

(Christian History) 4. the Conversion of Constantine & Its Aftermath

by David Guzik

David Guzik's sermon explores the pivotal events surrounding the conversion of Constantine and the subsequent transformation of Christianity within the Roman Empire.

Scripture: Mark 10:17

Topics: "Christian History", "Societal Regression"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the progress society has made over the years but also highlights its fragility. He uses the fall of Rome as an example of how quickly society can regress and how easily the things we take for granted can disappear. The speaker also discusses the story of the rich young ruler and how he applied Jesus' words to his own life, selling everything and living alone on a pillar to be closer to God. He mentions the stylites, a group of people who followed this monastic ideal of separating themselves from culture. The speaker concludes by challenging the notion that things always get better in the 21st century, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the potential for societal regression.

Transcript

All right, now already in our fourth lecture, we're moving out of the period of the early church, and we're gonna talk about this very long period that we call the period of the Christian empire. Now, I know that perhaps you would be interested in spending more time in the early church, but I have to say, we've really covered what I think are the dominant points of it, how they met in worship, just sort of what Christian life was like, some of the various threats that they faced, the whole phenomenon of persecution, the spread of the gospel, and then in particular, we also talked about some of the important people and writings of the period. So we could go into greater depth in any one of those areas, but I think you'll appreciate that because the Christian empire lasts so long, this period that we're talking about, 312 AD, which basically concerns the conversion of Constantine to the year 1500 AD, that it's worth us spending a good amount of time on.

Besides, I think what we're gonna talk about now is really encompassing both the end of the early church period and the beginning of the Christian empire period. You need to understand that at the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, now again, is it kind of like this with you, that when you say third century, you kind of begin thinking of the 300s, right? No, okay, the 300s is the fourth century. So

whenever I say third century, when I say the end of the third century, you think the late 200s, okay? When I say the beginning of the fourth century, you think the early 300s.

I'm gonna confuse myself if I speak, keep talking about it. At the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, it looked honestly like Christianity might be doomed or at least be beat back to something, nothing more than an insignificant faith with a few followers. Administrative changes in the Roman empire, especially splitting it between East and West and some very tough emperors, such as Diocletian and Galerius, who we discussed earlier, brought severe persecution for Christians.

Starting in 298, Galerius rooted out all Christians out of the army and out of government jobs, which by the way, there were a lot of Christians in the Roman army and there were a lot of Christians in government jobs where they were all fired. In the year 303, a tremendous persecution against Christians began. Churches were destroyed, scriptures were seized and burned and Christian services were prohibited from happening.

It looked like Christianity might be stamped out, but then two very remarkable things happened at the very end of the early church period. The first remarkable thing was the Edict of Toleration, which was put into effect April 30th, 311. Galerius, this emperor who had been a very strong persecutor of the church, surprisingly issued the Edict of Toleration on his deathbed without admitting that he was wrong before, Galerius declared that he admired the determination and the tenacity of Christians in the face of persecution.

And he decided that for the good of the empire, Christians should be allowed to meet in their congregations as long as they were orderly about it. He also asked Christians to pray to their God for the good of the empire. He established this significant official declaration of the toleration of Christianity in the Roman empire.

You have to say that actually it was the bravery of Christians in the face of terrible death and torture that changed the heart of this hardened Roman emperor. It's really one of the remarkable stories of church history. This Galerius was an extreme persecutor of the church, a vicious man, he hated the church.

He tried for years upon years to destroy the church with one of the most severe persecutions that the church has ever seen. And again, on his deathbed, his heart was melted by the love and the courage and the persistence of the brave Christians that he saw die and who were tortured for the sake of Jesus Christ. Now you can only imagine how this would be received in Christian circles, right? I mean, it would be rejoicing.

Think about it, you're a Christian in the Roman empire during this time and persecution is tough. I think sometimes it's very hard for us to understand in the Western world how stressful a season of persecution is. Listen, it's not that everybody has to be put into jail, everybody has to be rounded up.

If you had a congregation of 50 people, all you gotta do is take one of them and torture them. And then you know what? You torture him and then you send him back to the congregation so everybody gets to see just how badly he was tortured. You can only imagine the fear and the stress and the anxiety that that puts through communities of Christians.

Every once in a while you hear it, and I suppose at times that I have said it myself, although I don't know if it was wise to say, but certainly every once in a while you hear it, Christians say things like, well, you know

what the church needs today? It needs a good dose of persecution. I understand why people say that, but listen, if you know what it's like from a historical context, not to mention a personal context, which I've never experienced, of course, but if you know what it's like from a historical context to live through these vicious seasons of persecution, you don't wish that upon anybody at any time. You say, Lord, make us brave enough to deal with the challenges of our own affluence, with the challenges of our own comfort and ease, without having to send persecution, because let me tell you, seasons of persecution are vicious in the church.

They genuinely are. And so, you know, a lot of times as Christians, we tend to focus on the good stories of persecution, right? The brave men and women who see death through courageously or who endure torture, and hallelujah, there are many, many, many such stories. But let us never forget that persecution does take its toll upon the church.

In any regard, Galerius was the man who did this radical transformation, this radical change by issuing the edict of toleration. You could say that his heart was genuinely melted by the courage of these believers. So that was the first radical thing that changed.

The second radical thing that changed was the conversion of Constantine. But what I want you to notice was that the conversion of Constantine did not come first, right? First, before Constantine ever came to the throne, was this edict of toleration by Galerius. But Constantine's conversion was very important.

In October of 312, the imperial throne of Rome was contested and a young general named Constantine had the support of all the Roman armies of Britain and Gaul. You know where Gaul is, right? Modern-day France. He had the support of the armies in Britain and Gaul to be the next emperor.

And so, actually, Constantine received the news of the death of the emperor and was proclaimed to be the new emperor by his armies while he was in the city of York. And so outside the York Minster or cathedral, there is a statue of Constantine the Great and there is my son, Nathan, standing in front of that statue when he and I were on a trip to York. There's, again, this picture of Constantine declared to be the next Roman emperor by his army.

Unfortunately, there was another man named Maxentius who also claimed to be the next Roman emperor and Constantine and Maxentius were to fight it out. So Constantine marched with his armies from the north to meet the other claimant to the throne, Maxentius. And shortly before the armies were to meet in battle, Constantine said that he saw a cross of light in the sky.

And then he read or heard, we're not exactly sure, but he either read or heard the words in Latin, in hoc signus vincis, which means in this sign conquer. Do you understand? He sees a cross of light in the sky and then he hears these words or reads them, whatever, it says in this sign conquer. And Constantine was already beginning to reject the multiple gods of the Roman world.

And as he rejected the multiple gods of the Roman world in favor of a single God, he regarded this light in the sky, this cross in the sky as an important sign. Later, Constantine said that Jesus appeared to him in a dream and showed him the cross sign again. And this time he saw the top of the cross was bent over so that it sort of looked like, well, you might say it looked like the letter P with a cross symbol through it.

This is what Constantine said that he saw. This looked sort of like the Greek letters chi and ro together, the first two letters of the Greek name Christ. Constantine believed that Jesus told him to mark his soldiers

shields with this sign.

He did it, he went into battle against Maxentius and he won. So Constantine was the new emperor of Rome and claimed to have this religious experience where he came to Jesus Christ. Now, when Constantine came into power, he granted freedom and official status for Christians.

In the year 313, he issued the Edict of Milan granting religious freedom in the Roman Empire. The edict declared, our purpose is to grant to both the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired. What you have to say for that day and age was an extremely progressive idea.

So notice first, what did Galerius do? Galerius issued an edict of toleration, right? Constantine's edict went once further saying this is an edict of religious liberty, not just for Christians, but for everybody. Now, I'm gonna talk about a point that sometimes I get a little sore on, but I shouldn't. People tend to talk sloppily about Constantine.

They tend to say that he was the one who made Christianity the favored religion in the Roman Empire. That statement is both not true and true. Constantine did not officially make Christianity the favored religion of the Roman Empire.

His successors did that. But yet unofficially, because Constantine himself was a Christian and promoted Christians, you could say that he unofficially made Christianity the favored religion of the Roman Empire, but he did not do it officially. And so Constantine, becoming emperor, did whatever he could do to help the church, right? He was converted on this battle on the way to fight Maxentius.

He granted freedom to the Christians and then he tried to help the church. You could say that he tried to help the church in two ways, or in several ways. First of all, he sought to restore what was taken away in recent persecutions, right? In a time of persecution, the government is taking away a lot of property, a lot of money, a lot of things from the churches.

Constantine said, let's return that. Secondly, now under Constantine, government salaries began to be paid to bishops and to preachers. Third, Sunday began to be recognized as a governmental day of rest in the Roman Empire.

Constantine also tried to help sort out some doctrinal controversies that divided Christians. There's a couple examples of this. First of all, the Donatist controversy.

The Donatists were a strict group of Christians in North Africa who refused to recognize a man as bishop because he was ordained by someone who had faltered under persecution. Constantine and most Christians sided against the Donatists. I brought this issue up before.

I just mentioned the three categories of people under persecution, right? You had the martyrs, you had the confessors, right? And then you had the lapsed. You know what the lapsed were? The lapsed were the ones who chickened out, the people who faltered under persecution. And let me tell you, the church had a huge issue over what to do with the lapsed.

What do you do with them, right? What do you do with these people who said they were Christians, when the sword was put to their throat, they denied Jesus Christ, but then later on they felt terrible about it and wanted to repent and come back within the church. What do you do with them? Some Christians said, let

him back in, let bygones be bygones, come on in. Other people said, forget it.

You denied Jesus Christ, we deny you, you're going straight to hell, goodbye. And then there was a third way, which I believe was the accurate way, the proper way biblically. They said, okay, look, you can come back into the church, but as far as we're concerned, you're starting all over again, you're a brand new believer.

Here's the new believers class. You know, so they allowed for repentance, but yet they recognize the gravity of the sin. Well, this was a huge controversy and the Donatists were among those who said, forget it, if you're one of those who falter under persecution, if you're one of the lapsed, not only are you not saved, but anybody that you've baptized is not saved.

Well, this is a heavy thing, right? And Constantine got involved with this whole controversy and Constantine and I believe most Christians sided against the Donatists and they took the right approach. But then a second controversy that Constantine got involved in was the Arian controversy. Arius was the Bishop, excuse me, the Bishop of Alexandria, whose name was Alexander, this gets very confusing, doesn't it? The Bishop of Alexandria named Alexander.

He had a controversy with an elder in his church named Arius. Arius believed that Jesus was not truly divine as God the Father was divine. Alexander excommunicated Arius but Arius found other people to follow him and he started a movement preaching his doctrine.

Constantine called a council in the year 324, the Council of Nicaea, to settle the issue. Now, there's a big question mark here. A lot of people wonder, was Constantine a true Christian? This is a question that's actually very warmly debated.

The effect of the unofficial recognition and support of the church by the Roman Empire ended up being an extremely negative influence on the church, right? But I think that you have to understand Constantine in his context. One writer that I read, he says, it's doubtful whether Constantine was ever a true convert. His predecessors had persecuted the Christians for political reasons.

He favored them on similar grounds and showed himself willing to continue the policy of toleration, which had in fact been introduced about a year before he won his victory. Well, you know what? I have to say, from my judgment, and I'll admit that I could be wrong here, I believe that Constantine was a true believer. Now, some people criticize Constantine because they say that he was only baptized a short time before his death and so that must show that he was not a true believer because he didn't get baptized all up until the time.

But listen, you gotta understand how it worked in those days. In those days, it was commonly taught and believed that after your baptism, if you sinned in any significant way, you were lost forever, right? That was a common belief during those times. And so if that's what you believed, wouldn't it make sense to delay your baptism until close to the end of your life? Honestly.

I mean, if that's what was sincerely taught, that if you sinned significantly after your baptism, you were going to hell forever, then you would probably be very encouraged to delay your baptism until you knew you were gonna die, at least in some time in the future. I gotta say that from my reading of the historical evidence, I think that Constantine was a Christian. I think Constantine was a fairly good Christian.

I think he unintentionally set in motion certain things that proved to be very, very dangerous for the church. You see, I think we have to say that it's absolutely interesting to understand the different social and spiritual environment that Constantine put the church in. Think if you were a Christian who lived through the terrible persecutions of Diocletian, and then the terrible persecutions of Galerius, and then you hear that on his deathbed, Galerius issued the Edict of Toleration.

You'd be saying, hallelujah, this is wonderful, how great it can be, oh, Lord, you're so good. And then not a year later after the Edict of Toleration, you hear that the emperor himself has become a Christian. I mean, could you ever imagine such a thing happening? You would look at that and you would say, oh, this is the best thing that's ever happened to the church.

Now, if somebody from us went back in time travel and were to speaking to you, this Christian who saw the persecutions and saw the change in the Roman Empire, and we said, you better be careful of this, because this is gonna end up really hurting the church. You'd look at us and say, are you crazy? My cousin is dead because of those persecutions. My family lost everything it owned.

I haven't been able to get into a university or a decent job. How can you say that this is a danger? This is the best thing that ever happened to the church. The emperor's a Christian, how can that be bad? What I want you to understand is that the Christians in that day took a look at this and they say, how could it be bad that our religion is now favored by the Roman Empire and that the emperor himself is a Christian? In an amazingly short time, the church was completely in a different environment.

It went from persecuted to privileged. For centuries, the church was a counter-cultural movement. Now it had to deal with a whole nother set of problems.

Listen, when you're persecuting, when you're counter-cultural, there's a lot of problems that go along with that. But almost instantaneously, the church traded one set of problems with a whole nother set of problems. And here's the questions.

The church dealt with the old set of problems pretty well. How was it going to deal with the new set of problems? You see, now only Christians were promoted in the government or in the army. Many people became Christians because that was the way to get along and to get promoted.

In addition, the whole appearance of the church changed. Now there was a much greater emphasis on pomp and ceremony and grandeur and riches. You don't have big parades through the streets of Rome when you're a persecuted minority, right? But when you're in power, you celebrate what God is doing, right? And you do it publicly.

That's the change that the church had to reckon with in an amazingly short period of time. I'll tell you another thing that enters into this. It's Constantine's help in doctrinal matters.

This complicated things immensely. Because you see now, and I believe that Constantine meant well, right? Listen, I'm a Christian. There's controversy in the church.

Shouldn't we get together and try to solve these problems? That's a good Christian motivation, right? But what did it lead to? It led to the idea that there was an official government position on doctrinal controversies. Now at times this seemed to be good, but in the long run, it was very harmful to the church. The church started becoming much more like a corporation and the emperor of Rome was like the CEO.

By the way, Constantine retained the title that had been given to Roman emperors before him, the title of Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of the pagan worship of Rome. Now, he was no longer the high priest of the pagan cults. He was the high priest of Christianity, so to speak.

Now, let me give you an example. In the Arian controversy, in the Arian controversy, Constantine's greatest concern seemed to be the unity of the church, right? Listen, some Christians say that Jesus isn't really God. Other Christians say that he was God.

The feeling we have from Constantine is Constantine says, look, I don't really care what side you pick. Let's just stop the fighting about it. And so he called together the Council of Nicaea.

Now you see, this Arian controversy and Constantine's concern for the unity of the church in one sense was good because the church was almost entirely united against Arius. There was also a problem that arose because Athanasius, who was the successor of Alexander in Alexandria, Athanasius refused to accept repentant Arians back into the church. And you know what? Constantine tried to force him to do so.

But you see, when Constantine died, his empire was divided among his sons. One of his sons basically turned out to be an Arian and he forced an Arian creed upon many reluctant bishops. When the bishops appealed to the longstanding traditions of the church or the canons of the church, Constantine, the son of Constantine said, whatever I will shall be regarded as canon, either obey or go into exile.

You see, listen, in the Donatist controversy and in the Arian controversy, Constantine got it right, but it was almost by accident, right? His son got it wrong. And now the official power of the church was being, excuse me, the official power of the Roman government was being used to promote heresy. What I find very interesting about these controversies, such as the Donatist controversy and the Arian controversy, is that at first, no church leader ever called into question the right of the emperor to get involved in the matter.

They simply believe that he made the wrong decision or the right decision. Later, Athanasius openly declared his belief that the emperor simply didn't have any business ruling in doctrinal matters. He said to the Roman emperor, listen, I don't care what you or I should say the whole world says.

No, the emperor has no right to rule in doctrinal matters. But you see, I just want you to understand how Constantine, with good intentions, set these terrible forces in motion, right? This principle that the emperor should somehow be the umpire or the arbitrator of these doctrinal disputes ended up being a very, very difficult proposition. Well, one other thing about Constantine before we get to his kids, you can't talk about Constantine without at least mentioning his mother.

Constantine's mother, Helena, was also a notable person. She's well known for making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and for looking for places where biblical events took place. Most of the traditional sites that are in Jerusalem for where this happened and where that happened, they date back to Helena's search.

Matter of fact, when Helena went to Jerusalem, she had a dream in which she saw Mount Calvary being excavated. So going to Jerusalem, she found Jesus's tomb, or at least what people said was Jesus's tomb, and three crosses that were nearby with the inscription that Pilate had written separate from any of the crosses. So to find out which one of the three crosses were Jesus's cross, they touched a sick woman with each one of the three, and at the touch of the third cross, supposedly the woman was healed.

So what did Helena do with the cross? Well, part of it was set in silver and was to be kept at Jerusalem. The nails were still in the cross, supposedly. This is all fanciful, of course.

And one of the nails was attached to the emperor's battle helmet, and another was attached to the bridle of his horse. And so supposedly with this finding of the true cross, now look, are you going to tell me that the true cross of Jesus Christ survived some 300 years in that kind of climate, in that kind of place? It's impossible. It's an actual impossibility, but people believed it.

And over the years, thousands of slivers of wood were set in altars of churches and monasteries that were said to be from the true cross. By the time of Martin Luther, he could say that there was enough wood in all the pieces of the true cross scattered across Europe that you could build a ship from it. Well, again, this was a completely different thing, now having the mother of the emperor, a devoted Christian, and now being this influence in the Christian world.

Now, what were some of the general trends and characteristics going on? Well, we have to take a look not only of the different environment, but also at the Roman emperors after Constantine. You see, as noted before, Constantine's sons were also Christians, but not necessarily true Christians. They continued his practice of intervening in matters of the church.

They also did something that Constantine never tried to do. His successors, his sons, tried to stamp out paganism. In the year 356, Constantinus closed the pagan temples and prohibited sacrifice to the old pagan gods with a death penalty for dilating his decrees.

So you see, this is a whole other thing, right? Persecution, which was once used against Christians, is now being used against the enemies of Christians or the theological or religious opponents of Christians. And isn't this just the tendency, right? I mean, it's wrong to persecute believers, but it was also wrong to persecute the pagans. We would say today from our Western perspective, which was very difficult for them to grab ahold of, of course, in their day, we would say, let them have the freedom of religion even as Constantine has said, but his sons did not continue the same ideal.

So Emperor Constantinus followed after this policy of persecuting pagans, but after him, there was a nephew of Constantinus known or a nephew of Constantine named Julian who came to the throne. Julian barely survived a massacre of his entire family who were killed by soldiers who wanted to prevent the threat of the sons of Constantine becoming the next emperors. Julian was trained by Arian tutors and he developed an attraction to Greek philosophies and pagan mysteries.

He thought of himself as somewhat of an intellectual and was never happier than during the two years when he spent at Athens, which of course was the intellectual center of the world in that day. Julian became the emperor in the year 361 and that year he attended his last Christian worship service. He knew that he would never be accepted as emperor if he was hostile to Christianity, but once he became emperor, then he showed his true colors.

At first, Julian promoted what we might call a diversity campaign where he wasn't against Christianity, he just also promoted all the other religions as well. He would allow and promote them all. He even spoke of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem for the Jews.

But as he promoted a return to the old Greek religions and philosophies, he really hoped that if he left the Christians alone, that they would just fight each other and destroy each other. But when that didn't

happen, then Julian embarked on an anti-Christian campaign. This is why they call him Julian the apostate.

He took old pagan temples that were given to Christians and gave them back to the pagans. He restricted what Christians could teach. He only reigned for two years and he died on the field of battle in Persia.

It is said that as he lay dying on the field of battle, that he reached into his guts that were bleeding and he flung his blood up to the sky and he cried out, you have conquered, oh Galilean. Galilean, of course, being a reference to Jesus of Galilee. And he said, you have conquered over me.

Julian was what we would call the last pagan emperor of Rome because the emperors who followed Julian were generally sympathetic to Christianity and they generally followed the trend of opposing pagan religions and involving themselves in the disputes of the church. Now, that was a significant occasion with Julian. But about this time, and again, Julian was about the year 361 to 362, we're coming into the years of the important decline of the Roman Empire, right? If Christianity was born when the Roman Empire was young, then Christianity was accepted in the days when the Roman Empire was dying out.

We've already spoken in a previous lecture about the people who lived north of the Danube and east of the Rhine and how they were known as the barbarians, these mostly Germanic tribes, and how they were actually highly civilized and had high standards of morality, even though they didn't have quite the technology or the agricultural work or the sophistication of the Romans, they weren't like cavemen by any regard. Well, again, for 350 years, the Rhine and the Danube were the borders of the Roman Empire and these different Germanic tribes slowly had Christianity introduced to them. The first leader of a more organized Christian work was a German named Ulphius.

He was born about 310 who had a Greek Christian mother. He became a leader to Christians in his area and he learned how to speak Greek from his mother. In the year 341, he was among a party of Goths, that is this German tribe, who were sent to Constantinople as a diplomatic delegation.

He met Eusebius, who at that time was the Bishop of Constantinople. But the last Roman emperor left the throne in the year 476. He was deposed by German invaders, but understand that for some generations before 476, Rome was no longer a mighty empire.

It was divided and constantly fighting barbarian invaders, no longer just on the frontiers in Italy, but in Italy and in Rome itself. Rome was sacked in the year 410. Again, notice that's just 50 years after Julian's time.

Rome was sacked in 410 and in 455. This meant that the city was invaded and plundered, that men were killed and sold as slaves and that women were carried off as brides for Germanic leaders. Barbarians began to occupy the lands on the Italian peninsula and to carve up the entire region.

In the year 476, a German chieftain named Odovacer deposed the Western emperor, who was a boy of 11 years old. And with that event, the Roman empire was officially over in 476. And you have to understand what a absolutely catastrophic event this was for the Western world.

The population declined radically in Italy and in Rome. Pope Gallaicus, again, 492 to 496, at the end of the fifth century, he wrote of provinces like Tuscany in Italy that were almost completely depopulated. Rome itself, which probably had something like a million people in the first century, by the time of the 800s, which again, is much later than our period, but it was on this trend towards the 800s.

By the 800s, population of Rome was about 25,000 people. Whereas just several hundred years before, it was just a million people. When the Roman empire fell, society became more violent, more fragmented, more disorganized, and less urbanized.

Now again, how did this whole trend happen? How did the Roman empire get to this place where under Julian, it was still an impressive empire, but again, by the time 476 turned around, it was completely gone almost, it had truly fallen. Well, the pivotal thing happened about the year, again, somewhere around, let me go back to this. By the time of Julian, the Roman empire had begun in some significant decline.

About the year 350, the Roman empire was still massive. It included what is today the Near East, North Africa, England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, and Western Germany. Then, sometime around the time of Julian, violent invasions began to tear the empire apart.

A real turning point was the Battle of Adrianople in the year 378. This battle was fought between the Roman emperor Valens and the Goths on August 9th, 378. It took 10 miles outside the city of Adrianople, which is now the city of Erzin, Turkey.

By the way, Adrianople, or Turkey, or Erzin in Turkey, it's the most fought over city in the world. It's seen 15 major battles in 1700 years. Well, the Visigoths came across the Danube and into this area, south of the Danube River, at the invitation of Valens in the year 376.

He allowed them to come because they were starving to death because of a famine north of the Danube River, but Valens hoped to use the Visigoths to strengthen his army and to fatten the imperial treasury. So he gave them the mission to cross the Danube, to come south, and to come in the province of Thrace if they would come unarmed. Well, they didn't.

They came across the Danube, but they didn't come unarmed. And once they came into Thrace, they began to span out over the area, and they were enough of a threat to where the Emperor Valens felt that he had to face them in battle. It's very interesting about this Battle of Adrianople.

It's one of the turning points of the Western world because Valens believed intelligence reports that put the strength of the Visigoth army as being far less than it actually was. And then Valens refused to wait for reinforcements, supposedly because he wanted the glory of the battle all to himself. He pushed his troops too hard.

They marched all the way from Constantinople in a remarkably short period of time, and his troops came into battle exhausted and were defeated. Things might have been very, very different in the history of the Western world if Valens, Emperor Valens, would have won at the Battle of Adrianople. But after this victory, the Visigoths, this Germanic tribe, one of many Germanic tribes, were able to roam freely across Europe, unhindered by the Roman army that had lost something like 25,000 men at the Battle of Adrianople.

The momentum that made them win Adrianople would eventually, in a few years, bring them into Rome itself to sack the city. This whole defeat at Adrianople introduced a new kind of defeatism into Roman thinking. They lacked the psychological confidence to defeat the Visigoths and other Germanic armies.

And so the Visigoths worked their way through Greece and the Balkans, and then eventually into Italy itself, and under their leader, Alaric in 410, they sacked Rome for three days. But again, the critical turning point of it all was the Battle of Adrianople. Saint Ambrose of Milan said of this, of the defeat at Adrianople,

he said, it was the end of all humanity.

It was the end of the world. Well, the Germans established states of their own, and they copied the Roman forms as much as they could as they began to dominate. And when I say the Germans, don't think the same as modern day Germans.

I'm talking about barbarian Germanic tribes that came down from the north. And many countries and provinces of Europe today are named after these Germanic tribes. There was the Germanic tribe of the Franks that gave their name to France.

The Germanic tribe of the Angles that gave their name to England. The Danes to Denmark, the Suins to Sweden, the Lombards to Lombardy, the Burgundians to Burgundy, Saxony in Germany, Exsus and Wessus in England, all after the Saxons, and Friesland and Holland after the Friesians. So you can see how this new sort of takeover of Europe, so to speak, this huge influence all over Europe of the barbarian tribes after Rome fell.

Well, what was the reaction of Christianity to this? And I have to just say, if you could just for a moment get inside of this in your mind, what an absolutely cataclysmic event it was that Rome fell. Because once while there was still this sense of order and organization and law and structure to society, it seemed that in very rapid fashion, it all vanished away. It seemed to vanish away very, very quickly.

And in a few years, society took a great step backwards in culture and society and all the rest. Now, we don't often think that way, do we? We living in the 21st century, we have this sort of certainty that things keep getting better, right? Technology brings us better things, new inventions, neat new gadgets, things coming all the time, right? New diseases conquered, on and on and on. I mean, we've seen pretty much unbroken for the last hundred years or more real progress in many ways, not in all ways, believe me, but real progress in a lot of things in society.

But we fail to realize, I think, just how fragile society is in many ways. And I would say that the fall of Rome shows how quickly society can take a step backward, how quickly society can move backwards and how the things we take for granted, the infrastructure, the law, the government, the schools, the whole system, how quickly it can vanish. Every once in a while, you'll see one of these movies that thinks of a post-nuclear exchange world, right? You know, where there's been all these nuclear bombs go off and they're trying to rebuild society, you know, and it's all primitive and they all live sort of like, you know, cavemen, so to speak, almost, and it's all this primitive world.

You know what, that is somewhat what it was like after the fall of Rome. These structures and these things that were so dominant in society were now gone. Well, what sort of filled the vacuum? One of the things that partially filled the vacuum was something we're going to consider for sort of our last topic of the night, and that was the monastic movement.

You could say that in this Christian Empire period, after the fall of Rome, Christianity retreated to the monastery. The monastic movement was a reaction to the fall of Rome and to the social unrest that came after it. You see, as the church became more institutionalized and less and less of a real living organism, the church became more of a corporation, that the Bible became less available and Christians became far more superstitious.

In this time, you could say that true Christianity, at least in the perception of the population, became more and more the domain of monks and nuns. You see, the monastic ideal was based on an even more ancient idea of the hermit. The hermit began to emerge in the early church period.

The hermit lived all alone, usually in a barren wilderness, and their solitary life supposedly gave them a closer communion with God. Now, this seclusion was sometimes necessary in times of persecution, but later most of the Christian community thought that this was the way that a person could have the closest walk with God possible. So the hermits would retreat to the desert.

The first monk of any kind of note is a guy named Anthony the Hermit. He lived in the desert of Egypt and he was deeply impressed by the story of the rich young ruler, and he applied the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler, he applied them to himself. So he sold everything, he gave his money to the poor, he said goodbye to everybody, and then he lived alone.

First he lived alone near his house, that wasn't good enough. Then he lived alone in a graveyard, that wasn't good enough. Then he lived alone out on a lonely mountain.

Twice a year, friends would bring him food, and he drank nothing but water. He decided to never comb or cut his hair except at Easter. And as typical for many hermits, Anthony described strange visitations of demons and temptations in the wilderness that were intended to distract him from his relationship with God.

Another very notable group of hermits were called the stylites or the pillar saints. There's more on Anthony the hermit, you know, this artistic depiction of him enduring temptation from different demonic beings out there all alone in the wilderness. But then there was Simon Stylitis or the stylites, they were known as the pillar saints.

They took their name from a certain Simon or Simeon who died in 459. Simeon imagined that by living on the top of a pillar, his soul would be closer to God. So he started with a pillar six feet high and gradually increased the height of the pillar until he lived for 30 years on a pillar that was 60 feet high.

He had many visitors who preached and then he would preach to the visitors from on top of the pillar. The stylites were a group that followed Simeon upon his pillar, not upon his pillar, you know, there's only room for him on top of his pillar, but they got their own pillars and they were here just in communion with God on top of their pillar. Now these guys were kind of forerunners of this monastic ideal.

Again, notice the sense that you separate yourself from culture, you separate yourself from society if you really want to seek God and draw closer to him. That was the idea. And so there were many different monastic orders.

They were usually distinguished by their dress and by their particular rites. They were usually named after their founder, right? The Benedictine order was founded by Denedict. The Franciscan order was founded by Francis and so on and so on.

Now, the monastic movement, was it good or was it bad? Well, it was bad in the sense that it cultivated a false idea of spirituality. The idea was that if you were really committed to God, you would shut yourself off from the world and live in the cloister. This led to what you might call a two-level system of Christianity, where the real Christians lived as monks and the low-level Christians lived in the outside world.

Now, again, not every monastic order was cloistered. Some orders actually went out preaching the gospel and meeting the practical needs of people. And so it was a mixed bag, right? But in general, I think that monasticism in many ways had a bad influence because of these things, because of this radical separation of the world.

And basically what it said is that you can't be a really good Christian and live a normal life. If you're going to be a really good Christian, you have to go to the monastery. That's not a healthy thing.

Now, what was good about monasticism? Monasticism was good because it provided a place where some kind of learning and culture could survive the general breakup of society after the fall of Rome. You see, at their best, monasteries were like intense discipleship schools, and their disciples went out and did ministry. And this is what they did in some cases.

For example, we see that in this period of the Christian empire, in the early part of it, monks really spread the gospel in Europe. And so they went out to the Goths, who were converted by 720, to the Picts by 400, to the Irish by 435, to the Franks by 496, to the Scots by 563, and to the Angles and Saxons by 600. This was the monastic movement at its best, serving basically as radical discipleship schools to send forth the monks into the world to have an impact.

But we must say sadly, that the monasteries all too often did not function at that high ideal. So in some ways, monasticism was bad. In some ways, monasticism was good.

But I'll tell you what, monasticism was useful, because new monastic movements were created to absorb reform movements within the church. Listen, whenever an energetic popular reformer came along and said, hey, the church is messed up. We need to do things different.

You know what they said to him? Great, start your own monastic order. Gather around you a bunch of people who feel like you do, and then separate you from the rest of normal Christians, right? And you can do your reform among your own believers in a radical way. This was useful for the church with the monastic movement, because it had a way of sort of absorbing and taking in monastic movements.

Well, there's more we'll say about monasticism, but this will be it for this lecture, other than just to take a look back and take a look at these general trends. On the one hand, you have the church moving from the persecuted minority to the privileged majority, and all the changes that go along with that. And very much as part of this increasing, you might say, carnality in the church, monasticism was a reaction against that.

Next time we're together, we're going to get in more in the Christian empire. There's a lot more for us to learn in that.

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