CHURCH HISTORY
Week Three: The Imperial Church (313–590 AD)

A Christian Emperor?

Despite their treaty in Milan in 313, Licinius and Constantine battled for full control of the Roman Empire off and on for a decade until Constantine finally became sole emperor in 324. Throughout this time, Constantine continued to publicly favor Christianity. Under his leadership, destroyed churches were rebuilt and Christian clergy were exempted from paying taxes. In 330, Constantine relocated his throne to the newly built city of Constantinople, which was meant to be both the new Rome and an explicitly Christian city. However, despite his partiality toward Christianity, Constantine maintained strong ties to traditional paganism. For example, he retained the title of Pontifex Maximus, which made him the official high priest of the state pagan religion. The first coins he issued contained images of pagan gods and not Christian iconography. When he declared the first day of the week a public holiday in 321, he named it in honor of the sun rather than the Christian God. The sun was the sign of Apollo, one of the most important gods in the Roman pantheon—many scholars speculate that perhaps Constantine conflated the Christian God with Apollo, assuming they were two names for the same deity.

Despite the ambiguities surrounding his Christian commitment, Constantine played a crucial role in legalizing Christianity and putting it on the road to becoming the official imperial religion. Like earlier emperors, Constantine wanted to restore Rome’s ancient glory; unlike his predecessors, Constantine wanted to base this renewal upon Christianity rather than paganism. Constantine did receive baptism near the end of his life, which may have indicated a final break with traditional paganism as well as his personal confidence in the superiority of the Christian faith. It’s perhaps best to think of Constantine as one who, for whatever reasons, was favorable to Christianity during his reign and perhaps finally embraced the faith at the end of his life.

In 381, Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity to be the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Little by little, Europe became increasingly Christian over the course of the next six hundred years until virtually all Europeans except Jews and Muslims were at professing Christians by the dawn of the second millennium.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

From the time of Constantine until well into the Reformation, church and state worked closely together to bring about God’s purposes on earth. This included using the full power of the state to help define and defend orthodox doctrine. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the church rejected several key errors about God in general and Jesus Christ in particular. Heresies were renounced and orthodoxy was clarified through the means of ecumenical councils of bishops—the idea was that the bishops represented the church. Many of the councils were actually called by emperors, and even when they were called by church leaders, the empire cooperated with the church in enforcing the decisions of the councils. There were four main councils in the early church, each of which helped clarify key doctrines related to the Trinity and Christology.
### The Four Ecumenical Councils

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### Church, Sin, and Grace

After being radically converted around the age of thirty, Augustine served as the Bishop of Hippo from 396–430. During his ministry, he emerged as arguably the most influential theologian in church history. He was involved in two key controversies that continue to shape Christian theology and practice to the present day. The Donatists were a heterodox sect in North Africa that claimed baptism, the Lord Supper, and ordination were only valid when presided over by a bishop who was morally pure. The Donatists were concerned because some bishops had surrendered the Scriptures to the Roman authorities during the Diocletian persecution, effectively disqualifying them from Christian ministry. For the Donatists, the church is a visible society of the elect that is separated from the world unto holiness—sin in the camp can’t be tolerated, especially among church leaders.

Augustine responded that the elect are “the church within the church,” which means that every church by design includes both saved and unsaved members. The validity of the church’s sacraments and ceremonies isn’t dependent upon the purity of the church’s leaders, but rather upon the fact that they’ve been celebrated within the context of the true church. For Augustine, the true church meant the visible church, not the elect alone. Because the empire was now officially Christian, Augustine argued the state should compel the Donatists to conform to mainstream Christian practice.

Perhaps because the Donatists also championed exclusive believer’s baptism, Augustine argued for the importance of infant baptism. Like many Church Fathers, Augustine believed infant baptism washed away the effects of original sin. In the century after Augustine, infant baptism would finally supplant believer’s baptism as the normative practice for Christian families. By the early medieval era, rejecting infant baptism was a capital crime in most of Europe.
Augustine’s second major controversy was with Pelagius, an English monk who argued that Adam’s original sin has no effect on the rest of the human race. Pelagius claimed people are born without sin, we only become sinners once we choose to sin, and some people never choose to sin. For Pelagius, there are two ways to be saved: some people perfectly obey all of God’s commands, and some people trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation. Furthermore, because sin doesn’t affect human free will in any way, even those who believe in Jesus simply choose to do so without any divine intervention from the Holy Spirit.

Augustine responded that Adam’s original sin affected all humanity—we are born as sinners, which leads all people to inevitably and habitually choose to sin. Furthermore, our free will has been so corrupted by the fall that we never totally choose the good—even our best choices are tainted by sinful motivations. All people must trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation, but none will do so without God’s enabling grace to believe, which is a gift he bestows only upon the elect he chose to save before the foundation of the world.

The church agreed with Augustine’s critique of Pelagius, but there was widespread disagreement about Augustine’s alternative. Many “semi-Pelagians” agreed with Augustine that we are born sinners and thus inevitably and habitually choose to sin, but they disagreed with his idea that we need special grace to believe in Jesus Christ. Semi-Pelagians argued that belief is a simply free will decision—once we believe, God gives us the grace to complete our salvation. Though semi-Pelagianism was officially rejected at the Council of Orange in 529, it became the default view of most medieval Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Monks and Missionaries

During the third century, a growing number of Christians were convinced that the best way to please God was to separate from the world and devote themselves to Bible study, prayer, and meditation. Early on, male monks lived by themselves while female monks clustered into small groups (for protection). The most famous of the solitary monks was Anthony, who lived in the desert of North Africa until he died when he was 105 years old. One of Anthony’s protégés, Pachomius, pioneered communal monasticism when he began gathering male monks into small communities in North Africa. These communities evolved into the earliest monasteries.

A number of key Christian leaders were influenced by Anthony and Pachomius. Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers popularized the idea that the monastic life was inherently more holy than the ordinary Christian life. John Chrysostom, the leading preacher of the late fourth century, argued that even pastors should embrace celibacy and simplicity. Augustine agreed with Chrysostom—the former wanted to be a monk before he was literally forced to become a bishop by the people of Hippo. Jerome, who translated the full Bible into Latin, founded a monastery in Bethlehem. By far the most important monk was Benedict of Nursia, who founded several monasteries in northern Italy and wrote a monastic rule that became the guidebook for the Benedictine Order, the most influential monastic order for most of the Middle Ages.

Many monks also transformed their monasteries into missions outposts that intentionally spread the faith to unevangelized parts of Europe. The most famous monastic missionaries were located in the British Isles. Patrick of Ireland (389–461), a former slave-turned-monk, trained hundreds
of missionary monks to spread the gospel all over Ireland. In thirty years, Patrick and his associates planted 200 churches and baptized around 100,000 converts. A couple of generations later Columba (521–597) followed the same model. Columba established a monastery on the island of Iona that sent hundreds of missionaries all over Scotland and northern England.

**Barbarians and Popes**

Between 410 and 476, northern invaders conquered and occupied most of western Europe, a transition that was later called the “fall” of the Roman Empire. Some of the so-called barbarians were pagans, while others were Arians. The barbarians assimilated with the indigenous peoples they conquered and, over time, most of Europe was divided into hundreds of smaller kingdoms that were dominated by a feudal economy. Virtually all the barbarians and their descendants gradually became Christians between 500 and 900. Sometimes the conversions came about through preaching and missions, but often the barbarians were converted through conquest. By the time the Middle Ages began around the turn of the seventh century, it was common practice to force baptism upon newly conquered subjects.

A new institution slowly filled the leadership vacuum created with the collapse of the western Roman Empire: the papacy. Roman bishops had been arguing for their unique authority since at least the third century, but two popes played a key role in creating the papacy. Leo I (440–461) argued that the pope is preeminent because of Petrine succession, claimed the title *Pontifex Maximus* for the Bishop of Rome, and was the first Roman bishop to be buried under what is now St. Peter’s Basilica. When Attila the Hun attempted to invade Rome in 451, the emperor fled the city—it was Leo who met with Attila and persuaded the barbarian general to spare the city. Leo is probably the first pope in the sense that we use that term today.

Gregory I (590–604) was the first monk to become a pope. Prior to becoming a monk, Gregory had served as a secular prefect in Rome, and prior to becoming pope, Gregory served as his predecessor’s representative in Constantinople. Gregory’s administrative giftedness, diplomatic experience, and monastic values influenced his time as pope. Under his influence, the papacy took upon itself many of the prerogatives previously held by the emperor, including negotiating with foreign powers, acquiring property for Rome, and appointing governors over Italian cities. Gregory was also a gifted theologian who wrote a pastoral handbook and developed the concept of the seven deadly sins. Gregory is the last of the Church Fathers and the first medieval pope. The start of his papacy in 590 is frequently cited as the beginning of the Middle Ages.

The last member of the royal family living in Rome was executed in 476, marking the end of the old Roman Empire in western Europe. But Constantine had moved the imperial capital to Constantinople in 330 and the imperial bloodline continued in that city. Though Constantinople claimed to represent the Roman Empire throughout the Middle Ages, most historians call this the Byzantine Empire to distinguish it from the old Roman Empire. As the Middle Ages began, western Christians increasingly preferred to call themselves *Catholics*, while eastern Christians preferred to call themselves *Orthodox* (though everyone liked both terms). What began as two different trajectories within one church gradually developed into two different churches.