

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 41

The Crusades – An Overview

On November 27, 1095, Pope Urban II stood on a specially prepared platform in a big field in France to make an important announcement: the Turks were repeatedly attacking the Eastern Roman Empire. Christians were being killed or forced to convert to Islam. Churches were being destroyed, people were being enslaved, and women were being raped. The solution? Christians needed to take up arms and ride to the East, bringing aid against the Turks and liberating the Holy Lands from the Muslim infidels.

With that sermon/speech, several centuries of “holy wars” began, fought on behalf of “God and Church” – the Crusades. Ultimately, these holy wars/crusades would expand. Not only would the Muslim infidels face the Christian’s sword, but so also would many other “threats” to God’s church. The wars would be waged not only against infidels, but also against “heretics,” anyone who threatened orthodoxy and the power of the church.

What brought about these crusades? A number of factors came together to shape the theology, the social and political culture, and the individual beliefs of the day to make the Crusades what they were. We will examine those today, but first we need to put the Crusades into their historical context. Then in future lessons, we will draw from the Crusades the effects upon the church and the groundwork they laid for the reformation movement.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

We have taken the time to study Muhammad and the rise of Islam in the 600’s. During this time, Europe and the church were marking time in what subsequent historians have termed “the Middle Ages.” Also called “the Dark Ages,” this was a time where developments (culturally, religiously, and intellectually) came slowly. Society and European civilization crept along with little real growth in any substantive way. Over the next several hundred years, a number of things did occur which merit our attention as we move into the crusade years.

POLITICS AND THE STRUCTURE OF EUROPE

After the dissolution of the Western arm of the Roman Empire, a number of invading people from modern Germany control and rule various parts of that Empire. Among the invading Germanic tribes were the Frankish people (the

“Franks”¹). During the last vestiges of the Western Roman Empire, the Romans actually enlisted these Frankish tribes to aide in defending the borders of Gaul (Germany and France). Over time, the Franks actually became the invaders/rulers of the lands, going even into parts of Italy. The Franks became Catholic Christians when their leader Clovis² was converted in the late 490’s.

The various Frankish tribes never really consolidated themselves until the rule of Charles the Great (“Charlemagne”) (c. 742 – 814). Charles the Great conquered much of the European portion of the Roman Empire and was crowned “Emperor of the Romans” by Pope Leo III on Christmas day, 800. As the first ruler to really control a united Western Europe since the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Charles the Great is still considered the father of both France and Germany.

Upon Charles’ death, his Empire eventually again fell into divisive regions.³ In the midst of the political upheavals, the one constant force in Western Europe was the Catholic Church as governed by the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. The Western division of Charles the Great’s empire becomes modern France. The Eastern division becomes modern Germany. But before they take the forms we know them as having today, the lands and their leaders were in a constant struggle to reunite themselves as a kingdom under some ruler. This set a number of mounted soldiers following leaders in warring efforts to become *the* united empire. These mounted soldiers are what we today call “knights.”⁴ These knights came to be associated not only with the local “lord” or ruler they followed and fought for, but also with the various church institutions in their respective regions. Typically, these were monasteries that prayed for the knights and received protection for them as well.

¹ Our English expression of “frankness” or being “frank” means “blunt talking” or “plain speaking.” Its early English usage carried the core meaning of “free.” We might think of speaking “frankly” as speaking “freely.” The word derives its meaning from the historical fact that the Franks were the “freemen” in that part of Europe where they ruled.

² Yes, it is an unusual name (unless you are from Eastern New Mexico). Clovis becomes “Louis” in the French language. The German language evolves it into “Ludwig.”

³ Because of the strong affiliation of the Frankish Empire and Charles the Great with the church, for centuries, many people in Eastern Europe and the Middle East continued to call “Roman Christians” - “Franks.”

⁴ The Latin term used for them at the time was “*milites*.” We get our modern terms “militia” and “military” from this word.

THE DIVISION OF THE EAST AND WEST CHURCHES

Western Europe was not the only part of Christian society fractured in these centuries. For hundreds of years in our studies so far, we have seen the tension of the Eastern and Western arms of the church as well. The split in the Roman Empire into Eastern and Western parts was parroted in the church. The Eastern Empire, ruled from Constantinople, continued to exert considerable influence over the church in that area through the archbishop of Constantinople. The archbishop himself was, more times than not, actually picked by the Emperor. Just as Constantine and other emperors saw themselves as the bishop of bishops, the Byzantine rulers continued to effectively dominate much of the church.

Also, as we saw in earlier lessons, the Bishops of Rome (by this time called “Popes”) did not readily accede to the authority of either the Eastern Emperor or to the ancillary authority of the Bishop of Constantinople. Since the 500’s, the popes asserted themselves as the superiors of the church based upon the inheritance rights of Peter as the first among equals in the early church.

These two big divisions of the church drifted apart over the centuries, even though the official “split” did not occur until 1054. Were we to discuss history and politics with a 9th century Byzantine,⁵ that person would no doubt tell us that they were still the true Christian Empire. They saw themselves as the unbroken Christian Empire of Constantine, Theodosius and others. The Eastern Church, quite naturally, considered itself in the same vein. That is not to say the Eastern Church did not have its own significant divisive struggles. For example, we will delve a bit into the iconoclastic struggle of the church in our lesson on Christian art.⁶ But these internal struggles were overcome with time.

The date of 1054 marks a split over the issue of both papal authority and the “*filioque*.” The Western church considered the Eastern Church in error for allowing the Eastern Emperor to effectively rule the Eastern Church (they called it “caesaropapism” meaning “Caesar is pope”) rather than the Bishop of Rome, who they considered Peter’s rightful successor. Meanwhile, the Eastern churches considered the Western churches as one where the Bishop of the Roman See was attempting to become a monarch/king of the church. To the Eastern mentality, any proper orthodox bishop was a successor of Peter’s.

⁵ “Byzantine” came to refer to those of the “Later Roman Empire” or “Eastern Roman Empire.” The city of Constantinople was founded upon the older town of “Byzantium.” The name continued in use as a reference to the area and the Empire ruled from there.

⁶ In the early 700’s there arose a great controversy over whether the use of icons was a God-approved means of educating and focusing the masses in prayer or whether those icons were actually idols which substituted for God as an object of worship.

This difference in authority was seen in a number of issues that the churches resolved differently. For example, there arose a dispute in the 800's over whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in communion. The Eastern Church believed that the usage of unleavened bread was too Jewish and reflected an Old Covenant mentality. The Western Church believed that the Eastern use of leavened bread departed from the scriptural practice Jesus established. The pope ordered the usage of unleavened bread, but the Eastern bishops never accepted that the pope had the authority to dictate such.

The issue of the *filioque* centered on the Nicene Creed. (Go back to Lesson 18 for that!). The original Nicene Creed was written in Greek and said, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father." Subsequently, the Creed was put into Latin and the word *filioque* was added. That made the Creed read, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son* [*"filioque"*]." No one knows for certain how the term ever came to be added to the Creed, but the Eastern bishops considered it unorthodox, if not outright heresy. The addition was also viewed as the Western Church freelancing by adding to a Creed that all of orthodoxy had adopted together.⁷

These issues, along with the gradual divergence of the churches on many matters of practice and faith, led to the Eastern and Western branches of the church excommunicating each other in 1054. Today, we call the Eastern Church the "Orthodox Church," although no one in the Western Church would consider themselves any less "orthodox." Conversely, we today call the Roman church the "Catholic Church" even though the Eastern Orthodox Church considers itself the rightful "Catholic" church.

THE CRUSADES

Volumes are written on the causes and motives for the crusades.⁸ We can consider the motives of the governments, the motives of the church, and the motives of the individuals.

⁷ The West never did alter the Greek version of the Creed. Modern theologians and church historians recognize that the West dealt more with heresies about Jesus than the East. So, the emphasis on "and the Son" was important to Western orthodoxy. The East had more battles over the Trinity than the West. Therefore, the East was more concerned about the balancing of the Trinity which was found in the Creed without the *filioque*.

⁸ See Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Oxford University Press 1995); Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Harvard University Press 2006); Norman Housley, *Contesting the Crusades* (Blackwell Publishing 2006); Michael Paine, *The Crusades* (Chartwell Books 2006); Thomas Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Rowman and Littlefield 2005); Thomas Asbridge, *The First*

The government's motives centralized on the need for security and power. There is little dispute among scholars that the spread of Islam and the Turkish aggression was both real and dangerous to the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine ruler Alexius I sent a request for help to Pope Urban in March of 1095. Since the Turkish defeat of the Byzantine forces 24 years earlier, the Byzantine Empire was reduced to a small amount of land around Constantinople. Most scholars believe that all Alexius really wanted was a few mercenary soldiers. He never suspected that Urban would declare a "holy war" with perhaps 150,000 soldiers coming to fight for God.

The Western governments and the church were well served by the soldiers going off to fight infidels and free the holy lands. For centuries, the knights and local lords were fighting amongst themselves constantly trying to solidify their territories and perhaps take the illustrious position as a real king over much of Europe, as had Charles the Great. This repetitive fighting served only to keep commerce and progress at bay. Civilization crawled while Europe was war torn. The Crusades offered a chance to get some peace in the countryside while the soldiers were all sent to a foreign land to fight.

The Roman Church found a great tool in the Crusades also. Of course, the church was concerned about the peace of Europe, and so that benefit just discussed was a benefit to the church as well. But, there were more benefits. The Crusades also allowed the church to come to the "rescue" of the Emperor in the East, whose own church (remembering here the schism that had occurred just 40 years earlier) was of no use. The pope came and reduced both the Eastern Empire and the Holy Lands as well. By sending troops and ultimately (albeit temporarily) retaking Jerusalem from the Muslims, the Roman church added treasures to its coffers. Additionally, Jerusalem was once more a ready destination for pilgrimage to the believer.

The individuals had their own distinct motives for fighting in the Crusades. First, we should note that piety itself was a motive for many. There was a strong spiritual aspect to the fighting. Believers who went were following the Pope's teaching and preaching. That brought a strong sense of holiness to the individual. Also, the war itself was billed as God's war,⁹ a rescue mission liberating not only the holy lands but also the persecuted Christians who bore the abuse of the unbelievers.

Crusade, A New History: the Roots of Conflict between Christianity and Islam (Oxford University Press 2004); James Harpur, *The Crusades, an Illustrated History* (Thunder's Mouth Press 2005).

⁹ In fact, when Pope Urban II made his fateful call to arms on November 27, 1095, the cries of the crowds in attendance were "*Deus le volt!*" or "God wills it!"

The spiritual aspect had some other great appeals to the individual. Pope Urban declared that the fighting of the holy war would give pardon for sins to those that fought. On this subject, we need to regress slightly and pick up a theological thread in church history that we have not covered previously.

PENANCE AND INDULGENCES

There is a Latin word, *poena*, which means “punishment.” From this word, we get our word “penance.” But penance does not in itself mean punishment. Instead, it typically applies to a repentance and remorse for sin.¹⁰ The Catholic Church has a sacrament of penance. In this sacrament, sinners “obtain pardon from the mercy of God for offenses committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins....”¹¹

This penance has as its roots the confession of sin. Over the first few hundred years of the church, the process started taking on a more distinct form of confession to a priest, Bishop, or designate of a Bishop. The idea was that the Bishop had authority to forgive the penitent of the sins being confessed. By the time of Nicea, the church taught that forgiveness came because of divine mercy, and not the efforts of the penitent. Still, the penitent would be assessed some form of punishment as a means or recognition of repentance and reconciliation not only to God, but also to the church.¹² Pope Leo I (440 – 461) taught that the confession of sins was properly made privately by penitents to the priests, rather than publicly.

By the time of the Crusades, penance was a time of private confession, done at least annually before a priest who meted out the appropriate punishment while testifying to God’s forgiveness of the penitent’s sins.

This penance is closely related in the Catholic Church to the teachings of Purgatory¹³ and the afterlife. Purgatory is considered the place where Christian

¹⁰ “Penance” can also refer to the practice of sacrificing for spiritual reasons. In this sense, penance can be seen as giving away goods for the poor in light of the greater blessings of heaven, fasting from food to focus on feasting spiritually, or even choosing a celibate life over marriage to better concentrate of living and serving God.

¹¹ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (Thomson Gale 2003) v. 11 p. 66.

¹² Over the centuries, the sacrament of penance has undergone changes within the Catholic Church. Most recently after Vatican II, the Church issued a *Rite of Penance* in 1973.

¹³ Purgatory itself is not mentioned in scripture, although the Apocrypha has a passage in 2 Maccabees 12:42-45 where Judas Maccabees offers prayers for the dead to be delivered from

souls not yet free of imperfection go after death (before the final judgment). In purgatory, these souls make expiation (compensation or satisfaction) for unforgiven “venial” sins.¹⁴ They are also punished for venial sins and mortal sins that have already been forgiven. This, in essence, is seen as purification before entering heaven.

“Indulgences” gradually evolved in the church as a lesser payment or penalty for sinners in order to restore the disruptions that flow from sin. The idea stems from the recognition that in sinning, one disrupts his relationship with God, with the Church, and with himself. To satisfy the disruption with God, one must confess his sins and receive forgiveness. Restoration is the means of satisfying the breach with the church. This restoration often included monetary payments or deeds and services. These indulgences were in full swing by the time of the Crusades.¹⁵

We needed to digress into the concepts of penance and indulgences because they help us understand the motivation for many going to fight in the Crusades. Pope Urban II offered those who fought full penance. Fighting the holy war for God and Church was a way, to the ordinary Catholic believer, to avoid maybe thousands of years in purgatory. It was seen as bringing the sinner into a restoration with God and the Church.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

There were economic and social motives beyond the spiritual motives for the individuals as well. Church courts protected the properties and finances of those who fought in the crusades. Debts were suspended, and other incentives were placed for those who would leave family and home in this endeavor.

their sins. Those who believe in purgatory point to this passage and others to assert that there is some conscious life after death that precedes judgment. Hence, for those who believe so, they will pray for the dead and interceded on their behalf for what they are enduring. Those who do not believe in purgatory have no reason to pray for the dead.

¹⁴ “Venial sins” are considered in Catholic doctrine as those that are “less tragic” than the “deadly” or “mortal” sins. To speak an unkind word might be considered a venial sin, while murder would be the more severe mortal sin. Mortal sins, “if it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness...causes...the eternal death of Hell” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1861).

¹⁵ One no longer finds economic indulgences in the Catholic Church. The church stopped the practice because of abuses. Interestingly, the closest thing seen today is in some televangelist fundraising (“send money and you will get an anointed prayer cloth that will do miracles!”).

THE CRUSADES THEMSELVES

Over the next several centuries, the crusades were fought in waves. Scholars give numbers to the Crusades, but they ultimately exceed the classifications scholars assign. For our purposes here, we are using this class to understand the causes and events that gave rise to the Crusades. Over the next few classes, we will revisit the Crusades as we see them affect theology, expose the Church to new ideas (and old ideas) from the East and the Middle East, and invigorate different orders (e.g., the Knights Templar) that still have mystique for people today. Perhaps most importantly, we will see that many of the issues and beliefs that brought about and justified the Crusades are what brought the reformation movement into force.

POINTS FOR HOME

There is much to be said here. There are those convicted Christians who believe that wars can be just and that the Christian is to fight those wars in the name of God. This can be seen as submission to the authority of government (“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities... Rom. 12:1). It can be seen as God’s righteous fight against evil (“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” Rom. 12:9). Then, there are also those Christians who are pacifists. These point to the same area of Paul’s letter to the Romans just quoted, but emphasize the need to “be patient in affliction, faithful in prayer... Bless those who persecute you... Live in harmony with one another... Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (Rom. 12:12-17).

Some believe there are times where God would have us rise up and offer our lives in war, but that those times are *very rare* and a last resort. For these, the Romans passage 12:18 seems most appropriate: “*If it is possible*, as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” These folks believe that war or violence for personal self-defense is wrong. But, because Christians are charged to defend widows, orphans, the under-privileged, and those unable to defend themselves, there is a time when war, as a last resort (when it is “not possible” to live at peace otherwise) can be fought for Godly reasons.

As for the afterlife, penance and indulgences: there are several points where all Christians should agree. First, any forgiveness of sins comes because Jesus Christ himself bore the full brunt of our sins on the cross, and his wounds heal us. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:22-24).

Is there a place for confession of sins by a Christian? Absolutely. As James notes, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” James 5:16). Is there damage to the church and to others as well as us individually by our sins? Most certainly. After setting out a clear doctrine of salvation by faith in Galatians, Paul still writes, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8).