

56. THE GREAT SCHISM 1378-1417

In chapter 45 we discussed the struggle between Pope Gregory VII and the German emperor Henry IV. That was a power struggle between Church and State. But it wasn't only the *German* emperors who resisted the popes' continual grasping for power; the *French* kings had no intention of submitting to the pope's commands either! They firmly resisted being dependant on him for anything.



King Philip IV from France.
1268-1314. History.com

About the year 1300, Philip IV reigned in France. This king was at war with England. Waging war always costs lots of money. Philip IV needed lots of money to pay his soldiers. That's why the French citizens had to

pay high taxes. In addition, Philip IV wanted to levy taxes on the clergy and monasteries. They were rich, so they could easily afford to pay tax as well!

When pope Boniface VIII heard about that, he forbade it! He demanded that the clergy and



Pope Boniface VIII 1230-1303. Italyontheday.com

monasteries remain exempt from paying taxes. The French king ignored him. This was none of the pope's business! However, the pope thought: "The king of France must obey me!"

He made plans to *excommunicate* Philip IV and so try to *force* his will on the king. But before he could proclaim the ban, his palace was suddenly

attacked by six hundred heavily armed French soldiers.

They took the pope prisoner!

Now he, the vicar of Christ on earth, is a prisoner of the French king.

What a humiliation for that proud prince of the Church!

Thankfully, his friends soon succeeded in rescuing him, but the pope died very soon after. His capture and the humiliation had been too much for the seventy three-year-old man.

The cardinals chose another pope, who went to live in the city of Avignon. This city is near the Rhone River in the south of France. For seventy years, the popes resided in France, and during all that time, the French kings ruled over them. The popes' time in Avignon is sometimes called 'The Babylonian captivity of the pope', because just like the Jews were in exile in Babylon for seventy years, the popes lived in Avignon for seventy years. The French kings had become accustomed to ruling over the popes. They thought that was how it should be! However, in 1377 the pope returned to Rome again.

TWO POPES AT ONCE?

In 1378 a new pope was chosen in Rome. This pope refused to submit to the commands of the French kings. He wanted to break the influence of kings over popes. The French king became so angry that he said: "You may no longer be pope!" and through the French cardinals, he appointed another pope who went to live in the French city of Avignon again.



Pope Urban VI 1318-1389.
Pope in Rome who opposed
the French King.
British Museum.org



*Anti-pope Clement VII 1378-1417.
Pope in Avignon..
Constructionlitmag.com*

Now there were two popes at the same time! One pope lived in Rome and one in Avignon. This situation caused the beginnings of a great schism in the Roman Catholic Church.

Some acknowledged the pope at

Rome, while others followed the pope at Avignon. There was discord and division everywhere!

The churches split over it!
Monasteries split over it!
The ordinary members split over it!
Even families split over it!
Hatred and envy were everywhere!
The pope at Rome said, "I am the real pope. Everyone must obey me."

He excommunicated the pope who lived in Avignon. But this did not only affect the French pope, but also all his followers! This ban meant *they* were excommunicated as well!

The pope in Avignon did not accept that!

He said:

"No, I am the real pope!"

and with a large army, he marched against Rome to subdue his opponent. However, Rome defeated his army. When the French pope saw that he could not win, he decided to excommunicate the pope at Rome and all his followers.

Those two popes cursed each other in the name of Jesus Christ.

They raged at each other.

They directed papal letters and papal messages to the people.

They attacked each other in all sorts of ways.

It is not surprising that ordinary people lost all respect for the popes. The people in the pew no longer knew who they should obey.

There was also great division among the bishops and archbishops. They demanded obedience from their church members.

One would say:

"You must obey the Pope of Rome because he is the true pope."

Another said:

"No, you must obey the pope of Avignon because he is the real pope, and the other one is an impostor."

Well, who was right?

The people didn't know, so they shrugged their shoulders. They became indifferent and didn't care anymore. If the vicars of Christ cursed each other, then how could *they* figure it out? When the bishops and archbishops lived in hatred and envy with each other and gave contradictory commands, then the church people just laughed and did their own thing. The kings of France and Spain chose the side of the French pope. The emperor of Germany and the king of England decided to support the pope in Rome.

What confusion!

BOTH POPES LOSE INFLUENCE

This great schism helped make the people realise that things couldn't keep going like this. Something had to change, or it would ruin the church.

On top of all that, both popes were fond of feasting. Those self-important gentlemen did not care too much about church matters and their members, but lived in luxury and excess. But parties cost money. The papal courts badly needed lots of money. So they made the church members pay taxes to the pope and not just a little bit either.

Both popes had their own palace and court to maintain as well. The pope of Rome often had great festivals and hunting parties. The pope of Avignon also often had feasts and great hunting parties. And they both demanded that the people had to pay! They had to pay so many taxes it was making them poor! This made the people unhappy and disgruntled. They criticised the popes. They said: "Why don't the popes live more modestly? Why can't they be more frugal? We do not feast every day either!"

They were perfectly correct. The popes didn't need to throw money around like that. This selfish attitude caused the popes to lose popularity and influence. The people began to call for change, for reformation.

Do you see that gradually things were ripening for a dramatic change? At God's appointed time, the great Reformation would come, and then tens of thousands of people would be ready to leave the Roman Catholic Church. They were no longer satisfied with dead religion. The Roman Church did try to put an end to that division, but they were unsuccessful. That split is called a *schism*. Schism and split are the same.

A THIRD POPE!

At one stage, many of the cardinals, archbishops, and bishops held an important meeting. They discussed the troubling conditions which were rife in church life. They also discussed the unbearable situation that there were two popes simultaneously, and they decided to end that. At that gathering, they deposed the two existing popes and chose a new one.

But the pope at Rome said:

"I am the real pope, and I am not going away!"

The pope at Avignon said:



Pope Martin V replaced the two popes. Painted by Pisanello. Wikipedia.

"I will not consider leaving my post because I am the true pope, and they may not depose me!"
The newly appointed pope also remained! They all had their friends, supporters and followers, and the result was that now there were *three* popes at the same time!
It had become worse instead of better!
This situation split the church into *three*

groups! The division and confusion increased. Many of the ordinary people from the laity shook their heads or laughed about it.

During the time of this extreme and ridiculous split, of upheaval, hatred, envy, strife and division, there was a man in England who earnestly warned against this disgraceful, terrible wickedness. The name of that man was *John Wycliffe*. But that is for the next chapter.

QUESTIONS

1. How did Philip IV go against the pope's wishes?
2. How was the pope humiliated?
3. What is meant by the 'Babylonian captivity of the pope'?
4. What was the 'Great Schism'?
5. How did the two popes regard each other? What actions did they take against each other?
6. List four effects of the Great Schism on the people.
7. What effect did the luxurious lives of the popes have on the ordinary people?
8. How was a third pope added?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why did the power struggle between Philip IV and Boniface VIII end so differently from that between Gregory VII and Henry IV?
2. Pope Boniface VIII issued several bulls to assert his papal authority. He quoted Jeremiah 1:10 as proof of his right to control. Read verses 1-10 of this chapter and prove that this is a misinterpretation of Scripture.
3. How did the 'Babylonian Captivity of the Pope' significantly weaken papal authority? How did it lead to the Great Schism?