

Church History

- The Middle Ages are so called because they are the era that lies between the thriving of Roman and Greek culture and its rediscovery in the Renaissance (which means “rebirth”). The Middle Ages themselves can roughly be divided into two epochs: the Dark Ages and the High Middle Ages. The first is characterized by the collapse of systems that had existed for centuries under Roman rule, the loss of learning and education and a constantly changing series of polities. In contrast, the High Middle Ages witnesses a significant increase in intellectual activity, the population and economic activity. It is notable for being largely, but not completely independent of Classical influence.
- I. In the West, the fall of the Western Roman Empire had a profound impact not just on the political realities of the region but on the church as well. The response to these changes set the course for the Middle Ages.
 - A. The initial political landscape became dominated by the Franks, Visigoths, Ostrogoths and Vandals. These Germanic tribes conquered and assumed control of most of the land in the Western Empire.
 1. The Franks settled in northern Gaul and along the mouth of the Rhine River.
 2. The Visigoths took control of Spain and southern Gaul.
 3. The Ostrogoths ruled in Italy and parts of the Balkans.
 4. The Vandals conquered Roman Africa.
 - B. By 554 the situation had changed considerably, with the Eastern Roman Empire (or Byzantine Empire) reasserting itself in the west and new barbarian tribes arriving on the scene.
 1. The Vandals were reconquered by the Byzantines in 534 and the Ostrogoths were destroyed by 554. While the former reconquest was swift and efficient and resulted in a newly prosperous Byzantine Africa, the Gothic War left Italy depopulated and devastated.
 2. The Franks added more territory to their kingdom. They forced the Visigoths out of Gaul and conquered the neighboring Burgundians. This left the Franks ruling most of Gaul and along the shores of the North Sea.
 3. Shortly after the reconquest of Italy, a new barbarian tribe, the Lombards arrived and occupied many parts of Italy.
 - a. A particularly powerful Lombard kingdom was established in the north. This was to remain the Lombard heartland of Italy for a couple of centuries. South of Rome significant Lombard states were to last even longer.
 - b. While the Lombards took large sections of Italy, the Byzantine Empire was able to maintain its hold on some parts of the peninsula. Notable among these was the southern end of the Italy as well as a strip of land running from Rome north to the city of Ravenna. This particular area was to be known later as the Papal States
 4. Long after the Byzantine Empire had abandoned the area around Rome, the spurious document known as the Donation of Constantine was used as justification for the Pope’s rule over these parts of central Italy.
 - a. The document asserted the emperor Constantine gave the rule of the city of Rome to the Popes. This purported to give the church justification for the temporal rule of the city.
 - b. The Donation of Constantine was later shown to be a forgery during the Renaissance.
 - c. The forgery was likely created to aid in supporting Pepin the Short’s aid to Rome in 756.
 - C. The Western Roman Empire had abandoned Britain in 410. Subsequently, Germanic invaders, notably the Saxons and Angles sailed over to the Island and began occupying large sections of it. There was conflict between the native, Romanized Britons and the Germans for many centuries.

- II. Through this tremendous political upheaval, the church was changed. The changes were many and severe. In some ways, the church assumed a significant role in the secular affairs of the region. It was also affected theologically, as the lack of learning discouraged theological contemplation in many. At the same time, the response to these new conditions was one of isolation and asceticism, which led to the rise of western monasticism.
- A. All of the barbarians who settled in the Western Roman Empire were either pagan or Arian Christians. This necessitated the western church to respond to this Christological heresy as it had not had before.
1. The church emphasized the divinity of Christ against the Arian teaching that Christ was the first of all created things.
 2. In the zeal to affirm the deity of Christ, it was stated by many that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This statement was added to the Nicene Creed arbitrarily and upset those in the east, who maintained that such a change to the creed was inappropriate without conciliar affirmation. This would never have happened, since the eastern church absolutely rejected the idea. This is known as the Filioque Controversy.
 3. Eventually, the matter will be settled via conversion. Most importantly was the conversion of the Frankish king Clovis I to Nicene Christianity. He was heralded as a new Constantine and, consequently, began a strong alliance between the church and the Franks.
 4. This was followed by the conversion of Reccared and the Visigoths in 589 and Grimoald and the Lombards in 662.
- B. During the Dark Ages, the Bishop of Rome was transformed into the Medieval Papacy. Over time, the Popes took on more and more authority until they ruled as kings. This process took centuries but the evolution was steady.
1. The five great leaders of the church through the age of the Roman Empire were the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria. Of these, only Rome was in the west. When the Western Empire fell and isolation from the east began to creep in, this left the bishop of Rome as the most preeminent leader of the church in the West.
 2. Ambrose of Milan stood as a model of ecclesiastical primacy over the secular authorities.
 3. Leo, the Bishop of Rome from 440 – 461 was the first bishop of the city who was involved in church and political matters with equal authority. He fended off Attila the Hun while also maintaining a firm theological stance on the Hypostatic Union, thus influencing the Council of Chalcedon and maintaining right belief in the church.
 4. Through the rule of the Ostrogoths and the Lombards, the Bishop of Rome was a focal point of resistance to Arian teachings.
 5. This early period of the popes reached its zenith during the term of Gregory the Great, who was the Bishop of Rome from 590 – 604.
 - a. He was oriented toward monasticism and viewed the role of Bishop of Rome as a burden.
 - b. Having lived through the devastation of the Gothic War when he was young, he had a lifelong orientation toward helping the poor.
 - c. He instituted significant changes in the liturgies to ensure they were theologically proper.
 - d. He reasserted the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome over the churches in Spain and Gaul.
 - e. Gregory also wrote at length on many subjects, notably defending the reality of the resurrection as a real and palpable event, not one limited just to spirit.
 - f. Perhaps Gregory's greatest legacy was his sending out of missionaries. This began a great tradition of missionary work in the church that spread throughout Europe and ultimately, around the world. Under Gregory's leadership, Augustine of Canterbury and Paulinus of York were sent to spread the Gospel in England.

6. Following the rule of Gregory the papacy came to be dominated by the Byzantines, who still maintained control over central Italy. However, the controversies of Monothelitism and Iconoclasm drove wedges between east and west.
 7. When the Byzantines were no longer able to protect Rome from the Lombards, Pope Stephen II traveled north to the Franks and enlisted their ruler, Pepin the Short to come to the aid of the church. He did so, establishing Frankish influence over the papacy for the next 100 years and reaching its zenith when Leo III crowned Pepin's successor Charles as Emperor of the West in the year 800.
 8. The papacy reached its nadir during an era often referred to as the *saeculum obscurum* (the age of darkness) or, less kindly the *pornocracy* (literally "rule by prostitutes") when Frankish influence retreated as the Carolingian Empire broke up and the leading families of Rome asserted influence over the papacy.
 9. The papacy did not recovery its dignity until after the Great Schism of 1054.
- C. The political and economic upheaval that engulfed the West prompted many people to adopt monastic lifestyles. In seclusion, they sought safety and the opportunity to devote themselves to prayer and the study of God's Word. Monastic life had been a significant feature of the church in the East for centuries but had not been as widely practiced in the West. This changed as monasteries and convents were established throughout western Europe.
1. While eastern monastic life was typically solitary, in the west it developed as a communal effort. Refugees and spiritual pilgrims sought to escape the chaos of political and cultural upheaval by gathering together in groups.
 - a. The practice of monastic life was focused on pragmatic issues rather than theological contemplation that characterized the east. Moreover, the communities sought to maintain order within themselves as order dissolved in the outer society.
 - b. Western monastic communities were also independent of the church hierarchy, which was another difference between east and west.
 2. The great leader of western monasticism was Benedict (active from 500 – 548).
 - a. He was a stalwart Nicene who maintained the divinity of Christ in the face of Arian Ostrogothic oppression.
 - b. He founded the monastery of Monte Cassino in 529, which became one of the largest and important monastic communities in the west.
 - c. Benedicts most important contribution was the formulation of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. This rule organized monastic life along a middle path. While eschewing society for a communal life, is also steered people away from extreme ascetism. It was focused on guiding people in relationship with others while also channeling their ascetic tendencies into productive work. This was considered a moderate path in the current milieu.
 - d. The *Rule* proved so productive that it was adopted throughout the West as the primary way of organizing monastic communities and remains in use to the present day.
 3. Much of the work that occupies the monastic communities was the production of Bibles and the copying of older manuscripts. This resulted in the preservation of the knowledge and writings of the classical age.
 4. Monastic communities spread throughout the West and were particularly important in the British Isles. There they formed the nucleus of new societies that were forming far from the changes that were consuming the rest of continental Europe.

- III. As the Dark Ages advanced, two significant events would have major impacts on the church. These are the onset of Islam and the founding of the Carolingian Empire.
- A. In the year 632 Mohammed died and his successor, Abu Bakr, began invasions into Sassanid Persia and the Byzantine Empire. He, and his successors, ultimately established the Umayyad Caliphate. This new empire was dominated by Islam and eventually stretched from Persia to Spain. They conquered areas dominated by Christians, particularly Syria, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. Their relentless pressure on the Eastern Roman Empire was checked at the Great Siege of Constantinople in 674 – 678 and at the Battle of Tours in 732. They remained a dangerous foe and a scourge of the church ever since.
 - B. The Franks had been growing in strength since Charles Martel took control of the kingdom in 718. His son Pepin continued the advance, asserting Frankish power outside of Gaul (France) for the first time. However, his son, Charles (known as Charlemagne), established a new empire centered on Frankish power but encompassing much of the old Western Roman Empire. This provided a new counterbalance to both the Byzantine emperors as well as the pope.
 - 1. The Carolingian Empire included parts of Spain, all of Gaul, most of Germany and the northern half of Italy.
 - 2. Under Charlemagne's rule there was a new premium placed on learning and knowledge, which prompted what is known as the Carolingian Renaissance. This made a significant contribution to the preservation of ancient manuscripts and the knowledge they contain.
- IV. Through all this upheaval, destruction and corruption, there were still leaders in the church that valued the truth of the Gospel and its accurate teaching. One such leader was Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). He was a powerful voice proclaiming the grace of God, not through works or other practices. In response to the evils he witnessed while people pursued salvation through works he said:

What, indeed, can be conceived of more merciful than that God the Father should say to a sinner condemned to eternal torments and lacking any means of redeeming himself, "Take my only-begotten Son and give him on your behalf," and that the Son himself should say, "Take me and redeem yourself." For it is something of this sort that they say when they call us and draw us towards the Christian faith.

Further, he stated:

Look, O Lord, upon the face of Your Anointed, who became obedient to You even unto death, and let not the scars of His wounds be hidden from Your eyes forever, that You may remember how great a satisfaction for our sins You have received from him. Would, O Lord, that You would put in the balance the sins by which we have deserved Your wrath, and the sufferings which Your innocent Son endured for us! Truly, O Lord, His sufferings will appear heavier and more worthy, that through them You should pour out Your mercies upon us, than our sins, that through them You should restrain Your compassion in anger.