

{ Lecture 14 }

**THE CHURCH OF THE MIDDLE AGES (Part 1)**  
*Key Figures and Events from the Fifth to Fifteenth Centuries*

\* \* \* \* \*

I. **The Power of the Papacy Reaches New Heights** (Leo the Great [400–461])

- Leo became the bishop of Rome on September 29, 440
  - He had already been involved in the Nestorian dispute (John Cassian had dedicated his refutation of Nestorianism to Leo)
  - In 445, he came into conflict with Dioscorus, the bishop of Alexandria (successor to Cyril of Alexandria), and contended that Alexandria should submit to Rome just as Mark (the founder of the church in Alexandria) would have submitted to Peter (the founder of the church in Rome)
  - The Egyptian Christians of Alexandria, of course, saw the ancient patriarchates (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) as equal. But Leo insisted that Rome had primacy over the others (based on apostolic succession back to Peter).
  - For example, in 446 Leo wrote a letter to Anastasius in which he asserted: “The care of the universal Church should converge towards Peter's one seat, and nothing anywhere should be separated from its Head” (*Letter XIV*).
- **Leo Strengthens Rome’s Position in the West (445–450)**
- Convinced that the Church of Rome should have primacy over all of the churches, Leo relied on political support in the West to strengthen Roman influence there.
  - In 445, he obtained a decree from Valentinian III (one of the last of the Western Roman emperors) which declared the primacy of Rome (based on succession from Peter) and threatened objectors with legal repercussions (including accusations of treason)
  - As a result, the church in Gaul (and in the rest of the Western Roman Empire) came under the ultimate authority of the Church at Rome
- **Leo Strengthens Rome’s Position in the East (449–451)**

- **The Second Council of Ephesus (449)**

- When Dioscorus convened the Second Council of Ephesus beginning on August 8, 449, to decide whether or not Eutyches should have been condemned (as he had been previously by Flavian, the Patriarch of Constantinople).
- Dioscorus wanted the view that Christ has only one nature to be declared orthodox; and wanted anyone who held to two natures to be anathematized.
- Leo sent representatives to the Council along with a letter explaining his position. But Dioscorus refused to allow the letter to be read, in part because Eutyches complained that he did not trust the representatives from Rome.
- Flavian (of Constantinople) was not given an opportunity to defend his condemnation of Eutyches. And Theodoret of Cyrus (who was not at the council) was excommunicated in absentia (as were others of the Antiochan school).
- Later reports about the Council indicated that it was characterized by physical violence and that many monks agreed with Dioscorus because they were afraid of being hurt or killed. Flavian himself may have been mortally wounded when the violence erupted.
- Both Flavian and Theodoret appealed to Leo I. When Leo learned what had happened, and that his *Tome* had not been read at the Council, he announced that the findings of the Council were null and void.
- After the Council ended, Flavian was deported into exile and died shortly thereafter.
- The injustices of Ephesus were condemned and righted at the Council of Chalcedon held two years later in 451.

- **The Council of Chalcedon (451)**

- Chalcedon was near Constantinople. Today it is part of the city of Istanbul, Turkey.
- The emperor Theodosius II had authorized the Second Council of Ephesus, and he opposed Leo's attempts to convene a new council.

- But when Theodosius II died unexpectedly, he was succeeded by Marcian who favored the views of Flavian. Marcian allowed the bishops who had been excommunicated at Ephesus II to return to their dioceses.
- Though Marcian asked Leo to oversee the council, Leo instead sent delegates to represent him. (This was probably due to the political situation in Rome at the time.) Anatolius, the new Patriarch of Constantinople, was also favorable to the views of Leo.
- Some 370 bishops attended (over against the 130 who were present at the Second Council of Ephesus).
- Leo's *Tome* was overwhelmingly approved as the orthodox position.
- The Council of Chalcedon produced the following confession:

“Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity; "like us in all things but sin.' He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the virgin Mary, the Mother of God. *\*\* (Class note: Not an attempt to elevate Mary, but rather an attempt to describe the full deity of Jesus.)*

We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation (*in duabus naturis inconfuse, immutabiliter, indivise, inseparabiliter*). The distinction between natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (prosopon) and one hypostasis.”

- The Council of Chalcedon assured Constantinople of having priority among the churches in the Roman Empire, under Rome but above both Alexandria and Antioch.
- The Council of Chalcedon also greatly strengthened the influence of the bishop of Rome in the eastern half of the Roman Empire.
- **Leo Saves Rome with Political Prowess (452)**
  - In 452, Attila the Hun invaded Italy and threatened to attack Rome.

- Leo met him and convinced him to withdraw.
- Legends have grown up around this meeting, suggesting that an angel threatened to kill Attila's army if he did not relent; or alternatively suggesting that Attila was so impressed with the Christian bishop that he relented of his own accord
- It is more likely that Leo was able to convince Attila by offering him a large amount of gold, and by pointing out the fact that Attila's army was starting to get stretched thin.
- Whatever the case, Leo's prestige and political power grew greatly as a result.
- Several years later, in 455, Leo was unsuccessful in convincing the Vandals not to sack the city of Rome. However, the extent of the damage done to the city and its citizens was reduced on account of his influence. He, moreover, convinced them not to burn the city.

**Justo Gonzalez:** "These episodes—and others like it—gave Leo great authority in the city of Rome. That he was able to do these things was due both to his personal gifts and to the political situation of the time, when the civil authorities proved incapable of performing their duties. But in Leo's mind there was a deeper reason. 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" (*The Story of Christianity*, 243).

#### ○ **Leo's Significance**

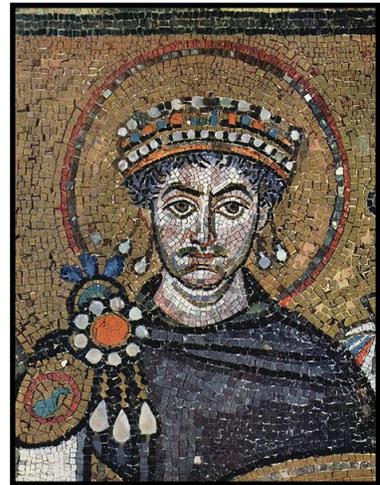
- From a Christological perspective, Leo played a significant role in the adoption of the Chalcedonian Creed.
- From an ecclesiological perspective, Leo was a staunch advocate of Roman superiority based on Petrine supremacy. His interpretation of Matthew 16:16–19 led him to conclude that Peter was the leader of the Apostles. Thus, his successors should also be considered the leaders of the Church.
- From a Protestant perspective, we would certainly disagree with both Leo's interpretation and application of Matthew 16:16–19.

- Moreover, we would assert that the idea of “apostolic succession” does not rule out the possibility of apostasy. A parallel example might be given: The high priest of Jesus’ day could legitimately claim priestly succession back to Aaron. Yet, the high priest of Jesus’ day was also apostate.
- Finally, it is important to remember that orthodoxy is evaluated through comparison to the Scriptures, not through a supposed line of succession.

## II. The Eastern Empire Regains Its Former Glory (Justinian the Great [483–565])

### ○ **Early Reign (527–532)**

- Justinian had been very close with his uncle, Justin, who was the emperor before him.
- In 525, he married Theodora; she was not part of the aristocratic class and thus Justinian received criticism. She would be a major influence in Justinian’s reign until her death in 548.
- Justinian became emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire on April 1, 527
- Early in his career, Justinian set about to revise all of Roman Law (with the help of a man named Tribonian). The result, known as the *Corpus juris civilis*, made its way to Italy and from there into Europe (where it provided the basis for much European law). It is still influential today.
- He is considered a saint by the Eastern Orthodox Church, though he was not always popular with his contemporaries (including an account possibly written by the historian Procopius)
- At one point (in 532) some businessmen in Constantinople became dissatisfied with Justinian and staged riots in the city (known as the Nika riots). Justinian responded by having at least 30,000 citizens killed, including the man who would have replaced him if he had been deposed.



### ○ **Military Conquests (527–562)**

- As a Christian Roman Emperor, Justinian felt that it was his divine obligation to restore the parts of the Roman Empire that had been lost
- He was not personally involved in these military campaigns; but his armies (under his general Belisarius, conquered large sections of territory)

- In 532, Justinian negotiated a peace treaty with the Sassanid Empire (to the East) and was thus able to concentrate on military activities to the West
- From 533–34, Belisarius and his forces retook North Africa from the Vandals; though long-term peace and stability would not really be established there until 548; it is estimated that the military endeavor cost about 100,000 pounds of gold
- From 535–540, the armies of Justinian fought with the Ostrogoths for control of Italy. Eventually, Belisarius reached the Ostrogoth capital city of Ravenna (in north eastern Italy). The Ostrogoth's offered to make him the new emperor of the Western Roman Empire. Belisarius pretended to accept their offer and then, once in Rome, he reclaimed it for Justinian.



- In the map above, the red section indicates the Eastern Roman Empire when Justinian came to the throne. The orange sections indicate territories that were regained through his military conquests.
- In 540, a strain of the bubonic plague affected the empire, and fighting was temporarily halted.
- When new hostilities broke out in the East (with the Sassanids), Belisarius returned there and fought against the Sassanids for several years. Eventually peace was again restored, finally bringing about the Fifty Years Peace in 562.
- From 541 to 554, war again broke out in Italy with the Ostrogoths. Under Belisarius and then Narses, the Byzantine armies were able to again gain control of Italy. The campaign reportedly cost 300,000 pounds of gold.

- Though Justinian’s efforts were successful during his lifetime, they were short-lived. Within 150 years, their advances in Africa and Spain would be permanently lost.
- Ironically, some historians believe that due to the expense of his military efforts, he may have actually made the Eastern Roman Empire more susceptible to attack (by stretching its resources too thin); thus, his attempts to expand the empire may have actually contributed to its decline.

○ **Theological Influence**

- Justinian saw the division over the Monophysite controversy as dangerous to the stability of his kingdom
- He attempted to maintain Chalcedonian orthodoxy (which he knew would gain him favor with the church at Rome) while not alienating the Monophysites (who had a great deal of popularity in the East); in the end, he failed to fully satisfy either camp
- At the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, the Monophysite position was condemned as heretical; though the Western Church (namely, Rome) felt that his condemnation of the *Three Chapters* went contrary to Chalcedon.
- Justinian, for his part, actively suppressed heretical groups and gave special legal advantages to Christian clergy and to monks. Other religious groups (including the pagan teachings of the Old Roman Empire) were vigorously opposed.

III. **The Western Church Expands Its Mission** (Gregory the Great [540–604])

○ **Early Life**

- Gregory was just a boy when the armies of Justinian recaptured Rome
- He was the son of Christian parents, and he excelled in education
- At one point, he became involved in Roman politics and even served as the Prefect of the City of Rome
- When his father died, Gregory converted the family home into a monastery; and Gregory himself entered into it as a monk



- He was eventually ordained as a deacon by Pope Pelagius II, who sought Gregory's help in resolving disputes in northern Italy related to the Three Chapters controversy
- In 579, Gregory was chosen by Pelagius II to be the ambassador from the Church of Rome to the Court of Constantinople; part of Gregory's mission was to obtain military aid from the emperor (Maurice) against the Lombards (who threatened to overtake Rome); but conflicts to the East made it impossible for the emperor to send military forces
- Gregory returned to Rome in 585 and was named Pelagius's successor in 590
- **Gregory's Tenure as the Bishop of Rome (590–604)**
  - Gregory I began his tenure as the bishop of Rome on September 3, 590.
  - At that time, the Roman Church's prominence had been in decline; and Gregory, for his part, admitted to having no ambition to be the bishop of Rome. He instead preferred the quiet contemplation of monastic life.
  - Gregory's influence helped to again assert the primacy of the Roman Church. He did much to improve the condition of the city itself.

**Justo Gonzalez:** Since there was nobody else to do it, [Gregory] organized the distribution of food among the needy in Rome, and he also took measures to guarantee the continuing shipments of wheat from Sicily. Likewise, he supervised the rebuilding of the aqueducts and of the defenses of the city, and the garrison was drilled until morale was restored. Since there was little help to be expected from Constantinople, he then opened direct negotiations with the Lombards, with whom he secured peace. Thus, by default, the Pope was acting as ruler of Rome and the surrounding area" (*The Story of Christianity*, 246).

- This was partly due to the successful missionary endeavors (primarily to the barbarian tribes in Europe) that took place under his leadership. Among the most famous of these is the mission of Augustine of Canterbury (not to be confused with Augustine of Hippo) to the Angles and Saxons in modern-day England. From England, additional missionaries brought Christianity to northern Germany and the Netherlands.
- *Note:* Ireland had already become Christian by this time, thanks largely to the work of Patrick (387–493) **\*(Class Note: This is St. Patrick)**, a Roman citizen (born in Britain) who had been captured by Irish raiders at the age of 14 and taken

back to Ireland as a slave. He eventually escaped from Ireland and was reunited with his family. Later he returned to Ireland as a missionary.

- From a Roman Catholic perspective, the practice of private penance (in place of public penance) began to develop during Gregory's time. He also referenced Purgatory frequently, and taught that good works in this life could lighten the torments of the purging to come. He was a wholehearted follower of Augustine of Hippo; such that what Augustine taught as possibility (e.g. Purgatory), Gregory taught as certainty.
- From a political perspective, Gregory began to forge good relations with the Franks—which would become important later (as the Roman Church would become allied with these Germanic Kings).
- He is also credited with working to improve communication and relations between the Church in the West and the Church in the East.
- Regarding Gregory's tenure:

**Justo Gonzalez:** “Gregory considered himself above all a religious leader. He preached constantly in the various churches in Rome, calling the faithful to renewed commitment. He also took measures to promote clerical celibacy, which was slowly becoming the norm throughout Italy, and which many claimed to follow but did not. Also, as bishop of Rome, Gregory saw himself as patriarch of the West. He did not claim for himself universal authority as Leo had done earlier. But he took more practical steps, which did in fact increase his authority in the West. In Spain, he was instrumental in the conversion of the Visigothic King Recared to Nicene Catholicism. To England, he sent Augustine's mission, which would eventually extend the authority of Rome to the British Isles. . . . However, it is not only for these reasons that Gregory is called 'the Great.' He was also a prolific writer whose works were very influential throughout the Middle Ages” (*The Story of Christianity*, 246–47).

#### ○ **John Calvin's Perspective on Gregory**

- John Calvin cites Gregory on a number of occasions in his *Institutes* in order to show how corrupt the Roman Catholic Church had become since the time of Gregory.
- Calvin seems to be citing Gregory primarily in order to make a rhetorical point. Calvin is not necessarily endorsing everything that Gregory taught.
- Below are two such examples:

### **Regarding the fact that many Roman Catholic priests were neglecting their responsibility as teachers of God's Word:**

It appears that in the time of Gregory some of the seeds of this corruption existed, the rulers of churches having begun to be more negligent in teaching; for he thus bitterly complains: "The world is full of priests, and yet laborers in the harvest are rare, for we indeed undertake the office of the priesthood, but we perform not the work of the office" (Gregor. Hom. 17). Again, "As they have no bowels of love, they would be thought lords, but do not at all acknowledge themselves to be fathers. They change a post of humility into the elevation of ascendancy." Again, "But we, O pastors! what are we doing, we who obtain the hire but are not laborers? We have fallen off to extraneous business; we undertake one thing, we perform another; we leave the ministry of the word, and, to our punishment, as I see, are called bishops, holding the honor of the name, not the power." Since he uses such bitterness of expression against those who were only less diligent or sedulous in their office, what, pray, would he have said if he had seen that very few bishops, if any at all, and scarcely one in a hundred of the other clergy, mounted the pulpit once in their whole lifetime? For to such a degree of infatuation have men come, that it is thought beneath the episcopal dignity to preach a sermon to the people. In the time of Bernard things had become still worse. Accordingly, we see how bitterly he inveighs against the whole order, and yet there is reason to believe that matters were then in a much better state than now. (Calvin's *Institutes*, 4.5.12)

### **Regarding the Corrupt State of the Papacy in General:**

But that I may not be forced to discuss and follow out each point singly, I again appeal to those who, in the present day, would be thought the best and most faithful defenders of the Roman See, whether they are not ashamed to defend the existing state of the Papacy, which is clearly a hundred times more corrupt than in the days of Gregory and Bernard, though even then these holy men were so much displeased with it. Gregory everywhere complains (Lib. 1 Ep. 5; *item*, Ep. 7, 25, &c.) that he was distracted above measure by foreign occupations: that under color of the episcopate he was taken back to the world, being subject to more worldly cares than he remembered to have ever had when a laic; that he was so oppressed by the trouble of secular affairs, as to be unable to raise his mind to things above; that he was so tossed by the many billows of causes, and afflicted by the tempests of a tumultuous life, that he might well say, "I am come into the depths of the sea." It is certain, that amid these worldly occupations, he could teach the people in sermons, admonish in private, and correct those who required it; order the Church, give counsel to his colleagues, and exhort them to their duty. Moreover, some time was left for writing, and yet he deploras it as his calamity, that he was plunged into the very deepest sea. If the administration at that time was a sea, what shall we say of the present Papacy? For what resemblance is there between the periods? Now there are no sermons, no care for discipline, no zeal for

churches, no spiritual function; nothing, in short, but the world. And yet this labyrinth is lauded as if nothing could be found better ordered and arranged. What complaints also does Bernard pour forth, what groans does he utter, when he beholds the vices of his own age? What then would he have done on beholding this iron, or, if possible, worse than iron, age of ours? How dishonest, therefore, not only obstinately to defend as sacred and divine what all the saints have always with one mouth disapproved, but to abuse their testimony in favor of the Papacy, which, it is evident, was altogether unknown to them? Although I admit, in respect to the time of Bernard, that all things were so corrupt as to make it not unlike our own. But it betrays a want of all sense of shame to seek any excuse from that middle period—namely, from that of Leo, Gregory, and the like—for it is just as if one were to vindicate the monarchy of the Caesars by lauding the ancient state of the Roman empire; in other words, were to borrow the praises of liberty in order to eulogize tyranny. (Calvin's Institutes, 4.7.22)

#### IV. **Islam Emerges a Major Threat** (Mohammed [570–632])

- Please see the earlier class notes on Islam. We are including this short reference in the notes here to show the chronology of these events in the Middle Ages.

**Justo Gonzalez:** Early in the seventh century, it seemed that order was about to be restored in most of the ancient Roman Empire. The Arian invaders had embraced Nicene orthodoxy. The Franks, who from the beginning had been converted to that faith, were beginning to unite in Gaul. In the British Isles, the first fruits of Augustine's mission could be seen. The Byzantine Empire still enjoyed many of the results of Justinian's conquests—particularly in North Africa, where the Vandal kingdom had disappeared.

Then something unexpected happened. Out of Arabia . . . a tidal wave of conquest arose that threatened to engulf the world. In a few years, the Persian Empire had vanished, and many of the ancient Roman territories were in Arab hands. . . . Mohammed claimed that he was not preaching a new religion, but simply the culmination of what God had revealed in the Hebrew prophets and in Jesus, who was a great prophet, although not divine as Christians claimed. (*The Story of Christianity*, 248–49)