

Church History, Lesson 5: The Medieval Church, Part 1: The Age of Darkness (590 – 1054)

11. Great Leaders

- a. Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great) (540 – 604)
 - i. Background: The last Roman Emperor fell in 476. Rome and the surrounding regions had been invaded by “barbarians,” people from what we now call Europe. This divided the Roman Empire into several kingdoms.
 - ii. In **590**, Gregory was elected as Pope.
 - iii. Significance
 1. Politically: Under Gregory I, the papacy begins to assume not only spiritual power but political power that will hold sway for a thousand years. “After Gregory, the pope was no longer only a Christian leader; he was also an important political figure in European politics: God’s Counsel.”²⁵
 2. Church:
 - a. First monk to become bishop of Rome.
 - b. Evangelized Europe, including German tribes and the British Isles.
 - c. Organizer of the Gregorian chant.
 - d. Asserted authority as the bishop of Rome over entire Western church.
 - e. Laid the groundwork for much of the theology and practice that we now call Roman Catholicism.
 - i. The Fall weakened human’s free will, but with the help of grace, human-kind may perform good

²⁵ Shelley, *Church History In Plain Language*, 177.

works, which are the product of grace and human will.

- ii. God forgives sins at baptism. Sins committed after baptism must be atoned through penance.
- iii. Prayers may be made to deceased saints who intercede for us.
- iv. Sins could be atoned for in purgatory, if not sufficiently atoned for in this life.
- v. Approved the use of holy relics (e.g., locks of hair, pieces of clothing, etc.)
- vi. Holy Eucharist—Christ’s body and blood are present in the bread and wine.
- vii. Note: Some of the beliefs were being taught before Gregory. Gregory’s contribution was organization and promotion.

b. Charles I (“Charles the Great” or Charlemagne) (ca. 742 – 814)

- i. Background: King of the Franks. Developed alliances with Christian leaders. Pope Leo III (795 – 816) was accused of sin. Fighting broke out. Leo turned to the king of the Franks, Charles I, for help.
- ii. Pope Leo III claimed himself innocent. And on Christmas Day, **800**, Leo placed a golden crown upon Charles’ head.
- iii. Significance
 1. The crowning of Charlemagne reunited the Christian Roman Empire (“Christendom”) that had collapsed three centuries earlier. Charlemagne thus became the first Holy Roman Emperor of the West, an empire that would produce nominal Christianity and would last (with a few ups and downs along the way) a thousand years until Napoleon Bonaparte in 1806.
 2. The crowning of Charlemagne also symbolically represented the new power of a Pope to crown an Emperor of the state.
 3. Noll summarizes the significance well:

What made the papal coronation of 800 so important was not that it represented the height of papal power. Rather, it represented a *strategic alliance* between the papacy's gradually expanding influence and a political power that, like the pope, was also expanding in influence.²⁶

4. In theory, Christianity and the state were two aspects of Christendom, working side by side. But conflicts arose between the papacy and the state. Thus, the main question became: does the church rule the state or does the state control the church?

12. Great Muslim Conquest: the rise of Islam (633 – 732)

a. History of Islam

- i. Muhammad was born in 570 in Mecca (in Arabia).
- ii. At age 40 retired to caves where he reports an angel visited him and ordered him to “recite.” From this came the *Qur’an* (“to recite”). The *Qur’an* is about two-thirds the length of the New Testament.
- iii. In 622 fled to Medina from Mecca. This became the first year of the Muslim calendar.
- iv. Died in 632 and a successor was needed. *Sunnis* suggested first caliph should be elected. *Shiites* suggested that a successor should come from Muhammad’s bloodline.

b. Basic tenants of Islam

- i. Strong belief in monotheism. “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet.”
- ii. Absolute submission to Allah. Muslim means “those who submit to Allah.”
- iii. Abraham and Jesus were prophets, but Muhammad is God’s last prophet.
- iv. Good Muslims pray five times a day.

²⁶ Noll, *Turning Points*, 117. Italics in original.

- v. Fasting during Ramadan, in celebration of the month when the *Qur'an* was given to Muhammad.
- vi. A once in a life-time pilgrimage to Mecca.

c. Conquest

- i. After Muhammad's death, Islam spread. During the first 100 years Jerusalem, Damascus, and Cairo fell.
- ii. Pagans were required to convert or die. Jews and Christians were allowed to keep their religions but were required to pay tribute and could not proselytize. They also had other strict requirements (e.g., had to wear certain clothes to set them apart).
- iii. Islam was defeated in the West at the Battle of Tours (732) by Charles Martel (grandfather of Charlemagne). The spread of Islam was stopped in the East by Leo III (a political leader not the Pope who crowned Charlemagne) (717 – 718).
- iv. The results of the conquest were Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain was subjugated by Islam.

13. Great Schism (1054)

- a. Background: Four significant events (from prior periods) marked the division of the East and West.
 - i. Constantine moving the capital city to Constantinople.
 - ii. Theodosius, on his deathbed, divided the empire between his two sons, into East and West.
 - iii. The Council of Chalcedon (451) giving the bishop of Constantinople equal power to that of the bishop of Rome.
 - iv. The fall of the Roman Empire in the West in the 5th century.
- b. 1054 the Western Church and Eastern Church split. Cardinal Humbert and two other delegates from Pope Leo IX entered the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople and placed a Bull (an official papal document, cf. English "bulletin") of Excommunication upon the altar. They then left the building. In time, Patriarch Michael Cerularius of Constantinople anathematized Pope Leo IX for having been excommunicated by him.

c. Causes for the split

i. Theological

1. Different claims to papacy: does the bishop of Rome hold supreme power over the entire Church?
2. Filioque controversy: The Western Church changed the Nicene Creed in 589 to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father *“and the Son”* (filioque), as opposed to only the Father (East).
3. Iconoclastic controversy (725 – 843): Because of the conversion of pagans to Christianity, icons became more prominent in worship. However, how were icons to be used in worship? (See Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 35, for a summary listing of arguments for and against the use of icons.)
4. Theological development: The Eastern Church had little theological development during the Middle Ages. The only exception is the work of John of Damascus (ca. 675 – ca. 749) whose *Fountain of Wisdom* influenced the Eastern Church during this time.
5. Celibacy: In the East, marriage was permitted if you were ranked below a bishop. In the West, clergy not allowed to marry.

ii. Political

1. Two different empires: Byzantine Empire (East) vs. Holy Roman Empire (West).
2. Muslim conquest: Eastern Churches were pressured by Islam. Western Churches evangelized the barbarians and assimilated them into the Church.

iii. Cultural

1. Language: Greek (East) vs. Latin (West).
2. Cultural outlook: West was more concerned with practical matters such as polity. East was more concerned with

philosophical and theological matters like the two natures of Christ.

d. Eastern Orthodoxy

- i. Humankind: The “image of God” plays a significant role. The Orthodox Church doesn’t view the relationship between God and man upon legal grounds (like Roman Catholicism and Protestantism), but upon the incarnation of God and the re-creation of man. Thus, when man sins, he does not break a legal relationship, but diminishes the divine image of God in man. (It makes sense, then, that icons play a significant role for the Orthodox.)
 - ii. Salvation: involves the re-creation of the image of God in man. Orthodox call this process *Theosis* or deification, as opposed to redemption.
 - iii. Polity: Eastern Orthodoxy is not Roman Catholicism without a pope. The Orthodox Church today is comprised of about 14 regional churches.
 - iv. Bible: Very generally, the role of Tradition in the Orthodox Church: the Bible is contained in Tradition. This is opposed to Protestantism: Tradition is contained in the Bible, and Roman Catholicism: Tradition and the Bible are both equally authoritative.
- e. Will the Church ever again have unity? A few attempts at reconciliation between the East and the West have been made since 1054. The most recent coming in 1965 after Vatican II where Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I declared:
- They regret the offensive words, the reproaches without foundation, and the reprehensible gestures which, on both sides, have marked or accompanied the sad events of this period.
- They likewise regret and remove both from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer relations in charity; and they commit these excommunications to oblivion.
- Finally, they deplore the preceding and later vexing events which, under the influence of various factors—among which, lack of understanding and mutual trust—eventually led to the effective rupture of ecclesiastical communion.²⁷
- f. Yet we still have an Eastern and Western church (and the Western Church is divided into two groups: Protestants and Roman Catholics).

²⁷ Walter M. Abbot, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, NY: Guild, 1966), 725-26; cited in: *Ibid.*, 148.