

MBC Equipping Hour 2019

Church History

Week 3: Medieval Church Period

Introduction

This time period, from 600 – 1517, is known as the Medieval Church period. “The collapse of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century left an enormous vacuum in Western Europe. The political, economic, social, moral, and intellectual structures of an immense civilization no longer existed. Undeniably, the institutionalized Roman Catholic Church filled this vacuum. The papacy gained legitimacy, monasticism became entrenched, Islam exploded across the Mediterranean, and the Crusades resulted. As the church grew in influence and power though, it became corrupt and ineffective. This is the story of the medieval church.”¹

This almost one thousand years of church history would set the stage for the next major event, the Reformation. There are many bright spots throughout this time, but the overarching black stain is that the church grew into a corrupt machine that sought power, money, influence and prestige at any cost.

One other major event during this time period is the creation of Islam. The founding of this religion pushed the church to places internally they never thought they would go in order to maintain control of their areas. The crusades play a pivotal role in the church’s control over their people.

We will also briefly look at the great Schism in 1054. When the Eastern church and Western church can no longer agree the logical outcome is a split. One had become increasingly more Latin while the other Greek. The way they thought, talked and processed Scriptures was vastly different and almost all common ground had been lost.

590 – Gregory I

While he personally would never have claimed the title, most historians trace the institution of the Roman Catholic Church back to Gregory I. It was after the fall of Rome that he was able to organize the papal system of government. By doing this, he set in motion a system within the RCC that still exists today. All the bishops around would report and look to leadership from one centralized leader, the pope in Rome. Furthermore, he was able to bring unity back to the fractured by defining and standardizing church doctrine. He developed doctrines such as the veneration of Mary, purgatory, transubstantiation and praying for

¹ James Eckman *Exploring Church History*

departed saints. There were other doctrines which the RCC holds to that found their seed in Gregory I, though he did not exactly teach it.

“Sin might be forgiven on condition of repentance, which involved contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Satisfaction included penance, and the penance was in proportion to the sin. On this was the vast complex penitential system of the Middle Ages constructed, and—combined with the doctrine of purgatory—it led to that mechanical theory of penance and indulgences against which Luther protested and which led on to the Reformation in Germany.”²

It is important to remember that none of the extra-Biblical doctrine which the RCC teaches came about overnight. These teachings stemmed from men as they sought new ways to exert control over the masses and grow and maintain their power and prestige. For us today, it is hard to imagine a city/state/country which is completely controlled by a church. But, during this time, there was only one church and it had gained power by aligning itself with the government.

The Rise of Islam

Born about 570 AD, Mohammed would begin a religion which is still at odds with the Christian world today, Islam. Islam started when Mohammed apparently had a vision from the angel Gabriel in 610 AD where he received words of revelation from God.³ He would go on to receive revelations from Gabriel for the next 23 years until his death in 632 AD.

Mohammed began teaching about this revelation, firstly to his wife, and after her conversion, to all who would listen. He gained a huge following and began to upset the status-quo and had to move from Mecca to Medina around 622 AD. In Medina, he gained an even larger following, money and put together an army. It was with this army that he would return to Mecca and conquer it with force.

Islam spread rapidly not only with converts locally but also globally. With Christianity still fractured because of the fall of Rome and the “headquarters” moving to Constantinople, Islam spread across massive amounts of land faster than any other previous religion. Christianity was weakest in Northern Africa and Egypt so Islam was quick to spread through those areas. In fact, from 622-750, Islam had covered all of North Africa, Spain, Portugal, Saudi Arabi, the Middle East and into Russia.

Islam made it much harder for believers to communicate across vast portions of land, bringing more division into the already fractured religion. Because Islam forced this division, it laid the groundwork for what would become the Great Schism in 1054 when the Eastern and Western church broke apart.

² *Who's Who in Christianity*

³ It is important to understand that ‘Allah’ is not just the Arabic word for God in the Biblical sense. They do not worship the triune God as Christians do.

*With Islam gaining ground and the church losing money, territory and support, something had to be done. Up until this point, the church and the government had been working together. The government had supported and pushed the church on the people, they were still two separate entities. They worked side by side, so to speak, but still had their own identities.

The Holy Roman Empire

The greatest perceived need in the church was to have unity among all the fractioned areas around the Roman Empire. It was Christmas Day, 800 AD that the catholic church became The Holy Roman Empire. Over the next 700 years, the Roman Catholic Church would be on a rampage until finally Martin Luther inadvertently started the Protestant Reformation.

Pope Leo III, at St. Peter's church in Rome, crowned Charles, the King of the Franks⁴ as Emperor. One witness said, "the venerable holy pontiff with his own hands crowned Charles with a most precious crown."⁵ The Roman crowd responded "To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-giving emperor of the Romans, life and victory."⁶ After his crowning, the people revered him, here is an example of a letter sent to him "Our Lord Jesus Christ has set you up as the ruler of the Christian people, in power more excellent than the pope or the emperor of Constantinople, in wisdom more distinguished, in the dignity of your rule more sublime. On you alone depends the whole safety of the churches of Christ."⁷

His exalted view of himself led him into many direct conflicts with popes. Because he believed that he was empowered by God to be the supreme ruler of Christianity, he saw the popes as subjected to him. "Charlemagne also sanctioned the insertion of the *filioque* clause into the Nicene Creed, over the head of pope Leo III's opposition, so that the creed now read that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father "and from the Son." The Eastern church protested passionately at this unilateral alteration of an ecumenical creed by a Western emperor, but to no avail. It was to have fateful consequences, contributing to the eventual break-up of East and West into separate and mutually hostile churches in 1054."⁸

Lights in the Darkness

⁴ France and Germany

⁵ Mark Knoll *Turning Points*

⁶ Ibid

⁷ TableTalk Magazine July 2008

⁸ Ibid

Waldensians (1170)

John Wycliffe

Jan Hus