

Sharing Jesus From Generation to Generation

As Good Shepherd celebrates its anniversary, this is the 2nd in a series of articles on church history.

A History of the Church in the Medieval Period

Pressured by the Huns, invading from eastern Asia, tribes on the European borders of the Roman Empire grew violent and began to invade it. The year 410 marked the beginning of the end as the Visigoths looted Rome. Some of these tribes had become Christian, but their faith included the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ. It was Pope Leo I, bishop of Rome, who persuaded Attila the Hun not to attack Rome, as the remnants of the Roman empire struggled to reorganize in the East at Constantinople.

About 620 AD, the religion of Islam was begun in Arabia by Mohammed. As the Moslems, began their rapid spread throughout Asia, India, North Africa, and even into Spain, they wiped out Jewish and Christian culture, establishing a Moslem Empire. The Moslems were stopped in the East at Constantinople and halted in the West in France by the Franks who were Athanasian (not Arian) Christians.

The Franks also became protectors and allies of the Roman Church. Constantinople was left with only an eastern realm, the Byzantine Empire. A Frankish leader, Charlemagne,

established a “Holy Roman Empire,” including most of Europe. Here, church and state were so closely allied that most church leaders were appointed by the Emperor and eventually performed much of the civil administration.

As political empires declined, the church experienced great missionary expansion led by such daring men as Patrick in Ireland, Augustine in Britain, Boniface in Germany, and Vladmire in Russia, where Moscow eventually surpassed Constantinople as a center of Christian power. When the Holy Roman Empire broke down into loosely allied feudal states of the “Dark Ages,” the church was the unifying power which kept the light of culture burning. Monasteries were centers of learning, welfare, and public works.

The political divisions between east and west were matched in the church. The East argued about whether using statues and pictures in worship was idolatry, finally allowing only pictures. In the West, new teachings developed: that the Lord’s Supper resacrifices Jesus, that this provides more forgiveness for the dead suffering in Purgatory, that angels and saints in heaven can be prayed to for help, and that adoring relics of saints brings spiritual benefits. Worship was refined using the Latin language and choral chanting.

The West also had controversies: about the idea that Jesus is God’s son by adoption; why some come to faith, but not others; etc. Differences between East and

West came to a head in a disagreement about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father or also from the Son. In 1054, there was a final and total split as the Eastern Orthodox Church refused to recognize the Pope in Rome as a superior authority.

Freeing the “Holy Land” from the Moslems was the original goal of military “Crusades” from the West between 1096 and 1270. While various leaders increased their power, some made financial profits, lives were disastrously wasted, and Christian cities themselves were plundered – Moslems continued to control Palestine and threaten Europe.

In the West, an inevitable struggle for power developed between church and state. In Germany, church leaders denied the authority of civil rulers to appoint them. The Popes grew in power and eventually claimed to be the highest authority in both religion and politics. When one Pope moved his official residence to France, a rival was elected in Rome and their successors battled for decades. Church councils, called to reform the church in the early 1400s, ended the split in the Papacy, but failed to reform abuses which financially benefited the church. While Papal power declined, various reformers, such as John Huss in Czechoslovakia and John Wycliff in England, met with popular support but official resistance and finally death.

Next month: A History of the Lutheran Church