



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

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 27 – The Disintegration of True Christianity

The Western Roman Empire came to an end in 476 AD. For the next 324 years there was no Roman emperor. The various barbarian tribes had their own kings and kingdoms. In Italy the Roman pope became both a secular ruler and the acknowledged leader of the Western church. Eventually, after all the chaos and confusion of the times, some order was restored when Charles the Great (Charlemagne), the king of the Franks, was crowned by Pope Leo III as the first in a line of new emperors of a new empire known as the Holy Roman Empire. This action took place on Christmas Day in the year 800 AD.

For the next centuries western Europe was mostly in the hands of these two forces: the papacy and the empire. They sometimes supported one another and sometimes they competed with each other for the leadership. Charlemagne himself was one of the greatest of the early emperors. He ruled over all of western Europe except for England and a large portion of Spain (which was controlled by the Muslim Moors).

Charlemagne himself was a confessing Roman Christian, but his way of spreading the Christian faith was to invade the surrounding nations and force them to be baptized. In this way the Frisians and Saxons were “converted”. He also started to drive the Moors out of Spain. Many of these new Christians were uninstructed and basically unchanged. He ran the church like he ran the government, with laws and the enforcement of the laws. He did succeed in reforming the monasteries and bringing them under the same regulations, namely, the regulations of the *Benedictine Rule*. He ordered that the preaching be done in the language of the people. He ordered that every church establish a school. Although ignorance still prevailed throughout his empire, there was a revival of learning, and some scholars who had escaped to the East returned to teach at the new schools.

Charlemagne's sons and grandsons did not have the same political control as Charlemagne. Charles the Fat ruled over a united empire from 881 to 887 AD. But soon there was chaos and confusion once more as the Norsemen invaded the empire from the north, and the Muslims controlled the shipping lanes to the east. Normal trade using money came to a halt. Land became the only thing of value, and the monasteries and the noblemen grabbed their share, while most of the people became serfs or peasants under the dominion of their feudal lords. These lords were in turn were controlled by the lords and rulers over them. The monasteries became the centers of learning. Monks copied the Bible and other ancient manuscripts. In doing so, they preserved some of the learning and literature of the past.

The master theologian of this age was John Scotus Erigena (815-877 AD). He still understood Greek and Latin. But his theology mixed Christian teaching with the philosophy of Plato, and he was far from being truly orthodox. Some of the old controversies concerning the person of Christ were revived. Some teachers denied the full deity of Christ because He died on the cross. But a man named Beatus made a good confession, saying: "Unbelievers could see nothing but a man in the one whom they crucified. And as a man they crucified Him. They crucified the Son of God. They crucified God. My God suffered for me. For me was my God crucified" (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 271).

A monk named Gottschalk attempted to reintroduce Augustine's teaching on predestination, but he was opposed by Abbot Rabanus Maurus and Bishop Hincmar. Scripture clearly teaches the doctrine of the predestination of believers. This doctrine emphasizes the truth that our salvation is a matter of pure grace, without any contribution from us. On the other hand, there is no such thing as a predestination to damnation. Gottschalk's views were condemned, and he was imprisoned.

Another controversy broke out between Radbertus and Ratramnus on the nature of the Lord's Supper. Radbertus taught that the bread and the wine were transformed into Christ's body and blood in such a way that the bread and wine were no longer present. Ratramnus did not agree. Eventually the view of Radbertus prevailed, and the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 AD established the present-day doctrine of transubstantiation. One by one more false teachings were introduced and supported by the Roman Catholic Church under the rule of the pope.

The return to law and order established by Charlemagne and his immediate successors did not last. The Holy Roman Empire split into factions. The Norsemen from the Scandinavian countries sailed their ships into the coastlands of England and France and stole their treasures. The Norsemen invaded inland cities like Paris and went as far as Spain and the islands of the Mediterranean Sea. They even conquered Sicily and southern Italy and established their own kingdom there. By the eleventh century King Canute of Denmark was in control of England, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Eventually the Norsemen were baptized, generally through the influence and example of their leaders. But again, many of these new Christians were uninstructed, and very likely they knew very little about their new faith. Even the residents of Iceland were baptized.

While the Norsemen invaded Europe from the north, the Magyars (Hungarians) invaded from the east. They entered Germany, Burgundy, and Italy. But in 933 and 955 AD the Magyars suffered two defeats at the hands of the Holy Roman emperors: one by Henry the Fowler and one by his son, Otto I. Otto I was followed by Otto II and Otto III (known as Otto the Great), who began to restore the Empire to some of its former glory under Charlemagne.

How did the papacy fare during the ninth and tenth centuries? Not very well at all. Fake documents were forged which seemed to give the papacy power over all other authorities.

Pope Nicholas I (pope from 858 to 867 AD) believed these documents were genuine and exercised authority over secular rulers. In fact, Nicholas I refused communion to the king of Lorraine (an area in France) and cursed him and his court.

But the popes who followed Nicholas I struggled to maintain order. One was poisoned, another was strangled, another died of starvation. Rivals fought for the papacy, and these rivals sought the support of rival families in Rome, who fought against each other with intrigue and criminal activity of all kinds. For example, Sergius III killed two of his rivals to become pope. Sergius had a lover named Marozia who, with her husband, suffocated John X with a pillow and placed John XI, her son with Pope Sergius III, on the papal throne. Pope John XII was her grandson and Pope John XIII was her nephew. This nephew's brother strangled the next pope. Pope John XIV died of either poison or starvation in the dungeon where he had been placed by Pope Boniface VII, who then was poisoned by his successor. These were men who claimed to be the heads of Christ's Church by divine right. What a sad condition the external church was in during that time! It is a wonder that the papacy survived as an institution. Both Daniel and the apostle Paul, however, had foretold that the Antichrist would continue until the end of the world. As time went on, it became clear that the papacy was, and is, the foretold Antichrist.

For a time, Emperor Otto III claimed the right to choose who would be pope, and he chose a scholar named Sylvester II in an attempt to clean up the papacy and reform the disintegrating church. But after the death of Otto III, the family of Marozia again took control of the papacy until Emperor Henry III intervened and called a council that removed all rivals and named Clement II the true pope. Clement II then crowned Henry III as the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Perhaps the ordinary Christians of those days knew very little about all this intrigue in empire and papacy. But surely such leadership can only bring shame to Christ and His Church and hinder the proclamation and spread of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Questions:

1. Who crowned Charlemagne as emperor? Why is this significant?
2. How did Charlemagne "convert" the heathen nations near him?
3. How did Charlemagne do good to the subjects under his control?
4. Who controlled most of the land in western Europe?
5. What important Christian truth did Beatus confess?
6. What teaching of Augustine did Gottschalk try to revive?
7. In what way was the teaching of Radbertus a false teaching?
8. Which tribes invaded western Europe and caused much damage?
9. How was the reputation of the papacy damaged in the 9th and 10th centuries?
10. List some of the crimes of Marozia and her descendants.
11. How can we be sure the Christian Church survived during this sad era?

