

# CHURCH HISTORY

## The Fall of Rome

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Early Church History, part 16

### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The fall of mighty Rome in A.D. 476 profoundly impacted the secular world and the church. This event plunged the western world into the Dark Ages in politics, economics and religion.
- B. The collapse of Rome, even though it was predicted by some, shocked the world. Jerome, in his cave at Bethlehem, wept on receiving the news of the fall of Rome, and in his commentary on Ezekiel, which he was writing when he heard the news, said, “Who could have believed that Rome, founded on triumphs over the world, could fall to ruin; and that she, the mother of nations, should also be their grave?” This event brought Christians to the point where they really thought the Lord would return, for Jerome again said, “The world is rushing to ruin. The glorious city, the capital of the Roman Empire, has been swallowed up in one conflagration.”

### II. CAUSES FOR THE FALL OF ROME

- A. Edward Gibbon in his classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* gives some basic reasons for the fall of Rome: (1) undermining of the sanctity of the home; (2) the rapid increase in divorce; (3) the development of huge armaments and the neglect of the enemy within; (4) the moral degeneracy of the whole society — sexual perversion and homosexuality; and (5) the declension of religious vitality, with formalism supplanting faith and impotence replacing power.
- B. Other reasons are as follows: (1) political chaos and distrust of political leaders; (2) a breakdown of justice; (3) a failure to maintain law and order; (4) increasing taxes; and (5) a mass movement from the rural areas to the cities.

### III. THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS

- A. The Roman Empire grew increasingly weaker and fortified itself on every front from the enemy except along its northern frontier. East of the Rhine and north of the Danube rivers were strong German tribes, and behind the German tribes were the savage Huns, who were constantly crowding the German tribes (Teutonic tribes). The Teutonic tribes feared the Huns more than they feared the Romans.
- B. In A.D. 376 (just 100 years before the fall of Rome), the first barbarian tribe, the Visigoths (West Goths) crossed the lower Danube to expand their borders. Then the Ostrogoths (East Goths) crossed the Roman borders. The Goths were pushing the Romans, and the Romans fought them at the Battle of Adrianople, where the Roman army was destroyed. Later, the eastern emperor of the Empire, Theodosius, raised a large army and pushed the Goths back from the eastern section of the Empire. Thereafter, the barbarians left the eastern part of the empire alone and the Goths turned and went west towards Rome. In A.D. 410, Alaric the Visigoth entered Rome and sacked it. Alaric soon died and his successors more or less peacefully coexisted with the Romans. The Ostrogoths settled in Italy after the fall of Rome in A.D. 476. The Visigoths settled in southern Gaul (France) and northern Spain.
- C. The Vandals came down through Gaul (France) and Spain, conquered North Africa, and invaded Rome from the continent of Africa. Genseric, leading his vicious Vandals, plundered Rome in A.D. 455. The Vandals settled in southern Spain and North Africa.
- D. The Huns were savage and fierce fighters, the most powerful of all the barbarians. Under the leadership of Attila, they pushed towards Gaul. Because both the other barbarian tribes and the Romans feared the Huns, they united in battle to fight the Huns at Chalons in A.D. 451. Attila and his armies were turned back and the power of the Huns was broken.
- E. The Roman legions in Britain were needed to defend Rome. Thus, the legions left Britain in A.D. 410 to defend Gaul and Italy. The Jutes, Anglos and Saxons, pagan and crude barbarians, poured across the North Sea from northern Germany and captured Britain, destroying the Christian church in eastern England and southeastern Scotland. The Celtic church, however, lived on in western Britain and Ireland, and showed great vitality.

- F. The Franks settled in northern Gaul, Belgium and southern Netherlands. The Frisians settled in the Netherlands, and the Burgundians in eastern Gaul.
- G. In A.D. 476, a German barbarian named Odoacer attacked the city of Rome, defeating Romulus Augustulus and his Roman armies. From that time on the Roman Empire in the west passed out of existence.

#### IV. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS

- A. Fortunately for the true church in the Roman Empire, many of the barbarian tribes were professing Christians. They were Arians and not orthodox, but at least they were somewhat sympathetic. Thus, many true Christians were spared death and church property was not destroyed.
- B. The western section of the Roman Empire was then completely under barbarian dominion and broken up into various states.
- C. This was a difficult time, for now Catholics, Arians and pagans all tried to settle down side by side, and this did not make for harmonious relationships.
- D. Most of the barbarians were ignorant (not stupid) and could neither read nor write. They had little or no respect for culture or learning, and destroyed much of the Roman Christian culture of that day.

#### V. THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL OF ROME UPON CHRISTIANITY

- A. *Roman Culture Continued in the East:* In A.D. 330 Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Byzantine for political and military reasons. He renamed this eastern city Constantinople. Naturally, Constantinople became a thriving city. When the western section of the Empire fell (including Rome), the Latin-Greek-Christian culture moved to the east completely, and this section of the empire did not fall until 1453 when it was taken by the Turks and the Mohammedan religion. The Turks renamed it Istanbul. Most of the emperors and populace in the Byzantine Empire were at least Christian by profession.
- B. *The Bishop of Rome Became a Prominent Person:* The prominent members of the Roman society fled the west and went east when they knew that the barbarians were coming. When Rome fell, there was no emperor left, but the

bishop of Rome stayed and was respected by the barbarian tribes because they were nominal professing Christians. This left the bishop preeminent in the social life of the city, and his moral authority increased enormously as a result.

In the east, the emperor would often have dispute with the bishop of Constantinople, and he would appeal to the bishop of Rome as an arbitrator. The bishop of Rome took the place of the emperor and became a political leader as well as a spiritual leader. His authority went almost unchallenged. This set the final stage for the papal system.

- C. *The Church Was Left to Educate and Christianize the Barbaric Tribes:* The church not only had to seek the conversion of the pagan tribes, but it also had the task of educating them. Many of the tribes such as the Huns, Jutes, Anglos, Saxons, Franks, etc. had no Christian background. Most of the others were Arian in their theology. In the 500 years following the invasion of the Roman Empire by the barbarians (by the year 1000), all the new nations of Europe had been Christianized. Some of these converted barbarians became excellent missionaries themselves. The British monk, Patrick, became the missionary to Ireland. Columba, an Irish monk, took the Christian message to the land of Scotland. Boniface took the gospel to the Frisians, and Willibord took it to the Netherlands — both of these men were Englishmen. Much of this missionary effort was Christianizing, not real conversion. The people were baptized, but kept most of their pagan superstitions.
- D. *Monasticism Grew Strongly:* Monastic living began with Anthony of Thebes of Egypt in A.D. 270. Men became hermits who separated themselves from all worldly practices and congregated together in monasteries. Monasticism came about because of the worldliness that had entered the church. Men desired to live holy lives, but could not because the pull of the world was too strong both inside and outside of the church. After the fall of Rome in A.D. 476, the desire for monastic living increased, for the world in general was in a mess and the church had become more worldly. Multiplied thousands of Christians, in all sincerity, gave themselves to an ascetic life in monastic orders.

As wrong as these monastic orders are in light of Scripture, God still used them. Whatever spiritual strength there was in the Middle Ages (and there was very little), it was probably found in the monks. The monks were used of God to preserve learning after the fall of Rome. What books were left from the Roman and Greek cultures were preserved and recopied by the monks. Unfortunately, monasticism was also the force that emphasized the separation of clergy and laity.

- E. *Conversion of King and the Franks (A.D. 496)*: Clovis was the king of the barbarian tribe of the Franks, who settled in northern Gaul. Clovis claimed he saw a sign in the sky, and that this sign was from God to assure him he could win a battle in war. He won the battle, and he and three thousand of his warriors professed Christianity at once. Later, his whole tribe made their professions. This was the first case in history of a whole tribe of barbarians professing Christianity because their king did. This certainly was not a healthy situation, for the whole thing was done for political purposes and the profession of the entire tribe certainly was not true conversion. Clovis accepted the Roman Catholic position over against the other barbarian tribes who were Arian. This helped Clovis by putting the orthodox Christians on his side politically. Still, God uses all things for his glory. Some 200 years after the wholesale profession of the Franks, God used this tribe to stop the onrushing Turks at the Battle of Tours in A.D. 732. It looked as though Mohammedanism would sweep the whole western world, but Charles Martel, the leader of the Franks, crushed the hosts of Islam. God works in mysterious ways.