

Reform in Italy

The title of this lesson is “The Dignity of Man, the Glory of God, Reform in Italy.” One of the people I am going to be talking about in some detail in this lesson is the famous pre-Reformer, Savonarola of Florence. We will begin with a prayer from Savonarola. He is a man who suffered a great deal in his life; he was martyred. This is a prayer that he prayed. Even though we do not face the same problems that Savonarola faced, we face problems in our lives, too. So we can certainly join in this prayer. Let us pray.

“Lord, we pray not for tranquility, nor that our tribulations may cease. We pray for Your Spirit and Your love, that You grant us strength and grace to overcome adversity. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.”

As we think about reform in Italy, coming toward the close of the Middle Ages, we need to talk about the word “renaissance.” Renaissance is a word that means rebirth. It is a movement that began in Italy in the 14th century. Then it was well established by the 15th century. It began to move northward and influence northern Europe in the 16th century.

There were people in Italy in the 14th century and in the 15th century who began to look back to the previous millennium, the previous 1,000 years. They saw that period of history as a dark period. It was the period after the decline and fall of Rome until their own time. It was about 1,000 years, and they saw it as a dark period of history. It separated their time from the glories of ancient Greece and Rome. So the idea of the renaissance, or the rebirth, of learning comes into play. The Renaissance was characterized by a renewed interest in the classics. In fact, the slogan *ad fontes*, which means “to the source,” was used to describe the attention that the people of the Renaissance began to pay to the ancient Greek and Roman classics. These were the ancient writings of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and also the Scriptures. Classics were the old writings of the Greeks and Romans, including the writings of the Scriptures. These people began to emphasize the classics, not the more recent writings of the scholastic theologians, but the ancient writings, both Christian and non-Christian. They also emphasized the importance of reading these writings in the original languages. So the study of Hebrew, Greek, and ancient classical Latin, not modern church Latin, became very important to the men of the Renaissance. It was said by 1500 in Europe and many places that a good Latin teacher could find students, an average Greek teacher could find students, and even a mediocre Hebrew teacher could find students. There were fewer Hebrew teachers, but there was now interest in the study of Hebrew as well as in the study of Greek and Latin. These teachers were needed in order to be able to read the classics, both pagan and the Scriptures, in the original languages.

It is from this interest in language that we get the word “humanities” and the word “humanism.” The humanities refer to the study of languages. In Great Britain, even today, the word humanity means the study of Latin. It is almost as though if you are really truly going to be human, you need to know Latin. The humanities become more generally known as what we now call the liberal arts.

The Renaissance was devoted to the study of the classics. That led to a new study of the text of the classics. Not only is there interest in the original languages in which these great books are written, but there is interest in the text itself. How accurate is it? How much can we understand about the writing through the study of the text? Textual criticism, for the first time in history in the West, became an important concept. The great name in that regard is Lorenzo Valla. He lived in the 15th century. Lorenzo Valla subjected a number of the famous writings to the scrutiny of textual criticism. He came up with some startling ideas for people at that time. For instance, he said that the Apostles’ Creed was not

written by the apostles. He was right; people had believed for a long time that the Apostles' Creed was written by the apostles. It was also Lorenzo Valla who established that Dionysius, the Areopagite who wrote various things that we studied earlier, could not have been a 1st century Greek apostle or follower of the apostle Paul as was claimed by whoever wrote the writings of Dionysius. Lorenzo Valla subjected that writing to some historical textual study and established the fact that Dionysius, whoever he was, was not Paul's convert at Athens. Instead he was a much later writer who probably came from Syria. After this, Dionysius became pseudo-Dionysius, a false Dionysius.

You may remember, too, the donation of Constantine. It was an alleged document that stated that the pope was making a gift of Rome, the territory around Rome, and all temporal power. It was actually the emperor who was making that as a gift to the pope. Ever since then Rome had insisted on the validity and the importance of the donation of Constantine to establish the fact that Rome had claim to the territory of Rome and the so-called papal states. But as Lorenzo Valla studied that document, he studied, quite rightly, that it could not have been a document from the 4th century written by a Roman emperor. He said, "What have satraps got to do with the case? Do caesars speak thus? Are Roman decrees drafted thus? Who ever heard of satraps being mentioned in the counsels of the Romans?" The word "satrap" was used in the Donation of Constantine. Lorenzo Valla noticed that; it is a wonder others had not noticed it before. He said that Romans do not write and speak like that. It had to come from another source and from a later date. Perhaps the most significant thing that Lorenzo Valla did was to subject the vulgate Latin translation of the Bible to some very careful attention. He pointed out that at many places the Vulgate had mistranslated the Hebrew and the Greek. This caused great concern in the Catholic Church, both then and later.

We are talking about the Renaissance, the importance of the classics, the study of languages, and the ability to subject the text to historical and textual criticism. There was another emphasis of the Renaissance, which was a stress on rhetoric. The rhetoric, or eloquent speech, became important. In church history there are some very eloquent speeches and books. For instance, Saint Augustine was a very eloquent writer. But after Augustine, theology tends to be much more dry. The theology of the scholastics is especially dry. The men of the Renaissance began to want to recover some of the strength, power, and beauty of language. According to the Renaissance figure Petrarch, "Words can sting and set a fire and urge toward love of virtue and hatred of vice." The words of the sentences of Peter Lomard do not really do that. They are not beautiful and powerful language. But the emphasis on rhetoric came through in the Renaissance and would influence theology in times to come. We will see this particularly as we come to *The Institutes* of John Calvin. We will see rhetoric playing a very natural and wonderful role in theology.

The importance of the classics, rhetoric, new art, and architecture come out of the Renaissance. Let me illustrate that last point in three ways. First of all, let us talk about the Pazzi Chapel built in Florence by Brunellesco in 1430. As you look at this chapel, if you have already been familiar with the great gothic architecture in the cathedrals in France, England and elsewhere, you will notice there is something quite different about this. The style has been called the architecture of the Renaissance or the architecture of humanism. I will explain a little more about the word "humanism" in a moment. I have used it already to say it is the study of the liberal arts. What is impressive about this chapel is that it is not very impressive, at least not compared to some of the great churches like Chartres or some of the cathedrals of England. It does not try to impress us or crush us by its size or weight as all God-directed architecture does. It is much more limited. It has a human scale. If you walked into this chapel in Florence, you would not be overwhelmed by it. You might be impressed by its symmetry, its orderliness, and its neatness, but you would not have the same feeling walking into this chapel as you would walking into one of the great gothic cathedrals.

About the same time that the Pazzi Chapel was built, another building in Florence, the Library of San Marco, was built by Cosimo de' Medici. The interior of that library is eloquent and elegant. It is a cool, harmonious place, not a dark place of mystery, as in some of the churches. It is a place of knowledge. It is not pointing to how much we do not know, but the books, light, harmony, and proportions of this library point to how much we do know and how much we can know.

The third illustration, and there could be hundreds of these, is the David, also in Florence. This is the great sculpture of the famous Michelangelo. Michelangelo, according to one of the encyclopedias, was a man whose giant talent dominated the High Renaissance. You probably know something about him in the many works he did in addition to this one. His giant David in the Academia in Florence is a giant—it is 14 feet high with outsized head and hands. It dominates that building. If this is Michelangelo's statue of David, the shepherd-boy, you wonder what the giant would have looked like. Some people, particularly Francis Schaeffer, have seen in the David a statement of man's belief in himself. The way Schaeffer put it was, "The David was the statement of what the humanistic man saw himself as being tomorrow. In this statue we have a man waiting with confidence in his own strength for the future."

I would like to use that to lead into the second word. We have been talking about the Renaissance, the new birth. It put special emphasis on the classics, rhetoric, new expressions of art, and architecture. We can also speak of this period of history and of this development as humanism. I think it is important for us today to define that clearly. We tend to think of humanism as secular and atheistic humanism. Humanism in the 14th and 15th centuries was not necessarily anti-God or anti-Christian. At times it could seem to be anti-institutional church, though.

There were other movements that were opposed to the institutional church as well. As we think of humanism, we are to think of the Renaissance and the people of the Renaissance who were coming up with some new emphases without rejecting the old emphases. There were two new emphases that could and did eventually undermine the old emphases. One is a this-worldliness, and the other is an emphasis on the greatness and essential goodness of human nature. It is impossible to look at this statue of the David, whatever Michelangelo was attempting to do there, without being impressed with the grandeur, dignity, and the potential of human beings. Fifteenth century humanism did not reject or attack Christianity directly or intentionally. Michelangelo was producing biblical themes, not only here, but in the Sistine Chapel and elsewhere. He tended to mix those with mythological and classic figures, though.

These two new emphases came through during the Renaissance. There was a this-worldliness, a focus on the here and now, against the other-worldliness of much of medieval life and thought. If you look at other medieval art, particularly earlier expressions of medieval art, you will often find the dance of death. One of the themes of medieval art is the picture of death coming and taking people at all stages of life and at the most inopportune moments. Death was very much in the mind of medieval men and women. But the Renaissance was not the dance of death anymore. It was a celebration of life. It was a new beginning, the rebirth. There is potential for life in this world. That tended to move the emphasis and the interest away from preparation for life in the next world.

One of the themes of humanism and the Renaissance is the goodness and greatness of human beings. It is type of Palagianism, although the people of the Renaissance did not have interest in putting it in theological terms; they just knew that human beings have great significance and importance. Let me illustrate that in three ways through three different figures. The first is Petrarch, a man who lived in the 14th century. He was called by Kenneth Clark the first modern man. Petrarch lived during the time of the Avignon papacy. He was very concerned with the way the church was going, with scholasticism and the scholastic theology. He was also, and more importantly, concerned with the worldliness of the

Avignon papacy and the worldliness of the church in general. He said, "I am now living in France, the Babylon of the West. The poor fishermen of Galilee have strangely forgotten their origin. I am astounded as I recall their predecessors. To see these men, loaded with gold and clad in purple, boasting in the spoils of princes and nations, to see luxurious palaces and heights crowned with fortifications, does not look like the beginning of Christianity." It did not look like the disciples, the followers of Christ in Galilee, to see the wealth and worldliness of the church as it centered in Avignon and France. Petrarch was critical of scholasticism and of the worldliness of the church.

As we move to the next figure we get a much more humanistic emphasis. Leon Battista Alberti is famous for a number of statements. He was a 15th century figure. He is often quoted as having said "A man can do all things if he will." That does not sound like Augustine or even the medieval theologians. It is a new note of human potential and possibility. Kenneth Clark said, "That statement of 'man can do all things if he will' could be the motto of the early Renaissance."

We have a portrait of Alberti; it is one of the first portraits that we have. The modern portrait came into existence during the Renaissance. Before the Renaissance, it really did not matter what people looked like. They could all look the same. The pictures that we have seen of the church fathers and others have looked somewhat the same. It was not all that important to distinguish between them. You would simply paint a person. But with the Renaissance there was a concern that the individual be depicted truly to express his or her uniqueness, importance, and psychological complexity. So with Alberti and others' portraits from this time, we have the modern man. It was the modern portrait depicting the modern man.

Alberti addressed his fellow men by saying, "To you is given a body more graceful than other animals, to you power of apt and various movements, to you most sharp and delicate senses, to you wit, reason, and memory like an immortal god." Kenneth Clark comments that it is certainly incorrect to say that we are more graceful than other animals. We do not feel much like immortal gods at the moment, but in 1400 the Florentines did (at least some of them). This was the Renaissance; this was the springtime, the rebirth. The darkness of the past was going to pass away. New light would come.

I will give one other illustration of this attitude from Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola. His book was *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Mirandola was a young man; he was very brilliant, handsome, wealthy, and energetic. He had everything going for him. He seemed to know everything; he seemed to learn everything. He came up with the plan and the idea to try to combine Christianity, the ancient classics, and even Islam. It was a new synthesis of truth. When he was 24 years old, he went to Rome and published 900 theses for debate. It was not 25 like Luther, but 900. He created something of a sensation and the debate never came off. The pope said, "That young man is looking for someone to burn him." Pico decided it would be better not to stay in Rome much longer!

That gives you a sense of what was going on in one place, Florence, and some of the other cities of northern Italy. Something else was going on in Florence, too. As we think of reform, it is not only the Renaissance. We have to think of a very different type of reform that came from the life and teaching of a Dominican monk whose name was Savonarola. He is the fourth of our pre-Reformers: Waldo, Wycliffe, Hus, and Savonarola. They are all seated at the base of the Luther statue in Barnes as important pre-16th century reform leaders. Savonarola was born in 1452; he was born, not in Florence, but in the Italian city Ferrara. There is a very lovely account of his childhood, particularly of his grandfather. His grandfather was a famous doctor in Ferrara. For some reason the grandfather had a particular contact with the little boy and responsibility for him; he brought him up and taught him along the way. What he taught him was very much the truth of the Bible. This famous doctor had a small notebook in which he wrote down different ideas that he came up with. He gave that notebook to his

grandson. In the notebook there were statements like, “Neither the pope nor their vicars have a right to teach anything contrary to the things instituted by God. All that we need to know is found in the Word of God.” So Savonarola grew up hearing that kind of teaching.

He had a disappointing love affair as a young man. He did what many young men of that time did after disappointing love affairs: he became a monk. He was a Dominican monk at the age of 23. Eventually he was brought to Florence by Lorenzo the Magnificent, who was the virtual ruler of the city of Florence. The wealthy family of the Medici controlled the city of Florence. Savonarola came to Florence in 1482, and he became friar of the famous monastery of San Marco in 1491. There is a story in the syllabus concerning the relationship between Lorenzo, this magnificent ruler of the city of Florence, and Savonarola, the Dominican monk. Savonarola worked away in his cell in the monastery of San Marco. There is a drawing depicting him working in his cell. He is writing a book. It was a book called *On Christian Simplicity*. He became a great preacher. At first Savonarola was not a very good preacher, but he became a great one. Florentines did not like him at first because they felt he had a very bad accent. It was not from Florence, it was from Ferrara, which they considered an inferior city. So he preached long sermons for about two hours. He shouted those sermons in a very ungraceful accent. His friends urged him to go and hear another preacher in town who was a very famous and eloquent speaker. He was the Augustinian Fra Mariano who was filling Santo Spirito, the church across the Arno River. Some years ago I lived in Florence for a year and studied Italian at Eurocentro. It was on the same piazza with Santo Spirito. So during the break in language class I would go over to Santo Spirito and look around at that church. That was where Fra Mariano preached. When his friends told Savonarola he should go hear Mariano, that he was a great preacher, Savonarola replied that he had already heard Mariano. He said, “He preaches from Cicero and the poets and not from the Holy Scripture.” He was a Renaissance figure who emphasized the classics but not the Scripture. Savonarola said, “You reproach me for my lack of style. What has style to do with it? Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can. That is the secret of preaching.” I am not sure style is totally unimportant, but having something clear to say and saying it clearly is certainly important.

The thing that is interesting is that Savonarola became a great preacher. We can be encouraged. His Lenten sermons in the Duomo, in the cathedral in Florence, moved the whole city. Not only did he have something to say because he was preaching the Gospel instead of Cicero and the poets, but eventually he also developed a style that was moving and powerful. One of the people who heard Savonarola preach in the Duomo was Michelangelo, the artist. He said, “Oh, that voice, that voice. It can never be forgotten.” It is interesting to read that when Michelangelo was doing the painting in the Sistine Chapel on the ceiling, the painting of the Last Judgment, as he worked for five years on that painting he had with him only one book. It was a book of Savonarola’s sermons. Somebody has said that the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel is essentially a Savonarolian sermon in color. In the syllabus we have one example of Savonarola’s preaching in the sermon on the ascension of Christ.

Not only did he become a great preacher, but Savonarola also became an important reformer in the city of Florence. Florence became what we could call a Christian city with a Christian constitution in 1494. The battle there was between Lorenzo and Savonarola. Each tried to pull the city in a different direction. Savonarola preached, “Florence is a spiritual wilderness, and it will be punished for worldliness and for the injustices inflicted on the poor.” It was a sermon he was preaching week by week in Florence. Lorenzo said, “I do not like to hear of anyone talking politics in the pulpit or anywhere else.” Lorenzo had his own ideas about what he wanted to make the city of Florence. It was not in line with the vision and dream of Savonarola. I will not go into the long, complicated history of the power struggle between these two and others. The outcome of it all was that Savonarola eventually became the leader of the city. He was not only the chief preacher of the city, but he was also the political leader of the city as well. I

think that was probably a mistake. It was not a mistake that the Reformers would make later. Luther never became a political figure, nor did Calvin. People think Calvin was a type of autocrat of Geneva, but that was not the case at all. John Knox was not a political figure either. They remained in their calling as preachers and spiritual leaders. Savonarola won the people, and they made him the leader of the city. He said, "Florence, Jesus Christ, who is the king of the universe, stands before the door and He knocks. He wants to come in. He wills to become your king in this very hour. Will you have Him as your king?" And the people shouted, "Yes, we will." They tried to create a theocracy, a Christ city, God's city on earth, with Savonarola as the leader of that city. One of the things that happened in Florence was what is called a burning of the vanities. People brought all sorts of things into the main piazza of the city, and there was a great bonfire. They threw into the bonfire cards, dice, jewelry, cosmetics, lude books, and pictures. Some of the paintings of Botticelli, for instance, were thrown into the fire. Botticelli himself threw them in. He had been moved by what was going on in Florence, as were Pico Della Mirandola and some of the other humanists whom we have talked about already. Of course the burning of the vanities has not made Savonarola popular with art students and artists through history. He was concerned that worldliness had captured the city. He felt that something had to be done in order to bring Florence back to a place of godly living.

That kind of vision and concern will produce many enemies. Savonarola made many enemies: the pope, the aristocrats, the Medici. Finally, through a series of miscalculations and misfortunes, the people lost confidence in him. He was arrested, hanged, and burned with several fellow Dominican monks on May 23, 1498 in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. If you can risk crossing that piazza on foot, just about in that place in the center of the piazza you will find a bronze marker on the pavement. It indicates the place where Savonarola and the other monks were martyred. Machiavelli was also a Florentine. He was 29 years old when Savonarola died. He would later write a very famous book called *The Prince*. His comment was "Unarmed prophets are bound to fail." Savonarola could not expect to succeed because he did not have an army.

When Savonarola died in the flames in Florence in 1498, there was another young man growing up in a little town in Germany. Martin Luther was only 15 years old. It shows how close we are to the Reformation because Luther was already 15 years old when Savonarola died. Luther said about this Florentine martyr, "Whereas anti-Christ [Luther's word for the pope] has damned Savonarola, God has canonized him in our hearts." "Seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that it marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).