

Church History: 8th–10th Centuries

Central Theme: *Even when the institutional church falters, the gospel goes forward through individuals willing to endure great persecution—even martyrdom—for the sake of their convictions.*

Background & Context

- The term "pope" derives from the Latin papa ("father")
 - First consistently used for the Bishop of Rome by Leo I (440–461)
 - By the 9th–10th centuries, exclusively referred to the Roman bishop in the Latin West
- After the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476), the Byzantine (Eastern) Empire continued
 - The Byzantine emperor was now the sole Roman emperor
 - Tension between popes and Byzantine emperors grew throughout these centuries
- By the 9th century, popes increasingly sought independence—and even imperial power—from Byzantium

I. The Eighth Century: Icons, Missionaries & East–West Tension

The Iconoclastic Controversy

- Key question: What role should images (icons) play in Christian worship?
- Icons: oil paintings of Christ, Mary, or saints; venerated from the 5th century onward in the East
- Iconoclasts ("image-breakers") argued veneration was idolatry—historically the majority position through the 4th century
- Dangers of icon use: icons kissed, incense burned before them, seen as channels of blessing
 - A perceived violation of the 2nd Commandment (Ex. 20:4–5)
 - A hindrance to evangelism among Jews and Muslims
- Emperor Leo III (717–741) launched the controversy in 726; Constantine V escalated persecution of icon defenders
- The Second Council of Nicaea (787) restored icon veneration under Empress Irene
- Final resolution: Empress Theodora (843) permanently affirmed icon veneration
 - Eastern Orthodoxy celebrates this as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy"—still observed on the first Sunday of Lent
- Theological arguments:
 - Against icons: 2nd Commandment; depicting Christ's human nature alone risks Nestorianism
 - For icons: the Incarnation made God visible; distinguished absolute worship (God alone) from secondary veneration
- Lasting question: How do we reach the illiterate? The medieval church answered with images; the Reformers answered with preaching the Word

Boniface (672–754): Apostle to the Germans

- English monk who became a traveling evangelist in modern-day Netherlands and Germany
- Defining act: felled the sacred "Oak of Thor" at Geismar—an Elijah-like declaration of Christ's lordship
 - The hostile pagan crowd witnessed the tree fall and many came to faith
- Planted churches across central Europe; martyred in 754

The Sigan-Fu Stone: The Gospel Hidden in Plain Sight

- A stone slab erected in China in 781 recorded 150 years of Christian history
- The missionary “A-lo-pen” came from Syria to bring the gospel long before Western Catholic missionaries arrived

II. The Ninth Century: Filioque, Slavic Mission & Gottschalk

The Filioque Controversy

- Debate over the Holy Spirit’s procession within the Trinity (addressed in the Nicene Creed of 381)
- The deeper issue: authority—Can Rome claim jurisdiction over Eastern churches?
- Pope Nicholas I (858–867) deposed Patriarch Photius of Constantinople (863)
 - Photius responded by excommunicating Nicholas
- The immediate trigger was missionary jurisdiction in Bulgaria; the real conflict was papal vs. patriarchal authority
- This controversy was never resolved and contributed to the eventual East-West Schism

Cyril (826–869) & Methodius (815–885): Apostles to the Slavs

- Brothers from Thessalonica; evangelists to the Slavic peoples around the Black Sea
- Learned local languages and created an alphabet for Bible translation
- Permanently planted the gospel in written form among the Slavic peoples

Gottschalk (804–869): A Lonely Defender of Grace

- German monk and missionary; his name means “God’s servant”
- Argued, following Augustine, that salvation is entirely God’s work (Eph. 2:5; 1:11)
- At the Council of Mainz (848), affirmed double predestination: election and reprobation are parallel divine decrees
- Condemned and handed to Archbishop Hincmar (Semi-Pelagian), who had him flogged, burned his books, and imprisoned him for life
- Died in 868—receiving more honor from history than from his contemporaries

III. The Carolingian Achievement: Charlemagne & the Church

- Charlemagne (771–814): first great Western emperor since the fall of Rome
- Christmas Day, 800: Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne Emperor—the origin of what became the Holy Roman Empire
 - A new political-theological construct, not a revival of the old Western Roman office
 - Directly challenged Byzantine claims to be the sole Roman emperor
- Charlemagne saw himself as spiritual head of a Christian empire—even above the Bishop of Rome
- Christianized vast territories by military force
- Standardized the Roman liturgy across the empire, accelerating worship centralization

IV. The Decline of Worship and the Word

- Most clergy limited ministry to sacramental functions; preaching nearly disappeared
 - Homilies written by others were read aloud in place of genuine preaching
- The Mass conducted in Classical Latin—unintelligible to average congregants who spoke Vulgar Latin dialects
- Laypeople became passive spectators: excluded from singing, unable to follow the Latin
- Frequency of communion collapsed: from weekly → three times a year → once a year (Easter)

Radbertus & Ratramnus: The Eucharist Controversy

- Radbertus (785–860): bread and wine are completely transformed into Christ's actual flesh and blood—the precursor to transubstantiation
- Ratramnus: bread and wine retain their physical nature; Christ is present spiritually for the believer through the Holy Spirit

V. The Tenth Century: Collapse and Unlikely Grace

The Nadir of the Medieval Church

- The papacy descended to grotesque corruption
 - Pope Stephen VI (896–897) had his predecessor's corpse exhumed, tried in court, mutilated, and thrown in the Tiber River
 - Between 896 and 1000: 30 popes and 2 antipopes were elected
- The church had become a hierarchical state-religion pursuing power rather than proclaiming the gospel
- Clergy were increasingly ignorant of the Scripture they were called to minister

Unexpected Renewal: Norse Conversions & Alfred the Great

- The same Norse warriors who burned churches in the late 8th century began converting in the 9th–11th centuries
- Alfred the Great (849–899) of England: defeated Danish invaders, required their king's baptism, translated Augustine into English, rebuilt Christian civilization in Wessex
- 10th century: Normandy, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland began to Christianize
- Hungary: Grand Prince Geza (972–97) accepted baptism; his son Stephen I completed Hungary's Christianization
- Within a century, the most feared enemies of Christian Europe had become its newest members

Key Takeaway: *God never leaves himself without a witness. Even in the darkest institutional periods, missionaries planted churches, theologians defended grace, and entire peoples came to faith. The gospel advances not by the strength of the institution, but by the sovereign work of God through unlikely instruments.*