



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 22 – The Rise of the Papacy and Western Monasticism

The Church of Rome, known as the Roman Catholic Church, promotes the unhistorical view that our Lord Jesus instituted the papacy and that He chose His apostle Peter to be the first pope. They claim that they have an unbroken list of popes, beginning with Peter, and continuing to the present day. But the fact is that the papacy was a gradual development and that no one in Rome claimed to have absolute authority over Christ's Church until after many centuries had passed.

God knows all of history before it happens. He knew that there would be such a papacy that would claim to be the head of Christ's Church on earth. Therefore, already in the Old Testament, God foretold the development of the papacy through His prophet Daniel. When Belshazzar was the Babylonian ruler, Daniel had a dream about four kingdoms represented by four beasts: a lion (Babylon), a bear (Persia), a leopard (Greece), and a horrible fourth beast with iron teeth (Rome). Daniel saw in his dream that from the last beast's ten horns there came a little horn and **"there, in this horn, were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words"** (Daniel 7:8). As Daniel was watching, he saw that this little horn **"was making war against the saints, and prevailing against them"** (Daniel 7:21). When Daniel asked for further explanation, he was told this concerning the little horn: **"He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, shall persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time"** (Daniel 7:25).

Notice that according to God's Word, this horn or kingdom would arise out of the Roman Empire and would be known by its big mouth (its pompous words) and by its persecution and control over God's people, the saints. The apostle Paul knew this prophecy and enlarged upon it in his second letter to the Thessalonians. He wrote that before the Last Day of earth history someone would arise **"who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing Himself that he is God"** (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Notice that this person is both against God and is trying to replace God. He sits in the temple of God – he would not be a political leader from outside the church but he is inside the church. Among God's people he claims to have the authority of God Himself and exalts himself above all others. Both Daniel and Paul foretold that this person would continue to retain this kind of power until the end of the world, when he would be overthrown.

Jesus Himself repeatedly warned His apostles against thinking of His Church as a worldly or earthly kingdom. When James and John requested the top places in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus

told His apostles: **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you”** (Matthew 20:25-26). Jesus repeated this same warning on the night before His death when **“there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest”** (Luke 22:24). When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus about His kingdom, Jesus responded: **“My kingdom is not of this world”** (John 18:36). Paul later explained: **“The weapons of our warfare are not carnal”** (2 Corinthians 10:4), that is, our weapons are not physical, earthly weapons.

Our Lord wanted to warn His followers about the rise of the papacy that would change His church from a spiritual kingdom with Jesus Himself as its only Head into a worldly institution with a person at its head. This person would exalt himself pompously as the head while at the same time opposing the true Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. This would not happen right away, but God said it would happen after a **“falling away”** (2 Thessalonians 2:3). It would happen **“because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie”** (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11).

Notice that, according to this prophecy, the first thing to happen is that there would be a falling away from the truth. The truth would become of less importance; that would make it possible for this little horn to grow in power until finally he would consider himself a replacement for Christ as the visible head of Christ’s Church.

If we look at the history of Christ’s Church in the first few centuries, we see that there was a gradual falling away from the truth. There was a great struggle to preserve the truth that God is a Triune God, and that Jesus is at the same time both true God and true man, but the teaching that the only way of salvation is through faith in Christ was beginning to fade out of view. The true distinction between the Law and the Gospel was slipping away. As proof of this, here are some things that early Christian teachers wrote and taught:

Clement of Rome: “Through love our sins may be forgiven.” But we cannot attain forgiveness of sins by our love, but only by faith in Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch likewise emphasized the Christian life of love rather than the work of Christ.

Polycarp of Smyrna mistakenly wrote that “almsgiving sets free from death”, even though he also taught that we are saved by grace, not by works.

An early writing with the title *Epistle of Barnabas* (although Barnabas did not write it) claims that almsgiving is a ransom for sins. Almsgiving (giving to the poor or sharing with the hungry) is certainly a good thing to do, but nothing we do can take away our sins or set us free from death. Only Christ can do that, and He did it.

Another early writing has the title *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. The emphasis in this manual is on how a Christian should live. In fact, in this manual there is no mention of redemption through the blood of Christ.

A writing known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* emphasized works rather than faith in Christ. It actually makes the forgiveness of sins dependant on the manner and measure of repentance and on the future keeping of the commandments. This represents a real falling away from the truth of the Gospel of Christ.

The Second Epistle of Clement says we are saved by faith in Christ and by keeping the commandments, even though the apostle Paul taught justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. In this view, good works have become a way of obtaining salvation rather than a fruit of faith in Christ.

Justin the Martyr thought of Christianity as a way of obedience to the law of God rather than as salvation in Jesus Christ. Justification by faith alone in a Christ, who has satisfied the Law in our place, has almost disappeared. The falling away from the truth is already evident.

There were also testimonies of church teachers that proclaimed the true Gospel of Christ. But as time went on, the message became less clear, and there was more mixing of the Law and the Gospel. God enabled Augustine to steer Christianity to a better understanding of salvation by grace alone, but the external church was not unanimous in accepting his teaching. There were many who still believed that salvation was attained partly by faith and partly by works.

Another factor that contributed to the rise of the papacy was the decline of the western Roman Empire. The papacy could not become strong until the empire became weak. This also had already been foretold by Daniel (Daniel 7:8) and by Paul (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7). The barbarians invaded the Western Roman Empire and set up their own independent kingdoms in northern Africa, Spain, France, England, and Italy. The papacy gradually became an independent kingdom also, controlling a portion of Italy just like an earthly kingdom. In time the papacy grew even more powerful and claimed authority over all the European kingdoms.

How could it happen that one man should consider himself the head of the whole Christian Church on earth? It happened very gradually. Christ certainly did not institute such a one-man rule in the church but warned strongly against such a development. He said: **“One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”** (Matthew 23:8-12). The word “pope” means “father”, so Christ’s warning is certainly to the point.

It is possible and even likely that Peter went to Rome late in his life and that was put to death there. But there is no reason to believe that Jesus ever considered him the head of His Church or that He intended Peter to pass on this headship to others in an unbroken line.

Since Rome was a large city, the leader (bishop) of the Christians in that city had an influence on other neighboring congregations and their leaders. But in the early centuries the leaders of the Church came from Africa: Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine. These leaders did not recognize the bishop of Rome as their head. The Eastern churches also did not regard the bishop of Rome as their head. They had their own head bishops whom they considered their leaders: the bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and later Constantinople. These men were called patriarchs, and they did not accept the headship of the bishop (or pope) of Rome.

When the barbarians invaded the Western Roman Empire and destroyed the peace and unity in the land, there was a power vacuum that the papacy began to fill. The first Roman bishop who began to act a bit like a pope was Leo the Great (440-461 AD). When the infamous Attila the Hun approached Rome with his forces in 452 AD, it was Leo who persuaded him not to attack Rome. Leo did not have the same success when the Vandals attacked in 455 AD. Yet it was Leo who negotiated with the attackers and persuaded them not to burn the city. Not only did Leo assume leadership in worldly matters, but “he was convinced that Jesus had made Peter and his successors the rock on which the church was to be built, and that therefore the bishop of Rome, Peter’s direct successor, is the head of the church. Thus, in Leo’s writings one finds all the traditional arguments that would repeatedly be mustered in favor of papal authority” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 243).

The last western emperor was deposed in 476 AD by the Ostrogoths, and after that there was chaos in the land. There were struggles between the Arian Ostrogoths and the Nicene Christians, between the Eastern Church and the Western Church, and even between rival popes. The Ostrogoths were defeated by the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) and its powerful ruler Justinian (527-565 AD) and his wife Theodora, who kept the popes under their control.

The Lombards then invaded Italy and the Byzantine Empire lost its power. Pope Pelagius II (579-590 AD) saved the city of Rome by paying off the Lombards in order to preserve the city. The next pope was Gregory the Great (590-604 AD). At that time the situation in the city of Rome was desperate because of the continued fighting and the outbreak of disease. Gregory took over the rule of the city and organized the feeding of the poor and established peace with the Lombards. In effect, he was now both the earthly leader with an earthly kingdom under his control and also the spiritual leader of his territory. It was now claimed that the emperor Constantine the Great in his time had donated the land around Rome to Peter’s successors. A forged document, known as the *Donation of Constantine*, appeared in the eighth century that supposedly proved this gift from the emperor to the pope. From that

time to the present, the pope has always claimed a piece of real estate in Rome, although today this piece of land is restricted to Vatican City.

Gregory also began to act like a pope in religious matters. He involved himself with church affairs in Italy, Spain, England, and Africa. It was only in France where his advice was rejected. Gregory was also a theologian, championing Augustine as his mentor. But in fact, his teaching was not identical to Augustine's teaching. For example, Gregory promoted the idea of purgatory as a place for departed Christians to be cleansed before going to heaven. Gregory taught that Christians must do penance for their sins through contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Gregory established the teaching that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice to take away sins, and that the living can help departed Christians out of purgatory by offering masses (celebrations of the Lord's Supper) for their benefit. None of these teachings came from God's Word, but they were accepted by the people as the truth since they were promoted by their leaders, like Gregory the Great.

The Eastern emperors controlled the Roman popes after Gregory. They confirmed all papal elections and forced the popes to support the emperors in their theology, even when it proved to be heretical. After the Eastern (or Byzantine) emperors lost their influence in the West, however, the popes became more independent again. But to retain their worldly powers, the Roman church needed the support of worldly allies. Even though the Franks had not cooperated with Pope Gregory the Great, they now found a common cause with the Roman popes. The Franks drove back the Lombards and gave some of the Lombard land to the papal church, so the popes became the earthly rulers of a large portion of Italy. They also managed to increase their power and influence over all the churches of the former Western Roman Empire. The **"little horn"** was beginning to speak **"pompous words"**, as Daniel had foretold.

The development of Western monasticism aided the growth of papal power and influence. In the East, the emphasis in monasticism had been on solitude and the renunciation of the world and the flesh. In the West, however, the monks were more concerned with the mission of the church and the spread of the Gospel – although by this time that Gospel was corrupted by false teaching and superstition.

The founder of Western monasticism was Benedict of Italy, who was born around 480 AD. He lived the life of a hermit at first, but others wanted to live with him. He therefore founded a monastery at a place called Monte Cassino, and his sister Scholastica founded a nearby community for women. Benedict formulated a book of rules (called *The Rule of Saint Benedict*) for his monastery that became the standard for many other monasteries. *The Rule of Saint Benedict* provided for two meals a day, including cooked dishes, fruits, vegetables, and wine. Benedict insisted on permanence and obedience – when a monk joined a monastery, he would have to remain there for life, unless ordered by his superior to leave. Every monastery had its ruling abbot, whose orders had to be obeyed without question. Insubordination was punished by shunning the disobedient monk until he was repentant. All

monks had to work, and this work was divided equally. The monks were to assemble eight times a day for prayer. The entire book of Psalms was recited every week. Other Scriptures were read as well. Another task of the monks was to copy Scripture. In this way the Bible was preserved for future generations. The monasteries served as teaching centers as well as hostels for travelers. They lived off the land and ate the fruits and the crops of their farms and gardens. Through the support and influence of Pope Gregory the Great, *The Rule of Saint Benedict* was spread throughout Europe, and monasteries following this rule were organized as far away as England.

The Athanasian Creed was probably written and came into use in the Western church during this time, the late fifth century. For many years people thought that Athanasius himself wrote this creed, but that is very unlikely, since Athanasius wrote in Greek and the Athanasian Creed first appeared in Latin. No doubt it was called the Athanasian Creed since it summarizes the two main doctrines for which Athanasius fought: the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. "It is now thought to be the work of an unknown author of the Gallic church from the late fifth century" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 23).

**The Third Confession
or the one called the Creed of St. Athanasius**

(excerpts from *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 23-25)

... The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God – and yet there are not three gods but one God... The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten by anyone. The Son is from the Father alone, not made or created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son, not made or created or begotten but proceeding...

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at once God and a human being. He is God, begotten from the substance of the Father before all ages, and a human being, born from the substance of His mother in this age... Although He is God and a human being, nevertheless He is not two but one Christ.

Questions:

1. How is the Roman Catholic explanation of the papacy unhistorical?
2. What did the prophet Daniel say would arise from the fourth kingdom (Rome)?
3. How did Paul describe this person that would arise in Christ's Church?
4. What did Paul say would happen first before this person would come?
5. How did Jesus warn against such a one-man rule in His Church?
6. How long was it before the bishop of Rome began to act like a pope?
7. What is the Scriptural distinction between the Law and the Gospel?
8. What evidence is there that the Christians of this time were losing the pure Gospel?
9. Why is it so important to exclude works as contributing to salvation?
10. What is wrong with Leo's understanding of the Church? Why was it wrong?
11. How did Gregory the Great become a worldly ruler?
12. What did Gregory teach about penance?
13. What did Gregory teach about the Lord's Supper?
14. In what way was Western monasticism different from Eastern monasticism?
15. What things were required by The Rule of Saint Benedict?
16. What good things were accomplished by the monks in Europe?
17. Which two main teachings are confessed in the Athanasian Creed?

