

Church History (13): The Fall of Rome and Conversion of the Barbarians

The phrase *Medieval Ages* literally means "between ages," and refers to the nearly thousand years between the patristic and reformation eras (500-1517). "The first 500 years of Christianity we usually call the early church. The next 1,000 years are known as the Middle Ages" (Calhoun).¹ Five events mark the first half of the Medieval Ages (500-1000): the fall of Rome and conversion of the barbarians; the rise of Islam; the crusades; the rise of Eastern Orthodoxy; and the formal rise of Roman Catholicism.

I. The Fall of Rome and Conversion of the Barbarians

1. *The fall of Rome.* Rome was the capital of the Roman Empire in the West (as Constantinople was in the East). In 376, German tribes (Goths), in fear of the Huns, fled down into the Eastern Roman Empire. "It was the first tribe of barbarians to enter the Empire" (Kuiper).² But they were eventually defeated by Theodosius. "Having failed in the East, the Goths, attacked the western part of the Roman Empire. In 410 Rome was laid waste by the Goths under Alaric. The barbarians broke into the city by night. For six days and nights the barbarians trooped through the city. Soon the streets were wet with blood. The city which had plundered the world was now itself plundered" (Kuiper).³ "The goths who sacked Rome in 410 were one of the various Germanic tribes who lived north of the river Danube, covering a vast area which took in not only modern Germany, but present-day Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and south-eastern Russia" (Needham).⁴ "The Vandals crossed the Rhine in 407, wandered across France and Spain, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 429, took Carthage in 439, and took Rome from the Goths in 455" (Gonzalez).⁵ Thus, by the middle of the fifth century, what was once the Western Roman Empire, was under the rule of the Goths and Vandals. "Although each of these several tribes set up a German-ruled kingdom within the confines of the empire, only the Franks in Gaul and the Anglo-Saxons in Britain managed to perpetuate their kingdoms longer than a few centuries" (Shelley).⁶

In all of this, after the fall of Rome, there was one unifying factor. There were then many competing tribes and feudal units. The only thing that held society together was Christianity. Christianity had spread beyond the cultural bounds of the Roman Empire into barbarian Europe just in time so that when Rome fell, Christianity did not fall with it. Christianity was already the religion of many of the barbarians who were invading the Roman Empire. Kenneth Clark said in his book *Civilization*, 'If you had asked the average man of the time to what country he belonged, he would not have understood you. But he would have known what bishopric he belonged to.' The idea of belonging to England or France or Germany would not have been a thought of someone of that time. The unifying factor in all of the confusion of the Middle Ages was Christianity.⁷

Although the city of Rome had fallen to the barbarians, the church in Rome remained the center of Christianity in the West. "Rome was a great center of Christianity during this second 500-year period. The other great center of Christianity was Constantinople. It became known as the 'second Rome.' Constantinople became a great city when the emperor Constantine moved the capital to that city in

¹ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:1

² B.K Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 91

³ B.K Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 92

⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:319

⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:232

⁶ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 164

⁷ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:2

the fourth century. There were other great centers of Christianity, but at that time no other cities could compete with Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East" (Calhoun).⁸ "The Roman Empire fell, but the Church survived. When the smoke and dust cleared away there stood intact among the blackened ruins of the Empire the Church, ready to bless and educate the barbarians who had caused this ruin" (Kuiper).⁹

2. *The conversion of the barbarians.* After Rome was taken for the second time by the barbarians (476), they gathered into groups and populated what's now called Europe. "The fall of the western Roman Empire created a number of independent kingdoms, each of which was of great significance for the later history of the church in its territory" (Gonzalez).¹⁰ "Within this period there was a new map of Europe that emerged. It was no longer a map of the Roman Empire. Europe was divided among many barbarian tribes—the Goths, Franks, Saxons, and many others. While the Roman Empire no longer existed, modern Europe had not yet emerged either. England, Italy, France, and Germany were not on the map yet. Europe was divided into barbarian kingdoms (Calhoun).¹¹ These newly formed lands were largely populated by Arian Christians and heathen. "Of these new Germanic kingdoms, the Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians, were Arians, while the Franks, Anglo-Saxons and Jutes remained Pagan" (Needham).¹² "The Church within five hundred years from its birth conquered the highly civilized heathenism of the Roman Empire. In the course of the next five hundred years, after the fall of the Empire in the West, it conquered the barbarous heathenism of northern Europe" (Kuiper).¹³

The conversion of the new and savage races which enter the theatre of history at the threshold of the Middle Ages, was the great work of the Christian church from the sixth to the tenth century. Already in the second or third century, Christianity was carried to the Gauls, the Britons and the Germans on the borders of the Rhine. But these were sporadic efforts with transient results. The work did not begin in earnest till the sixth century, and then it went vigorously forward to the tenth, though with many checks and temporary relapses caused by civil wars and foreign invasions. The Christianization of Northern and Western Europe was at the same time a process of civilization, and differed in this respect entirely from the conversion of the Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the preceding age. Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the alphabet, literature, agriculture, laws, and arts of the nations of Northern Europe.¹⁴

The task of converting these northern peoples was enormous. To bring them to a nominal adherence to Christianity was not so difficult, because they wanted to enter into the grandeur that was Rome. Christianity was, in their eyes, the Roman religion. But to tame, refine, and educate these peoples; to transmit to them the best of the culture of antiquity; to teach them the Christian creed; and, above all, to instill in them even an ounce of Christian behavior—all that was another matter.¹⁵

Before we discuss some of the missionaries that went up into northern Europe after the fall of Rome, we must remember that Christianity had already entered this area 100 years before (for example,

⁸ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:3

⁹ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 93

¹⁰ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:231

¹¹ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:1

¹² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:322

¹³ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 100

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:17

¹⁵ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 165

Pelagius was from Britain). "Most of the missionaries of that earlier period are unnamed and unknown. They were men and women who went out with the Gospel. As they went for various purposes—business, the military, or something else—they faithfully took the Gospel with them. In that way, the Gospel went to the limits of the Roman Empire and even beyond. Because of the work of those people, when the barbarians began to enter the Roman Empire, they had already heard of Christ. The missionaries had gone beyond the limits of the Roman Empire, and so when the barbarians attacked Rome, if they were not already Christians, they had at least been evangelized" (Calhoun).¹⁶ But it was following the fall of Rome, that the church began to formally send missionaries into Northern Europe. Four important missionary centers emerged.

The missionary movement during the second 500 years of Christianity had four centers. One center was Rome. Rome was primarily sending missionaries to the north. The most important of those missions was that sent by Gregory the Great to England. The missionary was Saint Augustine of Canterbury. Persia, in the East, became a center as Persian monk missionaries traveled the old Silk Road all the way to China. They established the Nestorian church in China in the seventh century. The fourth great center of missionary activity in the medieval period was Constantinople, with missionaries going north to the Slavs and north and east into Ukraine and Russia. So there were four distinct centers of missionary impetus. There were other minor centers, but the four significant centers of missionary activity were Rome, England, Persia, and Constantinople.¹⁷

(1) Rome. Although Rome was no longer the capital of the Roman Empire in the West, its church and bishop remained very influential. Gregory the Great (540-604) served as Patriarch of Rome from 590-604. Though he was a very zealous Christian and missionary, he is often referred to as the first pope. This is because he taught "that the Lord's Supper is a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ, that the saints can be of help to us, and that there is a purgatory" (Kuiper).¹⁸ "Gregory was a devout disciple of Augustine of Hippo in his theology, but he blended Augustine's theology with other elements drawn from the popular religious beliefs and practices of his own day" (Needham).¹⁹ "Gregory was concerned to extend the limits of the church. He was the great missionary pope. He was one of the first examples since the days of Paul of someone who had a carefully planned and calculated mission. He was a missionary strategist. Gregory promoted the spread of Christianity in the continent of Europe" (Calhoun).²⁰ The writings of Gregory were widely read in the Middle Ages, especially his treatise entitled, *On Pastoral Rule*. "His book *Pastoral Rule* became the standard textbook on the ministry throughout the Middle Ages in the West, and is generally reckoned to be a classic work on the subject" (Needham).²¹

In relation to Rome, it may be proper to speak of the conversion of the Franks. This clan occupied the northern part of Gaul. This conversion took place in the latter part of the fifth century and gave Rome an ally in spreading the gospel further north into Britain (who then took the gospel further north into Denmark and Norway). "The conversion of the Franks to orthodox Christianity was an event of the greatest importance. It was to have tremendous consequences for the future of the Church"

¹⁶ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:1

¹⁷ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:2-3

¹⁸ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 101

¹⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:333

²⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:3

²¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:335

(Kuiper).²² For example, Philip Schaff said, it was to Rome, aided by the influence of France, that England was Christianized.²³

The Franks were converted directly to orthodox Christianity. The story of the conversion of the Franks has to do with a queen named Clothilda and a king, her husband, Clovis. Clothilda was an orthodox Christian. She married the king of the Franks, Clovis, and she began right away to try to convert him to Christianity. It was not easy, but she eventually prevailed. Clovis became a Christian in 496, and when he became a Christian all the Franks became Christians. In those days, when the king made a choice about a religious allegiance, the people were forced to join him, whether they wanted to or not. The idea of individual conversion was not as prevalent as that of group conversion. So the king, Clovis, and the people of the Franks, were converted in 496.²⁴

(2) England. Gregory the Great sent Augustine of Canterbury (d. 406) to England in 595 (not to be confused with Augustine of Hippo). Though Christianity arrived in Britain before Augustine, it was almost nonexistent by his arrival. "With the conquest of the Anglo-Saxons, who were heathen barbarians, Christianity was nearly eradicated in Britain. Priests were cruelly massacred, churches and monasteries were destroyed, together with the relics of a weak Roman civilization" (Schaff).²⁵ "Augustine and his fellow missionaries had to start their evangelization of Anglo-Saxon England practically from scratch" (Frend).²⁶ Augustine became bishop of Canterbury in 601, and it would be under the leadership of Augustine that England would become a strategic base for missionary activity into north-west Europe.

During the Roman period in British history, the first through fourth centuries, the people of Britain were Christianized. Many converted, or at least heard the Gospel, from the soldiers who came from Rome, from merchants, from women, and from others who traveled up from the Roman Empire to settle in Britain. When the Romans withdrew and the empire began to shrink and fall apart in the fourth century, it left a vacuum in Britain. That vacuum was filled by Germanic invaders, called Anglo-Saxons. The Anglos and the Saxons began to pour in. Those people were not Christians. They were still pagans. The old Romanized, Christianized Britons were then pushed into the corners of the country, mainly into Wales the north. The Christian Britons understandably, but sadly, did not try to evangelize the invaders. That would have been a difficult thing, to preach the Gospel to someone who was taking your land and pushing you away from the place where you had always lived.²⁷

England produced two well-known missionaries in Patrick (385-461) and Boniface (675-754). (a) Patrick (385-461). "Obscurity veils much of the life of Patrick, and historians argue about the details, born in England, he was the son of a deacon and grandson of a presbyter. A band of Irish criminals kidnapped him in his youth, and sold him into slavery for six years in Ireland. It was during this period as a slave that Patrick experienced conversion; the faith he had learned in childhood became a living reality in his soul amid the harshness of a slave's existence" (Needham).²⁸ Patrick himself

²² B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 97

²³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:30

²⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:2

²⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:30

²⁶ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 793

²⁷ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 21:1

²⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:338

wrote in his *Confessions*, "I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many. My father was a deacon, and a son of a presbyter. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people—and deservedly so, because we turned away from God, and did not keep His commandments, and did not obey our bishops, who used to remind us of our salvation."²⁹ "In his early twenties, he escaped slavery, went to France, and devoted himself to a life of Christian service" (Ferguson).³⁰ "Patrick returned to Ireland to evangelize its largely Pagan population. To this Patrick devoted the rest of his life crusading against the supernatural powers of Pagan religion that reined in Ireland, and conquering all their dark magic in the mighty strength of Christ" (Needham).³¹ "The Ireland to which Patrick came in about AD 435 was still a rough and violent land. When the slave-turned-missionary landed in Ireland, he was about to usher in a new faith that would revolutionize Celtic culture" (Litfin).³² Patrick himself said, "I am greatly in debt to God Who has bestowed His grace on me so largely, that many people were born again to God through me. The Irish, who never had the knowledge of God and worshipped only idols and unclean things, have now become the Lord's people, and are called sons of God; and the sons and daughters of Irish kings are now monks and virgins of Christ."³³ "Patrick's missionary labors were so successful that he is often called 'the apostle of Ireland'" (Needham).³⁴

I came to the people of Ireland to preach the Gospel, and to suffer insult from the unbelievers, bearing the reproach of my going abroad, and many persecutions even unto bonds, and to give my free birth for the benefit of others; and, should I be worthy, I am prepared to give even my life without hesitation and most gladly for His name, and it is there that I wish to spend it until I die, if the Lord would grant it to me. I must accept with calmness whatever befalls me, be it good or evil, and always give thanks to God, who taught me to trust in Him always without hesitation, and who must have heard my prayer so that I, however ignorant I was, in the last days dared to undertake such a holy and wonderful work—thus imitating somehow those who, as the Lord once foretold, would preach His Gospel 'for a testimony to all nations before the end of the world.' So we have seen it, and so it has been fulfilled: indeed, we are witnesses that the Gospel has been preached unto those parts beyond which there lives nobody.³⁵

(b) Boniface (675-754). "Around the year 675 in the area of Wessex, England, a child by the name of Wynfrid was born. He is known to history as Boniface. A young man of considerable intellectual gifts, he committed himself to the monastic way of life and became an itinerant evangelist. Around 716, he was commissioned by Gregory II to Germany. He was martyred for Christ in 754" (Ferguson).³⁶ "After they were converted, the English became great missionaries. They labored among the heathen in the northern part of the European continent. The greatest of these missionaries was Boniface. He crossed the Rhine into Germany, and there he won many converts" (Kuiper).³⁷

One of the greatest gods of the German heathen was Thor. Boniface cut down a big oak which was believed to be sacred to that god. The heathen looked on with awe, expecting that Thor, the god of thunder, would strike him down with lightning. When

²⁹ Patrick, as quoted by Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 137

³⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 54

³¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:338

³² Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 259

³³ Patrick, as quoted by Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:338

³⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:338

³⁵ Patrick, as quoted by Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 141-142

³⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 90

³⁷ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 99

nothing happened to him the heathen gave up their belief in Thor, and accepted Christianity. Of the wood of the oak the missionary built a chapel. To this day Boniface is known as 'the Apostle of Germany'.³⁸

(3) Persia. By Persia is meant central Asia, or modern-day Iraq and Iran. "Missionary expansion was not only to the north. It also went to the Far East, to the nomads of central Asia, and then all the way to China" (Calhoun).³⁹ The Persian church is sometimes called the Nestorian church as it took its Christology from Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople from 428-431. If you remember, Nestorius preferred the term *Christotokos* (Bearer of Christ), rather than *Theotokos* (Bearer of God). His views were condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and he was deposed as Patriarch. David Calhoun suggests, the Persian church was more orthodox than it appeared, as "it may have been more of a matter of theological misunderstanding."⁴⁰ Either way, the Nestorian church in the East became a missionary base beginning in the fifth century, taking the gospel further east to China in the early seventh century. "In the second 500 years, Christianity not only survived in Persia, but it also spread vigorously all the way from Persia to China. By 635 Persian missionaries had reached the capital of the Tang dynasty in China, which they considered the end of the world. We need to be aware that Christianity, and churches, were in China—and great churches were built there—before the days of the modern missionary movement" (Calhoun).⁴¹

The first Christian church was built in Chang-an in 638. So only three years after the first missionary arrived, there was already a Christian church in the largest city in the world, the capitol of one of the most advanced cultures in the world. Despite persecution from Buddhists, Christianity grew. It seemed that China would become a great center for Christianity, as Constantinople and Rome had become. The Nestorian church almost totally disappeared, however, in the ninth century. After such a promising beginning, with high hopes that Christianity would have a strong Eastern base, the church in China virtually disappeared.⁴²

(4) Constantinople. "About the time that Christianity was disappearing in China it was beginning to take new life in the other end of Asia, in Russia, Ukraine, and among the Slavic peoples of Europe. Missionaries were pressing from Constantinople up into the north among the Slavic people. Constantinople was at the time the center of the Eastern part of the church, even though the church was not officially divided between the Eastern and Western halves until 1054. The missionaries from Constantinople were restricted in their movement to the east and the south by Islam, which was pressing in on the very borders of Constantinople at the time. Thus the natural direction for the movement of Christian missionaries from Constantinople was to the north" (Calhoun).⁴³

Two Greek brothers, Cyril and Methodius, were sent by the emperor in 862 to preach in modern-day Austria. These two missionaries who moved to Austria produced an alphabet and translated the Bible into Slavonic. They also translated liturgies, or a service book, into Slavonic. This was quite different from the missionary strategy of Rome. The missionaries of Rome took Latin with them and taught the people to read the Latin Bible, and they conducted Mass in Latin. The Eastern missionaries, however,

³⁸ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 99-100

³⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:3

⁴⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:5

⁴¹ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 19:5

⁴² David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:3

⁴³ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:4

did not usually use Greek, but rather they translated the Bible and the liturgy into the language of the people to whom they were ministering.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 20:4