Bible 101 • Summit View Church of Christ • Spring-Summer 2026

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

501-600 C.E.

April 15, 2026

Key Dates:
496 - Clovis king of the Franks becomes a Christian, bringing the French into agreement with the bishops of Rome
527-565 - Justinian rules the Eastern (Byzantine) empire
590-604 - Gregory I is bishop of Rome

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: In the West, the church becomes a stabilizing force in society and gains prominence. In the East, the church tends to fall under the control of the state.

Key Questions: Who is in charge: the head of the church or the head of the nation/empire? How will the church survive invasions from the north and from the east?

Key Places: Rome (head of the Western church), **Constantinople** (head of the Eastern church), **Gaul/France** (support for the papacy rises there and will be influential later)

Key People: Justinian, Eastern emperor 527-565 • **Gregory I,** bishop of Rome who brought increased power to the papacy (though he never accepted the title "pope")

Church Leadership: In the West, the bishop of Rome gradually became the pope over the whole (Western) church. Highest power fluctuated between the king as ruler over church affairs and the pope as a higher authority than even the king. • In the East, patriarchs (high bishops) ruled over the churches. The emperor in Constantinople enforced his will on the church, making him its highest authority. Thus, the state often ruled the church.

OVERVIEW

• In both the East and the West, Christian culture declined even as Christianity won the day as the dominant religion—but for different reasons:
- In the East, arguments over theological issues produced continual tension in the church. The emperors (especially Justinian) tried to quash these disputes, but their use of imperial power did not produce genuine agreement throughout the church.
- In the West, continued invasions from the north, along with continued disputes (even battles) between Arian Christians and Catholic Christians, damaged the spread and influence of the church.

1) IN THE EAST

• In the 500s, the Eastern empire struggled to deal with invaders from the north and a major invasion from Persia. The Persians took Syria, Palestine, and Egypt for a while.

JUSTINIAN, Eastern Emperor 527-565

• asserted his power over the church in the hope of producing unity in the church and order in the empire
• established laws requiring all his people to be Christian:
- baptized Christians who engaged in pagan cults faced the death penalty
- pagans were ordered to go to church for instruction
- those who refused baptism could have their property confiscated and could be exiled
- pagan children were required to be baptized
- *All of this legislation tells us there was still quite a battle going on between Christianity & paganism.*
- Generally, Christians did not enact physical persecution on non-Christians themselves, but destroyed their temples and idols and Jewish synagogues and repressed non-Christian religions via legislation.

- In 529, Emperor Justinian closed the schools in Athens to eliminate pagan influence there.
- pagans were denied education

• In the 400s, the emperors had put the church to use for the purposes of the state. They did so even more in the 500s, especially under Justinian.
- Justinian called councils, controlled their proceedings, invited those he knew would support his views, and used them to condemn those he wished to condemn.
- Under Justinian (and perhaps others), the Eastern church-state relationship was "caesaropapist" (king is ruler of both the state and the church, both caesar and pope).
- Justinian dealt harshly with Christians of alternate perspectives, deposing church officers, excommunicating and sometimes banishing people, and even placing some under the death penalty. He restricted Samaritans and Jews severely, though less than Christian heretics.
- One section of Justinian's law code was titled, "On the Highest Trinity and on the Catholic Faith and That No One Dare Debate about These Matters Publicly". His philosophy was, "Priests and emperors should work in harmony, the priests offering prayers and the emperors ruling."

• In North Africa, Catholics were persecuted by Arian Christians [who believed Jesus was a slightly lesser being created by God the Father] and Donatists [who rejected the authority of the bishop of Rome and churches associated with Rome]. This persecution ended when one of Justinian's generals captured North Africa in 533 and restored Catholic dominance. Catholics oppressed Arians and Donatists again.

• 554-568, Justinian took control of parts or all of Italy.

• During the 500s, the Eastern church continued to argue over whether the Father and the Son are one or two. When the emperor settled the matter by declaring it official church doctrine that they are one, opponents gave in—but not really. The problem remained unsolved because opponents remained unpersuaded. Imperial edict concerning church doctrine failed to unite either the church or the empire.

FAST-FORWARD: Ever since this time, the church in the East has continued to be more likely than the church in the West to be dominated by political powers. Hence today we have the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, etc.

2) IN THE WEST

CLOVIS (reigned ca. 466-511)
- united the Franks, who were from the east side of the Rhine River, on the east edge of what is now France, and completed the Frankish conquest of territories of Gaul and most of what is now France
- accepted Christianity in 496 through his wife's influence and in gratitude for what he thought was God's help in battle
- his turn to Christianity set the stage for later French support of the papacy against other rulers

DEALING WITH THE AUGUSTINIAN-PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY
- In the 400s, Augustine had taught that human beings, sinful from conception, can only come to God by God's grace and his specific calling of the individual. Pelagius had argued that God has given human beings free will, and we are able to come to God on our own initiative.
- 529, The Synod of Orange (in southeastern France) generally sided with Augustine, but with modifications pulling away from his more extreme views (like predestination or irresistible grace). They affirmed the primacy of grace over human will in the process of salvation.

CONFLICTS WITH ARIANISM
- Paganism remained in Italy through the 500s, but Arianism [the variation of Christianity that considered Christ a lesser divine being created by the Father] was a bigger problem. Most of the invaders from north/central Europe had been converted to Arian Christianity.

- Conflicts between Catholics and Arians were especially pronounced in Spain; each group held power over the other at various times. The decline in Christian character and conduct spawned by these conflicts prepared the way for Islam to make strong advances in Spain later.

IMPERIAL POWER

- 549, The Council of Orleans in Gaul (France) declared bishops must be elected with the king's consent.

CULTURAL DECLINE

- The invasions of Germanic peoples devastated culture & learning, particularly on the edges of the empire. Churches and especially monasteries became centers of learning, preservation of Scripture and other church documents and literature in general, and led the way in providing education.
- In these chaotic times, the telling of stories of the lives of saints, bishops, monks, and sometimes rulers who did great things or even worked miracles brought hope to the people.

> Christianity has often been criticized for what happened here, and some criticism is doubtless deserved. In reaching for some straw of hope, Westerners simply papered over reality by restoring hagiography [biography that idealizes its subject], which often must have misled those it was designed to help. Admitting that point, however, one must recognize that the churches were the only Western institutions stable enough to do anything in a time of severe crisis. They may have undertaken too much when they tried to fill the enormous void created by the Germanic invasions. The maintenance of civilization was a subordinate part of the church's task of spreading the gospel, converting, and christianizing. It took time for enough of the latter task to be achieved that the churches could contribute more to the broader aspects of society. — *Glenn E. Hinson, <u>The Early Church</u>, 308-309*

GREGORY "THE GREAT" (lived 540-604, bishop of Rome 590-604)

- born into an old, noble, wealthy family of Rome, was appointed as prefect of Rome about 570
- shortly after that he gave up the family fortune he had inherited and used it to built 7 monasteries in Italy, including one in his father's palace; he became a monk there; his renunciation of wealth impressed the people
- he became abbot of Saint Andrew's monastery, one of the monasteries he had founded
- 590, Pope Pelagius died of the plague. Gregory was chosen to become pope. He was known as a humble man. He called himself "servant of the servants of God".

> Gregory's greatest work was to expand the power of the Roman bishop. Although he disclaimed the title of pope, he exercised all the power and prerogatives of the later popes…to assert the spiritual supremacy of the bishop of Rome. He exercised episcopal care over the churches of Gaul, Spain, Britain, Africa, and Italy…
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> …When John the Faster, the patriarch of Constantinople, claimed the title of 'ecumenical' or universal bishop, Gregory immediately gave battle. He was willing to accept a coordinate status for the patriarchs of the church, which would put them on a level as heads of the great sections of the church, but he was not willing to let anyone have the title of universal bishop. But neither the patriarch nor the Eastern emperor would give in, and Gregory had to bide his time. — *Earle E. Cairns, <u>Christianity through the Centuries</u> 161*

- Gregory was passionate about mission work and sent missionaries to England, which built up the Roman church there over the next century.
- He was a very effective administrator. Under him the properties of the pope earned great wealth. He was able to use this wealth to protect the peace in the West. Lombards, following Arian Christianity, had invaded southern Italy and taken it over. At one point the Lombard king threatened Rome, and Gregory used his wealth to raise an army and force the Lombards to make peace.
- Gregory created the Gregorian chant, which came to be important in the Roman church.
- He was a good preacher! He gave practical sermons, with stress on humility and piety. He used too much allegory (you can make Scripture mean almost anything you want by allegorizing it), but that was

common at the time. He wrote an influential commentary on Job in which Job represented Christ, Job's wife represented sinful human nature, Job's sons represented the clergy, and Job's daughters represented faithful church members.

- He came to be considered one of the great four theologians in the Western church (with Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine) prior to Thomas Aquinas.

BY 590…

- The church was free from persecution by the (Eastern) Roman state (which had long since ceased to be Roman, but continued to carry on some of the legacy of Roman culture). The church had close links to the government in Constantinople.
- The church had converted many invaders to Christianity. But so many pagans had been won to Christianity so quickly that the church could not train them all. The invaders thus brought a measure of pagan influence into the church. Worship of saints replaced old worship of heroes. Rituals with pagan roots took on Christian forms in the church. The church brought the barbarians to Christ, but the new Christians also brought a bit of paganism into the church.
- Celtic Christianity—free from Roman control—thrived in Scotland and Ireland, though not in England, where the Roman church came to hold more influence.

3) IN THE FAR EAST

- Christianity was widespread in Arabia by 500.
- Christianity also spread into north Persia and beyond.

4) THE INCREASING POWER OF THE PAPACY

- Byzantine control of the popes decreased greatly when the Lombards invaded Italy and took control of it in 568. The popes became intermediaries negotiating with the new overlords, and also between the Lombards and Constantinople.
- The papacy came to hold land all over Italy and in Dalmatia, Gaul (France), North Africa, Sardinia, and Corsica. By the end of the 500s, the Roman church was the largest single landowner in Western Europe.
- By the end of the 500s, the Roman church served as a link between many different peoples: Visigoths in Spain, Franks in Gaul, Lombards in Italy, etc.
- By the end of the 500s, the leading thought on the relationship of church and state was that because the church is many peoples each under their own political head (king), the church ruled over all, and it was the duty of kings to enforce the rule of the church. Priests were therefore superior to laypersons, and the king was to use his power to enforce the priestly word and create a just society.
- Gregory I introduced a new era of power for the Western church when he became bishop of Rome in 590. Some historians consider his rise to that position the defining line between the ancient church and of the medieval church.

5) REFLECTIONS

During the Renaissance (roughly 1300s to 1600s), the period of about 500-1000 CE was considered the "Dark Ages" because classical influence and culture were no longer present. But this period was not entirely devoid of culture. Monasteries became centers of intellectual pursuits. The Western church provided cultural and religious services to the populace. Interestingly, "the Roman Catholics thought that this era was 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—according to the Roman Catholic thinkers. Protestant historians considered the Middle Ages the valley of shadow in which the pure church of the ancient era of church history was corrupted. The modern era of church history, which began with Luther, was to them one of reformation in which the church regained the ideals of the New Testament." *— Cairns 160*