

**Lecture 35- The Grass Withers: The Waning of the Middle Ages**

*The end of the Middle Ages can be variously regarded as a break-down, a break-up, or a break-through...They broke up certainly, into the nations and classes and the churches. They broke down, through the black death and the great schism and natural sin.*

*Charles Williams, The Descent of the Dove*

*And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.*

*Genesis 28:12*

**Assigned Reading**

*The Story of Christianity*—No reading assignment for this lecture

**Key Terms**

Medieval synthesis, voluntarism, nominalism

**Objectives**

- Define medieval synthesis
- Describe the reasons for the break-up of the medieval synthesis

**Class Prayer**

*“Lord Jesus Christ,  
Our Lord most dear,  
As Thou wast once an infant here,  
So give this child of Thine we pray,  
Thy grace and blessing day by day. Amen.”*  
*Heinrich von Laufenburg (1400-58)*  
*Ford Lewis Battles (1915-79)*

**The Grass Withers: The Waning of the Middle Ages****I. The Medieval Synthesis**

- The Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas
- The Divine Comedy* of Dante
- The glory of the cathedrals

“The final outcome...was—and still is—impressive. Stone seemed to take flight and rise to heaven. The entire building, inside and out, was a book in which the mysteries of faith and all creation were reflected.” Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* 1:323

Testimony of Dr. Hans F. Bayer: “During the first seventeen years of my life there was little conscious interest and concern to consider the existence of God. Increasingly, however, I became curious about transcendent realities which might underlie the reality perceived by natural senses. A significant factor in this development was the study of the history, architecture and message of the Chartres cathedral in France. As a result, I began theological studies out of mere curiosity.”

1. Dramatic
2. Didactic

**II. The Break-up of the Medieval Synthesis**

## A. Three Theologians

1. John Duns Scotus (1265-1308)—“the subtle doctor”

On his tomb in Cologne: *Scotia me genuit; Anglia me suscepit; Gallia me docuit; Colonia me tenet.*

2. William of Occam
3. Gabriel Biel

B. Theology—*via antiqua* versus *via moderna*

1. Voluntarism

- a. Divine will takes precedence over the divine intellect
- b. God should be defined as absolute power

2. Nominalism versus Realism

- a. Universals unnecessary (Ockham’s razor)
- b. Value of the individual

“As Kingfishers Catch Fire” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

“As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells

Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s

Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

Selves—goes its self; myself it speaks and spells,

Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

I say more: the just man justices;

Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—Christ.

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men’s faces.”

3. Salvation

- a. Based on God’s covenant
- b. Meritorious (although there was also a “Modern Augustinian School”)

## C. Church

1. Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy (1309-77) and the Great Schism (1378-1417)
2. Failure of reform

## D. Human Life

1. Crises and dangers

Piers Plowman; Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*

“...it is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.”

- a. Hundred Years War (1337-1453)
- b. The Black Death
- c. Longing and despair