

FAMOUS MEN OF THE RENAISSANCE

The Middle Ages were not the "Dark Ages." Yet there had been substantial changes in Europe from 500 to 1300 AD. Rome and her Empire fell. The Germanic tribes moved into the old Roman provinces and established feudal kingdoms. Many of the Roman cities declined in population or were abandoned. Gradually, much of the literature and learning of the classical world was lost and forgotten.

Around 1300, in the towns of northern Italy especially, a group of men began to devote themselves to the recovery and revival of the classical world. Petrarch and his friends were interested above all in recovering the polished, ornate, classical Latin of their hero and model, Cicero. Gradually, the interest in the classical world expanded to include the other ancient languages of Greek and Hebrew. The writers, academics, and artists who shared these interests were called humanists. The name of their party comes from the style of education that they favored — what they called the *studia humanitatis*, or humane studies. They wanted to reform the university program which focused almost exclusively on logic and recognized only a narrow range of authorities, above all, Aristotle. The humanists stressed the importance of rhetoric, the art of speaking and writing persuasively. "Aristotle may define the good, but Plato motivates one to **be** good." In place of Aristotle, the master of logic, they wished to substitute Plato and Cicero, the masters of rhetoric.

The following fourteen individuals are representative of the movement called the Renaissance.

Chapter 1

Petrarch 1304-1374



Petrarch was born at the end of the Middle Ages, in 1304, in the northern Italian city of Florence. His father was a minor government official. Petrarch's time in Florence was short, however. When he was only four, his father wound up on the losing side of a political quarrel and the family was forced to leave Florence. The family settled in northern Italy where Petrarch's father found work in the service of the Pope as a secretary and notary.

When Petrarch was six, the family was visited by Dante Alighieri, another exile from Florence who had been a friend and ally of Petrarch's father. While in exile Dante wrote one of the most important works of late medieval literature, *The Divine Comedy*. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante described hell, purgatory, and heaven. As he described each place, Dante passed judgement on both his friends and acquaintances from Florence as well as historical figures from Greece and Rome. He placed each of them in hell, purgatory, or heaven and described their punishment or their reward.

Petrarch grew to admire Dante as he grew older. His father's friend had a strong influence on him, both as a writer and as a moralist. Petrarch shared Dante's admiration for important figures from Greek and Roman history. At an early age, it became clear to Petrarch's parents that their son would have great skill as a writer.

When Petrarch was about 10, political unrest in Rome forced the Pope to move to southern France. Petrarch's father moved his family to France, hoping to continue in the service of the Pope, since he was still forbidden to return to Florence.

FAMOUS MEN OF THE REFORMATION

The Reformation of the sixteenth century has been called the Great Christian Revolution. The knowledge of Greek and Hebrew achieved by the scholars of the Renaissance caused men of learning to focus their attention more closely on the text of the Bible. One of the fruits of the Renaissance was that the Scriptures began to be studied much more diligently. The contrast between the plain teaching of Scripture and the practices of the Roman church troubled many a scholar. The goal of Wyclif, Hus, and Luther (and their colleagues and successors) was to reform the church by bringing it back into conformity with the Bible. Although they achieved some measure of success locally and regionally, they were disappointed that the church as a whole became splintered and was no longer unified.

Among the figures from this turbulent time, there is much to admire, and much to lament. There are examples of tremendous courage and examples of treachery, cowardice, and betrayal. The famous men of the Reformation teach us that matters of theology are critically important. Their lives also show us that secular government more often gets it wrong than right when it meddles in the affairs of the church.

As Martin Luther so eloquently expressed it in his hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*:

That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours, through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.

chapter 21

Thomas Miintzer 1488-1525

Thomas Muntzer was born in 1488, in the village of Stolberg in the Harz Mountains. He entered the University of Leipzig in 1506, at the age of 18. In 1512, he completed a Master of Arts degree at the University of Frankfurt. He was ordained as a priest, and from 1514-1517 he served as confessor at a nunnery in the town of Frohse. He attended lectures at the University of Wittenberg for a year, 1517-18. He then took a position as confessor in a **Bernardine** convent where the obligations to hear confessions took little of his time. He was thus able to devote himself to continued studies of the church fathers and the Scriptures.

On Martin Luther's recommendation, Muntzer was appointed town preacher in the prosperous central **German** town of Zwickau in 1520. In Zwickau, Muntzer began attacking the rich and powerful. He denounced local chapter of the Franciscans for their wealth and opulent lifestyle. He also denounced the local nobility for their exploitation of the peasants. In April of 1521, the town council of Zwickau expelled Muntzer because of his radical views.

Muntzer went to Bohemia (the modern-day Czech Republic) and stayed for some months in Prague. Because of the intense interest in everyone associated with Luther, he was invited to preach in Jan Hus' old church, the Bethlehem Chapel. In November of 1521, he composed a manifesto which was printed and posted on church doors in Prague. In the Prague Manifesto, Muntzer denounced the nobility, the clergy, and the learned for their perversion and suppression of the gospel. He called upon the common people to take control of the church, elect their own pastors and proclaim the true gospel.