

CHURCH HISTORY

Lesson 6 The Dark Ages: Late 300's A.D. - 1500's A.D.

This week we continue our study of church history by looking at the development and impact on theology during the period of secular history called "The Dark Ages." As I mentioned in class last week what we now see developing in church history beginning in the late 300s and up through the 1500's is a period which saw the minority Christian movement - the early church - go from being illegal and heavily persecuted, to becoming prominent worldwide, both in spreading the gospel, and in serving the needs of the Roman Government. By the early eleventh century the church will have become a power to be dealt with on a grander scale than anything the Roman Empire ever aspired to.



The church's influence through its monasteries, which protected and copied the sacred texts, and the missionary monks who went into win the barbaric countries over to Christ ahead of the Roman armies, was widespread and evident in spreading western civilization throughout Europe and Scandinavia. The impact of the church's influence within the government and the government's influence over the church are evident still today.

As an example, consider the following questions and see if you can see the church's influence then and how it impacts us today:

1. What is the significance this week of March 21st?
2. What is the significance of the following dates:
 - a. October 5, 1582
 - b. September 3, 1752
 - c. February 1, 1918
3. What is the Julian calendar?
4. What is the Gregorian calendar?
5. Who changed us from the Julian to the Gregorian...and why?

As this week we look at how the period of the Dark Ages affected theology and doctrine we need to quickly review what we learned last week about the role of the early church.

The formation of the Catholic Church, and the relationship between its head and the government's head, brought many blessings and many difficulties to the church. Beginning with Augustine the Romans saw the church as the unifying structure that would help the government achieve and maintain unity across its ever growing but somewhat fragmented empire. As a tool of the government the church was sent forth to pacify the barbarian tribes on the edges of the empire.

The unifying role of the church was further advanced by the edicts studied last week that outlawed all pagan religions, and declared Christianity the true religion of the Roman Empire. (What a turn of events from only four hundred years ago when

the reverse was true.) This led to the construction of monasteries and the dispatching of missionary monks to the outermost parts of the empire where the church became instrumental in winning to Christ that long list of tribes I cited last week in question 10, “What would the Armenians, the Ethiopians, the British Isles, the Celts, the Scots, the Burgundians, The Goths, and The Franks all have in common during this period called “The Dark Ages”?”

Also, this week we’ll see that another effect of the government’s influence and use of the church as both unifying and pacifying was the government’s position that having only one recognized church also meant having only one unified body of dogma. Thus the Roman position of one government, one church, and one body of dogma permeated the thinking and the development of doctrine during the Dark Ages. Gone was the period of reason and deep investigation into the exact meaning of scripture, and great was the presence and use of ecumenical councils to declare doctrine, and to resolve doctrinal issues. Let’s have a look at the outcome.

1. Can you find and jot down a definition for “Ecumenical Council”?
2. There were seven such councils called for between 325 and 727 A.D. Who called them (the head of what organization), and, once convened, who presided over them?
3. The Nicene Council of 325 A.D. was convened to deal with the problem of the relationship between God the Father, and Christ His Son. They were to answer such questions as “Was Christ a created being, Was the trinity actually a single being with three personalities,” etc. Two opposing views were held, one orthodox the other a theological view called Arianism. Note below our previously-identified definition for Arianism.
4. Who presided over this Council?
5. Where did the funds come from to finance the travel and the Council’s work?
6. Beyond the theological significance of the 325 A.D. and 385 A.D. Councils what political significance began during this period that continues to impact the Eastern Orthodox Church today?
7. An additional theological problem during this period was the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father. While today we readily accept the church’s position that the Holy Spirit is a part of the true deity of God this was not true early in the Dark Ages. Today we hold that the Holy Spirit is coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial with the Father and the Son. Prior to this becoming the position of the church in 381, then reaffirmed at the Council in 589, what was the doctrine of the day concerning the Holy Spirit? (Find the teachings of Macedonius, Bishop of Constantinople, 341-360, for example.)
8. A further area of troubled theology during this period centered on the human versus divine nature of Christ. Arguments raged back and forth over the influence of one over the other and were not completely settled until the Chalcedon Council of 451. Their position set out a doctrine consistent with the Christology of today. Can you define the term “Christology” and can you summarize this doctrine of Christ that the Orthodox Church still holds as a result of this Council?
9. Most of the divisions within theology and Christology positions during the Dark Ages were between the Western and Eastern Churches. These divisions highlighted the cultural differences between the two spheres. Can you identify some basic differences in thought processes between the eastern cultures and the western cultures that would surface in matters of theology, doctrine, and religious practice?
10. One final area of great division was the anthropomorphical relationship to salvation. What did Pelagius teach between 360 and 420 AD - and do we see any of this teaching evident today?
11. Compare and contrast the teaching of Pelagius with that of Augustine the great bishop of Hippo? Can you see any of Hippo’s teachings evident in Church doctrine today?

12. Finally, can you find a definition for the following? What impact, that we still see today, did the following have on the church?
- a. Cloisters
 - b. Monasticism
 - c. Asceticism
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While, in the end God's will prevailed and the Church held firm to sound doctrine the influence of the government upon it cannot be underestimated. Growing from the freedom of spirit that characterized the early church we see during the Dark Ages that Church doctrine, its theology, soteriology, Christology, and so on were now clearly documented and held as absolute within the church. To challenge the thinking of the Church would bring humiliation, ridicule and even death to those who would challenge its teachings.

I hope you're finding this study of the Church's history interesting and fruitful. Next week we'll begin looking at the Medieval Period.

May God richly bless you as you continue to study with us.

In Christ,

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