1348, a thousand years after Jerome translated the Vulgate Bible. It was thought that comets were heavenly signs that dark, tragic things were on their way and, this time, they were right. The Black Death, [eight] the Bubonic Plague arrived in Europe. In many places in Europe, it killed 70% of the population. It struck so quickly that it was said that you woke up with a fever and were buried at sunset. Oxford, England had 15,000 inhabitants in 1348 when the comet streaked across the sky. Five years later, only 3,500 were alive. One of those who lived was a first year student at Oxford, a young man named John Wycliffe. [nine]
- 22.**As a student at a major university, he had learned Latin. While watching 70% of the population of Oxford die, he wrestled with questions about faith, God and evil. Despairing, he turned to the scriptures and read them...and became enraged. He attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation, calling it mythology and paganism. He then attacked the elevation of Mary into the "mother of God" that made her into an object of worship. He attacked the doctrines of her perpetual virginity and the church's teaching on the superiority of virginity.
- 23.**The Catholic Church went after Wycliffe, of course, but the rulers of the city of Oxford protected him. Wycliffe considered himself a Catholic, of course, as there were no other churches. He stayed within the walls of Oxford and studied and taught his way upward, becoming the president of Balliol College. He was known as "the most learned man of his time" and he used that position to attack illiterate clergy, the selling of priesthoods and bishoprics, and the locking away of the Bible. He thought it was time to get the Bible into the hands of the people. For that, he was called an enemy of the church.

24.Wycliffe's position was becoming difficult. His king, Richard, was off on a Crusade. The establishment at Oxford was tired of him and wanted to give in to the church authorities so that they could get back to business as normal. The only protection he had at this point were the young people who were astonished at hearing the Bible read and preached in their own language. Still, they couldn't hold out forever so eventually Wycliffe was kicked out of Oxford. He went to the village of Lutterworth and, in 1375, set up a church. There, he translated sections of scripture and entrusted them to his followers. They were to take their bits of the Bible and go from village to village, preaching in the language of the common man. Many of those young people were captured, tortured, and imprisoned by secular authorities under orders of the church.

25.Transcribing a bible by hand was, of course, extremely tedious. Ink and paper were precious but so was time. You would have to feed and care for a copier for 18 months on average to get one Bible. On December 31, 1384, John Wycliffe died of natural causes. Only a handful of Bibles had been translated but they were on the move and being copied here or there, wherever people could dodge agents of Rome long enough to put quill to paper. The rallying cry of those who followed Wycliffe was Romans 8:31, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" [ten] Those who followed him were called Lollards, a term of derision meaning "uneducated, uncouth, simpletons." They called for a reform of Christianity and a return to the life and teaching of Jesus including simple living, charity, and moral living.

26.Wycliffe didn't release the Bible in the English language; he merely started that process. It would be centuries before an Englishman would see a Bible in his own language and, even then, he wouldn't own it. But Wycliffe also started a cry among the common people that would not die down even after his death. He called for the end of the Roman church's control over politics. He called for national sovereignty, independence for each nation so that it could conduct its affairs without puppetmasters of Rome in every office (remember The Three Musketeers?). [they would dig up his bones and burn them 41 years after his death]

27. Now...Wycliffe is dead and the students who loved and followed him are scattered. Many went to the continent where it was marginally safer for

them. We have to step into another story here that is very important to our larger story but which doesn't advance the issue of translation of scripture. We need to talk about Jan Huss. [eleven]

- 28.** John Huss (Jan Hus) was born in Bohemia, a part of what is today the Czech Republic, in 1369. He was only 15 years old when Wycliffe died. He had no idea who Wycliffe was but their lives would intersect in a way that would open the door to the Protestant Reformation a hundred years later. As a teenager, Hus supported himself as a singer in churches in Prague as he studied to be a priest. He got his Master's degree in 1396 and was ordained as a priest four years later in 1400. In two years (!) he was already preaching for reform in the church.
- 29.** How did that happen? Hus found notes written by Wycliffe's students thirty years earlier. He was won over by Wycliffe's arguments and even translated one of Wycliffe's important works (Trialogus) into Czech and distributed it around the nation. The main targets of Hus were the moral failings of clergy, bishops and even the popes. This didn't go over well in Rome (though in Bohemia, he was accepted). Pope Innocent VII directed an Archbishop to counter Hus in 1405.
- 30.** It was right after this that Hus was brought a document from Oxford University that praised Wycliffe. Hus read the document from his pulpit. The new pope, Gregory XII, declared Hus' teachings heresy and also attacked King Wencelaus for his sympathies for the non-conformists. The King buckled under the pressure and ordered all of Hus' works surrendered to the archbishop for correction. But then...something happened to the papacy.
- 31.** In 1408, the Roman Catholic church entered a crisis. The papacy split, [twelve] Gregory XII in Rome and Benedict XIII in Avignon both claimed to be the pope. King Wencelaus was already a bit sideways with Pope Gregory XII and Wencelaus wanted to become Holy Roman Emperor so he went with Benedict XIII. He denounced Gregory and ordered clergy and his university to be neutral. A great exodus of doctors, masters and students left (between 5000-20,000) and founded the University of Leipzig. They spread the news across Central Europe of the Bohemian heresies...but they

left Hus as the most prominent clergyman there. He became Rector of the university and taught the teachings of Wycliffe. Each side excommunicated each other, the popes excommunicated each other, the Council of Pisa created a third pope and a whole new round of excommunications began.

- 32.**The third pope – Alexander V – decided to take decisive action, thus proving himself the true protector of the faith. He issued a papal bull to attack Wycliffism in Prague and throughout the nation. All copies of Wycliffe’s works were to be surrendered, his doctrines repudiated, and all free preaching would be banned. Hus tried to reason with Alexander to no effect. Wycliffe’s books were burned throughout the region and all who followed his teachings were excommunicated.
- 33.**And now it gets more complicated. The third pope, Alexander, dies in 1411 and another pope, John XXIII, was created (both Alexander and John would later be deemed anti-popes). He immediately launched a crusade against Pope Gregory in Rome. To raise money, he sold indulgences. Priests were all recruited to be salesmen and sent out to gather people and meet their quotas.
- 34.**Hus publicly attacked this. He preached a sermon from Wycliffe, almost word for word, asserting that no pope – no Christian – had the right to take up the sword in the name of the church. He said we were to pray for our enemies, not kill them. He also attacked indulgences by saying that we were saved by forgiveness of sins attained by repentance and not by money. Some of Hus’ followers gathered in a public square and burned the papal bull, calling on the people to follow Hus rather than the “adulterers and Simonists” in the church.
- 35.**The church moved quickly. Three of the men were beheaded for attacking indulgences. They would later be called the first martyrs of the Hussite Church. They were, in reality, the first martyrs for the Protestant Reformation (though none considered leaving the church. They just wanted it cleaned up). King Wencelaus went along with the pope since he still wanted to be HRE one day. The king convened an assembly of bishops but they made little headway. The people of Bohemia were almost entirely in Hus’ corner. They wanted freedom, independence, and a reformed church.

- 36.**The people rioted in the streets against the king and the pope's actions against them. The pope responded with an interdict against Prague – a death sentence for the city. To protect the city, Hus left but before he did, he preached a sermon calling on all to accept Jesus as the supreme judge and the head of the church. This doesn't sound dramatic to us but it was to them. This effectively nullified the laws and structures of the medieval church. For the Bohemian Reformation, this was as significant as nailing the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Church door by Martin Luther a hundred years later.
- 37.**Now traveling through the countryside, Hus wrote books in Czech on basic Christian teaching and distributed them to the priests he met, most of whom couldn't read Latin and knew very little of the scripture. We have these books today and they are, frankly, copies of Wycliffe's sermons and books rearranged by Hus for his fellow Czech priests. These writings spread. Prague was overrun by those who backed Hus to the point where he was able to return.
- 38.**Wencelaus' brother, Sigismund of Hungary, was King of the Romans and also wanted to become HRE. He decided to take action to end the chaotic situation in the church by calling an ecumenical council to take place 1414-1418 (Council of Constance, the 16th such council called by the church). Sigismund called for Hus to be there and promised him safe conduct. Hus must have thought the promise to be unreliable because he made his will before he went. [thirteen] After arrival, Hus debated the champions of the church. At first, he was allowed to be free but on December 6th 1414, he was thrown into the dungeon. Sigismund protested but the church authorities said "Don't worry. You are not bound by promises made to heretics."
- 39.**The trial went on without Hus as he was not allowed to speak in his own defense. For 73 days, he was separated from friends, poorly fed, chained day and night, beaten and sick. He was eventually hauled into court and had official charges written against him. He said he would not deny anything he taught unless it could be shown to him that he was wrong by

referencing scripture. Threatened with death, he said he could only hope that his soul would be worthy to join Wycliffe's in heaven.

40.The trial was a sham and continued only a few more days. [fourteen] He was at last led in and read the sentence: execution. He was stripped of his priestly garments, his priestly tonsure destroyed, and a tall paper hat placed on his head reading "the leader of a heretical movement."

41.He was led to a stake where, after he prayed, his neck and hands were chained to the stake and wood and straw piled up along with Hus' and Wycliffe's writings. He was burned to death. The people revolted and wars between the Hussites and Catholics broke out. Two thousand Hussites were thrown into the Kutna Hora mines by the Catholics. Four Crusades were launched against the Hussites but they fought them all off. A hundred years later, 90% of all inhabitants of the Czech nation were Hussites.