

Essential Church History

5

The Dark Ages

The period of history we are about to look at in this study has been termed “The Dark Ages.” Although we are looking at it in the context of Church history, it is very important to distinguish between the true Church and what was generally called “the Church” during this period.

By its very nature, the true Church is made up of “the called out” ones* — those who, by faith in the work of Christ on the Cross, have “qualified...to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” and have been “rescued...from the dominion of darkness” and “brought ...into the kingdom of the Son he loves...” (**Colossians 1:12-13**).

We call this period “The Dark Ages” because, at first glance, it appears as if the light of the Gospel had gone out. The sun of God’s glory had set upon his Church (or so it seemed), leaving only a shadowy facsimile of the vibrant Church that had been birthed on the day of Pentecost.

However, even in the midst of the spiritual darkness into which the Church had plunged, there shone individual “lights” – genuine believers who refused to bow to the error, heresy and worldly ambition of the visible “Church.” Even during the Dark Ages, there were men and women whose faith was in Christ’s work on the Cross; men and women whose greatest desire was to know God and to serve him. And so, in the heart of darkness, the light of the truth of the Gospel still shone, here and there, as a testimony of the Church’s heritage.

The Incredible Spread of the Gospel

The Living Church

The Seeds of Decline

Leaven, Leaders and the

▶ **The Dark Ages** ◀

The New Dawn

Truth on the March

Waves of Awakenings

To the Ends of the Earth

The Church of the 21st Century

* The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, which comes from the two root words, *ek* (“to call”) and *klaō* (“out”). By its very nature, therefore, the Church is defined by God’s action – a “calling out” from the world – rather than man’s organization. During the Dark Ages, man shaped the Church into something very different from that which God had originally intended.

Read Isaiah 37:31-32

As with Israel of old, God always had his witness. Even in the Dark Ages, he always had his remnant. And so, in this lesson, we will track not only the Church's downward path into darkness, but also the scattered lights of those who remained faithful to the Gospel.

The East and West Divide

In AD 330, Constantine moved his imperial residence from Rome to the ancient city of Byzantium, and renamed the city Constantinople – the “City of Constantine.” This move shifted the center of gravity from the West to the East, in an effort to shore up the Empire's declining power – and, in effect, created a New Rome. But this move also proved to have great impact upon the Church.

As the political importance of the Old Rome declined, the churches of the Empire began to look to the bishop of Constantinople for their spiritual leadership. The effect of this shift came to a climax in AD 381 when Theodosius, the new emperor, wanting to bring order into his Christian Church, called a general council at Constantinople. However, only bishops from the eastern part of the empire were invited. The bishop of Rome did not even have a representative. As well as confirming and renewing the Nicene Creed, the council asserted:

“The bishop of Constantinople shall take precedence immediately after the bishop of Rome, because his city (Constantinople) is the New Rome.”¹

The convening of the Council of Constantinople was a political move designed to bolster the episcopal power in the East and to counterbalance the growing episcopal power of Rome in the West. Bruce Shelley describes the reaction of Rome:

“At a synod in Rome the next year, bishops from the West argued: ‘The Holy Roman Church takes precedence over the other churches, not on the ground of any synodal decisions, but because it was given the primacy by the words of our Lord and Redeemer in the gospel, when he said: ‘Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.’ Thus, we have the first mention of the ‘primacy of the Roman Church.’”²

The ecclesiastical chasm between the Greek East and the Latin West would eventually drive a wedge down the center of Christianity and create two distinct Churches – the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Growth of Monasticism

The tendency toward asceticism (a philosophy of austere self-denial) was already manifesting itself even in the days of Paul, who condemned it strongly.

Read Colossians 2:20-23**Read 1 Timothy 4:1-3**

From this early tendency toward asceticism grew the monastic system, which became so important during the Dark Ages. As we saw in the last lesson, it was

influenced very much by Gnosticism, but was also by a reaction to the worldliness of the Church. Bruce Shelley describes the development of early monasticism:

“Whatever Constantine’s motives for adopting the Christian faith, the result was a decline in Christian commitment. The stalwart believers whom Diocletian killed were replaced by a mixed multitude of half-converted pagans. Once Christians had laid down their lives for the truth; now they slaughtered each other to secure the prizes of the church. Gregory of Nazianzus complained: ‘The chief seat is gained by evil doing, not by virtue; and the sees* belong, not to the more worthy, but to the more powerful.’

“The hermit often fled, then, not so much from the world as from the world in the church. His protest against a corrupt institution, however, led him into the dangers of a pronounced individualism...Temptations of the outer world were replaced by temptations of the inner world: pride, rivalry, and eccentricity. Many of the monks in Egypt and in Syria went to extremes in enduring hardships. Some ate nothing but grass, while others lived in trees. Still others refused to wash. The reputations of some hermits attracted vast crowds of people from the cities...”³

But soon the monastic movement came into full force, as groups of hermits banded together in ascetic communities – called monasteries – supporting one another in fellowship, labor and a common vision. Even though these monasteries were an extreme attempt to address the blatant error of worldliness within the Church, they did make a real contribution in their own day – one that still affects modern civilization. The various orders of monasteries did a great work in developing better methods of agriculture and superior techniques of farming. They improved seeds and breeds of livestock. They cared for the sick and needy and the poor, and provided education to those nearby who had a desire to learn. And very importantly, they copied precious manuscripts which have been preserved to this day.

As you study the history of each monastic order, however, you quickly discover a general pattern. There was initially a time of strict observance of the monastic rules, during the lifetime of the order’s founder, followed by a time when the first enthusiasm waned and the order declined into spiritual decadence. In time, with the growth of power and of wealth, each order fell far from their founding ideals.

Here are some of the more important monastic orders that arose from the fifth century onwards:

The Benedictine Order

Benedict of Nursia lived as a hermit in a cave in the wild country south of Rome, adopting the most extreme form of asceticism. He spent three years there in severe self-denial and in the study of the Scriptures. The monks of a nearby monastery invited him to be their abbot, but after a while they could not take Benedict’s strict discipline and he narrowly escaped death when they tried to poison him. Again he

* The office of the bishop is called a “see,” which comes from the Latin word *sedes*, meaning “seat” or “throne.” Thus even today the Roman Catholic Church speaks of the throne and court of the Pope as the “Holy See.”

sought solitude in a cave, but was driven from the region by jealous opposition. In AD 529, at Mount Cassino in Italy, he founded what became the most famous monastery in Europe. Here he wrote his famous Rule. Based on two activities – prayer and work – this Rule became the foundation of the Benedictine Order and gradually superseded all other Western monastic rules. The order became immensely popular and very rich, but with that lost the purity for which it was founded.

The Cluniac Movement

Because the Benedictine Order had lost its zeal and become full of corruption, a man called Bernon started the Cluniac Movement in AD 910 at Cluny, in France. It stood for three main principles:

- No secular interference in the Church
- Abbots and bishops to be elected by the monks
- Clerical celibacy

Because of its exacting discipline, the influence of Cluny was widespread.

The Cistercian Order

This monastic order was founded for the purpose of keeping the original Benedictine rules in their purity. The monks aimed at simple living. In AD 1115, the famous monastery of Clairvaux was founded by Bernard. His influence was significant and the order eventually expanded to 700 monastic houses. One of the several hymns he wrote is the lovely “Jesu, the Very Thought of Thee.”

The Orders of the Knights

Three monastic orders, all composed of soldier-monks, were founded in Palestine, their object being the protection of pilgrims. Their purpose soon changed, however, to the very militant one of fighting the Muslim Saracens. These military orders were:

- The Knights of St John of Jerusalem (founded in AD 1048)
- The Knights Templars (founded in AD 1119)
- The Teutonic Knights (founded in AD 1121)

All of them became very wealthy and their influence spread to many places.

The Franciscan Order

Francis of Assisi, in Italy, founded the Franciscan Order with the aim of imitating the Lord in a life of poverty. In time, the Franciscans gained a dominant position in the Church, which caused much jealousy. Eventually the poverty ideals of Francis were set aside and the order fell, as others had, to the temptation of wealth and worldliness.

The Dominican Order

Dominic, a Spanish nobleman, founded the order that bears his name in AD 1215. Like Francis of Assisi, he insisted on a simple life. It was to the Dominicans that the Pope later committed the responsibility of the Inquisition, which we will study in the next lesson.

The Jesuit Order

The Jesuits, or the Society of Jesus, was one of the latest Roman Catholic religious orders. It was founded by Ignatius of Loyola in AD 1534 with the aim of defending Roman Catholicism against the Reformation.

The Friars

The cloistered monks that populated the monasteries of Christendom were not the only product of monasticism. A close relation to the monk, called the “friar,” emerged in the twelve century. As Earle Cairns explains:

“The friars represented still another type of twelfth century reforming monasticism. They took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as did the monks; but instead of living in monastic communities to pray and labor apart from the secular world, they went among the people of the cities to help them and to preach to them in the vernacular.* The monasteries had property, and the monks supported themselves by work; but the friars were supported by the alms and gifts that people gave them...The friars strengthened the people of the parishes by their unselfish service. Their good deeds and preaching in the vernacular were practical manifestations of the church that the people readily understood. In fact, preaching was restored to its proper place in the Roman church by the friars. Directly responsible to the pope, they tended to strengthen the powers of the papacy over local bishops and lay rulers.”⁴

Unlike the word “monk,” which derives ultimately from the Greek word *monos*, meaning “alone,” the name “friar” comes from the Latin word *frater*, meaning “brother,” showing the value the friars placed on their fraternity with fellow Christians in the real world. They played a significant role in shaping the Church as it began to emerge from the Dark Ages.

Two Significant Men

The late fourth and early fifth centuries saw the rise of two men who significantly impacted Church history.

Jerome

Born around AD 340, Jerome became in his generation the leading biblical scholar in the Western Church and pioneered monastic scholarship. He withdrew to an ascetic life in the Syrian desert where he mastered Hebrew. In AD 382, he acted as secretary and teacher to the Roman bishop, Damasus. Jerome still thought of Rome as resembling Babylon and, in time, hostility towards the monks there caused him to withdraw to a monastery in Bethlehem.

There, commissioned by the bishop of Rome, he translated the Old and New Testaments into Latin. His translation, known as the *Vulgate*, eventually became the authorized Latin version of the Bible of the Western Church.

* The vernacular means the common language of the people.

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine was born in AD 354, and was a contemporary of Jerome. For many years, he lived a licentious life. He wrestled with various philosophies and even toyed with the idea of becoming a Christian, but finally, according to his own account, while contemplating his options, he heard a voice of a small child outside his house repeatedly saying, “Take up and read.” Interpreting this to mean the Scriptures, he decided to open the Bible and read the first passage he happened to see, which was **Romans 13:13-14**: “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” He immediately converted to Christ and was baptized.

We know more about Augustine than any other figure in the ancient Church. His heart and life are revealed in his writings such as *Confessions* (AD 397-401) and *Retractions* (AD 426-427). He was fifty-six years old when Rome was plundered by the barbarian Alaric and his Visigoths,* and this event had a dramatic effect upon him, as it had upon the entire Christian world in the West, who couldn’t fathom why God would allow Christian Rome to suffer such a disgrace. Many pagans also blamed the Christians for the fall of Rome, claiming that the traditional gods of Rome were angry with the people for abandoning their worship in favor of the Christian religion – an accusation against which Christians did not have a reasonable defence. In response to this accusation, Augustine penned his greatest work, *The City of God*, which contrasted the city of the world (natural Rome) with the city of God (the heavenly Jerusalem).

The sack of Rome shaped much of Augustine’s later thinking. He was the first to propose the concept that the true Church was invisible and distinct from the visible Church, which incorporated much that was weak, worldly, and in error. The visible Church, in Augustine’s view, was the intermingling of these two cities – the natural (worldly) and the heavenly (spiritual) – likening it to Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares (**Matthew 13:24-30**). The true Church, he said, consists of the elect throughout all ages, while the Church as a visible institution has within it both those whose first love is God and those whose first love is self.

Through his writings, Augustine also battled errors and heresies within the Church, of which three were primary in his day:

- **Manichaeism** – the dualistic mixture of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Gnosticism. Augustine himself had once been a Manichaean, prior to his conversion to Christianity.
- **Pelagianism** – this was a growing heresy, started by a British monk, Pelagius, who denied the concept of original sin,* and emphasized free will

* Ironically, the Visigoths were mostly Christian, although of the heretical Arian sect. Being a Christian, Alaric ordered his army not to molest women, destroy churches, or steal Christian objects. On the whole his orders were obeyed, and Rome was not totally destroyed. But Rome, unconquered for 800 years, had only recently been conquered by the Christian faith, and so the sack of Rome by the Visigoths shocked the Christian world.

as the decisive element in human redemption and perfectibility. “Pelagius denied the existence of original sin and...argued that the corruption of the human race is not inborn, but is due to bad example and habit, and that the natural faculties of humanity were not adversely affected by Adam’s fall. Human beings can lead lives of righteousness and thereby merit heaven by their own efforts.”⁵

- **Donatism** – this sect held that the sacraments were only valid based on the morality of the one administering them. They condemned all church leaders who were *traditors* – those guilty of handing over their copies of the Scriptures to their persecutors, during the persecution of Diocletian.

The action of God’s grace was important not only in Augustine’s experience but also in his theology. His writings profoundly affected both the Roman Catholic Church, and also the nascent Protestant movement which later sprung from its ranks. It was through studying Augustine’s works that Luther, for example, came to see that salvation depends on God’s grace alone – that men are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and not by their own good works. Augustine’s writings also had a strong influence on Calvin, forming the basis for his doctrine of predestination.

The Fall of the Roman Empire

The fifth century forever stands out in history as the time of the fall of the Roman Empire. The Empire had been weakened by its love of luxury and other ills. For some time, the barbarians of the north and northeast had been pushing over the frontiers. Then, in AD 410, Alaric and his Visigoth army laid seige to Rome itself. The starving citizens of Rome finally threw open the gates of the city to the invaders, ending eight centuries of Roman invincibility.

The news of the sacking of Rome swept around the known world. Jerome, far away in his monastery at Bethlehem, wept: “The city which has taken the whole world is itself taken!”⁶ Although, when Alaric died a year later, his successor nominally put himself under Honorius, the emperor of the western Empire, the power of the emperors was now but a shadow of what it had once been. In all but name, the Roman Empire was no more.

“The Roman Empire of the West was now under barbarian dominion and broken up into various States...It was a difficult time for Christianity, and although the barbarians gradually became Catholic Christians...these accessions were by no means all gain to the Church. The spiritual tone was sadly lowered and many barbarian errors and superstitions found entry.”⁷

A M Renwick and A M Harman go on to say:

“There is not space to follow in detail the devastating conquests of the barbarians, and to tell how Rome, ‘the Empress of the World,’ finally fell; how Burgundians, Suevi, Vandals, and Alans pushed west, overrunning Gaul in

* Original sin, a term actually coined by Tertullian, means the universality of the sin nature, which is inherited from Adam by every individual in the human race. This is based on, among other scriptures, [Romans 5:12](#).

408; how Alaric, the West Goth, captured Rome in 410; how the Vandals, crossing over from Spain, ravaged the fertile province of Africa in 429; how Attila and his hordes of Huns were beaten at Chalons-sur-Marne in 451 by the army of Rome and the nations of Gaul; how Genseric and his Vandals crossed from Africa to Italy in 455 and plundered Rome; and how, at last, the ‘eternal city’ which had proudly ruled the nations for twelve centuries, fell before Odoacer, the Herulean, in 476, thus marking the end of an epoch.”⁸

With the fall of the Roman Empire, one might expect the power and influence of the bishop of Rome would also decline. The opposite, however, was true.

The Ascendancy of the Papacy

From the time of the third century, we see a slow movement toward the ascendancy of the bishop of Rome as the prime bishop of Christianity. Today, the bishop of Rome is known as the Pope. But as Bruce Shelly points out:

“The term ‘pope’ itself is not crucial in the emergence of the doctrine of papal primacy. The title ‘papa’ originally expressed the fatherly care of any and every bishop of his flock. It only began to be reserved for the bishop of Rome in the sixth century, long after the claim of primacy.”⁹

In theory, all city-bishops were considered equal (as demonstrated in the Church councils called from time to time), but in practice, some city-bishops were more prominent than others because of the importance of their cities. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325, for example, recognized three cities as pre-eminent in their regions – Alexandria, Antioch and Rome. Constantinople was added in AD 381, when the Church council meeting in that city declared it to be second only to Rome. Although Rome was even now vying for primacy, Rome’s hegemony was not accepted by the Eastern side of the Empire.

In order to see the steady progression toward Roman dominance, let’s follow the succession of Roman bishops from the mid-fourth century onwards.

Damasus

As bishop of Rome from AD 366-384, Damasus was the first to put argue that Rome’s claim to primacy was not based on the decisions of Church councils but upon the words of Jesus in **Matthew 16:18**. Damasus pointed to Peter’s founding of the Roman church* with a direct line of apostolic succession that could be traced down to Damasus’ own ordination as the current bishop of Rome. Damasus was also the first to refer consistently to the church of Rome as the “apostolic see” and to address other city-bishops as “sons” rather than as “brothers.” Damasus said:

“Although the East sent the apostles, yet because of the merit of their martyrdom, Rome has acquired a superior right to claim them as citizens.”¹⁰

* Although a good case can be presented for Peter’s ministry, and eventual martyrdom, in Rome, it is highly dubious that the church of Rome itself was ever established by Peter.

Damasus tireless work to promote the supremacy of the Roman See laid a solid foundation for his successors to build upon this claim.

Siricius

Bishop of Rome from AD 384-399, Siricius “was the first to use the ‘decretal’, a letter of instruction modelled on the Emperor’s decree sent to provincial governors. In using this kind of letter the pope was claiming the same kind of binding authority for himself in the church as the Emperor had in secular affairs.”¹¹

Innocent I

Siricius’ immediate successor was Anastasius I (AD 399-401). After him, Innocent held the position of bishop of Rome from AD 401-417. It was during his rule that Rome was sacked by the Visigoths.

Innocent I continued to assert the supremacy of the Roman See over both the Western and Eastern halves of the Empire. He claimed universal authority for the bishop of Rome by declaring that nothing done in the provinces could be considered authorized until it had come to his knowledge, and that the pope’s decisions affected “all the churches of the world.”¹²

The successors of Innocent – Zosimus, Boniface I, Celestine I and Sixtus III – all built upon their predecessor’s efforts to secure what they viewed as Rome’s rightful place as the “apostles’ see,” based on their claim of succession to Peter’s primacy.

Leo the Great

Leo was the bishop of Rome from AD 440-461. He has been described as “the greatest administrator of the ancient church, who established the primacy of the bishop of Rome over other bishops”¹³ by successfully securing an imperial edict from Emperor Valentinian III in AD 445. He was quick to put this edict into practice in the Western Empire.

“Leo was equally assertive in the East, although he did not always receive the same imperial, or even episcopal, support. His greatest triumph there was the Council of Chalcedon in 451, over which his own legates presided. The council was summoned to condemn the teachings of the Byzantine monk Eutyches, whose views had been endorsed by the ‘Robber Council’ held at Ephesus in 449. Eutyches embraced a form of Monophysitism, the doctrine that Christ has only one (divine) nature. Leo’s views on the relationship between Christ’s divine and human natures were formulated in his *Tome* (449) – his doctrinal letter to the patriarch of Constantinople – that was endorsed by the Council of Chalcedon with the famous words ‘Peter has spoken through Leo.’”¹⁴

As the Roman Empire began to unravel under successive barbarian invasions, Leo became a key player in the negotiations that safeguarded what was left of the Empire. In AD 451, Leo was commissoined by Emperor Valentinian to meet with Attila the Hun, whose army was advancing toward Rome. “The Roman Emperor was doing nothing to preserve the ancient capital of the empire and its surrounding territories from devastation. So Peter’s deputy, now acting in the name of the emperor,

sat facing Attila alone...[Attila]...granted the pope's plea that the capital should be spared. He even promised to withdraw from Italy, and he kept his word. The Bishop of Rome had assumed a new role and staked a fresh claim on the future."¹⁵

Three years later, Leo faced another test of diplomacy when the Vandals invaded and occupied Rome. Bruce Shelly describes the event:

“At the end of March 455, Gaiseric, King of the Vandals, set sail with a hundred ships, manned by Carthaginian sailors. His army landed north of the Tiber, creating panic in Rome. Rumors swirled about that Gaiseric intended to burn the city. Many tried to flee. The imperial troops mutinied. While attempting to escape, the Emperor Maximus was slain by one of his own bodyguards. His body was dragged through the streets, torn to pieces, and thrown in the river. No general took over the defense; the troops were disorganized. On 2 June 455 the Vandals entered Rome, meeting no resistance.”¹⁶

Leo and a contingent of priests met the Vandal king, Genseric, at the city gate. “When they faced each other, Leo begged for mercy. He urged the king to restrain his troops; he implored him not to burn the city. He offered money. Geiseric nodded silently. Then, spurring his horse away, he called out to the pope: ‘Fourteen days’ looting!’ The Vandals plundered the city systematically...For fourteen days the Vandals occupied the city. Then the ships were loaded and the expeditionary force withdrew to Carthage. After the Vandals were gone, the Romans held a solemn service of thanksgiving. Rome had not been burned down, massacre had been avoided, and only a few Christian churches had been plundered.”¹⁷

From this point forward, Leo assumed the old heathen title, *Pontifex Maximus* – the high priest of the Roman Empire – successfully fusing papal primacy with Roman law. And to the rest of the Christian world, the bishop of Rome was known as *papa* – the pope.

Gelasius I

As pope from AD 492-496, Gelasius did much to advance papal power. He advocated a “two swords” theory of secular authority and church authority, arguing that the latter was superior. In fact, he “insisted that the Emperor must guard the church but submit himself to the guidance of the pope, who was himself guided by God and St Peter. It followed that clergy should not be judged in secular courts and that the pope himself could not be judged by any man.”¹⁸ In Gelasius’ own words:

“Nobody at any time and for whatever human pretext may haughtily set himself above the office of the pope who by Christ’s order was set above all and everyone and whom the universal church has always recognized as its head.”¹⁹

Still, practice was often well behind theory. “For more than half a century after Gelasius the real position of the popes was very much less than their exalted claims...The papacy remained subservient to Constantinople long after...the failure of Roman rule in Italy. Until 741 papal elections had to be confirmed by Constantinople, or the imperial exarch of Ravenna.”²⁰

Gregory the Great

In AD 590, Gregory ascended the papal throne. “Gregory’s period as pope, by its extension of the pope’s authority, marks the transition from the ancient world of imperial Rome to medieval Christendom united by the Roman Catholic church.”²¹

By this time, the wealth of the Roman church, in terms of land and money, was multiplying, and with it, the political influence of the pope was growing. But not all was well in the Church. The tension between West and East, which had been steadily growing since at least the fourth century, was now coming to a head.

“The claim to universal supremacy in the Church, first made by Leo I, was renewed by Gregory on the same grounds. When in 588 John, the Patriarch of Constantinople, assumed the title of ‘Universal Bishop’, Gregory protested strongly to the emperor and to the patriarch himself that it was ‘proud, profane, wicked, blasphemous’, and suggested that the patriarch was ‘the fore-runner of Anti-Christ.’”²²

In 1054, the Eastern and Western sections of the Church officially divided, when the bishop of Rome formally excommunicated the bishop of Constantinople. But this was more of a rubber-stamp divorce following a prolonged separation that had been slowly poisoned by minor doctrinal differences, the constant jostling for hegemony, and the further souring of relations due to the Crusades.

The Holy Roman Empire

As Christianity spread throughout Europe, the church of Rome constantly sought new political alliances that would enhance its ecclesiastical authority. In the eighth century, the Roman See made an alliance with the Frankish rulers of western Europe, an alliance that would have a far-reaching impact on the Church.

“The pope found the support of the powerful Frankish kings, Pepin and Charlemagne, essential because of Lombard hostility and the presence of enemies even in the city of Rome itself....Pepin was ostentatiously crowned by the papal legate in 752. The pope received from Pepin the lands taken from the exarchate of Ravenna, and known thereafter as ‘the patrimony of St Peter’. This was the beginning of the ‘temporal sovereignty’ of the popes which was to embroil them in many quarrels. Charlemagne (724-814) not only saved the pontiff from the Lombards, who were enemies of the Roman See, but in 799 he delivered him from the wrath of the Roman populace who had accused the pope of glaring faults.”²³

On Christmas Day, in AD 800, the pope crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the West. Although this move surprised many, it had without a doubt been carefully planned beforehand. By forming an empire called both “holy” and “Roman,” a message was being proclaimed that there is only “one State and one Church with emperor and pope working hand-in-hand for the glory of God and the welfare of men.”²⁴

For the Roman See, this maneuver was leveraged in order to reinforce the bishop of Rome's primacy as the successor of Peter, the one to whom, according to Rome, Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom (**Matthew 16:19**).* "Henceforth the pontiff is found intervening in all kinds of affairs through the whole of Christian Europe. With a quiet assurance he assumed that he must be obeyed on the ground of his being the successor of St Peter."²⁵

The Rise of Islam

During the first six centuries, the Church was shaped, for better or worse, by its attempts to combat two historic enemies:

- **The 1st-4th centuries** – The rise of errors and heresies
- **The 5th-6th centuries** – The influx of pagans

But now the Church had to face a new kind of enemy, this time from outside the bounds of the old Roman Empire.

- **The 7th-15th centuries** – The rise of Islam

It is not the purpose of this lesson to study the beliefs of Islam itself, but rather to examine the historical impact that Islam's expansion had on the Church.

The *History of Christianity* explains:

"At the very time when Gregory the Great was turning away from the eastern Mediterranean and seeking to extend papal influence throughout the West, there began in Arabia the career of a remarkable religious leader, Mu-hammad of Mecca (about 570-632). His teachings had an almost immediate impact. The movement of Islam was born and spread with dramatic speed outside Arabia after the prophet's death. The course of medieval history in both the Orthodox East and the Catholic West was drastically affected. The rise of Islam directly influenced the political and economic development of the two halves of Christendom. Islam became medieval Christianity's greatest opponent. By the tenth century the Islamic community, stretching from Baghdad to Cordova, had become the most prosperous of the early Middle Ages."²⁶

The phenomenal growth of Islam, and the fear this produced in Christians throughout the post-Roman world cannot be overstated. "Only ninety years after [Muhammed's] flight from Mecca in 622, [Islam] stretched all the way from India to the Atlantic. Soon it penetrated into Central Asia and China, and later stretched through all southern Asia to Malaya. Our imagination reels before the magnitude of the disasters which overtook the Church through the Muslim conquests. In the great patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria, which extended over vast areas, only remnants of the Christian Church remained. Thus, in Syria alone, 10,000 churches were destroyed or became mosques. The Church

* The pronoun "you" in the original Greek was plural, not singular. In other words, it was to disciples as a whole, and through them, representatively, to the Church as a whole, that Jesus was giving the keys of the kingdom – not to Peter as an individual.

of North Africa, with its memories of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine, was practically obliterated. Only small Christian communities survived here and there. This destruction of the ancient and illustrious Church east and south of the Mediterranean was nothing less than a removing of the candlestick out of its place (**Revelation 2:5**).²⁷

Within a century of its outward expansion, the Muslim Moors had conquered Christian Spain. Islamic armies push northwards across the Pyrenees and entered the heart of France. Suddenly all of Europe seemed open to them and the tide of Islam appeared irresistible. But at Tours, in France, Christian armies were marshalled and drove back the Muslim invaders.

For a moment – but only for a moment – the tide of Islam appeared to be halted. It continued to make advances on the eastern borders of Europe, however, and reached its peak of power in the fifteenth century when, under the command of Mehmet II, Ottoman forces besieged Constantinople for fifty days. The city fell to the Ottomans in 1453, and was renamed Istanbul, now the capital of modern Turkey.

Christianizing Europe

During the fifth to eleventh centuries, concurrent with the encroach of Islam, Christian missionaries pushed into Europe, evangelizing the barbarian tribes. Let's take a brief tour of these evangelistic efforts:

- One of the earliest areas of Europe to be converted to Christianity was Armenia. Gregory the Illuminator took the Gospel to Armenia around in AD 300, and baptized King Tiridates. According to some claims, about 2.5 mil-

A Brief History of Muhammed

In AD 570, Muhammed was born in Mecca, on the Arabian peninsula. As a youth, Muhammed had some exposure to Jews and Christians, from whom he presumably learnt that there was only one God, not the pantheon of gods prevalent in the Arabian paganism of his day. The Christians were of various heretical sects, however, and much of what would later appear in the *Qu'ran* purporting to be Christianity was not drawn from the four Gospel accounts but from gnostic pseudo-gospels. The *Qu'ran* claims, for example, that the trinity of the Christians is made up of the Father, the Son and Mary, and repeats some of the fantastic tales told of Christ's missing childhood years.

When Muhammed was about forty years old, he claimed to receive revelations from God, resulting in the Islamic scriptures – the *Qu'ran* – which lay down the laws of God according to Islam. He preached a message of one true God, called Allah, to the people of Mecca, who rejected him. He barely escaped with his life to the nearby village of Medina. The Islamic calendar starts with the year of his Flight to Medina, which Muslims regard as the beginning of Islam proper.

Before his death, ten years later, Muhammed had gathered a sizeable following – a community with beliefs and lifestyle determined by the tenets of Islam. These Muslims – “submitted ones” – took Mecca and established Islam as the religion of the Arabian peninsula. From there, they began pouring out in all directions, conquering the surrounding lands under the banner of Islam.

lion Armenians were won to Christ by AD 410, resulting in Armenia being the first state to be declared officially Christian.

- Even before the Visigoths began marching on Rome, missionaries were reaching out to the Germanic peoples. In the middle of the fourth century, Ulfilas, an Arian Christian, starting preaching to the Visigoths and was ordained bishop of the Gothic Christians. His work was so successful that when the Goths invaded the Roman Empire, many of them came as Christians. The orthodox Church, however, expended much effort seeking to convert the Goths from Arianism to Catholic Christianity.
- At the turn of the fifth century, Patrick, the son of a British deacon, was just sixteen years old when he was captured by Irish pirates and sold as a slave to an Antrim chieftain in northern Ireland. Six years later, he managed to escape to Gaul, where he became a monk. Later, he was called in a vision to preach to the pagan Irish. He was ordained as bishop to the Irish and landed at Wicklow with a missionary party in about AD 431. At first, he received a very hostile response, but Patrick took advantage of the culture of clanship among the Irish and concentrated on preaching the Gospel to the clan chieftains, then using their influence, once converted, to preach to the Irish people. After Patrick converted Ireland, it became a springboard for Christian missionary activity throughout Europe.
- Toward the end of the fifth century, Clovis, king of the Franks, married Clotilda, a Christian princess from Burgundy. Under Clotilda's influence, aided by what Clovis believed to be divine intervention in battle, he converted to Christianity, resulting in mass conversions among the Franks.
- In the sixth century, Columba took the Gospel into Scotland, founding a monastery on the island of Iona, which then became a center for the evangelization of Scotland.
- Celtic Christianity thrived in both Ireland and Scotland during this time, and the Celtic Church was a strong missionary church. In the fifth century, however, Celtic Britain was invaded by the Angles and Saxons, and so the Celtic Church of Scotland began a missionary outreach to the Anglo-Saxon areas of Britain, soon to be known as Angle-land – England. Celtic Christianity and Roman Christianity, however, soon became rivals for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons.
- In AD 596, Pope Gregory sent Augustine of Canterbury (with a party of 40 monks) to Britain to begin the earnest evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons, focusing particularly on the kings and rulers. Augustine of Canterbury became known in the Roman Catholic Church as “the Apostle of the English.”
- Pope Gregory became well-known for his vision to convert not only the Angles but also other barbarian tribes to Roman Christianity. His vision of a Christian Europe under the rule of the Roman Church late became a reality in the medieval Europe, of which he may be considered the father.

- In AD 625, Paulinus traveled as a missionary from Canterbury (in southern England) to the kingdom of Northumbria (in northern England), and led King Edwin and members of his court to Christ. But after a few years, this missionary work was all but destroyed when the pagan king of Mercia (an adjacent Angle kingdom) invaded Northumbria, killing Edwin and causing Paulinus to flee. The next missionary outreach into Northumbria was initiated by the Celtic Church of Iona (Scotland) in AD 635, although Paulinus would not have been pleased, due to the rivalry between the Celtic and Roman branches of the Church.
- During the sixth and seventh centuries, the Celtic and Roman systems vied for supremacy on the British Isles. Trivial arguments over such matters as the date of Easter and the tonsure* of the clergy raged, but what was at issue was not so much who was right, but rather who was to decide. Did the bishop of Rome really have the final say on such matters, or did the local bishops have authority to decide? “Rome found its champion in the northerner Wilfrid (634-709), a vigorous, high-handed, not altogether scrupulous man, who for a time was Bishop of York. The issue was tried at the Synod of Whitby in 663-4; after hearing both sides, the king of Northumbria decided in favour of Rome.”²⁸
- From that point on, the influence of the Celtic Church in Britain began to wane. However, even as the Roman Church began to absorb the Celtic Church in England, the Celtic Christians began to carry out missionary outreaches into other parts of Europe. In AD 690, Willibrord, a native of York, went as a missionary to Frisia (in modern Holland), meeting great success among the Franks there. A few decades later, in AD 732, Boniface (known as “the Apostle of Germany”) had similar success in Frisia, but brought the churches and monasteries under the authority of the Roman See. Roman authority had finally eclipsed the Celtic missionary endeavors in the region.

Between AD 800 and 1073, the Gospel rapidly spread throughout Europe, sometimes by righteous means, sometimes by unrighteous. A M Renwick and A M Harman summarize the spread of Christianity in Europe during this period:

“Early in the ninth century, Ansgar carried the gospel to Denmark and Norway, but all Scandinavia did not become Christian till late in the eleventh century. In 846 Rastiz slaughtered his subjects in Moravia until he succeeded in making his domain ostensibly Christian. In 848 fourteen Bohemian princes were baptized, but the people fought stoutly against Christianity because it came to them from German sources. In 860, Boris, King of Bulgaria, followed the dreadful policy of Rastiz and massacred many. In 968 Poland became nominally Christian. The Magyars fell under Christian influences from 973 onwards through the work of Pilgrim. The Russians received the gospel from Constantinople in 988, through emissaries of the Greek Orthodox Church, sent at the request of King Vladimir. Russia became one of the great bul-

* A tonsure was the shaved patch on the crown of the heads of priests and monks in some religious orders.

works of the Greek Orthodox Church and made up somewhat for the terrible losses sustained elsewhere through the conquests of Islam. By the end of the thirteenth century at least nominal Christianity covered all Europe except Finland and Lapland.”²⁹

Entering the Dark Ages

This alliance of church and state would change the face of the Church in the coming centuries, known now to us as the Dark Ages. Hand in hand with increased ecclesiastical authority came the need to suppress any deviance from Roman orthodoxy. This necessitated the wholesale burning of classical libraries and books on any topic that might distract the believer from, in Pope Gregory’s words, “the contemplation of heaven.” Even the Bible itself was banned reading material for the common man.

When Pope Gregory I died in AD 604, he left a very different Church to the one he had inherited when he ascended the papal throne.

- Papal power had been consolidated, and the supremacy of the Roman bishopric, although still not absolute, was in the ascendancy.
- Wealth was steadily being transferred to the Church, resulting in more ornate meeting places. Jerome warned against the dangers of this ostentation, declaring that “that [the Christian] alone is the true temple which is adorned with the indwelling of a true, a holy life.”³⁰ The church services themselves were also becoming increasingly formalized and ritualized.
- The Church became increasingly hierarchical, modeling itself on the Roman secular bureaucracy. This institutionalizing of Church structure was also reflected in popular theology, which saw a hierarchy of saints acting as intermediaries between the Christian and God. Prayers to the saints (those canonized by the Roman Church) came to be officially recognized at the Second Council of Nicea in AD 787.
- The people soon began to venerate the saints of the Roman martyrology, praying to them in much the same way as their pagan forebears had worshiped the gods of Rome. Their relics were treasured as amulets and were believed to possess healing powers.
- Incense was now offered with prayers, despite the fact that Tertullian and others had earlier condemned the practice of burning incense as pagan, and not to be practiced by Christians.
- The Lord’s Supper started to take on the meaning of a perpetual sacrifice of Christ’s flesh and blood,* rather than just a memorial of the finished work of the Cross.

* Although the concept of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist was vaguely held by some, it was not until AD 831 that Paschasius Radbertus put forward what is today known as the doctrine of Transubstantiation (which teaches that the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ is physically present in the elements of the Eucharist, invoked by the priest who performs the Mass). It was not until almost four hundred years later, however, at the Lateran Council in AD 1215, that the doctrine of Transubstantiation was officially recognized as a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

- The concept of purgatory (a place positioned theologically between heaven and hell, where the souls of Christians were purified by fire) became the common teaching of the Church. The belief in purgatory set the stage for the later sales of indulgences (the official pardoning of sins, sold for a price).
- The cult of Marion worship (the veneration of Mary, Jesus' mother) began to spread, although not without opposition. By the end of the sixth century, prayers were widely addressed to her.
- From the eighth century, auricular confession (the private confession of sins to a priest) became the norm. Prior to this time, confessions were usually public, before the congregation, but since public confessions tended to provoke scandals, from the time of Leo I, private confession to a priest was encouraged, although not compulsory.
- With each passing century, sacerdotalism (the belief that a priest is able to mediate between God and men) became further entrenched. "The priest was now regarded as of a different order from the laity and as having a special grace and divine authority by reason of his ordination. He became indispensable in the Christian's approach to God. He handled divine mysteries and his work was regarded as a species of magic, like the work of the heathen priests. The altar at which he officiated, and upon which he offered again the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ, came to be regarded as the most sacred place in the building and was railed off from the nave of the church. Thus there grew up a priestly caste separated from the people."³¹
- The worship of images became a part of Christian practice. At the beginning of the seventh century, Pope Gregory had allowed the use of images in churches, insisting, however, that they should not be worshiped. But soon, people began addressing their prayers directly to the images. "[T]he Second Council of Nicea in 787...decided that images of Christ, the Virgin, saints, and angels could be set up. The Council recommended 'the offering to the images of salutation and honorific worship,' and the giving of 'offerings of incense and lights in their honor.'"³² By this time, Muslims were already calling Christians idolators, due to their image worship.

What a contrast between this Church, which had exchanged its Gospel foundation for a foundation of semi-paganism and empty ritual, and the Church of the first century. An outside observer might come to the conclusion that God's plan for the redemption of the world had, by and large, failed. But the story was not yet over. For step by step, God began to restore the truths of the Gospel that had been discarded or forgotten. A new dawn was just on the horizon.

- ¹ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.136.
- ² Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.136.
- ³ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.136.
- ⁴ Earle E Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.), p.224.
- ⁵ Microsoft Encarta, "Pelagianism," <http://encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/32/032E9000.htm?z=1&pg=2&br=1>
- ⁶ Jerome, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.187.
- ⁷ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.60.
- ⁸ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.60.
- ⁹ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.133.
- ¹⁰ Damasus, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.198.
- ¹¹ *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.198.
- ¹² *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.200.
- ¹³ Microsoft Encarta, "Leo I, Saint," <http://encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/1B/01BD8000.htm?z=1&pg=2&br=1>
- ¹⁴ Microsoft Encarta, "Leo I, Saint," <http://encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/1B/01BD8000.htm?z=1&pg=2&br=1>
- ¹⁵ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), pp.132-133.
- ¹⁶ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.139.
- ¹⁷ Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.140.
- ¹⁸ *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.201.
- ¹⁹ *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.201.
- ²⁰ *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.201.
- ²¹ *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.203.
- ²² A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.65.
- ²³ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.80.
- ²⁴ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.80.
- ²⁵ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.81.
- ²⁶ *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), pp.234-235.
- ²⁷ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp.77-78.
- ²⁸ Stephen Neill, *The History of Christian Missions* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1980), p.71.
- ²⁹ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986).
- ³⁰ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.70.
- ³¹ A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.70.
- ³² A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.82.

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