

Medieval Church History
(Part 1: The First Medieval Pope)

I. Introduction.

A. What does Medieval mean?

1. It comes from the Latin words *medius* “middle” + *aevum* “age.”
2. It refers to the middle years of the church – the time between Ancient and Modern – the Middle Ages.

B. What time frame does Medieval Church cover?

1. There are differences of opinion as to when it begins.
 - a. Some see it beginning in AD 313 with the grant of religious freedom.
 - b. Others at the Council of Nicea in 325.
 - c. Other in 378, the battle of Adrianople, which caused the migration of the Visigoths into the Roman Empire.
 - d. Still others with the fall of the last Roman emperor in 476.
 - e. The date we’re using is 590, the year that Gregory I began his work, which ushered in a new era of power for the Western Church.
2. When does it end?
 - a. Some prefer 1095, the beginning of the Crusades; 1453, the fall of Constantinople to the Turks; 1648, the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Year War between France and Sweden, and Spain and the Holy Roman Empire.
 - b. We will use 1517, the posting of the Ninety-five Theses by Martin Luther, which moved the church from an emphasis on the church as an institution to that of a body of believers, united to Christ by faith.

C. What were the Middle Ages like?

1. Some say it was a time of intellectual inactivity – the classical influence had disappeared.
 - a. For this reason, some call it the Dark Ages.
 - b. But the Dark Ages are properly from about 500-1000; even then the monasteries were still making some contributions.
 - c. Those of the Renaissance era thought it was “a chasm separating the brilliant classical and modern periods of humanism” (Carnes 166).
 - d. Modern historians have shown it was a period of slow growth, when the church helped to bridge the gap through useful cultural and religious functions between the city-state of ancient time and the nation-state of modern times.
2. How was this time frame viewed by Romanists and Protestants?
 - a. The Roman Church considered it to be the Golden Age of human history: “it was preceded by classical paganism and followed by the disintegrating forces of Protestantism, which created the chaos of the modern religious scene” (166).
 - b. Protestant historians, on the other hand, considered it to be a time when the purity of the NT Church was corrupted, only to be purified again through the Reformation.

c. Here we see the influence of bias or presuppositions on the interpretation of the facts of history – the same facts viewed through two different lenses.

3. In short, the Middle Ages was a time when the church sought to Christianize culture.

II. The Rise of the Pope.

A. Rise of the papacy in the Ancient Church era.

1. At the beginning, all the bishops were considered equal.
 - a. Between 313 and 450, the Roman bishop came to be the first among equals.
 - b. Beginning with Leo I (440), the Roman bishop began to claim supremacy.
2. What happened?
 - a. “The need for efficiency and coordination led naturally to centralization of power. The bishop was also considered the guarantor of orthodox doctrine. In addition, some of the Roman bishops of this period were strong men who missed no opportunity to increase their power” (Carnes 157).
 - b. By 590, only the patriarch of Constantinople and the bishop of Rome lived in politically significant cities.
 - c. The Council of Constantinople (381) recognized the primacy of the Roman see.
 - d. Emperor Valentinian III recognized the supremacy of the bishop of Rome in spiritual affairs in an edict dated 445, saying that what the bishop enacted was “law for all” (Carnes 158).
 - e. The work of missionaries loyal to Rome enhanced the bishop’s power.
 - f. Able bishops in the Roman church took every opportunity to strengthen their power.
 - (i) Damasus I (366-384) described his see as the “apostolic see.”
 - (ii) Leo I (440-461) used the title *papas* from which we get our word pope. In 452, he persuaded Attila the Hun to leave Rome alone, and in 455, he did the same with Gaiseric, although he had to agree to a two-week period of sacking by the Vandals. Rome looked at Leo as the man who saved Rome from complete destruction. Leo insisted that all appeals from church courts be brought to his court and that his decision should be final. Even if he wasn’t the first pope, he exercised all the power of the pope.
 - (iii) Gelasius I (492-496), wrote in 494 that God gave both sacred and royal power to the pope and the king, but because the pope had to give an account to God for the king at judgment, the sacred power of the pope was more important than royal power, therefore, rulers should submit to them.

B. The First Medieval Pope: Gregory I (540-604).

1. What is his significance?
 - a. He was an important transitional figure.
 - b. “He stood, as Augustine did in his day, at the divide between the two worlds of classicism and medieval Christianity and became the symbol of the new medieval world in which culture was institutionalized within the church dominated by the bishop of Rome.
 - c. Major contributions:
 - (i) He laid the foundation for the sacramental and hierarchical system that others built on in the Middle Ages.

- (ii) He also systematized doctrine and made the church a political power (Carnes. 169).

2. Background.

- a. Born in difficult times: the Eastern empire was seeking to regain that part of the Western empire lost to Teutonic tribesmen.
- b. Pillaging bands, disease, and famine were all common.
- c. He was born into an old, noble and wealthy family in Rome; given a legal education; prepared for government service; studied Latin literature extensively, but never Hebrew or Greek.
- d. He was familiar with the writings of Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, but knew little classical literature or Greek philosophy.
- e. He was made prefect of Rome in 570.
- f. Shortly afterwards, gave up his fortune inherited from his father, built seven monasteries in Italy – the most important in his father’s palace, where he became a monk. Thought asceticism was the way to glorify God.
- g. Between 578 and 586 was an ambassador for the Roman bishop at Constantinople.
- h. When he returned to Rome, was made abbot of St. Andrew’s monastery, which he had founded.
- i. Was made pope in 590 when Pope Pelagius died of the plague.
- j. His renouncing his great wealth impressed the people.
- k. He was a man of great humility, who thought of himself as “the servant of the servants of God” (167).
- l. He was a zealous missionary, instrumental in winning the English to Christianity.
- m. His legal training made him one of the ablest administrators the church of Rome had in the Middle Ages.
- n. But he was very superstitious and credulous.
- o. He had some training in sacred learning, but his ability was limited by the fact that he didn’t know the original languages of Scripture.

3. Contributions.

- a. His greatest contribution was to expand the power of the pope.
 - (i) He never claimed the title of pope, but exercised all the power of later popes.
 - (ii) He asserted the spiritual supremacy of the bishop of Rome.
 - (iii) He exercised Episcopal care over the churches in Gaul, Spain, Britain, Africa and Italy and appointed bishops in them.
 - (iv) When John the Faster, the patriarch of Constantinople, claimed the title of “ecumenical” or universal bishop, Gregory fought him. He accepted equal status, but was not willing to let anyone claim supremacy.
 - (v) However, neither the patriarch nor the Eastern Emperor would give in. But When a revolution in 602 brought a new emperor (Phocas) to the throne, Phocas sided with Gregory and acknowledged the bishop of Rome as the “head of all the churches” (167).
 - (vi) Even so, Gregory did not accept the title “universal pope,” which the patriarch of Alexandria wanted to give him. He preferred to be called “the servant of the servants of God” (168). Still, he would not allow anyone else to claim the title, he did exercise all the power of a pope, and no one dared go against his will.

- b. His missionary work.
 - (i) Commissioned Augustine (not of Hippo) to evangelize the British.
 - (ii) In 597, Augustine landed and soon won the king of Kent to Christianity.
 - (iii) They soon ran into competition with the Celtic Church as they evangelized towards the south; but in 663, the Roman faith won.
 - (iv) His able administration made the bishopric of Rome the wealthiest in his day. He used the money to protect peace in the West. When the Arian Lombard king threatened Rome during his pontificate, Gregory raised troops, forced the Lombard ruler to make peace, and won them from Arianism.

- c. Further contributions.
 - (i) Organized the Gregorian Chant: a solemn monotone in the part of worship that was chanted.
 - (ii) He was a good preacher: stressed humility and piety, but was too allegorical.
 - (iii) He wrote books.
 - (a) A commentary in which he allegorized the book of Job: “He pictured Job as a type of Christ, his wife as a type of the carnal nature, the seven sons as types of the clergy, and the three daughters as types of the faithful laity” (168).
 - (b) *The Book of Pastoral Care*: emphasizing the qualifications of a bishop and the need for introspection. Its ascetic nature appealed to the monks.
 - (c) There are also over 800 of his letters extant.
 - (iv) He was an outstanding theologian.
 - (a) Ranked with Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine as one of the four great doctors of the Western church.
 - (b) His thought laid the groundwork of theology for the Roman church throughout the Middle Ages until Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa*.
 - (c) “He believed that man was a sinner by birth and choice, but he softened Augustine’s view by asserting that man did not inherit guilt from Adam but only sin, as a disease to which all were subject. He maintained that the will is free and that only its goodness has been lost. He believed in predestination, but he limited it to the elect. Grace is not irresistible, he believed, because it is based on both the foreknowledge of God and, to some extent, the merits of man. He upheld the idea of purgatory as a place where souls would be purified prior to their entrance to heaven. He held to verbal inspiration of the Bible, but, strangely, gave tradition a place of equality with the Bible. The Canon of the Mass, which he changed somewhat, was widely used in his day; and it revealed the growing tendency to consider the Communion as a sacrifice of Christ’s body and blood each time it is performed. He also emphasized good works and the invocation of the saints in order to get their aid” (169).