CHRISTIAN HISTORY

1401-1500 C.E.

July 1, 2026

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: Church authorities' corruption decreases trust in the organization and hierarchy of the church—but not in the Bible. On the contrary, new scholarship advances interest and trust in the teachings of Scripture. Reform movements with strong leadership spring up regularly, in spite of violent repression by the Catholic Church. In the East, Constantinople falls and is replaced by Moscow as the leading seat of Orthodox Christianity. All across Europe, things are changing. Modern nation-states are growing powerful. New lands are being discovered. Trade is transporting new ideas as much as new goods.

Key Questions: Will the Roman Catholic Church survive? Will it stamp out "heresy" (any belief or practice it does not condone)? Will the Eastern (Orthodox) Church survive the fall of Constantinople? What will come of the various reform movements? Will the church ever truly get back to the teachings of the Bible?

Key Places: Rome & Avignon, where rival popes compete for power • **Constantinople & Moscow,** fallen and new centers of the Orthodox Church, respectively • **France & England,** fighting the Hundred-Years' War and beginning to pull away from the Catholic Church • **Spain & Portugal,** which get a head start in exploration/colonization of the New World and of Africa, and which spread of the Christian faith there • **Bohemia** (in what is now the Czech Republic in central Europe), site of a major reform movement stressing adherence to the Bible rather than to Catholic teaching

Key People: reformers John Hus, Thomas á Kempis, Hans Böhm, Girolamo Savanarola • Joan of Arc • King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain • Christopher Columbus

Key Dates:
1337-1475 — The Hundred-Years' War between France and England
1415 — John Hus is burned at the stake
1418-1427 — Thomas á Kempis writes *The Imitation of Christ*
1431 — Joan of Arc is executed
1438 — France nationalizes the church
1453 — Constantinople falls to the Muslim Ottoman Turks
1478-1834 — The Spanish Inquisition
1492 — Christopher Columbus discovers the New World
1493 — Pope gives all non-Christian lands to Spain & Portugal
1495-1498 — Leonardo da Vinci paints *The Last Supper*

1) MAJOR SOCIETAL CHANGES AND EVENTS

CONTINUING RISE OF NATION-STATES IN EUROPE — The first modern states in Europe were France, England, and the Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden). Spain came a little later, Germany and Italy much later. Switzerland began as an alliance of communities in the Alps that fought back the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor; they gained independence in 1499.

THE HUNDRED-YEARS' WAR — The English and French fought the Hundred-Years War (1337-1475), which focused around English control of areas of today's France, plus French support for Scotland when England tried to take control of Scotland. Most of Europe was involved in this war in one way or another.

JOAN OF ARC (1412-1431), a young woman from the French village of Domremy, claimed that visions of Saints Catherine and Margaret and of the archangel Michael had ordered her to lead French troops to break the English siege of Orleans and free the Crown Prince. She was so successful that, when he became King Charles VII, he would not let her return home but ordered her to continue leading his troops in battle. She was eventually captured and sold to the English; they sold her to a bishop who wanted to try her as a heretic and witch. At first she recanted her visions, but then claimed to have more visions. She was burned alive in 1431.

THE SPANISH INQUISITION was established under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain in 1478 and continued into the 1800s. It led to some 12,500 people being executed.

THE RENAISSANCE came into full swing, first in Italy and then all over Europe. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) lived during this time. He did work and research in engineering, jewelry, ballistics, and anatomy in addition to his world-famous painting. He developed the concepts for submarines and helicopters and thought through how to channel rivers and build new weapons. In an age that stressed the vastness of human potential, he was a true Renaissance Man, thriving in a number of diverse intellectual and artistic fields.

THE NEW WORLD — Christopher Columbus first set foot on the New World on behalf of Spain on October 12, 1492.

END OF MUSLIM CONTROL IN SPAIN — In 1492, Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella took control of Granada, the last part of Spain controlled by Muslims, ending almost 800 years of Muslim rule of all or parts of Spain.

2) SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

- In 1493, following the discovery of the New World, Pope Alexander VI gave all the non-Christian lands of the world to Spain and Portugal. Spain received (supposed) rights to all lands west of a pole-to-pole line a little west of the Cape Verde islands off the western coast of Africa. Portugal received lands east of that line. By treaty in 1494, that line was shifted westward, granting Portugal a claim to Brazil.
- AFRICA — Ethiopia was already a Christian nation in the 1400s and had been for a long time, though Europe did not have much awareness of it, but had only heard rumors about it. On the west coast of Africa, Portugal established colonies. Some Africans there were evangelized, but Portuguese clergy focused largely on serving the Portuguese settlers in the area, many of whom were there for work related to the thriving slave trade.

3) CONSTANTINOPLE AND MOSCOW

- At the start of the 1400s, the grand and ancient Byzantine Empire had been reduced to just a tiny collection of communities around Constantinople. Turks besieged Constantinople in 1422, but had to break the siege to deal with other enemies. Expecting the Turks to return, the Byzantine authorities appealed to the West for help and, in exchange, agreed at the Council of Florence (1438-1439) to reunite the Eastern and Western churches. The East would submit to the authority of the pope. Nearly all the leadership of the Eastern Orthodox Church, though, including the patriarchs of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, rejected this reunification. The agreement was never put into action, though the Byzantine emperors tried to force its acceptance.
- The Turks returned, attacked Constantinople again, and took control of it on May 29, 1453. After over a thousand years, Constantine's new, Christian "Rome" was Christian no more, but was ruled by Muslims.

• Leadership of the Eastern Orthodox Church moved largely to Moscow, which came to be called the "third Rome". To Orthodox believers, Rome had abandoned orthodoxy (sound teaching), and now Constantinople had fallen to Muslims. *(Today, the Orthodox Church is a family of independent church organizations including the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church in America, etc. Each organization has its own head, and no one person rules over all the churches in the way the pope leads the Roman Catholic Church.)*

4) CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

• IN SPAIN — In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ordered all Jews to either be baptized or leave Spain. Many converted, but more fled.

• IN PORTUGAL — In 1497, King Manuel I (1495-1521) ordered the baptism of all children, including Jewish children, between the ages of 4 and 14. This edict came after an order for all Jews and Muslims to leave his lands by the end of October 1497.

5) POPES, COUNCILS, AND KINGS — THE BATTLE FOR HIGHEST AUTHORITY

• THE REFORMING COUNCILS (1409-1449)

- THE COUNCIL OF PISA (1409) was called to decide what to do about the competing popes of the Great Schism: Benedict XIII in Avignon and Gregory XII in Rome. The council deposed both and appointed Alexander V, but the two deposed popes rejected the decision and stayed on, so that there were now three competing popes.

- THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE (1414-1418) met to address the problem of the three popes. One pope resigned, and the council exiled one and deposed the other. The council appointed Martin V as the new pope, and so displaced the college of cardinals as the proper authority for choosing the next pope. This council also condemned the teachings of John Wycliffe and burned John Hus (see below) at the stake.

- In the 1430s-1440s, an attempt (following on the work of the Council of Constance) was made to make whole-church councils the highest authority in the church, with the pope subject to them. But Pope Eugenius IV resisted that effort, the councils that met often disagreed with each other and divided, and in 1460 Pope Pius II outlawed future church-wide councils.

• FRANCE — In 1438, French King Charles VII (1422-1461) issued the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges, which removed the French church from the authority of the pope and placed it under the authority of the state. French clergy agreed with this ruling, in part because it protected them from having to pay heavy papal taxes and allowed them to appoint their own bishops and abbots.

THE POPES OF THE 1400s

• THE GREAT (WESTERN) SCHISM — Popes competed for power over the church:

from Rome	*from Avignon*	*selected by Council of Pisa*
Boniface IX (1389-1404)	Benedict XIII (1394-1423)	
Innocent VII (1404-1406)		
Gregory XII (1406-1415)		Alexander V (1409-1410)
		John XXIII (1410-1415)

• REUNIFICATION happened under the Council of Constance. Gregory resigned, Benedict was exiled, and John was deposed. Martin V (1417-1431) was elected to replace them all.

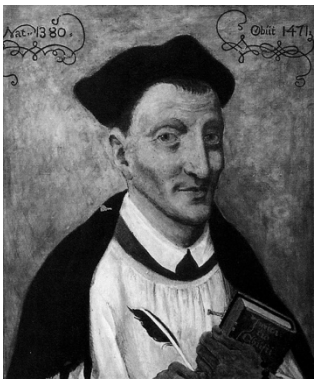
• Eugene IV (1431-1447) threw himself into the spirit of the Renaissance. Beginning with him, the popes worked hard to make Rome a beautiful and powerful center of art and culture. They tried to attract the best artists to Rome and constructed palaces to adorn the city. They tried to make Rome worthy of its place at the capital of Christianity. Their cultural passions outweighed their spiritual passions.

- Nicholas V (1447-1455) tried to take control of all of Italy. He executed those who opposed his power and tried to launch a crusade to recapture Constantinople from the Turks—but no one responded when he called.
- Calixtus III (1455-1458) focused on military efforts to unify Italy. He also indulged in nepotism, heaping honors on family members, especially his grandson Rodrigo, who would become Pope Alexander VI.
- Pius II (1458-1464) was the last Renaissance pope to take his religious duties seriously. He didn't accomplish much, but he at least was not out for power or family advancement.
- Paul II (1464-1471) loved collecting works of art, especially silver and jewelry. He was known for his love of luxury. His concubines were publicly acknowledged in the papal court. He put much effort into restoring the pagan monuments of ancient Rome.
- Sixtus IV (1471-1484) bought the papacy with gifts and privileges for the cardinals. His goal was to enrich his family, especially his 5 nephews; he pursued wars and enacted conspiracies for this purpose. He built the Sistine Chapel, which is named after him.
- Innocent VIII (1484-1492) vowed not to give more than one family member a high office if he became pope—but once elected pope, he declared that because papal power was supreme, he was not bound by his oath. He acknowledged several of his illegitimate children. For shameless personal income he sold indulgences. In 1484, he ordered that witches be exterminated from Christian lands; hundreds of innocent women were executed.
- Alexander VI (1492-1503) brought papal corruption to its worst point. He bought the papacy, took the wives of others in his court as his own concubines, and acknowledged the children he had by them. He had many people killed and launched several wars. He died suddenly, either from a sudden disease or (some thought) from accidentally taking a poison he had prepared for someone else.

6) KEY REFORMERS

- JOHN HUS (ca. 1373-1415) was influenced by, and preached, the ideas of John Wycliffe. He preached and also taught at the University of Prague. After some conflicts with the pope, he concluded that any pope who does not obey the Bible is himself not to be obeyed. When Pope John XXIII proclaimed a crusade against Naples, hoping to take it for himself, and financed the crusade through the sale of indulgences, Hus (who had bought an indulgence himself 20 years earlier, but later came to believe they were wrong) protested that God alone can forgive sins, and it was wrong for the pope to be fighting other Christians solely for his own ambition. He was condemned at the Council of Constance (1415). He refused to recant and was burned at the stake by order of the council.
  - Hus's ideas persisted. One group, the Taborites, rejected everything the Catholic Church did and taught that was not found in Scripture. Another group, the Utraquists, said whatever the Bible forbade should be eliminated from church life, and everyone should receive both the bread and the wine in the Mass. The Moravian Church, which is still around today, came from the United Brethren (also called the Bohemian Brethren), who followed Hus's teachings and formed around 1450. This group became one of the most mission-oriented church movements ever.
  - Bohemian resistance began to center around 4 beliefs:
    1 - God's Word was to be preached freely throughout the kingdom.
    2 - Communion would be given as both bread and cup to all church members.
    3 - The clergy must give up their wealth and live in poverty.
    4 - Gross, public sin, especially simony, was to be punished.

- The popes called crusades against the Bohemians because of these teachings several times, from around 1420 until a little after 1431; the crusaders were defeated every time. The Bohemians primary weapon was peasants' carts armed with blades to make them into war chariots.
- The Catholics finally negotiated with the Bohemians, and those who remained in the Catholic Church were allowed to share both elements of the Lord's Supper and follow some other of their beliefs. Others left the Catholic Church and formed the Union of Brethren, which grew in Bohemia and Moravia.



• THOMAS A KEMPIS (1380-1471) — His actual name was Thomas Hemerken of Kempen. He was a part of a mystically-oriented group called The Brethren of the Common Life. His famous book, *The Imitation of Christ*, renounces the world and calls for love of Christ and service for him in humble, practical ways.

• HANS BOHM of Nicklashausen (in Wurzburg, Germany) was a young shepherd who began to preach among the pilgrims who came to see an image of the Virgin Mary in 1476. Times were hard, crops had failed, and the local bishop oppressed the poor with ever-increasing taxes. Böhm at first preached repentance, but then, seeing the plight of the people, preached against the greed and corruption of the clergy. He gained some 50,000 followers and planned to lead them in refusing to pay taxes and tithes and in marching to claim their rights. But just before the march, the bishop's soldiers arrested him and chased the crowd off with artillery shots. People still came, until the archbishop ordered the local village church destroyed. Then they had no leader and no headquarters to rally at, and the movement ended…but its sentiment lived on.

• GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA (1452-1498) became a Dominican monk in 1474 and was assigned to preach in Florence in 1490. He became very popular for teaching from Scripture and preaching about the true Christian life in contrast to indulgence in luxury. He and the friars under him became known for holiness and godly service. He wanted to reform the state and the church in Florence. He preached against the pope's sins. After his reforms (especially against luxurious living) began to make it difficult for the wealthy merchants in Florence to conduct trade, causing them to lose money, Savonarola was tried, found guilty of some vague heresy, and hanged.

7) THE PURSUIT OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

• In 1400, a raid was carried out in Strasbourg, Germany, on a group of Christians who were called the Cornerers for their practice of meeting in secret in old corners and vaults in the city. They were arrested, tortured, and mutilated. "The persecutors extorted from these victims the confession that their sole authority was not the church but the New Testament, which should be studied in the language of the country. They rejected all adoration of Mary and of the saints and all veneration of pictures or crucifixes; they disavowed the authority of the consecrations by priests and bishops along with the clergy's claim to the keys of salvation and heaven… They called the baptism of children useless, since there could not yet be any belief in these little ones. Only the intercession of the commander of the knights of Saint John, who was favorable to them, and of the city clerk Johann von Blunstein, saved

the imprisoned ones from the funeral pile. They were banned from the city 'for eternal years' and disappeared in the loneliness of the valleys of the Vosges and Jura Mountains." *Hans Grimm, Tradition and History of the Early Churches of Christ in Central Europe, pages 30-31*

- In 1408, a provincial council at Oxford decreed that no one could, on their own authority, translate any text of Scripture into English or any other language without the approval of church authorities.
- The printing press was invented in 1440 and delivered its first major publication, the Gutenberg Bible, in 1452-1455.
- As the followers of Hus increased in Bohemia, Dominican inquisitors searched out anyone disagreeing with Catholic doctrine and practice. Believers who were trying to follow only the New Testament reached out to Hus's followers, trying to build bridges of fellowship between their groups. Some progress was made, which strengthened the believers for the reform movements of the 1500s. At the same time, the inquisitors persecuted, arrested, tried, and sometimes executed those following the New Testament alone, just as they did with Hus's followers and other breakaway groups.
- The driving question of scholarship at this time was the question of authority: Reason cannot explain God and the depths of his Being, so to understand the things of God we must rely on some other authority. But which one? The pope? The great church councils? The Bible? Finding their church leaders untrustworthy, believers more and more sought an authoritative word from the Bible.
- The theologians of the late Middle Ages were known for making careful observations about theology, with great subtlety and detail—to the point that they ended up distancing themselves from the common person by making theological truths difficult to understand. Yet the gospel, in its essence, was quite simple—so across Western Christianity a push grew to return to the simplicity of the gospel message.
- Textual criticism arose with the invention and use of the printing press. Now that writings could be mass produced without copyists adding new errors to them, scholars began studying the history of the transmission of New Testament and classical documents to find the most accurate copies possible and to eliminate errors. As attempts were made to clean up the biblical manuscripts, an awareness arose that contemporary Christianity was not what it had been in the church's earliest years, and many began to desire to return to the biblical text to determine how the church should be.