

Forerunners of the Reformation

Sources

Heiko Oberman, ed., *Forerunners of the Reformation* (1966)

G. H. W. Parker, *The Morning Star: Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation* (1965)

Douglas C. Wood, *The Evangelical Doctor: John Wycliffe and the Lollards* (1984)

Matthew Spinka, *John Hus: A Biography* (1968)

I. Introduction

A. “Reformers before the Reformation”

1. Concept debated by historians—allegedly “unhistorical” & polemical, but defended in seeing precedents
2. Nature of “Forerunners”
 - a. *Not* just a reformer (e.g., Francis of Assisi)
 - b. Called into question nature of medieval church (doctrine of church & sacraments, authority, salvation)
 - c. Desired a fundamental reshaping of the church—saw *themselves* as forerunners

B. General Forces for Reform

1. Mysticism: Desire for direct experience of God
2. Push for Poverty (Franciscans, Waldensians, etc.)—common belief among medieval reformers that poverty promoted morality
3. *Devotio Moderna* (“Modern Devotion”)
 - a. Somewhat mystical movement marked by practical piety stressing personal experience & reliance on Bible as a guide
 - b. Brethren of the Common Life
 - 1) Live communally like monks but w/ no vows
 - 2) Ran schools
 - c. Devotional classic: Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*

II. John Wycliffe (1320?-1384)

A. Career

1. “Morning star” of the Reformation
2. Opposed the political/economic power of the papacy
3. Died a natural death
4. Posthumously condemned by the Council of Constance (1415)

B. Beliefs

1. Attacked corruption in the church → pope as “antichrist”
2. Questioned Sacraments
 - a. Stressed preaching over sacramental role of the priesthood
 - b. Denied transubstantiation
3. Stressed Scripture
 - a. Stressed Bible translation and providing the Word of God to all people
 - b. Taught the supreme authority of the Scripture (*sola scriptura*)

C. The Lollards

1. Followers of Wycliffe’s teaching (late 14th century to the Reformation)
2. Became a sort of “underground church,” although its long-term impact is uncertain: “Poor Preachers”

III. John Huss (Jan Hus; 1373-1415)

A. Setting of Career

1. Bohemian priest (Bethlehem Chapel) and professor (Univ. of Prague)
2. Put to death by Council of Constance (1415) after being given safe-conduct

B. Teachings

1. Much influenced by Wycliffe but modified somewhat
2. Condemned sale of indulgences: “trafficking in sacred things”
3. Like Wycliffe, a reform based on *Scripture*
4. Ideas
 - a. Eucharist must be served in two kinds
 - b. Priests to surrender earthly position & possessions
 - c. Church subject to civil laws

C. Bohemian Brethren (Unitas Fratrum) continued his teaching

1. Originally a kind of reformed Catholicism
2. Later united with Protestants
3. One faction became the Moravian Brethren, or Moravians, in 18th century

IV. Girolamo Savonarola

A. Setting of Career

1. Dominican monk in Florence
2. Effective preacher
3. Launched a reform calling for repentance from worldliness—“Puritan in Babylon”

B. Ideas

1. Moral environment would promote reform
2. Civil forces (including people) should carry out reform
3. Goal: A “Christian commonwealth,” some would say a theocracy, under the rule of Christ—change society, not just the church
4. Hoped for an “Angelic Pope” to save the church

C. Impact

1. Sparked a revolution—driving out Medicis, forming a republic, w/ Savonarola as a major player
2. “Bonfire of vanities”: Led many to repent of worldliness
3. Opposed by Alexander VI
4. Caught up in a reaction and executed
5. More a *moral* than a *doctrinal* reformer