

The Late Middle Ages

This lesson is entitled “The Late Middle Ages, the Third 500 Years.” You might think that I covered the second 500 years quickly, and that is true. The second 500 years was a relatively undistinguished period. That is not to say it was unimportant, but compared to the first 500 years, the third 500 years, and the fourth 500 years, it is probably of less interest to us. Some very important events took place in that 500-year period, which I described. There was the spread of the Gospel in Asia, Africa, and Europe. I focused on the Christianization of Great Britain and how from Britain missionaries went from Ireland to Scotland to England and then back to the continent. I also described the preservation of learning and theology that took place in the monasteries and important centers of education such as the court of Charlemagne. Finally, I focused on the church in the East leading up to the schism in 1054.

The last century of that second 500-year period could be viewed as the true Dark Ages. While the whole 500 years is often referred to as the “Dark Ages,” it would be more accurate to use that term for the shorter period of time, about the year 900, and through the tenth century. With the near approach of the year 1000, people began to get nervous. They wondered what would happen when that fateful year came. Charles Williams wrote in *Descent of the Dove*, “In the eyes of Christendom, everywhere expected the end.” People thought it would be the end of everything as the year 1000 approached. Williams also wrote, “The end did not come. The first millennium of Christianity closed, and the second opened with no greater terrors than ordinary robberies, murders, rapes, burnings, wars, massacres, and plagues. So people sighed a sigh of relief, and life went on as usual.”

It is now time for me to present an overview of the third 500 years. I will cover this period in more detail for the remainder of the course. I want to use this lesson to present an overview of the entire period and introduce some of the important things that I will describe in more detail in later lessons. Before I do so, let us look to the Lord in prayer. I will use a prayer from the “Sarum Plainsong,” the liturgy of the church of Salisbury in England.

“Creator of the stars of night, Thy people's everlasting light, O Christ, thou Savior of us all, we pray Thee, hear us when we call. Come in Thy holy might, we pray. Redeem us for eternal day from every power of darkness, when Thou judgest all the sons of men. Amen.”

In this survey I am going to talk first about Christianity in Africa and Asia. Then I will give a brief glimpse at Eastern Orthodoxy, and then I will turn to Roman Catholicism in the West. Christianity in Africa from the years 1000 through 1500 could be described by the term survival. The Christian church in Egypt, the Coptic Church, survived despite great disadvantages under Muslim rule. That has been the fate of that ancient Egyptian church ever since the Muslim conquest. Yet the church was not obliterated as it was in other parts of North Africa. It continued to live on. Sometimes it lived with vigor and sometimes in decline. Nevertheless, it survived, as it has done to the present.

I have also talked about Nubian Christianity, which is Christianity south of Egypt, in present-day Sudan. That early African church reached its peak of greatness during this time. The greatest expression of Nubian Christianity came during the third 500 years. As Mark Shaw said, however, in his book, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, “The moment of greatness was like the flash of a comet across the night sky.” Nubian Christianity not only reached its moment of greatness during that time, but it also faced its decline and collapse. After 1500 we do not hear any more of Nubian Christianity. There was no longer a church in that part of Africa until the modern missionary movement. Nubian Christianity, which was so

strong for so many years, suddenly collapsed in part due to factors we have noticed elsewhere. Nubian Christianity was very dependent upon a favorable government. As long as that government was in power, the church in Nubia enjoyed prosperity. When that government collapsed, however, that church did as well. There was another reason why Nubian Christianity failed to live on. The Christians in that area were not able to effectively reach out in evangelism to their neighbors. For one thing, the Nubians had made themselves unpopular with their neighbors by engaging in a slave trade. They took Africans from other countries to sell them as slaves in Egypt in order to pay for various treaty obligations that the Nubians had with the Egyptians. You can understand why it would be difficult for the Nubian church to be aggressively evangelistic and at the same time raiding their neighbors for the slave trade. For at least those two reasons, and perhaps others, Nubian Christianity disappeared. It reached a high point during the thirteenth century. Then a couple hundred years later it was gone from the face of the earth.

The third center of African Christianity was Ethiopia. Ethiopian Christianity survived. It not only survived, but it also became almost a legend that inspired many African religions and cultural and political movements in the twentieth century. Ethiopia in the Middle Ages bears eloquent testimony to the fact that Christianity is deeply rooted in African history and culture. There were some ups and downs in the history of Africa. The situation in Ethiopia, however, remains the primary example of the success of the Gospel in Africa. By the fifteenth century, under King Zara Yaqob, the Ethiopian church reached the pinnacle of its cultural, literary, and spiritual attainments.

That was a brief overview of Christianity in Africa. Now I will turn to a brief overview of Christianity in Asia. This will be a look at the third 500-year period in Asian Christianity. The word that I used for Christianity in Africa during that time was “survival.” The several words that I would use to describe Christianity in Asia are “growth,” “decline,” and “almost eclipsed.” It was not a great period of Christianity in Asia.

At the end of my survey of the previous 500 years of Christianity I described how Christianity expanded greatly in China during the time of the Nestorian missions in T’ang, China. By the tenth century, however, Christianity had all but disappeared. As the T’ang dynasty fell, Christianity fell with it. Yet that was not the end of Christianity in China. Christianity returned in Mongol China. That was during the period of the fabled Kublai Kahn in the thirteenth century, the greatest of the Mongol rulers of China. Undoubtedly he was the most powerful man in the world at his time. His empire stretched from Korea to Burma and over to the Euphrates, which indicates something of the extent of his great empire. Kublai Kahn, who was not a Christian, was nonetheless a friend of Christians. Thus during the reign of this Mongol ruler in China and elsewhere throughout the Orient, Christianity faced an opportunity that it tried to move into. There was widespread Christian presence at the Mongol court. We know that from the visit of Marco Polo, who went from the West and discovered Christians in the thirteenth century in China. So Christianity prospered during the T’ang dynasty. Then it was almost obliterated. Then it recovered and returned during the reign of Kublai Kahn in the thirteenth century. Again, however, it was the same story repeated with the death of this friend of Christians in 1294. Christianity radically declined when Kublai Kahn, the protector of the church in China, died. Soon there was the second disappearance of the church in China. When John of Montecorvino, an Italian missionary and the greatest of the Roman Catholic missionaries of the era, reached China shortly after the death of Kublai Kahn, he was still able to receive a warm welcome. He became the first Catholic archbishop in China. He was also the last until the modern period.

With the fall of the Mongol dynasty the Chinese Christian churches disappeared for the second time. For the next 300 years the new China would be isolationist and nationalist and orthodox Confucian. It would be ruled by a completely China-centered dynasty called the Ming dynasty. That meant that very few

Christians were left in China by 1500. While some great things took place in China, and two strong Christian movements had existed—including one in this period—by the end of the third 500-year period almost nothing of Chinese Christianity was left.

You might wonder what was happening to the ancient church in Persia. That church reached its prime in the thirteenth century. Then, however, much like the church in Nubia, its prime was followed soon by decline and collapse. By the end of the fourteenth century, Persian Christianity was clearly in decline. Why did that happen? It was not because the church became syncretistic. Christians in Persia sharply distinguished themselves from Muslims. It was not because it was a foreign movement. The Persian Christian culture that expressed itself in the church was ancient. Rather, a failure of intellect, doctrine, and study led to the decline of the church in Persia. There was also the same story of too much dependence upon the government. Christians had to learn not to put their trust in princes. And they have had to learn that repeatedly. When the Mongol ruler of Persia converted to Islam in 1295, the year after the death of Kublai Kahn, it marked the final blow to the church in Persia. That church survived, but only in small numbers and under difficult circumstances.

In central Asia the victories of the religiously tolerant Genghis Kahn of the thirteenth century opened the opportunity for the spread of the Gospel. The empire of Genghis Kahn extended from the Yellow Sea to the Black Sea. Christian missionaries began to move into those areas. A second wave of Mongol conquest in the fourteenth century, however, came from the fiercely Muslim ruler, Tamerlane. He is often called “the scourge of God and the terror of the world.” He certainly had no love for Christians. Thus the momentary opportunity in central Asia soon disappeared with unparalleled destruction of churches. Central Asia by that time was turning hostile.

By the end of the third 500-year period, Christianity had received some major setbacks in Asia. There were still Christian churches and communities of Christians in central Asia, what we would call the Middle East. Byzantine Orthodox Christians, Syrian Jacobites, Nestorians, and others were all under Muslim rule. There were also some ancient Thomas Christians in India who survived, and even thrived in some ways. Yet they were relatively limited in numbers and quite isolated from the rest of the Christian world.

That was a quick overview of 500 years of Christianity in Asia. You can read much more about it in Sam Moffett’s *A History of Christianity in Asia*. Now I will move to Eastern Orthodoxy. I already presented one lesson on how Eastern Orthodoxy developed as a separate church. That division from the West took place in 1054, at the beginning of the third 500-year period. We can use two dates for Eastern Orthodoxy as we think about the third 500-year period. The whole period can be summarized by the terms “gain” and “loss.” There were some gains and there were some losses for Eastern Orthodoxy during that time.

The greatest gain, which was a major event in the history of Eastern Orthodoxy, was the conversion of Russia. The traditional date for that event is 988. Near the year 1000, Russia became Christian. They became Christian in the Eastern Orthodox form of Christianity. That greatly expanded Orthodoxy, which could not move to the West because of Roman Catholicism, it could not move to the south because of Islam, and it could not move to the East because of Islam. It could, however, move to the north, and it did, mainly through the conversion of Russia in 988. That was the high point, at the beginning of the third 500-year period.

The low point in Eastern Orthodoxy during that 500-year period was the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks at the end of the period, in the year 1453. Constantinople was the great capital of the

Roman Empire after Rome, which had flourished for 1,000 years. Yet it fell to the onslaught of the Muslims in 1453.

Further west the history of the Roman Catholic Church was unfolding. By the third 500-year period of Christianity, it could properly be called the Roman Catholic Church. The way to summarize that 500-year period is to speak about the consolidation of Christianity in the West. It was a period in the West that we can characterize by the word "Christendom," which is a union of church and state and culture. There was not only the consolidation in that 500-year period of Christianity and culture under the concept of Christendom, but there was also by the end of the period the breakup of that concept.

I will present some sketches of ideas regarding the period, some of which I will cover in more detail in later lessons. This will help give you an overview of the period. First of all, think of the diversity of Roman Catholicism. Sometimes we have the idea that Catholicism was very unified, or monolithic. Yet there were all sorts of people with all sorts of ideas during the period. One of the best ways to get insight into that diversity is to read *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer. That book presents different outlooks on the Bible, the church, salvation, and truth through the different characters. They were all within the scope of the Roman Catholic Church.

The next topic I need to mention from that period is the struggle with Islam. That struggle had been going on since the seventh century. Islam had moved into Europe and had been defeated at the Battle of Tours. Yet it still controlled Spain. It more greatly grieved Western Christians that Islam still controlled the Holy Land. During that 500-year period, Christians in the West decided to do something about Islam. They decided to engage in the Crusades. Thus it was a disastrous period for Western Christianity. For about a century-and-a-half, churches in the West were engaged in one crusade after another. They were military adventures into the East in order to attempt to defeat the Muslims' militarily and to reconquer Jerusalem and other sites dear to the hearts of Western Christians. All of that did nothing to strengthen Christianity, but it did much to heighten the antagonism of Muslims toward the Christian faith.

Another struggle that took place during that 500-year period was what is often called the Investiture Controversy. It is a way to talk about the relationship between church and state. In Europe during that time there were two interacting authorities. One was the church. The other was the state, or the various states that made up Western Europe. The question was who had ultimate authority. The investiture controversy relates to the problem of who was going to appoint bishops and church officials in countries such as France or England. Would the pope do that? Could the king do it? Of course, the kings claimed they should do it, and the popes claimed they should do it. Each claimed authority over the other. I will describe in some detail that struggle within Christendom, which had been going on since the days of Constantine, between church and state, or pope and emperor.

There were some great achievements during that period. It was a great period for books, theology, and many things that were created or developed and have lived on. I did not know until recently that golf was perhaps invented during that 500-year period. Other things were done, too, during that period. It was a great period of theology. If the second 500-year period did not produce much theology of note, then the third 500-year period certainly did. It culminated in one of the greatest books of systematic theology ever written, the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas.

It was also a great period of piety. Monastic orders were revived, and new orders were created. Literature of devotion and piety came from the Benedictines, Cistercians, Franciscans, and Dominicans, which were the great medieval orders of the time. The popular piety of the people also increased, yet it

went in some unfortunate directions. The veneration of saints and prayers to the Virgin Mary increased. Piety was often expressed in crass and mechanical ways.

In general culture it was also a great period. It was the time of the rise of universities, by the twelfth century. The first schools tended to be operated by the monasteries. Education was preserved in the monasteries. The fathers and brothers and nuns in the monasteries taught in the schools. From monastic schools there was the development of cathedral schools, which were schools in the great towns where there were large cathedrals. Then out of the cathedral schools the universities developed. There were universities in Milan, Cologne, Paris, Oxford, and other places.

It was also a period of the building of churches, great churches, and cathedrals. There were churches such as those at Chartres and throughout Europe. The style of church architecture shifted from the heavy, dark Romanesque to the style we call Gothic, which had flying buttresses supporting the weight of the walls and rooms. That allowed, for the first time, great areas for windows, stained glass, and light. The look of the great churches shifted from the older Romanesque to the more modern Gothic.

It was also a wonderful time for literature. People began to write, not only in theology but also in many other areas. Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the fourteenth century. At the same time Chaucer was producing his *Canterbury Tales* in England.

It was also in that 500-year period that many people became aware that all was not right with the Roman Catholic Church. It was a period of reform. As the period progressed, the need for reform became more evident. Some of that reform came from the papacy itself. There was the Gregorian reform, named for Pope Gregory VII. Gregory wanted to strengthen, invigorate, and clean up the church. He wanted to set it on a better foundation. The reforms during his reign were notable. He tried to do away with some of the financial and moral corruption in the church. Gregory insisted on clerical celibacy. It was the first time that practice became a requirement rather than a recommendation. Due to so much of the corruption that Gregory found in the church, he believed that the solution was to insist that every priest be celibate.

There was also the famous Lateran Council of 1215. It was an attempt before the Reformation to get the church back on track. That council, which met in Rome, had some important doctrinal elements. One was the doctrine of transubstantiation, which was made official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Earlier there had been a famous debate between Radbertus and Ratramnus over this issue. The church had been moving toward transubstantiation for quite some time as its official and only view. At the Fourth Lateran of 1215 that position was taken. The Fourth Lateran also said that every Catholic should go to confession once per year. By making annual confession a requirement it probably indicated how lax many people were about the matter of confession.

The period was also a great period for the development of the orders. The old orders, going back to Saint Benedict and the Benedictines, experienced a number of revivals and renewals. The most famous took place under Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians. In the thirteenth century two great new orders were established, the Dominicans and the Franciscans. I will describe those two orders in some detail in a later lesson.

From the standpoint of the official church, particularly as the end of that 500-year period approached, it was a time of heresy. Heresies began to arise. There were the Cathari, or Cathars, in southern France. They presented a serious challenge to the church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. We would say it was a real heresy. It was dualistic, Gnostic-like, Manichaean-style religious expression that dominated a

large part of southern France and Lombardy, or northern Italy. The church did everything it could to put it down, largely due to the use of force. The word “heretic” in the thirteenth century almost always applied to the Cathars.

There were other people, however, who were called heretics with whom we generally find ourselves in line. I will describe those so-called heretics in more detail. There was the movement of the Waldensians in Italy. It was a reformation before the Reformation. So much of what was later established by Protestant Reformers was put into practice by those Italian reformers 500 years before what the Waldensians call the second reformation. In England Wycliffe and his Lollards were preaching grace and translating the Bible. They were also suffering persecution. That message spread to Bohemia and John Huss. He was a preacher in Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. Huss was finally taken to the Council of Constance, where he hoped to only defend himself but also present the true Gospel. He was not allowed to do that. He was condemned to death and burned at the stake in 1415. As the fifteenth century moved on, down in Florence, in Italy, Girolamo Savonarola was preaching and reforming the church of the city of Florence. He died, burned at the stake as well, in 1498. With the death of Savonarola, the third 500-year period was almost at an end. In 1498 Martin Luther was a boy of 15 living in Germany, although he was not yet thinking anything about 95 theses or a Protestant Reformation. But the church was very close to the beginning of a new period.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

Some people wonder if the church historians of Africa and Asia view the history of the church in their continents differently than we do, as a decline and revitalization through the missionary efforts of those from other places. Generally they view it in the same way. My major source of information for Asia is Sam Moffett. He is a fair and very Asian-minded historian. He was born in Korea, and he served in China and Korea. He feels that he is Asian. Mark Shaw was a missionary in Nairobi, in Africa, and he writes very sympathetically to African ideas. He has extensively read the African writers. Using those two sources, I doubt there would be much difference in the presentation of the development of Christianity in those two continents.

Another important topic to mention is the preaching during the third 500-year period. Did the preaching emphasize grace? I wish that I could say that the Gospel of salvation by grace was preached, but it was not. The church had that message, and then largely lost it, or it went underground. The message was recovered by Augustine. But then the church lost it again. It was not until Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers that we read a clear expression of salvation by grace. There were a few places along the way, including Gottschalk, Wycliffe, and Huss. Yet those people were viewed as heretics in the Western church. Most of the preaching of that period, from the standpoint of the Reformers, was quite defective. I will later describe the sacramental system, which relates to how the common person of the medieval period conceived of salvation. Even though the messengers often got the message wrong, with the emphasis in the wrong place, they did preach the Bible. They used the Bible. God has a way of working through very defective means to get His message across. We cannot say that nobody was saved for 1,000 years. Some people take that very hard-line view, but I do not believe that is the way it happened. It may be that there were many people, whom we do not know about, who were preaching a purer Gospel. We primarily know about what the theologians, patriarchs, popes, and leaders of the church produced. Yet much of the message of that time was spread by common people. Of course, the message coming to them was from their leaders. I believe, however, that there could have been a purer message preached. Sometimes theologians can get it wrong and the people can get it right.