

Church History (15): The Crusades

The Crusades were a series of military campaigns that lasted less than two hundred years (1096-1270). These were organized by the church in the West (France, Germany, Britain) in response to the Islamic advance.

The Crusades were armed pilgrimages to Jerusalem under the banner of the cross. They form one of the most characteristic chapters of the Middle Ages and have a romantic and sentimental, as well as a religious and military, interest. They were a succession of tournaments between two continents and two religions, struggling for supremacy – Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam. Such a spectacle the world has never seen before nor since, and may never see again.¹

There had been a long tradition of warfare between Christians and Muslims before the Crusades. The Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Empire had been fighting each other in and around Asia Minor ever since the Muslim armies first came streaming out of Arabia in the 7th century. However, the wars of the Byzantines against the Muslims were not Crusades. This is because they were *not* wars led by the Church for a religious purpose (as the Crusades were): the Byzantine-Muslim wars were 'ordinary' wars, led by the Byzantine state for reasons of national self-defense, or the reconquest of Byzantine territory which the Muslims had seized.²

I. The Crusades

1. *The purposes of the Crusades.* "The immediate causes of the Crusades were the ill treatment of pilgrims visiting Jerusalem and the appeal of the Greek emperor, who was hard pressed by the Turks. Nor may we forget the feeling of revenge for the Muslims for their invasions of Italy and Gaul (France)" (Schaff).³ "

For several centuries, western Europe poured her fervor and her blood into a series of expeditions whose results were at best short-lived, and at worst tragic. What was hoped was to defeat the Moslems who threatened Constantinople, to save the Byzantine Empire, to reunite the Eastern and Western branches of the church, to reconquer the Holy Land, and in doing all this to win heaven.⁴

(1) To regain Jerusalem. Islam conquered Jerusalem in 637. For most Christians (especially in the West), Jerusalem was viewed as sacred. For the next 400 years, the Muslims allowed Christian pilgrims to visit Jerusalem at the cost of a tax. "From an early day Jerusalem was the goal of Christian pilgrimage. The Holy Land became to the imagination a land of wonders, filled with the divine presence of Christ. To have visited it, to have seen Jerusalem, to have bathed in the Jordan, was for a man to have about him a halo of sanctity" (Schaff).⁵ In 1076, the Turks swarmed westward out of Central Asia taking control of Jerusalem. These Muslims were less tolerant of Christians, and began attacking the pilgrims. Reports of robberies, beatings, killings, disrespect of holy sites and the kidnapping for ransom of the city's patriarch made their way back to Europe. "A rude and savage tribe, they heaped, with the intense fanaticism of new converts, all manner of insults and injuries upon the Christians. Many were imprisoned or sold into slavery. Those who returned to Europe carried with them a tale of

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:214

² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:199

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:221

⁴ Justo Gonzalez, *The story of Christianity*, 1:292

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:214

woe which aroused the religious feelings of all classes" (Schaff).⁶ Thus, the Crusades were intended to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims and secure a safe passage for pilgrimage. "The aim of the Crusades was the conquest of the Holy Land and the defeat of Islam" (Schaff).⁷ "The Crusades were a series of military expeditions to the Middle East by Western Christians, inspired and blessed by the Church, with the aim of recapturing the Holy Land (especially Jerusalem) from the Muslims" (Needham).⁸

(2) To stop the advance of Islam. "The Islamic Arabs took away from the Eastern Empire the provinces of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa. From Africa they swept victoriously with the speed of a whirlwind through Spain into the heart of France" (Kuiper).⁹ The lands conquered by the Muslims were Christian. So as a result of the Islamic conquests the Church lost immense territory. By the eleventh century, most coastal cities of Eastern Europe were controlled by Islam, and hundreds of thousands of Europeans were taken back to Arabia as slaves. The Crusades were fundamentally attempts to defensively push back the Muslims, and keep them from taking all of Europe. "The Crusades were really an attempt to do something about Islam" (Calhoun).¹⁰

The Crusades to the East were in every way defensive wars. They were a direct response to Muslim aggression—an attempt to turn back or defend against Muslim conquests of Christian lands. The Crusades were a response to more than four centuries of conquests in which Muslims had already captured two-thirds of the old Christian world. At some point, Christianity as a faith and a culture had to defend itself or be subsumed by Islam. The Crusades were that defense.¹¹

(3) To liberate oppressed Christians in the East, and reconcile the Western and Eastern Church. "By 1070 the Arab Muslims were supplanted in the East by the Turks. These also were Muslims, and they invaded Asia Minor and took control of Palestine, Syria, North Africa, and were seriously threatening Constantinople" (Kuiper).¹² This meant, the capital of the Byzantine Empire (the remains of the Roman Empire in the East), was under attack. In 1095, emperor Alexius (emperor from 1081-1118), sent ambassadors to Pope Urban II for help. "If the West were to save the Byzantines from that threat, it was to be expected that relations between the two branches of the church, broken since 1054, would be restored" (Gonzalez).¹³ Thus, this was in part why the Eastern church funded and promoted the Crusades: to liberate Western Christians oppressed by Muslims, and to possibly reconcile the fractured church. "The Holy War was the papacy reaching for universal sovereignty, one united Church, West and East" (Shelley).¹⁴

2. *The motivation of the Crusades.* The Crusaders largely came from France, Germany, and Britain. They were peasants, land-owners, clergy, and professional soldiers. Their motives for fighting were varied and mixed. (1) Religious zeal. Many Crusaders fought from a sincere desire to honor Christ. "We must always remember that the Crusades were genuine expressions of popular religious enthusiasm. Hundreds of thousands of Western European men sincerely wanted to free the tomb of Christ from the Muslims, as an act of devotion to their Savior" (Needham).¹⁵ "As we wonder about

⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:214

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:214

⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:199

⁹ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 168

¹⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

¹¹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

¹² B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 168

¹³ Justo Gonzalez, *The story of Christianity*, 1:292

¹⁴ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 202

¹⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:201-202

the motives of the crusades, there were probably some individuals who were motivated out of true sincerity. At that time, what the church, bishop, or pope said was the word of God. So there were very sincere people who believed they were hearing the voice of God in the calls for the crusades" (Calhoun).¹⁶ Thus, Urban II promised: "All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant them through the power of God with which I am invested."

(2) Material gain. "The Middle East opened up for the Crusaders a huge field for conquest. The Crusades were attractive because they offered the noble warrior a chance to prove how good a fighter he was and achieve military glory for himself. These secular motives must have played a part in the Crusades, but we have to recognize that a deeply religious concern lay at the bottom of it all, however misguided it may have been" (Needham).¹⁷ "Doubtless, the gospel was unnecessarily sullied by the granting of indulgences to participants in the Crusades and perhaps by the prospect of worldly fame to be won in the name of Christ. But we would be shortsighted if we thought the Crusades were exclusively expressions of crass military imperialism. For what promoted the Crusades was Islamic military expansionism—the invasion of entire nations where the Christian faith had once flourished" (Ferguson).¹⁸

3. *The number of the Crusades.* From 1095-1204 there were four major Crusades, and from 12012-1291 there were several smaller Crusades. (1) The First Crusade (1095-1099). After Emperor Alexius appealed for help in 1095, in the following November the famous Council of Clermont, Southern France was held which decreed the First Crusade. The Council was comprised of a vast number of church officials along with Urban II. "On the ninth day, Urban II addressed the multitude from a platform erected in the open air. The address was the most effective sermon ever preached. It stirred the deepest feelings of the hearings and was repeated throughout all Europe" (Schaff).¹⁹ After the sermon, the crowds responded with what would become the battle cry of the Crusades, "God wills it." To this Urban II responded, "It is the will of God. Let these words be your war-cry when you unsheathe the sword. You are soldiers of the cross. Wear on your breasts or shoulders the blood-red sign of the cross. Wear it as a token that his help will never fail you, and the pledge of a vow never to be recalled." "All Europe was suddenly united in a common and holy cause, of which the supreme pontiff (Urban II) was beyond dispute the appointed leader" (Schaff).²⁰

O what a disgrace if such a despised and base race, which worships demons, should conquer a people which has the faith of omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ! With what reproaches will the Lord overwhelm us if you do not aid those who, with us, profess the Christian religion! Let those who have been accustomed unjustly to wage private warfare against the faithful now go against the infidels and end with victory this war which should have been begun long ago. Let those who for a long time, have been robbers, now become knights. Let those who have been fighting against their brothers and relatives now fight in a proper way against the barbarians. Let those who have been serving as mercenaries for small pay now obtain the eternal reward. Let those who have been wearing themselves out in both body and soul now work for a double honor. Behold! on this side will be the sorrowful and poor, on that, the rich; on this side, the enemies of the Lord, on that, his friends. Let those who go not put off the journey, but rent their lands and collect money for their expenses;

¹⁶ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

¹⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:204

¹⁸ Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of Our LORD*, 124

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:227

²⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:227

and as soon as winter is over and spring comes, let them eagerly set out on the way with God as their guide.²¹

The First Crusade came in two waves. The first wave is often called the People's Crusade. It entailed more than 20,000 peasants, largely gathered and led by Peter the Hermit. They were brutally defeated by the Turks with no survivors. "A French monk named Peter the Hermit (1050-1115), claiming to be guided by visions, went about preaching the Crusade with an almost evangelistic passion. He gathered an army of some 20,000 ordinary people, mostly peasants (not knights). They were massacred by the Turks – it was a case of an unruly mob of poorly armed peasants fighting professional Turkish soldiers" (Needham).²² Following this failed attempt, there followed a more formal and organized effort. More than 300,000 trained soldiers travelled south from Europe into Asia Minor and retook Antioch, Nicea, Edessa, and in 1099 they took Jerusalem. "They captured Jerusalem in June 1099 after a siege of six weeks. Once inside the Holy City, the Crusaders spared no-one; they carried out a merciless massacre of its entire Muslim and Jewish population, including women and children" (Needham).²³

(2) The Second Crusade (1145-1149). After the First Crusade, the Muslims retook Edessa and Jerusalem. When news reached Europe, Emperor Konrad III and King Louis VII of France, rallied the troops. Eugene III (bishop of Rome), summoned Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), to leave his convent and "preach the crusade." "Bernard, the most prominent personage of his age, was in the zenith of his fame. He regarded the summons as a call from God, and proved to be a leader worthy of the cause" (Schaff).²⁴ Bernard preached across France and Germany. "Our King Jesus is accused of treachery. It is said of Him by the Muslims that He is not God, but that He falsely pretended to be something He was not. Any man among you who is His debtor ought to rise up to defend his Lord from the infamous accusation of treachery. He should go to the sure fight, where to win will be glorious and where to die will be gain."²⁵ "However, once the Crusaders arrived in the East, they met with total disaster. The Eastern Byzantine Christians, who had not asked the Crusaders to come, received them badly. Most of the Crusaders perished in Asia Minor through famine, fever, and Turkish attacks. Their one serious military operation, the siege of Damascus, was a failure" (Needham).²⁶

(3) The Third Crusade (1187-1192). This Crusade was undertaken to regain Jerusalem. It has been called the King's Crusade as several leaders, Emperor Fredrik, King Philip of France, and King Richard I of England (the Lionheart), all led their armies to war. This Crusade was also largely a failure. "The emperor drowned and Richard and Philip spent most of their time fighting each other" (Calhoun).²⁷ A positive result of this Crusade was that King Richard signed a treaty with the Muslim leader (Saladin), to allow safe passage to Jerusalem.

(4) The Fourth Crusade (1202-1204). Innocent III (1198-1216) proclaimed the Fourth Crusade. The Crusading soldiers were entirely French. "They intended to conquer Egypt from the Muslims, but they were being ferried there in ships provided by the great Italian trading republic of Venice; and Venice insisted, as part of the payment, that the French first of all conquer for them the city of Zara which had recently seceded from the Venetian empire and joined the kingdom of Hungary" (Need-

²¹ Pope Urban II, November, 1095

²² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:204-205

²³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:206

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:253

²⁵ As quoted by David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

²⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:214

²⁷ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

ham).²⁸ Thus, the Fourth Crusade began with the Crusaders shedding the blood of their fellow Christians as they stormed and captured Zara.

Following this, the Crusaders were diverted from Egypt to Constantinople, at the request of Alexius Angelus. Alexius' father, Isaac II, was deposed earlier, and Alexius promised the Crusaders large payment, and the submission of the Eastern Church, if they would help him regain the Byzantine throne. Thus, the Crusaders besieged and captured Constantinople in 1204 (killing many Eastern Christians). "The Fourth Crusade was one of the darkest episodes in Christian history. For the first time, a Crusading army fought fellow Christians, both from the West (Zara) and East (Constantinople), simply for material gain. An enduring legacy of deep hatred for the Western Church was left among the Eastern Church" (Needham).²⁹

(5) Later and smaller Crusades (1212-1291). The first Crusade of this era is called the Children's Crusade. "This took place in 1212. As many as 30,000 children were involved. They may have been teenagers. It is not certain what their ages were. A crusading spirit gripped all of Europe with such fervor that thousands of young people decided they would go on a crusade" (Calhoun).³⁰ Tragically, most children died of starvation or shipwreck. The rest were taken as slaves. The remaining Crusades through the 13th century, were largely tragic failures.

4. *The Results of the Crusades*. "The long-range results of two centuries of crusading zeal are not impressive. If the primary purposes of the crusades were to win the Holy Land, to check the advance of Islam, and to heal the schism between the Eastern and Western churches, then the crusades failed miserably" (Shelley).³¹ "With intervals the Crusades continued over a period of two hundred years. Some successes were scored, but they were only temporary. In the end the Crusades were largely failures from the point of view of the purpose for which they were undertaken. However, the Crusades had many results, entirely unintended and unlooked for, but tremendously important and far-reaching" (Kuiper).³²

(1) The fact that the Christian religion is advanced by spiritual not physical weapons, was graphically and tragically underscored. "False religions are not to be converted by violence, they can only be converted by the slow but sure process of moral persuasion. Hatred kindles hatred, and those who take the sword shall perish by the sword" (Schaff).³³ "Unfortunately the popes never held two basic truths that we must never forget: Christianity's highest satisfactions are not guaranteed by possession of special places, and the sword is never God's way to extend Christ's church" (Shelley).³⁴ "The Crusades established the idea and practice of using a religious war to destroy the enemies of the Catholic Church. The papacy would soon be suing Crusades against heretical or dissenting groups within Western Christendom" (Needham).³⁵ "The Crusades sought the living among the dead. They mistook the visible for the invisible, confused the terrestrial and the celestial Jerusalem, and returned disillusioned. They learned in Jerusalem, or after ages have learned through them, that Christ is not there, that He is risen, and ascended into heaven, where He sits at the head of a spiritual kingdom" (Schaff)³⁶

²⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:216

²⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:218

³⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

³¹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 200

³² B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 172

³³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:253

³⁴ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 200

³⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:221

³⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:253

(2) The tension between Western and Eastern Christians was increased and finalized. "The relationship between the East and West grew worse during the Crusades. If the Crusaders could not find Muslims to fight, then they settled for Eastern Orthodox Christians" (Calhoun).³⁷ "The Crusades inflicted lasting damage on relationships between Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Christianity because of the religious oppression to which the Crusaders subjected the Orthodox peoples of the East. The fall of Constantinople to a Crusading army in 1204 hastened the fall of the Byzantine Empire, and paved the way for the Muslim conquest of Eastern Europe" (Needham).³⁸

(3) The power and influence of the Roman Papacy was increased. "Perhaps the most significant result was the added splendor the crusades brought to the papacy. Not only did a pope, Urban II, launch the First Crusade, but the popes throughout the period were the primary inspiration for fresh expeditions. They not the emperors, strove to unite Christendom against Islam" (Shelley).³⁹ "The Crusades heightened the prestige and influence of the papacy in the West. The Crusades were inspired by the popes. The papacy appeared as the champion of Christianity, uniting Christians against the Muslim menace, and organizing the resources of the West in defense of the Holy Land and the Latin Crusaders" (Needham).⁴⁰

The papacy, however, had grown as a result of the Crusades. Popes had preached them, financed them, sent envoys to lead them, and through them had directed the foreign policy of Europe. But if the Crusades had magnified the papacy, they had also corrupted it, taught it the expediency of crying Crusade when there was no Crusade, and of using this magic gimmick for its own purposes, which were all too often saturated with secular self-seeking.⁴¹

The Crusades encouraged the use of indulgences by which the popes could pardon all the temporal penalties of sin. Originally indulgences were granted for some outstanding good deed (*e.g.* going on a Crusade). Soon they were being sold for cash: the payment of money to the Church was regarded as the good deed, in return for which penalties were cancelled. Eventually, indulgences were extended to cover souls already in purgatory. The theory was that if a believer had not paid off in this life the temporal penalties of his sins, he must pay them off by sufferings in purgatory. Buying an indulgence for a dead friend could therefore hasten his passage from purgatory to heaven.⁴²

(4) Military orders were formed. "The Crusades created three semimonastic military orders: the Templars (or Knights of the Temple) whose first headquarters were on the site of the old Temple of Jerusalem; the Hospitalers (or Knights of St. John of Jerusalem) who were founded originally to care for the sick and wounded; and the Teutonic Knights, exclusively a German order. Combining monasticism and militarism, these orders had as their aims the protection of all pilgrims and perpetual war against the Muslims" (Shelley).⁴³ "These orders combined the monastic way of life with the warrior-code of chivalry; their members were both monks and knights at the same time. Their purpose was to

³⁷ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, 26:1

³⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:222

³⁹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 200

⁴⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:220-221

⁴¹ James Douglas, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 3:262-263

⁴² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:221

⁴³ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 200

transport pilgrims to the Holy Land, give them shelter and protection while they were there, and do battle with the Muslim Turks" (Needham).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:219