Darkest Before Dawn
The Dark Ages and the Pre-Reformation

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation; it was on October 31, 1517 when Luther challenged the Catholic Church by nailing to the door of the Castle Church, Wittenberg, Germany 95 statements of protest; little did Luther realize the impact of this “95 Thesis;” it was the beginning of the breakoff of the Church from Roman Catholicism and the founding of Protestantism.

The task of a reformer is to do away with false doctrines and abuses within the Church and to introduce doctrine and moral conduct the aligns with Scripture; Luther had no plans to leave the Catholic Church but to reform the Church from doctrine and practices he believed were in opposition to Scripture.

A hundred years before Luther, a pre-reform movement was already underway; there were dark and troubling events within the Roman Church which made it easier for the Reformation; before we explore the Reformation, let’s look at the events which led up to the Reformation.

The Concerns and Conflicts Within Catholicism

*The casualties of the Roman Church during the “Dark Ages”...* We begin in the Middle Ages (590–1590 AD) also called “The Dark Ages;” this was a very divisive and dark time for the Catholic Church; it was many of the negative events of the Church during this time that ultimately led to the Protestant Reformation; we will look at these events but not necessarily in chronological order.

*The commitment to missionary expansion...* Not all was dark for the Church; in fact some have referred to the Middle Ages as the “Golden Ages;” under Pope Gregory I (590 AD) the Church had a zeal to convert barbarians by spreading the gospel; he sent Augustine of Canterbury to England to convert King Ethelbert, whose wife was already a believer; this opened the door in England to the Catholic faith; Boniface, a Catholic missionary left England to become the
“apostle of Germany;” an Irishman named Patrick (St. Patrick) went to evangelize Scotland and a Scotchman named Columba went to evangelize Ireland.

Charles the Great, known as Charlemagne (742-814) was the greatest of Frankish rulers and the greatest advocate for the spread of Catholicism; when the Lombards out of Germany threatened Pope Leo III, he appealed to Charlemagne who defeated the Lombards and then became their king; he waged war against the Saxons and won; with every military conquest he carried Roman Catholicism with him; he did more to spread Catholicism than any of the popes; he was crowned Emperor of Rome by Pope Leo III because his military protected the papacy and Church properties.

The controversies over icons and images that split the Church... Image worship had become popular in the Church as far back as the 2nd Century; images were introduced by pagan converts because Christians were called “atheists” as they had no idols; in 726 a debate arose over icons; some saw them as useful tools for teaching while others saw them as idols of worship and in violation of the Second Commandment not to make any graven image; the fact that worshippers kissed the icons was evidence they were worshipping the icon.

In 732 a disagreement arose between Emperor Leo of Rome who condemned the use of icons and Pope Gregory II who supported them; in 732 Gregory ordered anyone who destroyed an image to be excommunicated.

In 754, bishops in Constantinople endorsed image breaking and in 769 the Council of Lateran condemned these bishops; the final decision on the use of icons came at the Council of Nicea in 787 which declared image worship as an acceptable practice.

Finally in 1054 a split occurred over icons between the Eastern Church of Constantinople which became Greek Orthodox and the Western Church of Rome.

The theological differences between the two:

1. The Roman Church accepted the primacy of the Roman bishop whom they declared as pope; the Greek Orthodox rejected the authority of the pope’

2. The Roman Church used unleavened bread at Mass; the Greek Church used leavened bread.
3. The Roman Church believed the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son; the Greek Church from the father only.

4. The Roman Church believed in celibacy for priests and bishops; the Greek Church believed priests could marry but not bishops.

5. The Roman Church accepted icons, the Greek Church did not.

6. The Roman Church practiced immersion for adults and sprinkling of infants; the Greek Church practised Tri-immersion for adults and sprinkling for infants.

7. The Roman Church preferred Latin as the language of the Church; the Greek Church preferred Greek.

In 1203 the Roman Church launched a crusade against the Greek Church raping and slaughtering Christians in the name of Christ; not the best moment for the Roman Church.

The Crusaders and their nine defensive wars against Muslim occupation of the Holy Land from 1095-1292... In 1071 Seljuk Muslims, ancestors to the Turks who came out of Persia (Iran) were on their own crusade; they conquered Egypt and North Africa, Palestine, slaughtering Christians and Jews alike in the Holy Land; they would not allow Christians to visit Jerusalem because of their hatred for Christians.

In 1095 they conquered Syria and were on their way to Constantinople when the bishop of Constantinople and leader of the Greek Orthodox asked Pope Urban II (1088-1099) to help rescue Constantinople and Jerusalem from these Muslims; there was no love lost between these two branches of Christianity.

Pope Urban was not interested in rescuing Constantinople, but he was very concerned about rescuing Jerusalem and all the holy sites from the Muslims; in the fall of 1095, Urban II went to the city of Clement in France to speak about the Muslim occupation in Jerusalem; in his speech he said:"From the confines of Jerusalem and from the city of Constantinople a horrible tale has gone forth... an accused race, a race utterly alienated from God has invaded the lands of those Christians and depopulated them by the sword, plundering and fire... O most
valiant soldiers... start upon the road to the Holy Sepulcher, to tear that land from the wicked race and subject it to yourselves.”

Pope Urban called on the people to go to the Holy Land and rescue Jerusalem and the tomb of Christ from the Turks; he also provided great incentive--- their time in Purgatory would be greatly lessened and all who would die in the war would go straight to heaven; Urban thus gave the people a new way to earn salvation; the Bible says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31). Pope Urban said, “Go to battle against the Muslim Turks and if you die you will be saved.”

When Pope Urban finished his speech, the crowd began to cry out, “God wills it! God wills it!” The people were convinced that it was God’s will to take the Holy Land from the Muslims; in 1095 one million soldiers marched into Jerusalem; but it was not a pretty site as the Crusaders killed thousands of Jews, Christians, and Muslims; many were unruly, wicked men who stole, pillaged, and raped their way from one city to the next; while the cause may have been noble and just, the atrocious behavior of many Crusaders in their mistreatment of innocent people did not speak well for the Catholic Church.

None of the Crusades were successful for any length of time; they conquered Jerusalem in 1099, lost it in 1187, reconquered it in 1229 and lost it again in 1244; it remained in the possession of the Turks until World War I when the British took control of Palestine in 1917.

The most peculiar of all the Crusades was two Children’s Crusades in the year 1212; two boys Stephen from France and Nicholas from Germany both claimed to have received a vision from Jesus to lead a peaceful crusade of children to Jerusalem to convert Muslims; Pope Innocent III supported the Children’s Crusades; 30,000 children between 6-12 joined the cause; these children were put on ships which they believed were going to take them to the Holy Land and they believed the Muslims would naturally surrender to this army of children; the wicked ship owner had other plans as the children were sexually abused and sold into slavery; many died at sea and none returned to their parents.

The controversy over fund raising to pay for the costs of the Crusades... The nine Crusades lasted until 1292 and were very costly to the Church; also Church bureaucracy was growing and the Church needed funds; nine methods were established by the Church to raise money; we will look at three:
1. Dispensations: A church member who violated Church rules could pay a fine and be considered a member in good standing.

2. Tithing: This was a tithe tax levied on all Church properties.

3. Indulgences: A document could be purchased to buy left over good works from martyrs already in heaven which in turn would lessen one’s time in purgatory; every good believer goes to purgatory after death to be purged from unforgiven sin before entering heaven.

*The control of the Roman Church by the papacy...* There had always been a struggle for control between the Emperor of Rome and the bishop of Rome; the Emperor would put demands on the pope that he refused to obey; the most serious controversy arose between Emperor Henry IV (1056-1106) and Pope Gregory VII who issued a bulletin that popes had the right to dispose any secular ruler including the emperor who repudiated that claim and as a result was excommunicated from the Church.

The emperor saw his authority eroding in the eyes of the public; humiliated he came wearing peasant clothing and came to the gates of the pope’s castle to ask for forgiveness; Pope Gregory kept him waiting three days before he would see him and grant him forgiveness.

Emperor Henry eventually got the upper hand and drove Pope Gregory out of Rome; the problem between the Church and Rome reached a compromise in 1122 at the Concordat of Worms; the decision was to have Church elections free from the emperor’s control, but the emperor could have representatives present; any elected bishop had to swear political allegiance to the emperor, but the emperor’s spiritual authority would come from fellow churchmen and the pope.

*The collapse of papal prestige and the Inquisitions...* During the 12th through the 14th Centuries heresy took on a new meaning; anyone who did not accept the organizational structure of the Church and the absolute authority of the pope as the “Vicar of Christ” was branded a heretic; Pope Innocent III (1198) was the first pope to claim the title “Vicar of Christ;” he stated that Christ had given to him the divine law for the Church as well as the authority to choose rulers including the emperor of Rome; he based that authority on Jeremiah 1:10 where God said to
Jeremiah: “I have set you over the nations and over the kingdoms to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to pull down, to build and to plant.”

Anyone who did not support the pope as the Vicar of Christ was branded a “heretic” and subject to the Inquisition; some had their properties confiscated, some were tortured and put to death without opportunity to confess their faith in the Church; in 1212 at the 4th Lateran Council heretics were given an opportunity to confess their faith in the Church and avoid punishment.

In 1229 Pope Gregory IX launched an Inquisition against the Albigenses, a mystic cult in southern France and viciously wiped them out of existence; this encouraged bishops throughout Europe to ferret out heretics and engage civil authorities to punish them; this showed the clout that local bishops had and most bishops did this without papal authority; the accused were never told who accused them, they were given no counsel, they went against the 4th Lateran Council; many were tortured to death even though some of the popes opposed torture.

The Spanish Inquisition (1478-1820) was intended to wipe out heresy in Spain but also in South America; it was never officially approved by the pope, and sometimes done in defiance of the pope; this Inquisition was launched against Catholics who were deemed insincere, including Catholic bishops who were regarded with suspicion along with Protestants, Jews, Muslims; among those which also incurred the wrath of the bishops were Freemasons, homosexuals, blasphemers, married priests, bigamists, humanists, philosophers, and writers of books which had not been approved by the Church.

When my wife and I were in Cartagena, Columbia we visited an Inquisition Museum that had on display the torturous implements, some designed to literally rip the body of a heretic in two. Without describing the torture itself, or how the implements worked, the names of these implements ought to be enough to make you shiver: there was the Breast Ripper, the Rack, the Crocodile Shears, the Head Crusher, the Coffin Torture, the Thumbscrew to name a few; under the notorious inquisitor Tomas de Torquemada, it is estimated that more than 2,000 heretics were burned to death and a total of 30,000 died altogether in the Spanish Inquisition; the Inquisition was a very dark time in Roman Catholic history, and was approved by some popes, but not all popes.
The confusion over three popes at one time... In 1309 Clement V moved the papacy from Rome to Avignon, France; it remained there for the next 68 years (1309-1377); there were nine popes in succession who held their papacy in Avignon; this is called “The Babylonian Captivity;” this created a vitriolic struggle within the Church and a tug-of-war between two popes as two men would both claim to be pope at the same time.

In 1377 Catherine of Siena persuaded Pope Gregory XI to move the papacy from Avignon back to Rome; he died and the cardinals elected Urban VI to reside in Rome; some regretted their decision and recast their vote for Clement VII, who to their regret went to Avignon; this period was known as “The Great Schism;” finally Gregory XII was declared pope in Rome and Benedict XIII was now pope in Avignon; the Church had divided loyalties--- France, Spain, Scotland followed the pope in Avignon; Germany, England, Northern Italy followed the pope in Rome.

The Council of Pisa (1409) decided to elect a new pope in hopes the other two would step down--- Gregory XII in Rome and Benedict XIII in Avignon; the cardinals elected Alexander V, but neither of the other two popes would step down; now there are three popes each one claiming to be the one true pope; it remained this way for another five years until the Council of Constance (1414-1417); the town of Constance, on the Swiss-German border, swelled in population during this Council, but so did prostitution and crime; the decision was to dispose the three popes and elect Martin V; this dilemma brought much criticism to the ecclesiastical office, for 39 years (1378 to 1417) the Church had rival claims to the papacy.

Joachim of Floris (1132-1202), a fiery Italian Cistercian abbot and author began to attack the idea of the papacy as did others who followed his writings--- such as John Wycliffe and Martin Luther who referred to the papacy as “the Antichrist;” the pope by this time has became so powerful, his word was more authoritative than that of Church councils.

The Challenge to the Catholic Church from Pre-Reformers

Peter Waldo (1150--1218)... Waldo lived during the time of the Inquisition under Pope Innocent III (1198) as well as when Innocent III declared himself the “Vicar of Christ,” meaning he could speak for the Church and for government on behalf of Christ.
Waldo was born to a wealthy merchant in Lyons, France; he had a life changing conversion and then hired two priests to translate the Bible into French for all the people of Lyons; he loved the Scriptures and became an evangelist converting layman to Christ; his followers were known as Waldenses and all were excommunicated from the Church and made subjects for the Inquisition.

The Waldenses believed in baptism by immersion and rejected infant baptism; they denied papal authority, purgatory, praying to the saints, the doctrine of transubstantiation; they believed the common person could read and understand the Bible without the official interpretation of the Church; they refused to confess their sins to the priests and believed every believer was a priest.

It was Waldo and his followers who read the Bible in public in the language of the people; this caused the Catholic Church to forbid the reading of Scripture in the language of the people; only the Church can interpret Scripture, and not the common man.

*John Wycliffe (1329-1384)*... born in England and earned a doctorate of theology from Oxford; he began to give lectures on the debauchery of the priests and the wickedness of their lifestyle; he objected to the wealth of the Church and the extravagant living on the part of the hierarchy; his message never got any attention until the “Great Schism” when the church had two popes ---Gregory XII in Rome and Benedict XIII in Avignon.

Wycliffe not only wanted to purify the Church, he saw doctrinal errors; in 1381 he exposed the pope as a mere human and not the head of the Church--- that title belonged to Christ; he attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation; he believed the Bible should be available to everyone in the language of the people; he criticized the monks and friar who were negligent of taking care of the poor, the fatherless, and the widows; he believed the Word of God should be taught, “ Appropriately, simply, directly, and from a devout and sincere heart.”

His primary goal was to translate the Bible in the language of the people, a task he undertook in 1382 and completed in 1384; the Church brought death threats but he stuck with the task.
His followers were known as “Lollards” meaning “stutters” or “stammers;” they were also called “Poor Preachers” who were scattered everywhere reading the Word to peasants; we don’t know a single one of them by name, but without their faithfulness we may not have received the gospel today.

Wycliffe’s health was not good, he died broke and alone in 1384; forty-four years after his death, Pope Martin V insisted his body be exhumed, burned and his ashes scattered in the Swift River; it was the way the Church was trying to squelch Wycliffe’s influence.

Wycliffe’s influence has not been forgotten; in 1942 William Cameron founded Wycliffe Bible translators in his honor; to date the Bible has been translated into 550 languages; the N.T. into 1,300 languages and there are still 1,800 languages to go.

_John Huss (1369-1415)..._ Huss was born in Bohemia (the Czech Republic) and ordained a Roman Catholic priest; he studied under Wycliffe at Oxford and was influenced by his teaching; Huss was around when the Church had two popes at the same time and was in agreement with the cardinals on how to solve the problem; however, both popes were unhappy with Huss for spreading the teaching of Wycliffe which was considered heresy.

In 1409 word came from Rome to silence Huss but the attempt failed; he was excommunicated along with his followers; at the Council of Constance in 1414 he was given the opportunity to recant; he refused and was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415; as the smoke was bellowing and the flames licked higher on his body, three times he cried out: “Jesus Christ, Thou Son of the living God, have mercy on me;” two hours after his death his cremated body was thrown into the Rhine River.

What was his sin? He believed the Bible to be God’s final authority in matters of doctrine; he believed people should not be allowed to purchase forgiveness for their sins with indulgence money; he believed the eucharist should be served to common people and not just the clergy; he believed the clergy should stop abusing the laity both economically and emotionally; He believed the true Church was comprised of all who accept Christ as their Savior, and not just the clergy with the pope as its head.
It is because of the sacrifices of these three men: Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, John Huss that we have a Martin Luther who came along 100 years after Huss died to lead the Church out of the Dark Ages and into the light of God’s truth.