

CHURCH HISTORY

The Entrenchment of the Roman Catholic Church (590–800)

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Medieval Church History, part 1

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The stage had been set for the complete development of the papal system which dominated western civilization for almost 950 years, from 590 to 1517.
- B. Apart from the providence of God, there were many secular and religious events in history which gave the Roman See such great power.

II. THE CONDITION OF THE CHURCH IN THE WEST AFTER THE FALL OF ROME

- A. There was political chaos in western Europe, for the influence of the Roman culture was lessening and new forms of thought were becoming prominent because of the intermingling of Teutonic and Roman ideas.
- B. War and famine were commonplace and the Lombards, Germanic barbarians, were threatening to capture all of Italy, which had just been captured by the Goths. The Lombards had very little respect for the Bishop of Rome and used him mainly for political purposes.
- C. The Church outside of Italy had lost much prestige. The influence of the Roman pontiff had become very weak in Spain, Gaul and Illyria, and almost vanished in Africa.
- D. Arianism and other heresies were rampant in the state formed by the barbarians.

III. GREGORY THE GREAT (590-604)

- A. *Introduction:* Gregory was the first pope in reality. Leo I (440-461) made the claim of “pope,” but did not have the authority to carry out this claim. Gregory

stands out as one of the chief architects of the papal system which has influenced so greatly the history of the world.

- B. *Rise To Power:* Gregory was born in 540 to a rich, senatorial family in Rome. At an early age he entered into governmental service. He had keen mental and administrative gifts, and when the Lombards were threatening to take Italy, it was Gregory who organized the state into an effective political and military organization to push back the Lombards. He later felt the call of God, entered the clergy, sold all his possessions, and became a monk of the Benedictine Order. His governmental diplomacy was recognized by the Bishop of Rome, and he was sent on diplomatic missions to deal with the emperor and bishop of the eastern section of the Roman Empire (Byzantine Empire). In 590 he became Bishop of Rome. Gregory never called himself “pope,” but he exercised all the powers of later popes. However, he did call himself “the servant of servants,” believing that he was supreme among all bishops. Gregory had a great conflict with John the Patriarch of Constantinople, who also claimed to be the universal bishop. Gregory believed in the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church and that there was no salvation outside of this religious organization. He was a devoted man who had great respect for the Scriptures and looked for the speedy coming of the Lord to judge the wicked world. Gregory may be described as monastic, ascetic, and devout; as well as superstitious, hierarchical, haughty and ambitious, yet humble before God. His diplomacy in government gave him special advantages over the Lombards, and he became the most potent political force in all Italy.
- C. *His Missionary Zeal:* Gregory bent his ceaseless energies towards increasing the prestige of his See in lands where it had fallen low, for more than two thirds of Europe was still pagan. He literally pushed the Roman Catholic system on many on the continent, and had an impact on most of England (the Celtic Church held out for independency from Rome until the seventh century). The missionaries to England were able to gain a strong foothold in Canterbury in the Church of St. Martin. There grew up the great cathedral of Canterbury which has been so deeply tied up with the history of English religion.
- D. *Heresy Introduced:* (1) He transformed the bishopric of Rome into a papal system. (2) He formalized ritual and placed great emphasis upon the altar and a re-sacrificing of Christ in the mass. (3) He pushed the concept of purgatory. (4) He gave impetus to the worshiping of saints and martyrs. (5) He enforced celibacy of the clergy and monastic discipline whenever he could.

IV. MONASTICISM

- A. Monasticism was another force that gave great impetus to the papal system. Literally multiplied thousands of men went into these monkish orders, giving real numerical as well as spiritual strength to the Roman Catholic Church.
- B. These orders were all founded during the medieval period of the history of the church: (1) Benedictines; (2) Cluniacs; (3) Cistercians; (4) Franciscans; (5) Dominicans; and (6) the military orders: Knights, Templars, Teutonic Knights, etc. At their best, the monasteries did a great work in forwarding agriculture, providing schools of learning, caring for the poor, and giving hospitality to the sick and needy. After the founder had died, however, and the first enthusiasm had waned with the growth of wealth and power, it generally happened that they fell into spiritual decadence and in time moved far from their early ideals.

V. LOMBARDS AND FRANKS

- A. In 568, the Lombards, a barbarian tribe, conquered the northern section of Italy. They were converted from heathenism to Arianism, and were later brought to an understanding of orthodox Christianity.
- B. The Franks were another German tribe who were converted to orthodox Christianity when King Clovis made his profession to the Christian religion. The Franks settled in the area that is now France.
- C. The history of the church, and especially of the papacy, became intertwined with the history of the Lombards and the Franks. The presence of the Lombards in Italy was a constant threat to the popes. At no time were they certain of their safety. The eastern Roman Empire was in no position to help the Bishop of Rome, so the papacy was forced to turn to the Franks for help against the Lombards. It was the Lombards that drove the popes into the protective arms of the Franks. This strengthened the position of the pope politically, for the most powerful nation in Europe was allied with the pope.
- D. Most of the Frankish kings after Clovis were very weak, and the nation was really governed by Charles Martel, who was mayor to the place. The son of Charles Martel, Pepin the Short, obtained the same high office as his father upon Charles's death. Pepin was not satisfied with his position and wanted to be king. So Pepin banished the king Childeric to a monastery, and placed himself on the throne. But he felt for this act he should have the sanction or

approval of the pope. So, Pope Zacharias gave his approval and Pepin was crowned king. This was a very significant event, for from this act the Roman Catholic Church has drawn the conclusion that she has a right to take away and to give kingdoms. This was also the first step in trying to put back together the Roman Empire which had fallen in 476.

VI. MOHAMMEDANISM

- A. *Background:* The inhabitants of Arabia were descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham and half-brother of Isaac. They were heathen, worshiping idols and believing in many gods. In the year 570 at the city of Mecca, a boy named Mohammed was born. He lost his parents at an early age, and as a merchant came into contact with Jews and Christians, from whom he learned something of their religions. He would meditate and pray much, fall into trances and claim to hear the voice of Allah. Mohammed was impressed with the idea of the monotheism of Jews and Christians, but was terribly unimpressed with their lives. In fact, he called the Christians, “bone worshipers.” The Koran is the sacred book of Islam, and is supposed to contain the divine revelation made to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel.
- B. *Teachings of Mohammedanism;* (1) their creed is “There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet”; (2) prayer five times a day toward Mecca; (3) making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one’s lifetime; (4) giving alms for pious and charitable purposes; (5) fasting from sunrise to sunset throughout the sacred month of Ramadan; and (6) the sword in holy war is a means of spreading the Islam religion.
- C. *The Rise of Mohammedanism:* In 622, Mohammed was forced to flee Mecca because the population was not ready to accept his teachings. He fled to Medina and there his teachings were warmly received. With the help of his converts, in ten years time he made himself master of Arabia. By 711 the Islam religion had conquered Persia, penetrated into India and China, and overrun Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa. It had conquered Spain, and was threatening to move into all of Europe. This meant the end of Christian culture in the west. The Muslims were never able to take the Byzantine Empire, but they certainly took much of the territory of this empire. Constantinople, while attacked and under siege numbers of times by the Muslims, did not fall until 1453 when it was conquered by the Turks.

D. *Causes For The Rise of Mohammedanism:*

1. A positive, fanatical monotheism which promised positions of leadership and booty to those who would engage in world conquest was an incentive in obtaining followers. Also those that die by the sword for Allah are guaranteed heaven.
2. The eastern section of the Roman Empire was decaying from within and using most of its resources to fight off the Persians. Neither the Persians nor the Byzantines were any match for the fanatical Arabs.
3. The development of image worship in the Catholic Church made the Christianity of the day look polytheistic to both the Mohammedans and many Catholics. Therefore, Mohammedanism with its monotheistic emphasis seemed to be superior.

E. *The Halting of Mohammedanism in the West:* It seemed as if no one could stop the armies of Islam, for they had pushed through Spain and into lower France. The Muslims had to be stopped, for the whole future of Europe and the church were at stake. The Franks, under the leadership of Charles Martel, came forward to stop the onrushing invaders from Mecca. Charles's army was called a "Christian" army, for most of the Franks gave assent to Christian teaching. The battle for Europe and the Christian church in the west was to be settled on the plain of Tours. In 732, the Battle of Tours took place, and it was a bloody battle indeed. Until this time the Muslims had not lost one battle for over one hundred years. Why should they not also win this battle? The Arabs had many experienced cavalymen and the Frank's army was mainly on foot. The Franks drew up their army in close order. Nowhere was there a gap in their ranks. All day long, in charge after charge, the wild expert Arab horsemen swept down headlong and furiously upon the Frankish army. When night fell, both sides retired exhausted to their camps. Heaps of dead covered the bloody field to Tours, and the Arabs had been turned back. Early the next morning the Franks again drew up in battle array, but no Arab horsemen appeared. Fearing ambush the Franks sent out searching parties. No enemy could be found. The Arabs had retreated behind the Pyrenees into Spain. Tours was the highwater mark of the Mohammedan tide. The once heathen and barbarian tribe of the German Franks had saved western Europe for Christianity.

F. *The Effects of Mohammedanism on the Church:* The church was weakened spiritually and territorially from 632 to 732 because of the Muslims. Many explanations can be given for this crushing defeat to the church, but the best

explanation, from a divine perspective, is that this was judgment from God. Christians in the eastern section of the church had failed to evangelize — they were salt without savour. Thus, this destruction of the ancient and illustrious church east and south of the Mediterranean was nothing less than a removing of the candlestick from its place (Rev. 2:5). The church in Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria suffered terribly under the Muslims. In Syria alone, 10,000 churches were destroyed or became mosques. The church of North Africa, with its memories of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine, was practically obliterated. Only small Christian communities survived here and there.