

The Pre-Reformation Catholic Church¹

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St. Paul tells us that “no one can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Ghost,” and he also tells us that it is by the same Spirit, that all those who “own Jesus as Lord” are “all baptised into one Body.” Now there is no question but that this “One Body” is the true “Church of Christ” and that “those who have not the Spirit of Christ,” as St. Paul says again, are not really members of that true Church, even though they may be enrolled as members of a Visible Church.

If we bear this foundation Scriptural truth in mind it will, I think, explain some apparent anomalies in the pre-Reformation Church. It will also answer the question which was freely hurled at the Reformers in the sixteenth century: “Where was your Church before Luther?”

Now “before Luther,” there was certainly a world-wide Visible Church, although it consisted of a Western and Eastern branch which were not in communion with each other and had not been for 500 years. But if we confine our attention to the Great Western Church, we find that very early, and especially in the Middle Ages, it had very seriously departed from the purity of the Faith and the simplicity of the worship of New Testament days. But all the same, undoubtedly it still contained numbers of Christians who owned “Jesus as Lord,” even though their doctrines may have been in some respects corrupt or unscriptural. But they were still members of the true Church of Christ.

Now I think the statement of our Article XXVI would fairly accurately describe the condition of the “Visible Catholic Church” in the Middle Ages. For it was not only a clear case of the degenerate and “evil being mingled with the good,” but also of the corrupt and “evil having the chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments.” For erroneous and superstitious teaching and practices were adopted by the Visible Church, and these errors sorely tried the consciences of those who had remained, in the main, faithful to the pure early faith of the Church of Christ. Many of these faithful Christians were in time driven outside the Visible Church by persecution.

Now what the movement known as the “Reformation” did, was to enable these “spiritual” or true members of Christ’s Body in several countries and regions “to reform themselves” by purifying their authorised Faith and Worship. But as the great Elizabethan Churchman Hooker said at the time “to reform themselves was not to sever themselves from the Church they were of before. In the Church they were, and in the Church they remained.” They had only become, as he says, “more soundly religious by renouncing idolatry and superstition.” But “the indisposition of the Church of Rome to reform herself,” led to a severance of outward fellowship with that corrupted part of the organised Church of Western Christendom of which the recognised centre of unity then was the Pope of Rome.

The main question which we have to consider in dealing with the Medieval Church is therefore—“What are the marks or ‘notes’ of the true Church of Christ?” Do they depend on its outward visible organisation and Ministry, or on its profession of the primitive, scriptural and apostolic Faith? This is not a mere theological academic question. Because if on the

latter, then there was always a true Christian Church within the outwardly organised Visible Body even before the Reformation. For all those who held this primitive and apostolic Faith were thus true members of the one holy Catholic Church, even if they were excommunicated by the leaders of the “Visible Church.” They belonged to the “blessed company of all faithful people.” And the salvation of this elect “Company” does not depend on its actual membership of any outward Visible Church, however much it may be helped by it. For we must remember that the early Christian congregations were voluntary associations of those who “owned Jesus as Lord,” and that the Christian Church was from the first a fellowship of these baptised Spirit-filled believers. It was this widespread Fellowship which constituted the “One Holy Catholic Church of Christ.”

Now when we consider the main New Testament doctrines which were universally held and taught in this Primitive Catholic Fellowship we shall soon discover that they are exactly those which are conspicuous of Evangelical teaching today. For we find that these early Catholic Christians taught:

- (1) The sufficiency of the Scriptures as the sole rule of doctrine and life—“the Holy Scriptures which are able to make us wise unto salvation.”
- (2) The right of direct access of the soul to God through Jesus Christ, the one mediator. “Through Him we have access by one Spirit to the Father.”
- (3) Justification by Faith in Christ’s atoning sacrifice—“In Whom we have redemption “through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.”
- (4) The transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as seen in lives of piety and godliness—“If any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creation.”
- (5) The Universal priesthood of all believers in Jesus Christ. “Ye are a royal priesthood,” says St. Paul.

Now we have sufficient evidence that these Scriptural principles of primitive Evangelical Catholicity were held and taught with varying emphasis by the true members of Christ’s Body from Primitive times to the Reformation era. But also there is no doubt that very early, corrupt and false teaching found its way into the Christian Church, so that the gospel of God’s free grace was gradually changed into one of salvation by human merit and special priestly mediation. For instance, the simple symbolical Fellowship Meal of the Early Church was in time changed into the “Mass Sacrifice” offered by the medieval priest for the sins of the living and the departed. A very surprising “development.” Other evils and abuses followed, such as the doctrine of a “Treasury of Merits,” and Indulgences, the doctrine of transubstantiation and papal supremacy; so that Christianity in the Middle Ages had degenerated from a simple Scriptural and spiritual religion into a rigid, legal and mechanical system of sacrifices and superstitious ritual observances. But, as we shall see, “even in the midnight of superstition and palpable darkness which had overspread the visible medieval Church, there was within it, though not of it, many visible members of the Holy Catholic Church” (Dean Jackson).

The spread, and the realisation, of this corruption of the Catholic Faith of the Church of Christ, was gradual and sporadic, and we have no time to trace it in the earlier Christian centuries, or to refer to those conspicuous Churchmen, who during this period, maintained an

apostolic zeal and fervour with the purity and simplicity of Evangelical Faith. But jumping to the eleventh century, we find bodies of Christians, especially minor sects in France and Germany, like the Petrobrusians and Henricians, who by way of positive protest, emphasised, even if, at times, with certain fanatical excesses, the inner spiritual worship and teaching of the New Testament days. These sects made deliberate efforts to return to apostolic teaching and practice as set forth in Holy Scripture. Consequently we find that these teachers referred to Scripture as the sole rule for Christian life. But they were continuously persecuted by the official Church. In fact all through the Middle Ages we find a succession of free spiritual societies or associations, usually persecuted by the Church, seeking a practical and pious Christianity. Such were the female Society of Beguines in the eleventh century and the male Society of Beghards in the Netherlands in the thirteenth century. They lived lives of the greatest simplicity, and spent much time in prayer and were occupied with useful handicrafts and with works of mercy and charity.

For instance, none were allowed to be enrolled as “Beguines” under the age of forty and then only women of the most reputable character. They had to vow a celibate, chaste and separate life. Their discipline was strict and they wore a uniform and the white veil. They had for a time wealthy establishments in many of the large cities, like Mechlin. The Beghards were mainly weavers or tradesmen, and they were also unmarried and wore a uniform and lived a community life under a “Master.” They had, like the Beguines, fixed times for prayer and exhortation.

But in due time these Societies declined somewhat from their original ideals of pure, practical piety, and many of them, like the Friars, degenerated into mere idle mendicants. Also in the fourteenth century a distinctly heretical and schismatical section of these Beghards was very active. They joined with some fanatical Fratricelli and with the “Brethren of the Free Spirit,” who propagated very dangerous and harmful doctrines. Many held pantheistic and mystical views, while some practised and advocated lax and licentious principles, involving the virtual abrogation of married life. In fact they held views similar to those now being advocated under the specious name of the “New Morality.” They professed, for instance, to restore a divine life of “freedom, innocence and nature,” which an unnatural “law of marriage” had overthrown. There is nothing “new” under the sun! Then, as now, there were “nudist” societies and meetings. But this was only a fanatical section.

But the rise of these and other purer sects in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries served to demonstrate the moral and spiritual revolt of those who knew, at least by tradition, of the early Evangelical teaching in its main principles. They were thus fully alive to the fact that the sacerdotal system of the Medieval Church had sadly obscured this primitive teaching. Many of these sects were, it is true, short-lived. But the headquarters, if we may so localise it, of this Movement for the recovery of primitive truth, was in the South of France. Now we must not imagine that all these zealous Evangelical Teachers were perfectly “orthodox.” We have just seen that some were even “heretical.” They lived in a dark, corrupt and ignorant age. They were surrounded by superstitious beliefs, and therefore they often ran into fanatical extravagances or eccentricities of doctrine, as a sort of reaction.

Peter de Bruys, a presbyter, who was the founder of the Petrobrusians, started his zealous preaching crusade in Languedoc and Provence in 1110, and laboured faithfully for twenty years, until he was burned by the furious populace in 1140. He took the Bible as his sole standard of Faith, but apparently he used it in a very “modern” way. For he discriminated critically between the value of the Old and New Testaments, and also between the teaching of

Our Lord and of the Epistles. He also rejected Infant Baptism and re-baptised all his followers. His followers, the Petrobrusians, also disliked “churches” and they vehemently condemned the Mass, transubstantiation and the veneration of the Cross. So they had some definite “Protestant” principles.

Another powerful preacher—Henry, the Cluniac monk—whose followers were called “Henricians,” also denounced the vices, the general laxity and unspirituality of the clergy, until he was imprisoned by Pope Eugenius III in 1148.

A little later on we come across Peter de Waldo and the “poor men of Lyons.” They were also celebrated preachers and apostles of this spiritual movement, but they soon encountered the active hostility of the hierarchy of the Church.

Sects of Cathari or “Purists” had also, about this time, spread extensively in France, Germany and Southern Europe. Their teaching was on some points far from orthodox. In fact, one section taught Manichaeian tenets, while others inclined to Docetism.

But even earlier than this, in the Swiss and Italian Alps, the Vaudois [Waldensians] had advocated pure, primitive Evangelical truths. For these Vaudois, besides stressing a knowledge of the Scriptures and the necessity of obedience to their precepts, preached the Evangelical message of salvation through the merits and sole mediation of Christ; and they fearlessly rebuked all sin and evil living. They were described by a contemporary Church chronicler as “an ancient race of simple men, dwelling in the Alps, who love antiquity, and desire to supersede our religion and the creed of the Latin Churches. Their teachers learn the Bible by memory and have a constant aversion to the rites of the Church.” But it was of such faithful witnesses to the power of the Gospel that even an enemy wrote “they may be recognised by their manners and speech. They are law-abiding and modest. They shun display in dress, and work with their hands as day-labourers. They do not accumulate wealth, contenting themselves with simple necessities. They frequent neither drinking shops nor dances. In their speech they are sober and modest, avoiding all bad and silly language.” We might be reading a description of the Puritans of the seventeenth, or the Evangelicals of the eighteenth centuries, and in the main, I hope, of those of today.

We ought here just to mention the great but transient reforming and purifying work of the Friars in the thirteenth century. Even though they may not have altogether grasped or restored the purity of primitive and apostolic doctrine, they were possessed of an apostolic faith and fervour; and practised the Christ-like life of poverty and self-sacrificing service. They were also most moving preachers. But their declension from their definite original ideals and principles was very rapid; although a minority, including St. Bonaventura, called the “Spirituals” or “Little Brethren,” remained pure, and clung to their rule of absolute poverty. But this faithful remnant was bitterly persecuted and condemned by the Pope as heretical. Similar societies, like the “Brethren of the Free Spirit,” who held secret meetings for prayer and worship also received the grim and relentless attentions of the Inquisition.

Among those aiming at the restoration of a purer faith and deeper spiritual life, and who had a happier and longer, although not altogether a peaceful history, we should make special mention of a company which went under the name of “The Brethren of the Common Lot.” Their origin may be traced to the twelfth century from a spiritual revival at that time, occasioned by the worldliness and degeneracy of the Church. They actually received the approval of the Council of Constance in 1415. They established their schools and centres, and

spread rapidly, especially in the Netherlands and North Germany. Closely associated with them was a celebrated school of mystics, including such outstanding saints as Tauler, Thomas à Kempis, John Wessel and John of Goch.

These “Brethren” practised a community of goods and lived by manual labour and donations. They also instituted “Brother-Houses,” although they were not strict or regular Monastic Orders. They aimed at spreading practical Christianity by transcribing and circulating the Scriptures, and instructing the common people in Christian truths, and also gratuitously educating the young. It is not surprising to learn that with such pure and self-denying aims these “Brethren” were most unpopular in an age of conspicuous religious corruption and declension. Henry Suso, the great Dominican mystic of the fourteenth century, was most outspoken in exposing the general worldliness and laxity of the times. He denounces the luxury of the Monastic Houses and the corruption and even debauchery of the secular clergy. “All godly earnestness has disappeared and is forgotten among them” is one of his sweeping statements. “Of those who really desire grace,” he pessimistically declares, “the number is very small, and were they all to depart this life, Christianity would at once come to an end.” That was the gloomy view he took.

Consequently the pious zeal and apostolic lives of these “Brethren” put many to shame; and they were therefore bitterly attacked by the Monastic Orders, who objected to them, because, as they were not bound by vows or rules, they did not constitute a true Order. Attempts were made to suppress them as “heretics” and “rebels,” but these attacks were squashed by the Council of Constance, and at this time they even secured fresh papal recognition. Their labours continued for at least two centuries, but they were most active and successful throughout the fifteenth century, and it was between 1425-50 that the greatest number of “Brother-Houses” was built. By the middle of the sixteenth century they had greatly declined, and they had almost died out by the seventeenth century. Several causes account for their gradual extinction. A great part of their work had consisted in hand-copying the Scriptures; and so with the invention of printing, this work died out, for the “Brethren” had not the means to develop printing to any great extent. Moreover, their work as educationists was largely superseded by the wider spread of, and the greater desire for knowledge, which was ushered in with the Renaissance Movement. Again they had gained much popularity by their use of the vernacular in preaching and expounding the Scriptures, but this practice became more and more general, and it was indeed a special feature of Luther’s work.

In fact, the Reformation had constituted a crisis for these “Brethren of the Common Lot.” It had a disastrously divisive effect on them, since they possessed many positive, primitive spiritual elements, but yet in the main they remained faithful to the current Medieval Church doctrines. Consequently some of them embraced the Reformation Movement, whilst others were driven in self-defence into the regular monastic system.

They were definitely “Pietists,” and thus they aimed at restoring a true spiritual life into the Church by an earnest piety of heart and conduct. In this respect it is interesting to notice their affinities with the later Moravian Brethren, while in the transparent purity and simplicity of their lives and their consuming zeal for vital religion they looked back to the early Primitive Church. We can form a good idea of the truly apostolic and evangelical principles of these devoted Christians and Churchmen, as we listen to Gerhard Groot, one of the most learned of their leaders. “Let the root of thy studies and the mirror of thy life,” says Groot, “be first of all the Gospel, for in it is contained the life of Christ; next, the biographies and sayings of the Fathers, afterwards the Epistles of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles, and finally the

devotional works of Bernhard, Anselm, Augustine and others.” Although Groot was a devout medieval churchman, and never questioned the power of the hierarchy or the authority of the Schoolmen, yet the result of his fiery zeal and apostolic labours was adverse to medieval teaching and practice, since he appealed to the Scriptures and regarded the Primitive Church as the model of perfection. This was the position of the later Reformers and they soon discarded the errors of medieval religion. Groot’s career was remarkable and in some ways anticipated that of Wesley or Whitfield. Born in 1340 at Deventer, in early manhood he was merely a worldly and avaricious cleric; but a definite spiritual conversion entirely revolutionised his life and he soon became an ascetic and a powerful evangelistic itinerant preacher. His eloquence and fervour were most convincing, and numbers were converted, so that at length his licence to preach, like that of Wesley, centuries later, was withdrawn. He then founded a School at Deventer and his main object and work was the circulation of Holy Scripture. We should remember the preaching of these days, although comparatively scarce, was of a lively, practical and popular character. It was based on personal experience and was therefore emotional and forceful, and in the vernacular. About the same time in Bohemia, there were other outstanding Evangelical Churchmen and preachers fearlessly proclaiming the primitive and scriptural truths which John Wyclif was, at this very time, all unknown to them, advocating so strenuously and so powerfully in England. One of these—a Canon of the Church—cannot be passed over in silence. Mathias of Janow was a most faithful and fearless preacher of righteousness, who laboured hard for a reformation of current abuses. Anticipating Luther by over a century, he preached justification by faith in Christ crucified, and exalted Him as the only Mediator. To read of his conversion is like attending an old-fashioned Methodist testimony meeting:

“Once my mind was encompassed by a thick wall, I thought of nothing but what delighted the eye and the ear, till it pleased the Lord Jesus to draw me as a brand from the burning. And while I, slave to my passions, was resisting Him in every way. He delivered me from the flames of Sodom and brought me into the place of sorrow. Then first, I became poor and contrite and searched with trembling the Word of God. I began to admire the truth in the Holy Scriptures, to see how in all things it must be exactly fulfilled . . . and there entered me, i.e. into my heart, a certain unusual, new and powerful fire, but a very blessed fire, and which still continues to burn within me and is kindled the more in proportion as I lift my soul in prayer to God, to our Lord Jesus Christ the Crucified, and it never abates nor leaves me except when I forget the Lord Jesus Christ and fail to observe the right discipline in eating and drinking.”

When we read such a record let us never be tempted to think that God’s Spirit was not actively at work in the lives of His children, so that even in these not altogether miscalled “Dark Ages,” He was leading humble believers into the full light of His truth, and into holiness of life and walk.

When we turn to the fifteenth century we find, apart from such well-known characters as John Huss and Jerome of Prague and the Lollards in England, quite a number of outstanding teachers and preachers, almost all of them associated with the “Brethren of the Common Lot.” Also they all advocated the spiritual and scriptural truths emphasised so fully and fearlessly by the Reformers of the next century. It is impossible to refer to all these individually, although we may just outline the careers of one or two of the more prominent, and then touch on their general theological position. One of the most learned and active of these “Reformers before the Reformation,” as they have been styled, was John Pupper, or as he is more familiarly known, as John of Goch, in which place he was born in the Duchy of Cleves in the beginning of the fifteenth century. He was educated probably at one of the Schools of the “Brethren of the Common Lot,” and was specially well read in the Scriptures,

the Fathers and the Schoolmen. He was a man of pre-eminent piety and of excellent judgment, and was very keen on the reform of Church life. He founded a priory of Canonesses at Mechlin in 1451 and was their Confessor for many years.

Another equally active and prominent reformer was John of Wesel, who was born about the same time as John of Goch. He was a Professor at Erfurt University in 1440, which at this time possessed a strong reforming element, as well as a very definite “National” spirit. He anticipated Luther in being especially active in his opposition to Indulgences, and he wrote against them in no measured terms in the year of the Papal Jubilee 1450. He could find, he boldly declared, nothing in the Gospels nor in the Epistles, nor even in the early Fathers, to support Indulgences. His denunciation of practical Church abuses and his opposition to papal infallibility was so uncompromising, that he was at length accused of heresy and sentenced to life-imprisonment, and really died of grief in 1481.

But probably the greatest intellectual, doctrinal and spiritual force of the fifteenth century was a contemporary and namesake of John of Wesel—John Wessel (spelt with two s’s instead of one). He was born about 1420 at Gröningen, and was the son of a baker, but he lost both parents early in life, and was practically adopted and educated by a lady of means. He received his first instruction from the “Brethren of the Common Lot,” and he came under the influence of Thomas à Kempis. But he was of a far more inquiring and self-reliant disposition than à Kempis, and he was possessed of a greater and more positive reforming zeal. Wessel had no use for mere formal or superstitious worship of any kind. He even rejected all set forms of prayer, except the Lord’s. He was a great preacher and studied at most of the chief seats of learning such as Heidelberg, Louvain, Paris and Rome. He died in 1489. He was a profound theologian with a very definite Reforming and even progressive outlook. In his interpretation of Scripture he rejected all fanciful medieval scholastic theories and followed a natural and practical exegesis, and he regarded the Old Testament as the less perfect stage of revelation.

Now if we examine carefully the theological and doctrinal teaching and principles of these outstanding fifteenth-century preachers and Evangelists, we shall find that in the main, with of course minor individual differences, they emphasised the same distinctive truths and principles which were so strongly advocated by their successors, who acquired the title of “Protestant Reformers” in the next century.

First of all they one and all insisted on the primitive Catholic position of the appeal to Holy Scripture as the final standard of doctrine. John of Goch, although he held the general medieval “exclusive” views on priesthood and Ministry, laid down the foundation principle that all Christian doctrine must be based on Scripture; and accordingly, like Luther, he declared that the sinner could only be justified by a living faith in Christ and not by his own works. All authoritative divine teaching was stored in Holy Scripture, and doctrines were only valuable as far as they were in accord with Scripture. Heresy therefore, Goch said, was obstinately maintaining opinions which were contrary to clearly expressed Scriptural truth. Now this was practically the position taken up by Luther at the Diet of Worms a century later. “Scripture,” said Goch, “possesses an incontrovertible authority from which nothing can be taken away and to which nothing can be added.” Similarly, John of Wesel refused to accept any truth unless he could be convinced that it did not swerve from Scripture. The Scriptures to him were the only safe uniting link and ground of faith; and, anticipating the teaching of our own Homily, on Holy Scripture, he declares that the Scriptures will explain themselves. In fact he says that “the man who instructs and corrects us with the Word of God,

he is our Pope and Bishop, though most illiterate and humble of all people.” We are reminded how conspicuously Toplady’s conversion illustrates the truth of this statement, when he tells us that humanly speaking it was all due to the spiritual ministrations, i.e. the preaching of an obscure Christian in a barn in Ireland who “could hardly spell his own name.”

John Wessel also took his stand on Scripture as the only reliable fountain of the Christian Faith, and like the later Reformers, he questioned the absolute authority of both the Church and the Pope, and only followed the Pope as far as he was true to Scripture. With a fearless “protestant” note he asserted that “the will of the Pope must be regulated by the truth of Scripture.” Moreover, he definitely claims what has been called the Protestant “right of private judgment,” when he maintains that “the Pope and the bishops can make no law on which a Christian is not at liberty to form his judgement.”

If we turn to the doctrine of the Church we find that the views of these evangelically minded churchmen are certainly not those of the current medieval theologians. Thus John of Goch propounded the then startlingly heretical view that the Visible Church was fallible, and he does not scruple to attack the existing hierarchy. He also describes the Catholic Church as the “mystical Body of Christ” of which He is the Head. John Wessel also expounds clearly the later “Reformed” doctrine of the Church. He regards it ideally in its “invisible aspect,” as an internal fellowship of believers united by faith to Christ, who is its Head. This fellowship of the Saints is, he affirms, unbroken by the heresy of the governors or leaders of the Visible Society. Consequently to him the unity of the Church under one Pope was merely accidental and not necessary. “We must acknowledge,” he says, “a Catholic Church, but we must place its unity in the unity of the faith, in the unity of the Corner Stone, not in the unity of Peter or his successors, as the Church’s governors. In this unity of faith are members who have never heard that there is such a person as the Roman Bishop.” Like the Reformers, he reaches the Church through Christ or through the Gospel. “It is for God’s sake that we believe the Gospel, and for the Gospel’s sake that we believe the Church and the Pope, we do not believe the Gospel for the Church’s sake.”

In the same way John Staupitz, Luther’s Confessor, not only held the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith, but he taught that the unity of the Church was found in the union of all believers in Christ by faith. With him also it was not “through the Church to Christ” but “through Christ to the Church.”

Again the outstanding New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (which the Reformers revived) was also taught by these great forerunners of the Reformation.

Mathias of Janow, a Canon of Prague, complains of those who do not wish to know that “to all Christ’s faithful people it has been said ‘ye are a royal priesthood.’” John Wessel and Staupitz also taught this truth, while Cornelius Grapheus, the friend of Erasmus, expressly declares: “All laymen are priests, and if we except the women and children, have equally a legal right to consecrate the Sacraments, although they would commit sin if they did it without permission.” Cornelius Grapheus also fearlessly denounced the spiritual declension of the Church. He says: “In place of the Gospel we have adopted the decrees of the Pope, in place of Jesus, a certain Aristotle, in place of piety, ceremonies, and in place of truth, falsehood.” This was a cynical, but fairly accurate description of the medieval faith of his day. And he adds: “For more than 800 years we have deplorably backslidden from liberty to miserable bondage, from faith to infidelity.” There were at this time, we should remember, numbers of devout souls who re-echoed these sentiments, but who dare not openly express

them; and it is not surprising that Grapheus fell foul of the Inquisition, and was deposed and forced to recant.

But John of Wesel had been equally outspoken. "The Church," he declared, "has lapsed so far from true piety into a certain kind of Jewish superstition, that wherever we turn our eyes we see nothing but an empty and ostentatious display of works, void of the least spark of faith; cold ceremonies and vain superstition, not to call it idolatry." "Behold how the whole face of the Primitive Church of Christ has been changed," he declares. "It is considered 'priestly' merely to move the lips and coldly and unintelligently to mumble the prayers."

And these fearless men did not hesitate also to attack the distinctive medieval doctrines. John of Wesel, like Wyclif, denied transubstantiation, and declared that the consecrated oil was "no better than that in daily use in kitchens."

John Wessel also held that the efficacy of the sacraments depended on the frame of mind of the participants and not on the "intention" of the priest, and so he declared that "whosoever visibly eats, unless he likewise eats spiritually, does not eat at all." Like St. Augustine, he stresses the essential necessity of faith. All is by faith and it is "they who believe in Him who really eat His flesh." Although he admitted that "only a priest can procure Christ's presence *sacramentally*," yet he asserts that "others *without a priest* by virtue of inward participation can partake of the Holy Supper." Zwingli, in fact, learned his doctrine of the Eucharist from a treatise of Wessel's on the subject. It has been well said that "Wessel carried in his bosom the embryo of that which after a time, and under more favourable circumstances, and by the aid of still greater personages, produced the Reformation" (Ullmann).

From this rapid survey we can see that in the centuries immediately preceding the Reformation there were numbers, not only of the humbler Christians, but also many earnest theologians, who had begun to realise keenly the need of a return to a vital and simple Scriptural theology. These "Bible theologians" crop up in considerable numbers, and they opposed the Scholastics and Dogmatists of the Middle Ages. They always urged the reading and study of the Scriptures, and they zealously preached the atoning merits of Jesus Christ as the one way of salvation. For remember that religion in the Middle Ages had become almost exclusively a Pelagian round of moral discipline and of fixed rules and of human merit, for serving and pleasing God. The Church was not an ideal community of free Spirit-filled believers, but rather a strictly confined Society, modelled on the lines of the State, the divinely ordained power being limited to its hierarchy. It was, as it has been described, a "mixed temporal and spiritual universal monarchy, great and mighty by the traditions of the past, but insufficient for the present, and without life and vigour for the future" (Ullmann).

These forerunners of the Reformation, whom we have been considering, who were the true members of the "Holy Catholic Church," were endeavouring to reassert the apostolic and primitive principle of faith and love, the simple teaching of Scripture and the regenerative power of the gospel to transform lives. They emphasised the truth that "Christianity is Christ" in regenerative action on the human soul, and so they proclaimed the gospel of repentance from sin and dead works, and salvation through simple faith in Christ's once offered sacrifice for sin. But above all they illustrated their doctrine by conspicuous piety and spirituality of life and character. What the Venerable Bede said of the saintly Aidan was true of these fearless pioneers for righteousness, for they "were full of apostolic zeal and humility and they fearlessly rebuked vice and sin, and they did not teach otherwise than they lived."

The aim of the Conciliar Movement in its attempted reform of glaring ecclesiastical abuses was reformatory and beneficial; but the entrenched power of the papacy, which it challenged, was too strong for it. Its efforts proved impracticable, and were not sufficiently radical. Thus the Reformers' way of complete freedom from papal domination proved inevitable, but we must not forget what a large part had been played by these spiritual and Evangelical forerunners in breaking up the hard ground, and sowing the seed, and thus preparing the hearts and minds of people for the great Reformation spiritual upheaval of the sixteenth century.

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Endnotes:

- 1) The first of four lectures delivered at Dean Wace House, 1935.