4. The early Middle Ages

Introduction

Today we're in the early Middle Ages. For our purposes we'll define that as running from 451-1054. The Council of Chalcedon gives us the first of those dates. The split between Eastern and Western churches gives us the second. It's a 600 year stretch! So we're only going to drop in on a few points. What we're going to do is look in on two time periods and then focus on two key themes.

Acknowledgements: as ever let me mention my dependence on Capitol Hill Baptist Church and also the work of Garry Williams in producing this material.

First, we'll pray. Then we'll listen to God's Word in Ephesians 2. These are words about sin and grace. As we look into the Middle Ages together we'll see that the Bible's teaching on sin and grace was critical to the health (or otherwise) of the church.

Ephesians 2:4-9, But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- [6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Before we get to the early Middle Ages…

Introductory question: learning from the past, church tradition and *Sola Scriptura*

I'm grateful for a couple of excellent questions that have been raised – to do with our dependence on teachers and teaching from the past, and how that fits with our commitment to *Sola Scriptura.*

Here are a couple of observations:

- There are certain individuals (who are outside of the inspired company of Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophets) who have had an extraordinary influence on the church. In this and the previous session we've though about Augustine of Hippo. We cannot imagine what it would be like to be a Christian today without the influence and teaching of Augustine (or Luther, Calvin, etc). This is God's providence: he gave these people to the church, even though they are not inspired and inerrant.
- When the Reformers of the 16th and 17th centuries rejected the false authority of the Roman Catholic church they didn't reject church tradition wholesale. If you read Calvin's *Institutes,* for example, the footnotes are full of quotes from people like Augustine. But they did clarify the respective weight that we should attach to Scripture and to church tradition.
- They drew this important distinction: Scripture alone possesses a *magisterial* or ruling authority. Church tradition (e.g. the past teachings and practices of the church) exerts only a *ministerial* authority. We would be foolish to ignore the great ones of the past. But they should only function as servants of the Word and servants of the church as we seek to submit to Scripture.

1. The fifth and sixth centuries

(a) Political fragmentation

Barbarian invasions reshaped and then dismantled the Roman Empire. Barbarian kingdoms took root. The Huns came from the north and moved south. Tribes of Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Anglo-Saxons were pushed into the Roman Empire – sometimes initially they were invited in to fight for the Empire, but then they stayed.

In 410 Rome was sacked by Alaric the Visigoth. The Western Roman Empire is functionally over from this point. The Hun threat disappears. But we are left with a plethora of little barbarian kingdoms. There is no great central power in the West anymore.

But in the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire, centred on Constantinople, the emperor remains in power, with a united political system beneath him.

There are now (almost) two worlds. And this split between East and West was mirrored in the church.

(b) Church divisions

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 debated Christology: the humanity and divinity of Jesus which we examined in our previous session. For the western churches this matter was now settled. But not so in the east – where it remained a matter of dispute and debate.

In the west, churches were gripped by a salvation question: the great debate between Pelagius and Augustine that we also discussed last week. Formally the western church backed Augustine – salvation is monergistic, it is the sole work of God. But in practice Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism had crept into the church.

As the story of the western church rolls on we'll see an increasing pollution of doctrine – as the role of the church and the ability of the human soul were wrongly exalted, and the free grace of God and the sufficiency of Christ blasphemously diminished.

Let me mention a side issue as we look at the whole Middle Ages period from our vantage point today: have you ever asked the question "Lord, what were you *doing* in the Middle Ages! Was the true Gospel actually lost for a thousand years before the Reformers rediscovered it?!"

- Some have argued that the true church did indeed disappear. But this can't be the case: the Lord promises that in every generation he will preserve his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against here.
- Others have suggested that you can find the true church in history by following a trail of blood: i.e. where there were martyrs *there* the true church is to be found. There's something in this. But whilst the New Testament does teach that suffering will *accompany* faithfulness it is not accurate to say that martyrdom is it's primary indicator.
- The true church is found where apostolic doctrine is adhered to. The Middle Ages *did* include great and faithful teachers and works of theology that helped some to hold on to the truth in the face of a growing tide of error. (Boethius' *Consolation of philosophy,* Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Theology,* Anselm's *Prosologion* should be mentioned at this

point)[1]. But perhaps the key to spotting where true doctrine remained is to look for the unbroken line of Augustine's teaching on sin and grace.

Back to the 6th century! At the time there were two gigantic figures that deserve a mention: in the East there is an emperor, and in the West there is a Pope. That difference in role is highly significant.

(c) In the East: Justinian

In the east Justinian is emperor from 527. He was notable in arguing for *Caesaropapism:* the idea that the emperor has authority over both church and state – an idea which he claimed came down from Constantine. The pope, he says, is ruled over by Caesar. The Byzantines (i.e. the remnant of the Eastern Roman Empire) very much saw themselves as heirs to the idea of Rome. They temporarily recaptured North Africa from barbarian tribes. Justinian built the enormous Hagia Sophia church in Constantinople.

But by the early 600s they face a new threat: Islam. Mohammed is born in 570 into polytheistic tribal Arabia. He claims to receive a revelation from God, he's persecuted in Mecca, travels to Medina, recruits an army, and returns to Mecca in 630. He conquers most of the Arab world. Within a hundred years they are laying siege to Constantinople. By the end of the Middle Ages a Muslim army would be at the gates of Vienna. (For more information on Muslim history and evangelism see Rob Scott's seminar materials which we've engaged with previously).

(d) In the West: Pope Gregory the Great

What about the West? It's the exact opposite. In the West, the guy who's in charge isn't the emperor, but rather the pope (or the 'bishop in Rome'). Here we speak of 'papal monarchy.'

Europe is divided, and increasingly it's the pope who exercises influence across the little kingdoms that emerge – the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Visigoths in Spain, the Angles and Saxons in the British Isles (later we'd term them "Anglo-Saxons"), the Franks in Gaul. Here is the development of what we now know as Western Europe.

But there's disorder and a power vacuum into which the church was able to bring help. And as he helped, the bishop of Rome acquired vast amounts of power and authority.

The embodiment of the papal monarchy in West in this period is Pope Gregory "the Great," who John Calvin later called "the last good pope." Why would he say this? Gregory did subscribe to the idea of the Pope having a special authority, but he didn't personally abuse it. Gregory was heavily missions-minded, and wrote famously that the sight of blond-haired slaves from England paraded in the Roman forum moved him to think that there were people outside culturally Roman areas who needed the Gospel. In some ways Gregory was a bridge between the Roman and north European Germanic cultures. He lived simply and not ostentatiously. He's probably best known for a writing a classic work on the pastoral ministry.

Now fast forward to the 9th century…

[1] For a brief introduction to gospel theology before the Reformation see: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/searching-for-gospel-centered-theology-before-the-reformation

2. The ninth century

In the East…
The Empire is shrinking under Muslim assault. At the same time they're sending missionaries into the Slavic lands of the east. There's a row about icons and worship – the iconoclast controversy, which has to do with images in worship and to do with Christology.

But for now just note how the eastern and western churches were increasingly moving in different directions – both politically, and within the church.

In the West…
Charlemagne the King of the Franks is crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in the year 800. This is a key moment in the beginning of Europe as we know it. There's consolidation of power happening in the West for the first time in centuries. And there'll be ongoing rows between king and pope from here onwards.

More church divisions!
There's an increasing distinction between east and west in terms of soteriology: how you get saved.

Augustine continues to influence the west, though semi-Pelagianism is ever present. But in the east there is an even weaker doctrine of sin and salvation. Salvation is not seen in terms of *justification,* but a highly mystical process of *deification* in which humanity and deity are almost blended. (This idea appears to remain central in modern day Eastern Orthodox teaching and piety).

Churches in the east and west are going in different directions. And it was a dispute over one word in the creed that formalized a split: *filioque* – which means "and from the Son." Does the Spirit proceed from the Father only or from the Father and the Son? The west said from both. The east denied. The result was the formal split of Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches which remains to this day.

Let's turn now to two key features of life in the early middle ages.

3. Monasticism

When we think about the Middle Ages we ought to think about Monks, Nuns and Monasteries. It was a huge feature of life in the period.

The first monastic movement was centered in Egypt in the early 300s. Many people fled into the wilderness after reading Athanasius' biography of St. Anthony, a rich young man who sold everything he had to become a monk. Lots of monks flocked to Egypt and Palestine on an ascetic quest for holiness. In time it developed even into an extreme examples of self-depriving behavior such as Simeon the Stylite, who lived for 40 years on a platform atop a 50 foot high pillar.

The monastic movement in the West picked up steam during the sixth century. One particular monk – St. Benedict of Nursia – wrote a hugely influential handbook (now known as "The Rule of St. Benedict") for how to be a monk and how to establish a monastic order. Gregory endorses it and its popularity grows.

The monastic movement's goal was to pursue God and personal purity, apart from the contamination of the surrounding material world. It was a retreat into a kind of sanctuary where you could focus on self-denial and denial of the world and concentrate on pursuing God.

What was monastic life like? There was no private ownership. There was a rigorous life of prayer (usually 7x times per day, including waking in the middle of the night), Bible study, celibacy and a general rejection of bodily and worldly pleasures as being opposed to the wholehearted pursuit of God.

A monastic way of life may not appear very attractive to us today! Why does this pick up steam at this point in history? There are a few reasons.

- First, there is no persecution anymore. Christianity had by then become an endorsed religion in the Roman world. Monasticism became one way to experience a harsher form of life in which you could test your devotion to Christ when no-one was actually persecuting you. (Remember: the martyrs by this time were clearly felt to be "higher level" Christians).
- Second, it was increasingly taught (wrongly) that the body and material pleasures ought to be rejected in order to purify the soul.
- Third, in a post-Roman world with increasing social chaos and disorder (Barbarian tribes, fragmented political rule, etc) retreating to a distant monastery could actually bring a degree of stability and security.

How should we evaluate the monastic life in the middle ages?
Postively:

- To some extent it did enable a focus on Christ
- It was the base for much early evangelism: monastic orders evangelized Barbarian tribes sent the likes of to share the gospel. Patrick goes to Ireland, St. Martin of Tours in France, St. Boniface in Germany
- These monasteries (to some extent) preserved orthodox theology and civilization during a time of illiteracy and chaos (often, simply, through preserving ancient texts in monastic libraries which became key resources in later centuries)
- They provided essential community services through teaching children, building homes, providing medical care, growing crops

But negatively we note:

- Soteriology, or how to be saved: the influence of semi-Pelagianism was prevalent. A synergistic view of salvation and a "works-based" theology was encouraged. Rejecting the bodily and the material as unspiritual is always a false turn in spirituality.
- Given the N.T.'s commands to be "salt and light" and to love our neighbour it is hard to see how dis-engagement with the world was healthy.
- The monasteries were fertile grounds for corruption. By the middle ages they were known (often) for the sexual immorality. And, given the increasingly faulty doctrines of the Roman Catholic church, they became vastly wealthy and powerful. Picture this scenario: a largely Biblically illiterate population is encouraged to believe that unless they give money and leave lands to the church they and their dead relatives will endure thousands of years in the torture of purgatory. It's not surprising that, by the end of the Middle Ages, the European monasteries had hoovered up vast amounts of cash and land (much to the envy, for example, of monarchs like King Henry VIII of England).

4. How do you encounter the grace of God?

Lastly, we turn to another key theme from this period – which helps to explain many of the wrong turns that were made by the Medieval church. *How do you encounter the grace of God?* Why would this be a question in the first place? Remember that most ordinary people were badly educated and mainly illiterate.

For the likes of Gregory the Great there was a genuine desire to help people get to know God. But one of his key responses was to go on Europe-wide tours to enable ordinary people to *see the person of the Pope, and thereby connect with the church and with God.* To this day, Protestant believers like ourselves are astonished (and horrified) by the way in which Catholic clergy and especially **popes are treated as human "connectors" to the grace of God**.

Faulty theology and philosophy also cut in at this point and help to explain the development of popular (and false) Roman Catholic practices. We need to note here the Catholic understanding of the Lord's Supper (what they would call "Mass") and the **doctrine of transubstantiation**. According to this view the bread and wine are actually changed, by the words of the priest, into the substance of Christ's body and blood. In this way a Medieval Catholic could look at the very body of Christ. It was a visible glimpse of God's grace in your life.

Aside from the blasphemous implication that Christ's death on the Cross could be repeated (and needed to be repeated) the doctrine of transubstantiation was founded on an ancient bit of Greek philosophy the influence of which endured within the life of the church. Aristotle had taught that an object could be considered both with respect to its *appearance* (this object looks like a "pen") and its *substance* (it possesses what we might call "pen-ness"). From this the Catholic church developed the idea that the bread and wine could retain their outward appearance whilst their substance was changed into the body and blood of Christ. This remains the doctrine of the Catholic church (and is believed by many Anglo-Catholics also). Critics in the Medieval period were few, but some did point out that it was both non-sensical and blasphemous an idea.

To this was added the popular **cult of saints and the veneration of Mary**. Jesus might have seemed remote – stuck in a book that most couldn't read, and stuck also in the remote past. But Mary and the saints were real people who were ascribed powers to help you and pray for you, and to whom you could personally relate in prayer.

Similarly, **the cult of relics emerged** – in which tangible objects (supposed portions of saints bodies, clothing, the true cross, etc) were ascribed miraculous powers. They could, it was claimed, bring a connection with the grace of God.

An inflated view of the church helps to explain other false ideas that grew in prominence during this period. For example, **verbal confession to a priest followed by acts of penance** became a key part of normal Christian life. Only the priest could forgive, and restore a person to a "state of grace." Forgiveness, however, was dependent on certain works which the priest prescribed (which might include prayer, payment, works of piety, etc). It was a form of spiritual slavery in which grace and Christ were actually obscured. But it made a person's relationship with God tangible and active – and for that reason (allied to a high level of Biblical illiteracy) was largely unchallenged.

It is during this period that the Roman church increasingly came to **regard itself as the "Roman Catholic" church.** The word "catholic" is often misunderstood. It simply means universal. So, when Protestant believers say the Creed and affirm that they are part of "one holy catholic and apostolic

church" they are affirming that they are part of an invisible but real gathering of believers that stretches across the globe and across the whole of time. However, the when the network of leaders and churches that were connected with Rome adopted the term "Catholic" for themselves they were making a massive and erroneous statement: they were claiming that to be part of the universal church of Jesus' followers you had to be connected with Rome – and that apart from the Roman church there was *no* true church or possibility of salvation. (This has remained, technically, the position of the Roman Catholic church to this day, though has been modified somewhat in the second half of the 20th century).

Conclusion

We'll continue the story of the Middle Ages in our next session. But even in this early period – roughly from 500-1000AD – it is not hard to see the seeds of corruption against which the Protestant Reformers (and proto-Reformers like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus) would have to react.

Infographic depicting the Medieval Catholic scheme of salvation