

Church History 101

Lesson 14

Two Kingdoms

Key Concepts: The Roman Empire was slowly dividing between east (centered at Constantinople) and west (centered at Rome). This division impacted the churches throughout the Empire.

The Story: For many years (235-395) the Roman Empire had two courts, one in Rome (west) and the other in Constantinople (east), yet were ruled by a single Emperor. The last of these Emperors was Theodosius who died in 395. From that time forward the Western portion of the Empire was wracked by the struggles between “strong men” who contested for leadership, between Christians and pagans fighting over the religion of the Empire, by continuing invasions of Germanic and Hunic tribes and finally by declining economic conditions.

All of these factors ultimately allowed the western empire to be overrun by Germanic tribes including the Angles, Saxons, Franks, Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals and the Huns. Interestingly enough, many of the Germanic tribes were Arian Christians, meaning they followed Christ, but were not convinced that Jesus was actually God. In some cases, such as in Italy, these invaders allowed the Roman Trinitarian Church to continue to operate and the church became the one stable organization in an ever deteriorating Empire. In other cases however, these invaders, especially the Vandals (who were again Arian Christians) attempted to destroy Roman Christianity wherever they found it, especially in North Africa (late 420s) where they almost completely eliminated it. The significant role of the church in the midst of the continuing chaos can be seen in 455 when the Vandals and their allies, coming from North Africa were poised to destroy Rome. Pope Leo I met directly with the invading king and convinced him not to burn the city and slaughter its inhabitants, as the Vandals had done elsewhere. Tradition states that the western empire fell in 476 when the last Roman Emperor was deposed.

The story in the east was different. While the eastern portion of the empire (Byzantine Empire) often felt the wrath of the Germanic tribes and especially the Huns, it was able to far better maintain its spiritual and cultural identity. This was due in part to its continuing political and military stability. This stability allowed it not only to repulse invaders but in the 550s to reconquer much of the western Empire, including North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. In addition Justinian I (r. 527-565) negotiated a treaty with the Persians in the east which made for economic stability. Justinian was also responsible for the codification and enforcement of a new set of laws, which form the basis for much of modern civil law.

The Byzantine Empire maintained its spiritual stability by holding seven ecumenical councils between 325 and 787. These councils dealt with a wide variety of issues ranging from the Trinity, to the role of Mary (who was declared to be *Theotokos*, mother of God), to the nature of Jesus and to the role played by icons. The set of religious beliefs (dogmas) produced by these councils became the only dogma recognized by the Eastern Church, which would eventually create friction with the church in the west. The Emperors were also supportive of the church and supported the building of the Hagia Sophia Basilica (537) and the creation of the Divine Liturgy which is still in use today. In the early 600s the Empire engaged in what it considered to be “holy wars” against the Persians in order to reclaim Jerusalem (which had been lost) and the “True Cross.”

Questions

1. What do you think of the connection between empire and church?
2. Who do you think ought to have the right to determine basic Christian beliefs?
3. Do you think that is important for the leader of the United States to be a Christian?