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The Gospel in the Medieval Church

CARL A. VOLZ

A curious phenomenon of Protestant and Lutheran historiography since the 17th century has been a studied neglect of the millennium labeled by Renaissance scholars as the "Middle Ages." One reason for this indifference lies in the popular notion that the Reformation was preceded by a thousand years of sub-Christian superstition during which the strong Pauline accent of justification by grace through faith on account of Christ was almost totally ignored. By coloring these centuries dark, the reformers tend to stand in bolder relief as heroic men of God who appeared to correct long-standing abuses in the church. The more sharply the contrast is drawn, the more heroic the reformers appear.

A current trend in historical theology seeks to rehabilitate the Middle Ages—to return to the medieval sources of Western Christianity and to see whether the Reformation of the 16th century may not have been a culmination of Pauline theology as well as the beginning of a new era. There is in this process the danger of trying to make medieval men say what they did not say by forcing them into a Lutheran mold. Few articulated their understanding of the gospel in such forceful or precise terms as Luther. The conclusion does not follow that their understanding of Christ's saving activity was necessarily deficient or inadequate for their needs. Medieval theologians acknowledged that mankind was

sinful, alienated from God, egocentric, and under Satan's tyranny. Christ was the bearer of forgiveness, reconciliation, and victory. In short, they were optimistic about God, pessimistic about natural man, and optimistic about the new man in Christ. Whatever varied definitions medieval theologians may have given to grace, they were agreed that without God's gratuitous gift of salvation because of Christ all men would be condemned.

The modest purpose of this essay is to suggest three areas of investigation which may reveal gospel motifs at work in the church during these centuries. As such it represents a program of proposed research rather than the fruits of such study, and the conclusions offered here are tentative suggestions that a few surface nuggets may point to rich ore still buried in the medieval church. These general areas are *institutions, theologians, and movements*.

INSTITUTIONS

Gospel accents are apparent in the conciliar victories of Augustinian theology over that of the school of Lerins, which is often labelled Semi-Pelagian. The theology of the Middle Ages was largely shaped by St. Augustine. No single individual (except St. Paul) exerted a more profound influence on Western Christianity. One of Augustine's most significant emphases, developed in opposition to Pelagius, had been his insistence on the sinful nature of man and his corresponding need for God's grace. During the fifth and sixth centuries a Semi-Pelagian school of thought arose

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in opposition to Augustine's basically pessimistic view of man. The leaders of this movement, who for the most part came from southern Gaul, objected to the idea that man by himself was incapable of Christian faith and good works. John Cassian (d. 435), a monk from Marseilles, agreed that man was by nature inclined toward sin, but this proclivity did not involve guilt, and enough good will remained in fallen man to cooperate with God's grace. In the last half of the fifth century another monk, Faustus of Riez, went beyond Cassian to assert that man was saved by good works and that grace was the reward of merit. This Semi-Pelagian position was staunchly opposed by Caesarius of Arles (d. 542), who insisted on the total depravity of natural man and on the necessity of God's grace as a prior condition for good works. The Augustinian position won a notable victory at the Council of Orange (A. D. 529) which declared:

1. Adam's fall cast all men into physical death as well as the death of the soul.
2. Grace is necessary for the beginning of faith, and all of man's efforts toward believing, seeking, knocking, and asking are the result of God's grace.
3. It is false to say that man is saved by the exercise of his free will.
4. Man of himself has nothing but evil and sin.
5. Without us or with us, God produces all the good which man accomplishes.¹

The confession of faith which was appended to these decrees rejected the idea

¹ Council of Orange A. D. 529 in *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, ed. Giovanni Mansi (Florence: Antonii Zatta Veneti, 1762), "Concilium Arausicanum," II, 711 to 724. Hereafter this work will be referred to as Mansi.

of predestination to damnation, thereby correcting what was considered an Augustinian aberration.

A second reforming council of early medieval times was also associated with an Augustinian controversy. This time it was over the doctrine of predestination, which, if held in a strictly double sense, would deny the availability of forgiveness to all and limit it only to the predestined. Gottschalk of Orbais apparently insisted:

Just as the immutable God before the foundation of the world through His gratuitous grace immutably predestined all His elect to eternal life, so in like manner all the reprobate who will in the day of judgement be condemned on account of their evil deserts has this same immutable God through His righteous judgement immutably predestined to death justly everlasting.²

Hincmar of Rheims, one of the most influential theologians of the ninth century, strenuously opposed such a dilution of God's grace. At the Council of Kiersey A. D. 853 he secured a reaffirmation of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. The four chapters of the council can be summarized as follows:

1. Through Adam's fall the race became a *massa perditionis*. "A good and just God elected from this same mass of perdition according to His foreknowledge those whom He through grace predestined to life, and He predestined eternal life to them. He foreknew that the others, whom by the judgement of righteousness He left in the mass of perdition, would perish. But He did

² Hincmar of Rheims, *De Praedestinatione* 5, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. Jacques P. Migne, 125 (Paris: Garnier Brothers, 1879), cols. 89—90. Hereafter Migne will be referred to as PL.

not predestine that they should perish, but because He is just, He predestined to them eternal punishment. Hence they [council fathers] acknowledge but one predestination."

2. Grace has made our will free, "by grace set free and by grace healed from the corrupt state."
3. Grace wishes all men to be saved. "That some perish is the desert (*meritum*) of those who perish."
4. Christ died for all. That His death does not set all free "is the fault of those who are unbelieving, or who do not believe with the faith that works by love."³

The canons of the great ecumenical councils of the Middle Ages are notably devoid of gospel accents, perhaps in part because they were called to deal with political and administrative affairs. Some disciplinary canons, however, were certainly prompted by evangelical concerns. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decreed:

All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own parish priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist. . . . Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of one injured after the manner of a skillful physician, carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and the sin, from the nature of which he may understand what kind of advice to give and what remedy to apply, making use of different experiments to heal the

³ Council of Kiersey A. D. 853, Mansi 14, cols. 920—21. Cf. Karl J. Hefele, *Concilien-geschichte* (Freiburg: Herder, 1879), pp. 186 to 188.

sick one. But let him exercise the greatest precaution lest he in any degree, by word, sign, or any other manner make known the sinner.⁴

Doctrinal controversies involving grace were most often resolved in local synods or diocesan councils, and it is here one might profitably search for a medieval understanding of the gospel. For instance, the Third Council of Toledo in 589 is especially known for its adoption of the *filio-que* in opposition to the Spanish Arians, who in denying the deity of Christ also vitiated His saving work. The Christological controversy continued into the era of Charlemagne, when Alcuin of York succeeded in condemning Felix of Urgel's adoptionism at the Council of Frankfurt in 794. Another significant controversy which touched on the doctrine of grace was that between Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus over the nature of the Christ received in the Eucharist. If Jesus Christ was not truly present in the sacrament, there could be no true forgiveness, and if He was not true God, man was still in his sins. Although Radbertus has often been labeled an early advocate of transubstantiation, his primary concern seems to have been an emphasis on faith. He indicates the effect one's theology of the Eucharist has on other doctrines:

For this reason, therefore, this mystery is far different from all those miracles which have occurred in this life, because they all occurred so that this one may be believed, that Christ is truth, yet truth is God, and if God is truth, whatever Christ has promised in this mystery is the same way truth. Therefore the true flesh and blood

⁴ Fourth Lateran Council A. D. 1215, Mansi 22, col. 1010 (Canon 21).

of Christ, which anyone worthily eats and drinks, have eternal life abiding in them, but in corporeal appearance and taste they are not on this account changed, as long as faith is exercised for righteousness. And because of faith's desert, the reward of righteousness is achieved in it. For the other miracles of Christ confirm this one of His passion, and so the elements are not outwardly changed in appearance on account of the miracle but inwardly, that faith may be proved in spirit. Most truly we confess that because "the just man lives from faith" he should have the righteousness of faith in the mystery, and through faith receive the life abiding in it.⁵

A second institution which may reflect Pauline gospel accents is monasticism. Although in the late Middle Ages the monks represented everything which the Reformation opposed, monasticism in its origins may be interpreted as expressing a truly gospel motif. Richard Sullivan has recently suggested that the early monks played a reforming role especially in the area of anthropology. The prevailing concept of man among the Greco-Romans was decidedly optimistic and man-centered; they believed with unbounded faith that "man could create an earthly paradise by the exercise of his natural talents."⁶ Although second- and third-century Christians had stressed man's impotence before God, by the fourth century the concept of human depravity had become blurred in

many places. "The futility of human power was little evident when in the normal course of affairs great prelates counseled emperors, bishops built palaces, priests arrayed themselves in splendor to discharge their spiritual duties, and ordinary Christians did honor to God in magnificent temples."⁷ It was at this crucial juncture that the monks reasserted a Pauline anthropology by their conviction that man could find help only from God and that, although man was still God's foremost creature, he was fallen and in need of grace. In short, the unexpected political victory of Christianity posed a problem of identity for the church, so that the "new" church created by the monks "was hardly less revolutionary than the primitive Christian community."⁸

Sociologically speaking, the monks provided a prophetic vision capable of recreating the Church and thus of guiding the faithful through a time of trouble wherein there lurked dangers never before experienced by the believers in Christ. Put another way, the monks became reformers, supplying a regenerative impulse in a perilous age.⁹

⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

⁹ Ibid. In this connection see the ideas developed by Gerhard Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959). Joachim Prinz, *Popes from the Ghetto* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 76, probably overstates the case: "Monasticism, in any event, becomes the wellspring of developing Christianity. If it is paradoxical to say that those who ate and drank little fed the surfeited and smug, it is nevertheless true. Without the continuing stream of harsh admonitions that came from the monks, Christianity would have perished in the morass of daily compromises." Cf. Carl Volz, "The Reforming Role of Religious Communities

⁵ Radbertus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, PL 120, col. 1271.

⁶ Richard E. Sullivan, "Some Influences of Monasticism on Fourth- and Fifth-Century Society," in *Studies in Medieval Culture*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt, II (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1966), 21.

Early monastic hagiography is filled with miraculous and incredible deeds performed by the desert heroes. Possibly the meaning behind the myth in this literature is the awareness that without God's help man is helpless, but with divine grace all things, including oneness with Him, are possible. To be sure, this interpretation falls short of an explicit articulation of salvation by grace through faith because of Christ, but in its pessimistic anthropology and optimistic theology it is much closer to Paul than, say, Tetzl.

A third medieval institution which may have originated in a deepened awareness of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins is private confession and absolution. Penance, like monasticism, later deteriorated into a crass caricature of the gospel, but in its origins it individualized the forgiveness available because of Christ. Confession and absolution in its earliest form was limited to gross and public sins, murder, adultery, and apostasy, to be administered but once in a lifetime and that by the bishop. Taking their cue from Augustine's dictum, "Those sins are to be reproved before all which have been committed before all; those are to be reproved more secretly which have been secretly committed,"¹⁰ Finnian, Columbanus, and other Irish monks introduced the concept of the availability of forgiveness for the average Christian who had not sinned flagrantly but who nevertheless realized his sinful condition. Private confession and absolution answered the

in the *History of Western Christianity*," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXIX (1968), 670—85.

¹⁰ Augustine, Sermon 82, PL 38, col. 511: "Ergo ipsa corripienda sunt coram omnibus, quae peccantur coram omnibus; ipsa corripienda sunt secretius, quae peccantur secretius."

pastoral needs of the time, and its emergence can be identified with a serious concern for the application of Christ's gospel to individual needs. The sinner was henceforth to scrutinize his entire life to search out not only gross sin but inward desires and motivations as well. The seriousness of sin was recognized. God was offended by man as a sinner, not only by gross manifestations of sin. Sin was henceforth associated with man's nature and not limited to individual acts. When the concept of penance came under the influence of Germanic law, specific tariffs were proposed for individual sins which corresponded to the German wergild, and the gospel was transformed into a legal system of purchasing forgiveness.¹¹ Granting this abuse, the private confessional with its pastoral overtones introduced something new into the West—the concept of motivation and intention. The Roman and barbarian laws, based on the Theodosian Code, considered infractions of the law in absolute terms, whereas the church took into consideration the circumstances surrounding the act. This is undoubtedly one reason for the popularity of ecclesiastical courts in the Middle Ages. The civil courts won the populace by emulating ecclesiastical procedures which had been influenced by the

¹¹ August Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, V (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852), 191, holds that the penitentials came as a result of the wergild system. T. P. Oakley, "Medieval Penance and Secular Law," *Speculum*, VII (October 1932), 515—24, claims that it is impossible to determine the order of dependence. Cf. R. C. Mortimer, *The Origins of Private Penance in the Western Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939); Herman Wasserschleben, *Die Bussordnungen der abendländischen Kirche* (Halle: Verlag Graeger, 1851).

confessional. Private absolution carried with it the possibility of abuse and corruption, but where used with knowledge and understanding it served to bring God's forgiveness in Christ to penitent sinners through the absolution pronounced by a pastor.

THEOLOGAINS

For centuries the "ransom theory" of the Atonement was the dominant soteriology in the West until Anselm of Bec expounded the "satisfaction motif" as best exemplifying the gospel. His *Cur Deus Homo* was an epoch-making exposition which provided a blueprint and a vocabulary that is still dominant in Christian theology today. Anselm neatly summarized the dilemma between God's justice and His mercy:

Let us consider whether God could properly remit sin by mercy alone without satisfaction. So to remit sin would be simply to abstain from punishing it. And since the only possible way of correcting sin, for which no satisfaction has been made, is to punish it; not to punish it is to remit it uncorrected. But God cannot properly leave anything uncorrected in His kingdom. Moreover, so to remit sin unpunished would be treating the sinful and the sinless alike, which would be incongruous to God's nature. And incongruity is injustice.¹²

It was therefore necessary that God's honor should be repaid or that punishment should be inflicted, otherwise God was either not just to His own edicts or He was powerless to bring about that which He desired. Anselm concluded that the only being of

sufficient worth to restore God's offended honor was God Himself. But since man was the guilty party, man ought to make the satisfaction. The only solution lay in God becoming a man to offer satisfaction back to God, and this was effected through the sacrifice of Calvary.

What greater mercy can be conceived than that God the Father should say to the sinner, condemned to eternal torment and unable to redeem himself, "Receive my only Son, and offer Him for yourself," while the Son Himself said, "Take me and redeem yourself." And what greater justice than that One who receives a payment far exceeding the amount due, should, if it be paid with a right intention, remit all that is due?¹³

A second monastic theologian who repeated Pauline and Augustinian concepts was Bernard of Clairvaux. Melancthon wrote that the following passage in one of Bernard's sermons deeply influenced Luther:

In addition, you must also believe that through Him your sins are forgiven. This is the testimony that the Holy Spirit has put into your heart when He says, "Your sins are forgiven you." For this is the meaning of the Apostle, that man without merit is justified through faith.¹⁴

Melancthon added that Luther was enlightened and strengthened by this statement and that it clarified for him the meaning of Rom. 3:28. The occasion for Bernard's comments on grace was his attack against Abelard's "moral example" theory of Christ's atonement. Just as it was

¹³ Ibid., 2:20, in Schmitt, II, 131—32.

¹² Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 1:12, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt, II (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946), 69—70.

¹⁴ As quoted by E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 171. Cf. *Corpus Reformatorum*, VI, 159.

incorrect to say that Adam's mere example made men sinners, so it was false to say that Christ's example made men righteous. Bernard referred to Christ's blood as "the price of our redemption" and said "it was Christ's suffering which appeased the offended Father."¹⁵

Therefore, where there is reconciliation, there is remission of sins. And what is that but justification? Whether therefore we call it reconciliation or remission of sins or justification, or again redemption, or liberation from the chains of the devil, by whom we were taken captive at his will, at all events by the death of the only-Begotten we obtain that we have been justified freely by His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.¹⁶

The Lutheran Confessions cite Bernard to support the idea that in the past there were good monks who were not guilty of work-righteousness.

As Bernard says very powerfully, "First of all you must believe that you cannot have the forgiveness of sins except by God's indulgence; secondly, that you can-

not have any good works at all unless He has given this too; finally, that by no works can you merit eternal life but that this is freely given as well. Let nobody deceive himself, for if he considers carefully he will undoubtedly discover that even with ten-thousand soldiers he cannot stand up against the Lord who comes at him with twenty-thousand."¹⁷

Recent years have seen a revival of interest by Lutherans in the teaching of the gospel in St. Thomas Aquinas and its relationship to the thought of Luther.¹⁸ A perusal of Question CIX in the *Summa theologiae*, "On The Exterior Principle Of Human Acts, Namely The Grace Of God," indicates the direction of his thought.

1. Whether Without Grace Man Can Know Any Truth?

We must say that for the knowledge of any truth whatsoever man needs divine help in order that the intellect may be moved by God to its act. But he does not need a new illumination added to his natural light in order to know the truth in all things, but only in those that surpass his natural knowledge. . . . We always need God's help

¹⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, Ep. 190, PL 182, col. 1067. This epistle is also given the title *Tractatus de Erroribus Abelardi*. Cf. Sermon 20, PL 183, col. 867.

¹⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, Ep. 190, PL 182, col. 1069. Bernard's statement on subjective justification is equally clear. "The great fragrance of your righteousness is spread abroad upon every side, inasmuch as you are not only righteous, but also Righteousness itself—yes, a righteousness which renders righteous him who is unrighteous. And as powerful as you are to justify, so bountiful also are you to forgive. Therefore let him who is touched with sincere sorrow for his sins, who hungers and thirsts after righteousness, believe without hesitation in you, who justifies the ungodly, and being justified by faith alone, he shall have peace with God." Sermon 22, PL 183, col. 881.

¹⁷ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XXVII. Cf. Bernard's *Sermon on the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, I:1—2; James Pragman, "Bernard and Luther on Monasticism," unpublished S. T. M. thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., 1965.

¹⁸ Cf. Stephanus Pfürtner, *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964); Robert Scharlemann, *Thomas Aquinas and John Gerhard* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); Charles Keating, *The Effects of Original Sin in the Scholastic Tradition from St. Thomas Aquinas to William of Ockham* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959); Theodore Diercks, "The Doctrine of Justification According to Thomas Aquinas," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, IX (February 1938), 114—23.

for every thought, inasmuch as He moves the intellect to act.¹⁹

2. Whether Man Can Will Or Do Any Good Without Grace?

In both states (before and after the Fall) human nature needs the help of God. . . . In the state of the integrity of nature man needs a gratuitous strength superadded to the natural strength . . . but in the state of corrupted nature he needs it for two reasons, in order to be healed and furthermore in order to carry out works of supernatural virtue.²⁰

3. Whether By His Own Natural Powers and Without Grace Man Can Love God Above All Things?

In the state of integral nature man did not need the gift of grace added to his natural endowments in order to love God above all things naturally, although he needed God's help moving him to it; but in the state of corrupted nature, man needs even for this the help of grace healing his nature.²¹

4. Whether Man, Without Grace and By His Own Natural Powers Can Fulfill The Commandments Of The Law?

There are two ways of fulfilling the commandments of the Law. The first regards the substance of works, as when a man does works of justice, fortitude, and of other virtues. And in this way man in the state of integral nature could fulfill all the commandments of the Law; or otherwise he would have been unable not to sin in that state, since to sin is nothing else than to transgress the divine commandments.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I—II, Q. 109, in *Introduction to Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), p. 653.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 655.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

But in the state of corrupted nature man cannot fulfill all the divine commandments without healing grace. (As to motivation for good works) man cannot with his purely natural endowments fulfill the precept of the love of God according as it is fulfilled through charity.²²

5. Whether Man Can Merit Eternal Life Without Grace?

Acts leading to an end must be proportioned to the end. But no act exceeds the proportion of its active principle; and hence we see in natural things that nothing can by its operation bring about an effect which exceeds its active power, but only such as is proportioned to its power. Now eternal life is an end exceeding the proportion of human nature. Hence man cannot by his natural powers produce meritorious works proportioned to eternal life; but for this a higher power is needed, the power of grace. Without grace man cannot merit eternal life.²³

6. Whether A Man, By Himself and Without The External Aid of Grace, Can Prepare Himself For Grace?

We must presuppose a gratuitous gift of God, Who moves the soul inwardly or inspires the good wish. . . . Hence it is clear that man cannot prepare himself to receive the light of grace except by the gratuitous help of God moving him inwardly.²⁴

7. Whether Man Can Rise From Sin Without The Help Of Grace?

I answer that man by himself can in no way rise from sin without the help of grace. Since sin is transient as to the act and abiding in its guilt, to rise from sin is not the same as to cease

²² *Ibid.*, p. 659.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 660.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 662.

from the act of sin; but to rise from sin means that man has restored to him what he lost by sinning. . . . It is manifest that nothing can be restored except by God.²⁵

8. Whether Man Without Grace Can Avoid Sin?

In the state of corrupted nature man needs grace to heal his nature in order that he may entirely abstain from sin . . . but the fact that he cannot avoid sin without grace does not excuse him from sin.²⁶

In the two remaining articles Thomas states that even after his conversion man continues to live in the strength of God's grace. He follows Augustine in viewing grace as a power or strength bestowed by God, so that the man who possesses it can proceed to merit favor with God through good works. Nevertheless, salvation remains God's gift to fallen humanity, and it proceeds entirely from God. Thomas stressed man's impotence to will or to do good and the corresponding necessity for God's initiative in reconciling humanity.

Anselm, Bernard, and Thomas—three giants of the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries—all breathe the spirit of St. Paul in their articulation of the gospel. The list could be extended to include mystics such as Bonaventure, Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Hilton, Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroeck, Thomas a Kempis, and the unknown authors of the *Theologia Germanica*. Among these later writers we find an interiorization of the gospel which was often lacking among the more intellectual scholastics, and if their subjectivism is sometimes foreign to the temperament of less speculative Christians,

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 664—65.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 666—67.

their examples at least point to the importance of understanding the gospel in an intimately personal way. They were highly individualistic, often opposing (or ignoring) traditional ecclesiastical structures. These, they maintained, more often hindered than helped in maintaining a Christian faith. They tended to be suspicious of human productions, institutions, wisdom, and society.

MOVEMENTS

If one accepts a fairly broad definition of gospel to include concern for the social outcasts and works of mercy "because of Christ," then certainly the emergence of the mendicant orders is an example of gospel in action. With the development of commerce and the rise of cities during the 12th century there went a corresponding crisis of relevance for the church. Neither the monastery nor the rural parish any longer exercised the influence they had enjoyed in earlier centuries. The church was losing its struggle for the minds of the educated who crowded around teachers in the new universities. The cities not only attracted skilled craftsmen and merchants, but the poor, sick, and disinherited also found a place within urban walls. At this critical juncture in its history the church received help from the new religious orders, notably the Franciscans and Dominicans.

Preaching and pastoral care had fallen to a pitifully low estate among the secular clergy, and the universities tended to foster a secular gospel that called into question truths which had been held to be absolute for nearly a millennium. The clergy and hierarchy were embroiled in a struggle with powerful nobles and kings to keep

a firm hold on their landed estates. The papacy, too, was involved in an unhappy conflict with the rulers of the young national states, a struggle that resulted in the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism. The friars represented a new form of ministry to deal with the new situation. The Franciscans concentrated their attention on the urban poverty areas, espousing "evangelical poverty" as a way of identifying with the poor. They emphasized the humanity of Christ and sought to reflect this in their humanitarian work. The Dominicans restored the art of preaching and devoted themselves assiduously to the intellectual needs of the church. Because of their popularity, the friars were not always welcomed by parish priests. Clearly one reason for this was the fact that the friars generally outshone the priests in the art of preaching, in pastoral counseling by means of the confessional, and in holiness of life. An anonymous treatise gives vent to a cleric's complaint:

Here are men who seek to forestall the clergy in their clerical functions. They claim to administer the sacraments of baptism, penance, and extreme unction of the sick, and also bury the dead in their own churchyards.²⁷

Despite such complaints, the secular clergy were forced into a more diligent exercise of their pastoral functions by the wholesome competition provided in the energetic work of proclamation by the friars.

Perhaps the best-known late medieval movement with a decidedly evangelical thrust was that of the Waldensians. The main tenets of their faith are outlined by

²⁷ In Daniel-Rops, *Cathedral and Crusade*, I (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1957), 204.

one of their chief opponents, who wrote early in the 14th century:

The sect and heresy of the Waldensians began in about the year 1170. Its founder was a certain citizen of Lyons named Waldo, from whom his followers were named. He was a rich man, who after having given up his wealth, determined to observe poverty and evangelical perfection in imitation of the apostles. He caused to be translated into the French tongue the Gospels and some other books of the Bible, and also some authoritative sayings of saints Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory. . . . They usurped the office of the apostles, and presumed to preach the Gospel in the streets and public places. And the said Waldes converted many people, both men and women. . . . They scorned the prelates and the clergy because they abounded in riches and lived in pleasantness. . . . They hold and teach that all oaths are forbidden by God. . . . They do not accept or consider valid the canonical sanctions and the decretals and constitutions of the supreme pontiff, and the regulations concerning fasts and the celebration of feast days, and the decrees of the Fathers. . . . They hear the confessions of men and women who wish to confess to them and be absolved and have penance imposed on them. . . . They declare that indulgences are worthless. . . . In the Sacrament of the Altar [they believe] the bread and wine do not become the body and blood of Christ if the priest is a sinner . . . [and that] the consecration may be made by any just person.²⁸

It is clear from this account that the Waldensians rejected clerical and papal authority and hoped to return to a simpler form

²⁸ Bernard Gui, "The Waldensian Heretics," in *The Portable Medieval Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), pp. 202—6.

of Christianity that stressed preaching, reading the Bible in the vernacular, and a minimum of ecclesiastical organization. In opposition to the prevailing attitude of work-righteousness, they rejected purgatory, veneration of saints, and dietary regulations as meritorious exercises. The episcopate, threatened by this attack, considered them heretical. Although homiletical historians have occasionally cast the Waldensians in the role of "pre-reformers" who were martyrs for truth, they also harbored some strange notions concerning the church, nature of the sacraments, and the taking of oaths. Nevertheless, they provided a strong witness to the gospel of God's grace in Christ and the inability of man to provide the means for his own salvation.

It has been suggested up to this point that a rewarding search for evangelical thought in the medieval period might be made among conciliar decrees, theologians, and significant movements. Is there any evidence that the gospel ever reached the masses of people who supported the medieval church? Evidence of any kind that reflects the thinking of the masses in medieval times is rare, since this segment of society was seldom represented by articulate spokesmen. However, a hint of folk piety can be found in the hymnology of the pre-Reformation period, for we know that hymns were frequently sung, often from memory. Texts of hymns undergo frequent revisions, and it is hazardous to offer modern versions as documentation for medieval thought, but those suggested here have come to us intact from their authors. One of the most loved of all medieval hymns was the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Although it is

hardly a conclusive statement on justification, in the third stanza we read, "Tortured, scourged, in expiation, Of the sins that marred His nation,"²⁹ and from the 11th century comes the well-known plainsong:

Kyrie, O Christ our King,
Salvation for sinners Thou didst bring.
O Lord Jesus, God's own Son,
Our Mediator at the heav'nly throne,
Hear our cry and grant our supplication.

The Lutheran Hymnal contains 56 hymns that were composed prior to 1500, some being more precise than others in expressing evangelical doctrine. Venantius Fortunatus' famous sixth-century *Vexilla Regis prodeunt* was an annual Good Friday favorite:

The royal banners forward go, The cross
shines forth in mystic glow
Where He in flesh, our flesh who made,
Our sentence bore, our ransom paid.³⁰

The 11th-century *Veni, veni, Emmanuel* also speaks of "ransom" from Satan's tyranny and the grave. From the eighth century come two hymns which reflect a strong Christology: "Christ, Thou Art the Sure Foundation," and "Christ Is Our Cornerstone." From the 12th century we have the well known "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" (whether from the pen of Bernard is debatable), which closes:

Be Thou my Consolation, My Shield, when
I must die;

²⁹ Joseph Connelly, *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy* (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1957), p. 188. "Pro peccatis suae gentis, Vidit Jesum in tormentis, Et flagellis subditum."

³⁰ Ibid., p. 80. "Vexilla regis prodeunt, Fulget crucis mysterium, Quo carne carnis conditor, Suspensus est partibulo." In this verse the ransom idea seems to have been added first in the English translation, though "redemptionis gratia," appears in verse two.

Remind me of Thy Passion When my last
hour draws nigh.

Mine eyes shall then behold Thee, Upon
Thy cross shall dwell,

My heart by faith enfold Thee, Who dieth
thus dies well.³¹

From this same period comes the stirring
"Christ, the Lord, Is Risen Today." *Veni,
Creator Spiritus* is from the pen of ninth-
century Rabanus Maurus, a hymn which
was often sung at Sunday worship.³² *Dies*

³¹ The original Latin text is a poem of seven
hymns addressed to the several members of
Christ's body hanging on the cross. The hymn
was translated by Paul Gerhardt in 1656 and set
to a tune by Hugo Hassler already in 1601.

Dum me mori est necesse
Noli mihi tunc deesse;
In tremenda mortis hora
Veni Jesu! absque mora
Tuere me et libera
Cum me jubes emigrare
Jesu! Care! tunc appare,
O amator amplectende
Tenet ipsum tunc ostende
In cruce salutifera

From *Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient
and Modern*, ed. Maurice Frost (London: Wm.
Clowes and Sons, 1962), p. 198. F. A. March,
Latin Hymns (New York: American Book Co.,
1874), gives the texts of six hymns attributed
to Bernard of Clairvaux, including *Salve, caput
cruentatum*. Others listed also carry a strong
evangelical message: *De passione Domini, Ad
Cor, Vanitas mundi, De Nomine Jesu*.

³² Honorius of Autun, *Speculum ecclesiae*,
PL 172, col. 815, a south German monk who
lived during the first half of the 12th century,
insisted that the *Veni, Creator Spiritus* should
be sung at the beginning of each service, "so
that through the Holy Spirit's assistance he (the
priest) will be assured that his words will be
filled with grace, and he can confidently begin
in His name." This same monk wrote: "In this
life we need the preaching of the Gospel, but
in the future life there will be no doctrine, be-
cause from the least to the greatest all will know
the Lord. It is preaching which saves the
world." *Gemma animae*, PL 172, cols. 550 and
571.

irae, dies illa, known generally as a solemn
dirge, contains within it these lines:

Think, good Jesus, my salvation
Caused Thy wondrous Incarnation;
Leave me not to reprobation.

Faint and weary Thou hast sought me,
On the cross of suffering bought me,
Shall such grace be vainly brought me? ³³

One can proceed in this way through vol-
umes of medieval hymnody and discover
strong evidence for an understanding of
the gospel on the part of the masses. Per-
haps the best source for such an enterprise
is the *Analecta hymnica medii aevi* (Leip-
zig, 1915), which offers the text and criti-
cal apparatus of medieval hymns in no less
than 55 volumes.

Our search for the gospel in the Middle
Ages can also be pursued from the perspec-
tive of authority. Implications for the gos-
pel are present in deciding the question,
Holy Writ or Holy Church? if by the lat-
ter term is understood a human institution
imposing itself between the sinner and
God, creating dogmas which may be shown
to be anti-Scriptural. The medieval con-
cept of Scripture was more flexible than
ours in the 20th century, for it included
not only the canonical writings but the
various commentaries of the theologians as
well. The apostolic writings were supple-
mented by the homilies and treatises of the
Fathers.³⁴ Today we usually refer to inter-

³³ Connelly p. 254. "Recordare, Jesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae, Ne me perdas illa
die; Quarens me sedesti lassus, Redemisti cru-
cem passus, Tantus labor non sit cassus."

³⁴ Cf. Hugh of St. Victor, *De scriptura et
scriptoribus sacris*, 6, PL 175, col. 16: "As the
prophets follow the Law and the historians the
prophets, so the apostles follow the Gospels and
the doctors the apostles. The wonderful plan of

pretations of the Bible as tradition, but to the medieval mind the Bible and its interpretation through the centuries constituted one harmonious unit. No ultimate contradiction between canonical Scripture and the church's interpretation was conceivable. They were the two eyes, the two breasts, or the two shoulders on which the church rested. Medieval theologians held to *Sola scriptura*, but the scripture included *ecclesia*. It was not until the 14th century that these twin authorities began to be considered separately.³⁵ This crisis of authority was caused in part by the Great Schism and as a result of papal tensions with national princes.³⁶

When the question finally emerged and church began to be considered apart from Scripture, theologians were found who supported the primacy of each. Strong *Sola scriptura* sentiments were expressed by Henry of Ghent:

In itself and absolutely speaking, one must believe Holy Scripture rather than the Church, because the truth as such is al-

the divine dispensation is such that while the full and perfect truth resides in each Scripture, none of them is superfluous."

³⁵ Henry of Ghent, *Commentary on the Sentences*, n. 4: "Concerning the things of the faith, the fact is that the Church and the Holy Scriptures agree in everything and testify to the same thing, namely to the truth of the faith, in which it is reasonable to believe both of them: Scripture on account of the authority of Christ which true reason shows as obviously residing in it; the Church on account of what is seen in it by man."

³⁶ George Tavard, "Holy Church or Holy Writ: A Dilemma of the Fourteenth Century," *Church History*, XXIII (1954), 195—96: "Authority in the Church is inseparable from the authenticity of apostolic doctrine. . . . [But from the fourteenth century on] the voice of the Church, rather than growing from the contents of the Scriptures, is superadded to them."

ways kept in Scripture without alteration or change and nobody may add to, subtract from, or change it. . . . In the persons who are in the Church, the truth is variable and changeable, so that the multitude of them can dissent from faith and renounce it by mistake or malice, although the Church remains always in a few just men.³⁷

The same theologian wrote further:

Thus indeed a believer, knowing sacred Scripture and having found Christ in it, believes the words of Christ in it rather than any preacher, rather even than the testimony of the Church, since he believes in the Church already on account of Scripture. And supposing that the Church herself taught contrary to Scripture, he would not believe her.³⁸

These significant words were written about A.D. 1275. From the 14th century we read in William of Ockham's *Dialogue Against Heretics*:

The only truths that are to be considered Catholic and necessary to salvation are explicitly or implicitly stated in the Canon of the Bible. . . . All other truths, which neither are inserted in the Bible nor can be inferred formally and necessarily from its contents, are not to be held as Catholic even if they are stated in the writings of the Fathers or the definitions of the supreme pontiffs, and even if they are believed by all the faithful. To assent to them firmly through faith, or for their sake to bind the human reason or intellect, is not necessary to salvation.³⁹

With the cleavage between Scripture and church came the corresponding question:

³⁷ Henry of Ghent, n. 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 10.

³⁹ William of Ockham, *Dialogue Against Heretics*, 2:2.

THE GOSPEL IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

What is basically essential to salvation? The Parisian theologians (John Gerson and Peter d'Ailly), the conciliarists, and Nicolas of Cusa must certainly be taken into account with Wyclif and Hus in any treatment of late medieval evangelical theology.

The gospel of Christianity has been variously interpreted and understood throughout the history of the church and churches, and no one definition can be said to ex-

haust the richness of its meaning. During the thousand-year medieval period there was always present somewhere in the Latin Church a theology of man's inability to achieve his own salvation and his corresponding need for God's initiative in Christ. It can be said with some justification that the 16th-century Reformation represented the culmination of an era just as it was the inauguration of a new epoch for the church.