CHAPTER 8: THE CHURCH IN THE SIXTH CENTURY

The Dark Ages

The sixth century often is classified as the beginning of the “Dark Ages,” which period includes over 500 years of semi-civilization, about the sixth through the tenth centuries. This designation comes from the general decline in education, culture, law, and commerce that began at this time. All these areas of life were more advanced while the Roman Empire was strong, but they fell apart after the empire fell under the pressure of its barbarian enemies and its own corruption.

Governmental decline

With no strong center to maintain law and order, society fell apart, with strong individuals taking control of local areas. This was the beginning of the feudal system, which was to reach full flower in the later Middle Ages.

All this took place after Rome was taken over by the barbarians. The last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus, was deposed by the Visigoth leader Odoacer in 476 [no Roman emperor for over 300 years, until Charlemagne crowned emperor of the “Holy Roman Empire” in A.D. 800]. But the empire was preserved theoretically by the Eastern emperors, who appointed “patricians” among the barbarian leaders [the Eastern emperor Zeno appointed Odoacer “patrician” of his troops in the West, even though Zeno had no actual control]. The idea of the Roman Empire was still in the popular mind; barbarian rulers tried to have “Roman” courts (e.g., Clovis in the sixth century); this idea contributed to the growing power of the papacy.

Various migrations, begun in earlier centuries, continued. In addition, the Slavs, from little-known previous locations, migrated to Eastern Europe. Many of them were slaves, thus called “Slavs.” After 600 they all were converted to Christianity.

Cultural decline and changes

Literacy declined from nearly universal (in the empire) to ca. 2%. Artistic works never again reached the level of the Classical period.

As general literacy decreased, much traditional learning was preserved in monasteries. During the Dark Ages and the later Middle Ages, it was the monasteries that kept many documents from being destroyed, and which passed on a tradition of some learning. The monks preserved not only copies of the Bible and Christian writings, but about 1/3 of the classical Greek and Roman works.
While Latin still was the language of culture, other European languages were developing in various regions. Different areas developed Latin differently (e.g., Portugal, Romania); the Germanic tribes fused many of their languages.

**Eastern Empire**

While the empire in the West had fallen to the barbarians, the Eastern Empire withstood many attacks: Goths, Slavs, Persians, and later, Mohammedans. This Eastern Empire continued the Greek-speaking tradition in their culture and in the church. It was the basis of the later Byzantine Empire, which lasted until the fifteenth century.

**Justinian I**

(483-565, ruled 527-565)

Justinian was the most important emperor of the century, and the greatest Byzantine emperor. He fought Goths, Slavs, and Persians. He reconquered North Africa from the Vandals, and even most of Italy from the Goths. He codified Roman laws; his famous law code was finished by 534. A strong orthodox Christian, he built the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. His wife was a monophysite; he tried to win over monophysites, but failed to do so.

**Clovis, the Franks, and the Catholic Church**

Clovis was the son of King Childeric. When he succeeded his father, he expanded the area of his rule (in modern France) significantly. He followed the idolatrous religion of his tribe. His wife Clotilda was an orthodox Christian, the princess of Burgundia. Clovis was not converted until ca. 500, when, like Constantine before him, he turned to Christ during a battle. In 508 the Eastern emperor Anastasius conferred on Clovis the title “Consul and Augustus.”

Clovis’ line continued for about 200 years ruling over the Franks; they are known as the Merovingians. Since the time of Clovis, the Franks were one of the strongest supporters of the Roman church. Later in the Middle Ages the Franks crossed over the Alps on several occasions to rescue the popes from various enemies.

**Italy under siege**

After the Visigoth Odoacer had seized control of Rome and deposed the last emperor in 476, he continued to expand his power in that area. Although the Eastern emperor Zeno had conferred the title “Patrician” upon him, he soon became alarmed at Odoacer’s increasing power and influence. Therefore he appointed Theodoric, leader of the Ostrogoths, as Patrician in the West, and sent him against Odoacer. In 489 Theodoric and his Ostrogoth army defeated Odoacer, and established an Ostrogoth
kingdom in Italy.

After Theodoric died in 526, the new Eastern emperor Justinian resumed direct control over Italy by defeating Theodoric’s successors.

However, Eastern authority over Italy gradually fell apart. The Lombards (a Germanic tribe) gradually took control of northern Italy, but later, in the eighth century were defeated by Pepin, Charlemagne, etc.

Later the Normans sailed from northern Europe and took control of southern Italy. Thus in the Middle Ages, the popes were squeezed in middle of Italy.

Development of monasticism

Some continuation

Some monastic traditions continued from earlier centuries, including individual monks, hermits, and pillar saints. The Augustinians died out after the Visigoths conquered North Africa, to be reinstated in eleventh century. Various monasteries continued under control of local bishops.

The Benedictine order

The most important monastic development in the sixth century was the beginning and growth of the Benedictine order.

The Benedictines are the oldest continuous monastic order. The order was started by Benedict of Nursia (in southern Italy, ca. 480-547). Benedict started twelve monasteries, but most importantly, established rules for monks (cf. “The Rule of S. Benedict” in Bettenson, 127-141):

- Reasonable hours
- Mix spiritual and physical exercise
- Three-year trial for novices, can leave during that time
- Three vows: poverty, chastity, perpetual obedience

The order spread, dominated Middle Ages until thirteenth century, when Dominicans and Franciscans started.

Preservation of learning in monasteries

Benedict and many other monks were not fond of learning, but others took the lead.

Cassiodorus (ca. 477-570), Gothic statesman in the West, gave up his secular life to become a monk. He was very fond of learning, and established monasteries for studying and copying the Scriptures and
other Christian and scholarly works. The influence of Cassiodorus spread into the Benedictine monasteries, and they ended up preserving much learning and literature (e.g., Ethiopic version of Bible).

**Good and bad features of monasticism**

**Good:**
- Get away and meditate
- Culture
- Civilization
- Refuge
- Independent supplies
- Copying

**Bad:**
- Escapism
- Deprived society of needed men and women
- Wealth brought idleness
- Sin (increased)
- Salvation by routine

(Cf. the relevance of monastic mentality to modern devotional ideals—John Battle, “Monk or Merchant? The Direction of Spiritual Discipline” *WRS Journal* 8:2 [August, 2001] 16-22; this article compares the monastic ideal in Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* to that of John Calvin in *The Golden Booklet on the True Christian Life*).

**New doctrines**

The sixth century witnessed the growth of popular superstition, which continued on through the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages.

**Mariolatry**

The worship of Mary developed mostly in tribes with polytheistic backgrounds. This was a development of the orthodox *theotokos* to the extreme (the orthodox doctrine was established by the 3rd Ecumenical Council in 431). After Jerome, most Catholic Christians believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary.

**Worship of saints**

This superstitious practice was not done until after last persecutions in fourth century and the death of the confessors (people who survived torture), ca. A.D. 400. This worship included shrines to martyrs and famous saints, veneration of relics, prayers referring to saints, and belief in miracles done by them. Later, Christians believed that the saints could hear prayers.
Purgatory

This belief was first associated with the practice of prayers for the dead (cf. 1 Cor 15:29); some fathers had suggested the idea (Cyprian on Matt 5:25-26 [stay in prison until he pays his way out]; Augustine on 1 Cor 3:12-15).

The American Catholic Bible gives these references: 2 Macc. 12:43-46 (Judas prays for dead); Matt 5:25-26; 12:32 (forgiveness in the world to come); Luke 12:58-59; 1 Cor 3:13-15 (saved so as by fire); 1 Pet 3:18, 20 (Christ in limbo). To help the Roman Catholic theologians against the Protestants who opposed this doctrine, the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century officially declared the Apocrypha to be canonical.

Ca. 600, Pope Gregory the Great stressed the teaching of Purgatory. He declared that belief in Purgatory was essential for orthodoxy. Purgatory was viewed as a cleansing fire for venial sins.

Sixth century missions

Irish missions

These missions penetrated into Scotland, then France and Switzerland; they were independent from Rome at first.

Columba (521-597) was a hot tempered Irishman, a presbyter. But he had great dedication and self-discipline and scholarship. He was involved in an Irish civil war; left to go to Iona, a small island off Scotland. There he evangelized the northern Picts. He established a monastery on Iona, which became a center for other missions.

Comgall (517 - ca. 601) was a close friend of Columba. He established a monastery and a school in Ireland. At one point he had over 3000 students

Columbanus (ca. 543-615) was a student of Comgall. He had a passion for learning, and studied Greek and Hebrew (!). When he was nearly fifty years old, he felt the call to be missionary. He established a strict monastery-school in Burgundy, France. He was expelled by the clergy, and formed other monasteries in Switzerland and Italy. Columbanus produced many scholarly works—e.g., a letter to the pope against Eutychianism, and defences of the independence of the Celtic church in letters to Popes Boniface IV and Gregory I.

Conversion of England

As late as 590, most of the Celtic inhabitants of the current England were still idolaters; when Gregory was an abbot, he was impressed with fair-haired slaves in market (“angels, not Angles”); he desired to evangelize England. When still an abbot, Gregory made a quick missionary trip to England, with no success.
After being pope seven years Gregory sent Augustine of Canterbury and forty Benedictine monks in 596 to evangelize the Angles and Saxons (cf. “Gregory the Great and the Church of England” in Bettenson, 167-169).

King Ethelbert’s wife Bertha was a French princess, a Christian; she encouraged Augustine’s work, and the king granted them freedom to preach. In 597 the king himself converted. Augustine settled at Canterbury, and died in 604. Canterbury ever since has been the center of the English church. The English church was willingly subservient to Rome for over 900 years.

The Fifth Ecumenical Council

- Constantinople, 553

All Christian churches recognize the first four ecumenical councils as being orthodox. Up to the time of the Reformation such councils were assumed to be authoritative; Luther appealed to a future council in his conflict with the pope. The Roman Catholic Church lists a total of 21 (last one—Vatican II).

The first four were very important, universally recognized; the second four were less important. All Christian churches recognize the first four; the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches recognize the first seven; the Roman Catholic Church recognizes all eight; the Eastern Orthodox churches replace the eighth with a counter-council held in 879. Protestants recognize councils as orthodox only if their pronouncements are agreeable to Scripture; they have no independent authority.

The fifth and sixth councils continued the subject of the fourth council, the unity of person of Christ in two natures.

Monophysites (Eutychians) were condemned at Chalcedon in 451, but continued on—riots, bishops assassinated, etc.

The Eastern emperor Zeno had tried to enlist Monophysite support against the Persians (later, tried the same against the Arabs). In 482 Zeno wrote the Henoticon (“Edict of Reunion”), an attempt at compromise—failed to be accepted; it was condemned in 484 by Pope Felix III (see “The Henotikon of Zeno, 482” in Bettenson, 97-99).

The Eastern emperor Justinian had a Monophysite wife, allowed the statement “God who suffered for us.” In 544 he condemned an orthodox book that had been written by three deceased anti-Monophysites (led by Theodore of Mopsuestia) called Three Chapters, a book against Alexandrian Monophysites. Justinian’s opposition to this book cast reflections on the Council of Chalcedon and led to conflict with Pope Vigilius.

In 553 Justinian called for a fifth general council in Constantinople. It was attended by 160 bishops; this council condemned the orthodox book Three Chapters and approved the formula “God suffered” to appease the Monophysites; it also condemned Origen as a heretic (see “The ‘Three Chapters’: The Canons of the Second Council of Constantinople, 553” in Bettenson, 91-92, new ed. 99-101).

The Western bishops failed to go along with this council. Justinian had forcibly brought Pope Vigilius to
Constantinople in 547 and had kept him there until he signed his approval for this council. Vigilius then changed his mind and wrote a condemnation of the council; he was thrown back into prison for eight years. During this time Vigilius changed his mind several times (what about the “infallible” pope?), and finally signed his approval again; he was sent home, died on the way, in 555.

Pope Gregory I did not recognize this council.

**The papacy in the sixth century**

The only two outstanding popes in the church up through this time were Leo I (the Great, ca. 450) and Gregory I (the Great, ca. 600).

Here are two popes of the sixth century that deserve special note:

**Vigilius**

(Pope 537-555)

Disagreed with fifth general council of 553; was imprisoned by Justinian. He changed his mind four times about the orthodox book *Three Chapters*.

**Gregory I, the Great**

(Pope 590-604)

Gregory started as a civic officer, capable. He became a Benedictine monk, very strict with himself (ruined health, spent much of his life in bed). He was pious, a good preacher.

Interested in missions; sent Augustine to England (English church loyal to Rome for 1000 years).

One blot on his career: he argued with emperor Maurus; Phocus murdered Maurus and family and became new emperor; Gregory praised Phocus.

The patriarch of Constantinople claimed the title “universal bishop”; Gregory said bishops of Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome were equal to bishop of Constantinople; said “whoever calls himself universal bishop is a forerunner of Antichrist” (later, popes claimed the title).

Gregory established the doctrines of purgatory, purgatory fire, and masses for the dead as required orthodox doctrine.

Gregory established a liturgy, including the “Gregorian chant” (solemn monotone).

He is recognized as the pivotal pope who established the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages.