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Christian History Made Easy (Rose Bible Basics)

19. Stumbling Downward: The Church Loses Its Way (1200–1517)

This chapter traces how the late-medieval Roman Catholic Church drifted from people's real needs and how God kept raising reformers in response. It moves through the crises of the 1300s and 1400s—corrupt popes, the Black Death, rival papacies—and the voices that pushed back, ending on the eve of Luther in 1517. The author frames it all with a personal story: giving a theologically correct answer that offered no comfort. The church, likewise, gave right-sounding answers that met no real need.

Key takeaways

- The 'Babylonian Captivity' (1309–1377): popes lived in luxury at Avignon, selling church offices and indulgences while neglecting the people.
- The Black Death (1347–1350) killed roughly a third of Europe; many priests and popes fled instead of ministering to the dying.
- The Great Papal Schism left the church with two—then, after the Council of Pisa, three—rival popes, so no one knew where the true church was.

- John Wycliffe defined 'church' from the New Testament, not tradition: it is everyone God calls to faith in Christ, and every believer should read the Bible in their own language.
- Jan Hus carried Wycliffe's ideas to Bohemia and was burned at the Council of Constance (1415) after being promised safe conduct.
- Alternatives to dead scholasticism arose: the Common Life movement and Thomas à Kempis's inward devotion, and Renaissance 'humanism'—'back to the sources.'
- Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453; fleeing Greek scholars fed the Renaissance, and Gutenberg's press (c. 1453) made Bibles cheap and widespread.
- Erasmus, a loyal Catholic, published the Greek New Testament (1516)—the tool that would enable radical reform.
- Key concept: when a church loses sight of people's needs, God raises fresh voices of repentance and reform.

Passages worth keeping

"I appeal to Jesus Christ, since he will not base his judgment on false witnesses and erring councils but on truth and justice."

Hus refusing to recant—the reformer's appeal to Christ over church authority.

"Wycliffe and Hus had packed a powder keg. Erasmus had woven a fuse. On October 31, 1517, a hotheaded monk lit the fuse and rocked all of Europe."

Ties the whole chapter to the coming Reformation.

How it connects

The chapter's thread is Ephesians 4:15—truth spoken in love. Whenever the church had the truth but no love for hurting people, God raised reformers who married sound doctrine to genuine care.

Scripture referenced

- **Ephesians 4:15** -- Speaking 'the truth in love'—the author's failure and the church's.
- **1 Corinthians 13:5** -- Love is sensitive to people's needs.
- **James 2:18** -- Wycliffe: a godly life is the best evidence of real faith.
- **Acts 15** -- The apostolic council as the proper model for church councils.