CHRISTIAN HISTORY

801-900 C.E.

May 13, 2026

Key Dates:
814 — Death of Charlemagne
858 — the Photian Schism
late 800s — Viking invasions; fall of the Carolingian (Frankish Holy Roman) Empire

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: Life in the East is stable. Society in the West, rebuilt under Charlemagne and his predecessors, declines again as his empire is divided up and Vikings invade from the north. Feudalism arises as authority is decentralized. Culture, trade, and stability suffer. Corruption grows in the papacy.

Key Questions: Will the papacy endure? Will the Vikings take over all of Europe? Can the popes in Rome tell the church in the East what to do? How will the rise of feudalism affect the church and the Christian faith?

Key Places: Rome, Constantinople, and any coastal communities attacked by the Vikings

Key People: Charlemagne (ruled 768-814) • **Pope Nicholas I** (858-867)

Church Leadership: Controlled by the emperor in the East and sometimes by kings in the West. In the West, corruption in the papacy increases as society falls apart and authority is decentralized, leaving the papacy open to seizure through bribery, violence, etc.

1) SPREAD AND STATUS OF CHRISTIANITY

- CHINA — We know Christianity had reached China by 635. Emperor Kao Tsung (649-683) became a Christian and founded monasteries throughout his realm. By the 700s and 800s Christianity's presence was significant, but by the 1100s Christianity in China was pretty much gone.
- ENGLAND — Viking invasions during this period devastated the church in England, and the culture of England as well. The invaders destroyed monasteries, burned Canterbury and London, and overthrew some local kings. The influence of Christianity in England was diminished.
- SPAIN — One section of Spain, in the mountainous far northwest, did not fall to the Muslims. It was from there that Christian forces would recapture Spain in the 1000s.

2) CHARLEMAGNE (742-814; ruled 768-814) (continued)

REVIEW: In the late 700s, Charlemagne ruled the Franks and conquered much of north and central Europe. He forced mass baptisms and required obedience to the church. He controlled the largest area in the West since the Western Roman Empire ended in 476. Pope Leo III, in gratitude for Charlemagne's assistance to him, crowned Charlemagne emperor on Christmas Day, 800. Charlemagne's empire became known as the Holy Roman Empire. He invested heavily in educating the populace and instituted religious and moral reforms in the church, which were partially effective.

- Charlemagne was about 7 feet tall and proportionately large-bodied. He had long white hair that gave him an air of dignity. He loved to hunt, ride, and swim, and enjoyed culture, as well. He was devoted to the Christian faith, though he also kept concubines in his palace in addition to his wife.

- Military Achievements: He defeated the Lombards in Italy, conquered the Saxons in Germany, and spread Christianity by force of arms. He doubled his father's territory and ultimately held all of north Italy as far south as Rome, most of modern Germany, and all of modern France. Almost all of Western Christendom was under his control—all but mainly the British Isles and the portion of north Spain not controlled by the Arabs.
- Charlemagne dreamed of reuniting the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. He offered to marry Irene, empress of the East, to bring both sections of the old empire under one crown. But Irene refused hm.
- His empire did not last long after his death. By the end of the reign of his son Louis, his grandsons and others were fighting civil wars. The empire came to be divided among Louis's three sons under the Treaty of Verdun (843). One of those sons, Charles, united most of the empire from 881 to 887, but it was divided again after he died.
- One aftereffect of Charlemagne's push to revive learning in his empire was that wherever a strong ruler brought stability and a degree of peace, schools flourished, manuscripts were copied, and some theological activity developed. *(Thinking of this dynamic, recall 1 Timothy 2:1-4. It is easier for people to come to Christ when society is stable.)*

3) PAPACY AND GOVERNMENT IN THE WEST

STATUS OF THE PAPACY

- There were 20 popes in the 84 years from 816 to 900, with an average tenure of 4.2 years each.
- After Charlemagne's empire was divided among his grandsons, they could not unite well enough to control the popes, so the popes began to exercise more freedom.
  - In August 846, Saracens (Arab Muslims) attacked Rome and raided St. Peter's and St. Paul's basilicas. The kings sent some help, but not enough. Pope Leo IV (847-855) built a protective wall around the Vatican and constructed a navy to protect against the Saracens. He went with his army and navy to Ostia (on the coast near Rome), where they defeated the Muslims and destroyed their fleet.
  - Pope Nicholas I (858-867) was one of the most effective popes of the 800s, in part because the kings of his time were rather weak, so he was seen as the only ruler over all lands. He worked to expand the power of the papacy, arguing that the pope is viceregent of Christ and therefore speaks with the authority of God; that he is supreme teacher, judge, and lawgiver; that his decisions are final and are not subject to councils; and that not even the emperor may sit in judgment on the pope. He held that spiritual authority is higher than secular authority, so the Church may direct the state, but the state may not direct the Church. The state exists to support the Church. Nicholas tried to exert his power even over the Eastern emperor—*see "The Photian Schism" below.*
- Though the popes were viewed as rulers over all Western lands (especially when the kings were weak), it was not so in Rome. In Rome, there was chaos, and the popes were hardly able to govern their own city, over which they were the bishops. To the Romans, the papacy became a prize to be gained by bribery, deceit, and violence.
  - Pope John VIII (872-882) was murdered in his own palace by one of his aides.
  - Various groups in Rome fought for the papacy, and popes changed frequently. Sometimes there were 2 or even 3 rival popes. Corruption abounded. "In 897 Stephen VI presided over what came to be known as the 'Cadaveric Council.' One of his predecessors, Formosus, was disinterred, dressed in his papal robes, and exhibited on the streets. Then he was tried, found guilty of a multitude of crimes, and mutilated. Finally, what remained of the body was thrown into the Tiber [River]." (Justo L. Gonaález, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day,* page 275)

SHIFT IN GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE AND EVERYDAY LIFESTYLE

- The Arab conquests cut off almost all trade with the East (the Middle East & the Orient). There was very little shipping across the Mediterranean. Every region had to become pretty much self-sufficient, most people had to return to the land for their living, and money almost stopped circulating. City life declined along with trade. Land became the primary source of wealth, and kings and lords paid for services with lands. **This was the birth of feudalism.**
- As landholders came to holds lands granted by various lords/kings, and so had conflicting loyalties, politics and economics were fragmented across western Europe to the point that all centralized power declined, including that of kings. This decentralization of political power made bishops, abbots, and abbesses extremely important, since bishoprics & abbeys held vast pieces of land. The authority to name those who would hold these land-controlling positions became very important politically.
- Feudal society basically had three groups: knights, who protected the people and held land in return for their service; serfs, who lived on the land and were the producers; and pray-ers, the clergy. Each manor (estate held by a lord/knight) was mostly self-sufficient (some lords might own several manors).
- The church became a massive landowner, receiving gifts of land from the repentant or the pious and holding it in perpetuity. The clergy sometimes gave land to knights in return for protection. This produced a new question: Was the local church leader (priest, bishop, etc.) to be most loyal to the local lord, to whom he was obligated for protection, or to the pope, the spiritual leader? Many nobles used the system to get their relatives into church positions, where they could acquire land and prestige. Popes and local lords argued over who could assign spiritual authority, political authority, or both. Church leaders lost spiritual focus in the effort to collect political power, manage lands, and deal with local squabbles. Where the church in the East had to struggle against imperial control, the church in the West had to fight the corruptive effects of feudalization.

NEW INVASIONS

- Magyars (who came to be called Hungarians) from the east invaded and reached as far as southern Italy. They settled in south-central Europe (including modern Hungary).
- Scandinavians (Vikings) from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark became exceptionally good at shipbuilding and mastered the seas. They first invaded England and the coasts of northern Europe down to northern France; in these areas they pillaged churches, monasteries, and palaces, where wealth was, taking treasures and slaves. They might attack any community on the coast or along a navigable river. Later they began to conquer instead of pillaging, and they settled in the places they conquered. Norsemen sacked Paris in 845 and attacked Muslim territories in Spain, too. The area they settled in northern France came to be called Normandy. Others settled in Sicily and southern Italy; some migrated east into Russia. The Vikings largely became Christians, primarily by assimilating into the cultures of the people they had conquered and of those who surrounded them.
- The Viking invasions helped to break down the Frankish Carolingian Empire, which under Charlemagne had been the Holy Roman Empire but had begun to decline after his death in 814. From the ruins of that empire, France and Germany gradually became states.
- As the Frankish Kingdom dissolved in the late 800s and the popes were less often chosen or protected by the king, it became possible for aristocratic Roman families to seize the papacy for themselves. This became a major problem during the last part of the 800s and through the 900s, in a period known as “the Great Pornocracy” because of the gross immorality associated with the papacy.

CONTROVERSIES IN THE WEST

JESUS: HOW BOTH HUMAN & DIVINE? — Some Christian leaders under Muslim rule, or recently freed from it, held to earlier Spanish liturgical practices and not Roman/French practices. Some said Jesus was truly and always divine as God's Son, but as a human being he was a mere man whom God had adopted as his Son. Western theologians and the pope condemned this belief, and the controversy subsided within a couple of generations.

PREDESTINATION — A monk named Gottschalk of Orbais tried to bring the church back to the teachings of Augustine on predestination. But Gottschalk was widely disliked by church leaders, and he was declared a heretic and imprisoned in a monastery, where he died.

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN COMMUNION — A monk named Paschasius Radbertus wrote about the communion and declared that the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of the Lord when they are consecrated. He said they become the very body to which the virgin Mary gave birth, with the same blood that was shed at Calvary. He claimed that occasionally a believer might even be able to see the literal body and blood of the Lord instead of the bread and wine. King Charles the Bald (843-877, grandson of Charlemagne) was uncertain about this teaching and asked Ratramnus of Corbie for his thoughts. Ratramnus disagreed and said the body of Christ is truly present in Communion, but not in the same way as other physical bodies—and that there is a difference between the eucharistic body of Christ present in the bread and cup and the historical body of Jesus, which is sitting at God's right hand. Paschasius's teaching was an early form of the later doctrine of transubstantiation, which became official Catholic church doctrine in 1215.

- The more the bread and wine were viewed as the actual body and blood of Christ, and the more the Communion service was viewed as a sacrifice, the more important it became for the Communion to be presided over by a priest or higher clergyman. Such views increased the power of the papacy because the pope was the head of all the clergy, who alone could preside over the Communion mass. Thus the doctrine of transubstantiation (officially adopted in 1215 and fully defined at the Council of Trent in 1545, but promoted by Paschasius Radbertus around 831) strengthened the power of both priest and pope.

IN THE EAST

- IN THE EAST, the battle over images (the Iconoclastic Controversy) continued. The emperors restored a ban on images, but they were so vicious in enforcing their ban that popular opinion grew in favor of images. The ruling empress Theodora (who died in 867) restored the use of images.
- THE PHOTIAN SCHISM — Emperor Michael III (842-867) unjustly deposed the patriarch of Constantinople, named Ignatius, and installed a man of his own choosing, Photius. In April 863, Pope Nicholas I deposed and excommunicated Photius and reinstalled Ignatius. The emperor replied in August 865 that the pope's order would not be enacted. Photius listed complaints about papal tyranny in the West and excommunicated Nicholas. In addition to this dispute, the East and West argued about the interference of Catholic (Western) missionaries in Bulgaria, which was being evangelized by Greek-speaking (Orthodox) missionaries. The emperor was assassinated in 867, and the next emperor reinstated Ignatius. Then when Ignatius died in 878, Photius was reinstalled as patriarch. When everyone involved in this dispute had died, life moved on—but the Eastern church remained offended by Nicholas's attempt to exert his authority over them.