

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## God Prepares the Ground

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me

Malachi 3:1

In the wake of the Great Schism confidence in the papacy reached an all time low and there was strong pressure for reform within the Catholic Church. In the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century successive Church Councils tried to make it happen but with very little success. The change that was called for was beyond their power to deliver.

## The Mass and the Masses

By the end of the medieval period the mass was celebrated every day in every parish church. It was a visual drama in which every act was symbolic of some aspect of Christ's atoning death. Most ordinary people only attended on Sunday and usually as spectators, watching as the priest alone ate and drank

The words of the mass were spoken in Latin and the whole procedure was calculated to induce a sense of awe and wonder in the worshipper. This sense of awe found its focus in the wafer (the host) which was believed to become the actual flesh of Jesus Christ, and there were many miracle stories about the host in circulation to perpetuate that particular lie.

There was also a widespread notion of the mass as a way of releasing God's power against demonic forces and the host itself was thought to have supernatural powers to heal and deliver.

This strong sense of awe toward the mass and the Catholic Church was to be a giant hurdle for the Reformers. But things happened in Western Europe that were to create an atmosphere in which the behaviour of the hierarchy and some of the more bizarre aspects of "mass piety" could be criticised.

## Renaissance

The Renaissance (the word means 'rebirth') was not a religious movement. It was a revival of interest in Latin and Greek literature and art that began in Italy in the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. It brought with it a spirit of adventure, enterprise, discovery and intellectual quickening and stirred a reaction against the monastic ideals of poverty, asceticism and heavenly contemplation in favour of an active and productive life through "secular" pursuits.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time as this was happening, the invention of the printing press around 1450 by Johanne Gutenberg of Mainz in Germany facilitated the spread of knowledge to ordinary people like never before. By 1500 over 200 presses were in operation throughout Europe. Whereas previously books had to be laboriously copied by hand now thousands of copies could be produced quickly and easily. Ideas could spread more quickly, more so as the ability to read became more highly valued.

The Renaissance prepared the way for the Reformers by opening men's minds and breaking the shackles which the hierarchy of the Church had imposed for centuries. Those who promoted its values saw it as the rediscovery of true culture after the long centuries of ignorance, superstition and barbarism which they scornfully called "the Dark Ages."

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<sup>1</sup> The word secular comes from Latin word saecula meaning "this present age."

## **Savonarola**

Girolamo Savonarola lived in the time of the Renaissance. He affected the lives of many in his day. Although he continued to hold to much of the doctrine of the Catholic Church, his saintliness and earnest preaching had a profound effect by exposing the depths of sin to which the culture of his day and indeed the hierarchy of the Church had fallen. Florence, the Italian city where he ministered was transformed as a result of his moral reforms. Famously, in 1496, its citizens burned all their pornography, cosmetics and things used for gambling in a public 'bonfire of vanities'.

A dispute with the ruling Medici family in Florence brought Savonarola into conflict with pope Alexander Borgia — probably the most wicked man ever to sit on the papal throne — and led to his execution in 1498.

Although his emphasis was on moral reform, not the reform of doctrine, Luther and others regarded Savonarola as an important forerunner of the Reformation.

## **Erasmus**

By far the most famous and influential Renaissance figure was Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. He wrote 226 works and two and a half million copies of them were circulated. Almost single-handedly he created a new atmosphere in Western Europe.

Erasmus' lifelong concern was for a simple Christ-centred faith and a practical religion. He identified and exposed many things that had gone seriously wrong with the Church including the practice of merely external religion and rampant immorality among the priesthood. He called for moral, cultural and Scriptural reform, encouraging the study of the Scriptures by what is known as the grammatico-historical method. In 1516 he published the first printed Greek New Testament and thereby exposed many errors in the Latin of the Vulgate translation used by the Church.

"The sun itself is not more common and open to everyone than the teaching of Christ is. I utterly disagree with those who do not want the Holy Scriptures to be translated into the native tongue and read by ordinary people as if Christ's teaching were so complicated that only a few theologians could understand it! Or as if the strength of the Christian faith were found in people's ignorance of it! It may be wise to conceal the mysteries of kingly government from ordinary folk, but Christ wanted His mysteries to be proclaimed as openly as possible. I want even the lowliest woman to read the Gospels and the letters of Saint Paul. I want them to be translated into all languages, so that they can be read and understood by Scots and Irishmen. by Turks and Muslims. To make people understand what Christianity teaches is surely the first step to converting them. Perhaps many will mock the Scriptures, but some will take them to heart. I greatly desire that the farm-worker should sing parts of Scripture to himself as he follows his plough, that the weaver should hum them to the tune of his shuttle, that the traveller should banish the boredom of his journey by reading Bible stories."

From Erasmus, The Paraclesis

Erasmus wanted to reform the Catholic Church from within and when, during the Reformation, others were leaving the Church he refused to do so. Luther said of him:

"He has pointed out the evil but is unable to point out the good and to lead into the promised land."

Nevertheless, Erasmus played an important part in preparing the way for the Reformation.

## **Witch Craft and Demons**

Strangely the Renaissance, whilst it launched a tidal wave of criticism of superstitious beliefs, also saw the birth of the witch craze that was to sweep Western society for the next 300 years. Fear and panic about the existence and activities of witches gripped almost every level of society and governments put thousands of men and women accused of practising black

magic to death.<sup>2</sup> It was in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century — not as many suppose during the Middle Ages — that this began to come to a head and whole new areas of theology sprang up to deal with it. The most thorough and famous work on the subject, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Hammer of the Witches) was published in 1486 two years after the burning of witches first became official Catholic policy.

After the Reformation, the witch craze was just as fierce in Protestant communities, including Puritan England and Puritan America, as it was in Roman Catholic lands.

### **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. The Renaissance opened men's minds and broke the shackles the Church had imposed for centuries. In what ways had the Church shackled the minds of the people?
2. The Renaissance prepared the ground for the Reformation but it also led many who espoused its ideas into worldliness. Overall, was it a good thing or a bad thing?
3. Observing these events which led up to the Reformation, what can you learn about the way major change in a society comes about?
4. What does the fact that men like Savonarola and Erasmus were used by God to prepare the ground for the Reformation teach us about God's ways of working in the world?

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<sup>2</sup> Estimates of the number put to death throughout the entire period range from 100,000 to nine million.