

# The Dark Ages

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – the dark period at the beginning of the Middle Ages and its effect on the church
2. aim – to cause us to consider how Christianity survived a period of deep cultural anarchy

### b. outline

1. The Remains of the Empire
2. The Invaders of the Dark Ages
3. The Reality of the Dark Ages

### c. overview

1. a reflection upon *the Early Church* – a period of *persecution* leading to the establishment of:
  - a. a canon of Scripture
  - b. a definition of *orthodox* Christianity (**i.e.** creeds and confessions)
  - c. a defense against early forms of heresy (**e.g.** Gnosticism)
  - d. a series of early *teachers* (fathers) to help solidify doctrine (**e.g.** Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen)
  - e. **the church with the beginnings of true orthodoxy and orthopraxy**
2. a reflection upon *the Imperial Church* – a period of *peace* leading to:
  - a. an embrace of Christianity by Rome and its leaders (**i.e.** Constantine)
  - b. an increase in the size of Christianity as a new “state” religion
  - c. a rise of theological squabbles *within* the church (**i.e.** Arianism)
  - d. a set of *schisms* amongst believers over matters of interpretation (**e.g.** monks, Donatists, **E/W**)
  - e. a series of *ecumenical councils* to address theological matters (**e.g.** Nicea, Constantinople)
  - f. a group of early *theologians* (**e.g.** Athanasius, Augustine, the Cappadocians [Basil])
  - g. an expansion of the church *outward* from the Roman Empire (**e.g.** Persia, Arabia, Ireland, Africa)
  - h. **the church pushed out to the “utmost” parts of the earth**
3. a preview of *the Medieval Church* – **c. 470 – 1517AD**
  - a. medieval = the period of history known as the “Middle Ages” (**i.e.** between two periods)
    1. the period between *classical antiquity* and the *Renaissance* (new classical), or
    2. the period between the *W Roman Empire* and *Western Civilization*, or
    3. the period between the *orthodox* church of antiquity and the *Reformation*
  - b. dark ages = the period of **W history** after the Fall of Rome from c. 450 – 700AD marked by frequent warfare and the virtual disappearance of urban life and high culture; a period of intellectual darkness and barbarity (**i.e.** the history of the W, not the E; **see below**)
    1. it is the rise of the “official” W church that is (usually) attributed with the end of the “dark ages”

## I. The Remains of the Empire

### Content

#### a. the remains of the E

1. although the W portion of the empire fell in the 5<sup>th</sup> C., the E portion continued from Constantinople for almost the *entire* Middle Ages – it became known as the *Byzantine Empire*
  - a. during its existence it was known as the Roman Empire; the name *Byzantine Empire* was applied *after* it faded out of existence (primarily to distinguish it from the W)
    1. **i.e.** from the name of the original city that became Constantinople under Constantine I
  - b. the empire would reach its greatest extent during the reign of Justinian I (c. 565AD) covering all of Asia Minor, Greece (and much of Italy); Palestine, and N and E Africa
  - c. Greek thought would come to dominate the empire; the E Orthodox church even to today finds its roots and language from Greece
  - d. it would fall to the Ottoman Empire in 1453

#### b. the remains of the W

1. the remaining church in the W slowly became the *Catholics* (the “united”)
  - a. they were the group forced to hold *orthodoxy* in the face of numerous heretical invaders
  - b. the rise of the *papacy* occurs within this tumultuous period of the overthrow of the W

## II. The Invaders of the Dark Ages

### Content

#### a. the barbarians

1. the *barbarians* = invaders from the N who came to settle within the Roman Empire
  - a. perceived by the Romans as looters and destroyers
  - b. however, most were looking to come and enjoy the benefits of Rome

#### b. the Germanic invaders

1. the Vandals (from Poland to N Africa)
  - a. they crossed the Rhine in 407, wandered W through France and Spain, crossing the Straits of Gibraltar in 429, and took Carthage in 439 (taking control of N Africa)
  - b. they took to the sea and occupied Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia, sacking Rome in 455
  - c. they were conquered by the Byzantine Empire under Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> C.
  - d. they held to an Arian form of Christianity (brought down from the N)
    1. **remember:** from early invaders coming to Rome, being converted during the early days of the Imperial Church (while Arian) and returning with their faith to the N
2. the Visigoths (or Goths; from the NW of the Black Sea [Bulgaria] to Spain)
  - a. they defeated the Romans at Adrianople in 378 (WNW of Constantinople), swept through the Balkans, and took Rome in 410
  - b. by 415, they occupied Spain (until they were overthrown by the Muslims in the 8<sup>th</sup> C.)
  - c. they (too) were Arian, but were converted to Catholic orthodoxy after 589, when King Recared embraced Nicene orthodoxy
  - d. the church acted as *legislator* for the Visigothic kingdom, providing order to the chaos
    1. a number of councils are noted for their *attempts* to organize life in a “Christian” manner
  - e. although overthrown by Muslims c. 711, Christianity had become so rooted in the country that it became the rallying point in the struggle to re-conquer the peninsula from the Muslim Moors
3. the Burgundians and the Franks (from Gaul to W Europe)
  - a. Gaul (the area of Europe E of the Rhine river) was divided in the 5<sup>th</sup> C. between these two groups
    1. the Burgundians were Arians, the Franks pagans
    2. c. 496 (under Clovis, married to a Burgundian princess) the Franks converted to Christianity
    3. c. 516 (under King Sigismund) the Burgundians converted to Nicene orthodoxy
  - b. in 534, the Burgundians were conquered by the Franks
    1. the church and state became so intertwined that *land holdings* were connected to the office of bishop; the bishops virtually stopped being pastors and became *lords*
4. the Angles and the Saxons (from N Europe to Great Britain)
  - a. the removal of Roman legions from the island brought these groups, who established their 7 Kingdoms; they were Germanic pagans
  - b. the Irish church (still flourishing) sent missionaries into Scotland, and eventually further S
    1. **e.g.** the hymn “Be Thou My Vision” is a translation of a Celtic prayer to thwart the evil influence of the Druids (pagan Celtic priests?)
    2. a number of “unique” practices began in Ireland and spread into Scotland
      - a. **e.g.** “private” confession to a priest, monks becoming the head of the church rather than bishops, the date of Easter, and the performance of some rites
    3. this produced conflict between the practices of the Scotch-Irish and the Western church
      - a. the Scotch-Irish held to their ancient traditions, the Western missionaries insisted that their traditions came all the way from Peter (i.e. holding the keys to the kingdom; Matt. 16)
5. the Ostrogoths and Lombards (from the Balkans to Italy)
  - a. the last Roman emperor (Romulus Augustulus) was deposed in 476 by Germanic invaders
  - b. but, Zeno (emperor at Constantinople) overthrew them using the E Germanic Ostrogoths
    1. they were Arians who persecuted the orthodox
    2. they were overthrown under the Byzantine emperor Justinian early in the 6<sup>th</sup> C.
  - c. in 568, the Lombards invaded Italy from the N
    1. as the power of Constantinople was declining, the Italian peninsula was threatened to be overrun by the Lombards
    2. thus, the papacy turned to the Frankish kingdom for help, leading to the crowning of Charlemagne (**see future**) by Pope Leo III as emperor of the W on 12/25/800 – **i.e.** the beginning of the **Holy Roman Empire** (i.e. the end of the Dark Ages)

### III. The Reality of the Dark Ages

#### Content

##### a. the reality of the Dark Ages

1. from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> C., W Europe was swept by a series of invasions
2. these invasions destroyed a great deal of “classical antiquity” (**i.e.** culture and learning; thus “dark”)
3. and, these invasions brought in an influx of either a) pagans or b) Arians into “Christian” lands
4. however, the invaders were *eventually* converted to the faith of those they conquered ...
  - a. the orthodox church (in the W) continued to hold to the ancient faith, and
  - b. many of the invaders encountered various “forms” of Christianity, which they embraced
5. however, the church began to be *changed* through these events, including the rise of **the papacy**
  - a. although *originally* a function of the providence of God in preserving the wisdom of the ancient past, the papacy *eventually* “morphed” into a position of *power* within the political landscape of the time, and moved *beyond* the bounds of orthodoxy (**see future discussion**)
  - b. thus, the Dark Ages comes to an end with the rise of a combined force between the church and the state (**i.e.** Charlemagne), and continues to “change” in theology over time as that combination “wears away” at orthodoxy
    1. **BTW:** the church in the E does not face this struggle – the invaders remain largely in Europe, and the E church does not have to deal with this struggle between church and state
  - c. so, the Middle Ages will come to an end with the rise of men who attempt to *reform* the church and its popish leadership *back* to the orthodoxy they originally held *at the beginning of the era*

##### b. the importance of the Dark Ages

1. in his sovereignty, God purposed for the church in the W to struggle through these invasions
  - a. it would bring Christianity to the whole of Europe, and even spread orthodoxy to the N
  - b. it would bring the church to a consistency of orthodox thinking (at the beginning)
    1. even though it would still struggle with some heresies and Christological issues to resolve
2. so, although political systems (and nations) come and go, the church continues on ...
3. because (by definition), the church is *distinct* from political systems
  - a. **i.e.** it has its own king, and it is a part of a *larger* movement of that king to establish a *worldwide* system of governance, one that is *greater* than the church (per se)
4. **to be seen:** the greatest difficulty of the church is when it *intertwines* with political systems
  - a. **e.g.** the popes becoming more “wards of the state” than theologians, and the entire *structure* of the church (including its theology) changing to fit a *political world* more than a *spiritual one*
  - b. thus, it behooves us to be *very careful* about how we connect the church with the state