

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (7)

The Medieval Church (AD476-1517) – Deterioration

A. Introduction

1. What is church history?

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

The command of making disciples, which Jesus gave to His followers, involved them taking the good news of Jesus to places where it was not known and teaching His followers to obey Him.

Church history is the story of how this has happened.

2. Why bother with church history?

Three great reasons for studying church history:

Instruction – the difficulties and circumstances we face today are not new and we can look to the past to learn from where believers have acted wisely in these situations and where believers have acted foolishly.

“Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.” (Deuteronomy 32:7)

Worship – when we see all God has done through His church it should lead us to praise Him for His faithfulness.

“Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.” (Psalm 150:1-2)

Confidence – Jesus is keeping His promise to build His church.

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

3. The Early Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Edict of Milan in AD313.

This period was marked by growth: the church grew in size as Christians spread the gospel throughout the Empire; the church grew in maturity as they sought to obey everything Jesus had commanded by gathering to worship, baptising converts, being instructed in doctrine, caring for one another, and appointing leaders.

But two dangers threatened to halt its growth and could have potentially destroyed it: persecution and false teaching.

The response of the early church to persecution was the rise of the apologist who defined and defended the faith. Whilst it did not succeed in convincing any of the Roman Emperors to stop persecuting the Christians, it did strengthen the confidence believers had in the truth they professed.

The response of the early church to false teaching (over who Jesus is and what is Scripture) was the formation of the canon of Scripture and creeds that summarised what Christians must believe. Responsibility for protecting the apostle’s teaching also transferred from the church to the bishop.

4. The Imperial Church was the period of church history between the Edict of Milan in AD313 and the Fall of Rome in AD476, and was a time when the Roman Emperors looked favourably on the church.

This period was marked by three big changes: Formalism – the church became shaped by the world around them and the services began to reflect the pomp of the civil ceremonies; Nominalism – suddenly everyone in the Roman Empire was now a Christian and the church became a mixed community of believers and unbelievers; and Hierarchicalism – the structure of the church emulated Roman organisation and the church was now under state control with the Emperor as the head of the church.

With the influence of the world, the presence of unbelievers and the power of the state, the danger was that the apostles' teaching about what to believe and how to live would be lost.

As the Christians during the time of the Imperial Church responded to these changes, a number of positive developments took place in the church in the areas of training of church leaders, Bible translation, preaching and in the education of children.

But that wasn't all. A right understanding of the Bible's teaching about Jesus and His saving work came into view through controversies about the Person of Christ (Arianism) and the Work of Christ (Pelagianism).

5. The Medieval Church was the period of church history between the Fall of Rome in AD476 and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

Perhaps the best way of summarising what took place over this thousand-year period is to look at three ways the Middle Ages can be described.

It was a time of deterioration.

It was a time of development.

It was a time of dissent.

6. The Medieval Church was a time of deterioration.

The deterioration we see in this period of church history was really a continuation of a trajectory set by the Imperial Church.

The deterioration we see in this period of church history shows us why the Protestant Reformation was needed.

B. Deterioration in the Leadership of the Church

1. In the time of the New Testament and the Early Church, the elders were leaders who served a local church.

The Imperial Church brought a new hierarchical structure to church leadership, and the Medieval Church gave church leaders power that they were never supposed to have.

There were two battles that took place during the time of the Medieval Church that increased the power that church leaders, especially the Pope, had.

2. The battle over who was in control of the Empire.

After the Fall of Rome in AD476, all that remained of the Roman Empire was the Eastern part (which would survive until 1453 as the Byzantine Empire) and was ruled over by the Byzantine Emperor.

In the West the situation was more complicated.

With no emperor, the Pope in Rome was in charge of the church, and what was the Western part of the Roman Empire was now divided into different tribal groups (such as the Franks, the Visigoths, the Lombards, and the Saxons) and ruled over by their leaders.

When the Western part of the Roman Empire reformed as the Holy Roman Empire (comprised of different kingdoms) with the crowning of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III, a power struggle began between the Emperor and Pope over who was in charge of both the Church and the State.

It wasn't enough for the Pope to lead the church and the Emperor the Empire. Both men wanted to control both Church and State.

During the Middle Ages, there were times when the Emperor (or kings, nobles, landowners) called the shots, and times when the Pope was able to get them to do his bidding.

The bottom line was that the Pope was getting involved in matters he should have kept out of.

3. The battle over who was in control of the church.

While the battle for control between the Pope and the Emperor was taking place in the West, another battle for control was taking place.

The church in the East and West had quarrelled for centuries, yet still viewed themselves as one body.

This would change during the time of the Medieval Church.

When the church leaders in the West, without calling a council, changed a line in the Nicene Creed to say that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and from the Son in order to emphasise the full divinity of Jesus, it did not go down well with the church leaders in the East.

The final straw came when the Eastern Emperor ruled that the Pope in Rome, not the Patriarch of Constantinople had overall control of the church.

In 1054, the Eastern and Western churches formally divided to become what we now know as the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

C. Deterioration in the Beliefs of the Church

1. In the time of the Early and Imperial Church the church responded well to teaching that was contrary to what the Apostles' taught preserved for us in the Bible.

With the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition the church had two rich statements that summed up what the Bible taught: That there is one God who exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God; and that Christ is fully God and fully man in one person.

And thanks to Augustine, the church was clear that though in Adam all have sinned were unable to save themselves, God has chosen to save some, by giving them the faith they need to trust in Christ and His death in their place that has taken the punishment their sins deserve.

2. This doesn't mean that no errors had crept into the church.

But errors that were present in embryonic form by the end of the Imperial Church, during the time of the Medieval Church were given birth to and became blatant.

3. What were some of wrong beliefs that became clear in the Medieval Church?

Transubstantiation: When the priest blesses the bread and wine during the Lord's Supper, it is transformed into Christ's body and blood.

The seven sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony): When they are celebrated they both signify and make present in our lives the grace which each sacrament points to.

Sacerdotalism: The belief that the priest has been given the special authority to act as mediator between God and man, which they do through teaching, confession, prayers and communion.

Purgatory: An intermediate state where those destined for heaven are purified, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter heaven.

Indulgences: A way of shortening time in purgatory by doing deeds, especially by tithing.

Papal infallibility: The pope is infallible when he speaks from his position of authority on a particular issue or doctrine.

Praying to Mary or to the saints: People felt they couldn't approach Christ so they prayed to Mary or to a saint in heaven in the hope that they would put in a good word for them.

D. Deterioration in the Mission of the Church

1. In the time of the New Testament and the Early Church, the church grew as ordinary Christians took the gospel wherever they went.

Whilst the Imperial Church blurred the distinction between the Christian and Non-Christian when suddenly everyone in the Roman Empire became a member of the church, the desire to reach people with the gospel was still present, as seen in the sending of missionaries like Saint Patrick to Ireland.

This continued at the start of the Medieval church.

Pope Gregory (590-604) was active in sending missionaries to reach the different tribes of Europe.

But that was as far as the gospel went.

2. As well as this missed opportunity, areas where Christianity once was active were lost.

In 610 an Arab trader in Mecca, Mohammad, had a series of visions that he claimed to be from Allah, the only true God. He rejected the pagan beliefs in many gods and the Christian belief that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

After being forced to flee Mecca in 622, he gathered an army of followers, who he called Muslims (those who submit to Allah) and their religion became known as Islam (meaning submission).

After his death, Mohammad's four main successors, The Rightly Guided Caliphs, spread his beliefs throughout Arabia, Syria and North Africa. Places where the majority of the people living there had once been Christians came under the control of Islam.

In 638 Jerusalem fell to Muslims, and by 711 Islamic troops had invaded Europe conquering Portugal and Spain, although were stopped from taking France by Frankish armies.

Whilst Christians and Jews living in these areas were not forced to convert to Islam, they were treated as second class citizens, forced to pay higher taxes, wear distinct clothing, and most importantly were not allow to evangelise Muslims.

3. How did the church respond to the rise of Islam?

Not by sending missionaries with a Bible (although there were some) but soldiers armed with a sword.

Now the Pope had the power of the Holy Roman Empire, in 1095 they decided to use force (Crusades) to advance the church and the cause of Christ, and one of the main objectives was to save the Holy Land from the infidel.

4. The Medieval Church both missed the opportunity to take the gospel beyond Europe and worse sought to make Christians by force.

E. Deterioration in the Worship of the Church

1. Central to worship in the Early Church was the reading and preaching of God's Word.

During the time of the Medieval Church the emphasis on preaching would progressively be reduced.

Why?

Because of a decrease in the level of education amongst the priests.

However, an uneducated priest could still memorise liturgy and administer the mass. So as preaching declined, the sacraments came to occupy the central position in worship.

2. The result of this is that Christianity became a religion of the eye, not the ear.

Because few people could read, the church had to teach visually.

Priests relied on statues, stained glass, and plays to teach the people about God.

Church buildings became 'Bible in stone'.

F. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. Don't forget that the Word is central.

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching." (1 Timothy 4:13)

How were errors allowed to creep into the church unchecked?

Because the priests weren't preaching the Word and the people could not read the Word.

There is no substitute for a sustained diet of faithful preaching of God's Word.

2. Don't forget that it is the gospel which saves and it is to be taken to the ends of the earth.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

The failure of the gospel to be taken outside Europe reminds us of the priority of evangelism and world missions today.

3. Don't forget that leaders are servants.

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2-3)