

Church History: The Fifth Century

An Overview Outline

Context: Rome crumbling externally; church defining orthodox doctrine internally. Two major controversies — the Pelagian debate (West) and Christological disputes (East) — shaped the century.

I. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

A. Background & Early Life

- Born 354 in North Africa — pagan father, devout Christian mother (Monica)
- Brilliant classical education; student of Cicero; one of the greatest Latin writers in history
- Rejected Christianity as intellectually beneath him; fell into sexual sin and took a mistress
- Joined the Manichaeans (gnostic sect); later drifted toward skepticism
- Left North Africa for Rome (383), then Milan — seeking fame and career

B. Conversion

- Milan: encountered Bishop Ambrose, who showed Christianity could be intellectually rigorous
- Augustine attended Ambrose's sermons initially as a rhetorician studying arguments
- Three-stage conversion:
 - Intellectual conversion through Ambrose's preaching
 - Garden conversion (386): heard "tolle lege" — "take up and read"; opened to Romans 13:13–14
 - Baptism by Ambrose, Easter Sunday 387 — formal identification with Christ's body
- Monica, his praying mother, died shortly after witnessing her son's salvation
- Returned to North Africa (388); founded monastic community; ordained presbyter (391); Bishop of Hippo (396–430)

C. Three Great Works

- Confessions — spiritual autobiography written as prayer to God
 - Opens: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You."
 - Reflection on stealing pears as a boy → deep doctrine of original sin
- The City of God — written over ~20 years in response to the sack of Rome (410)
 - Two cities: City of God (love of God, contempt of self) vs. City of Man (love of self, contempt of God)
 - Intermingled now; separated at final judgment. History = outworking of God's sovereignty
- On the Trinity — explored the divine unity shared equally by all three persons of the Godhead

D. Theology of Grace & Predestination

- Original sin: all humanity present in Adam federally — born with corrupted nature
- Humanity not merely sick but dead in sin (Eph. 2:1); free to do what we want, but apart from God we only want sin
- Conversion = sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, not human achievement
- Election: from eternity, God chose those He would save and predestined them

II. The Pelagian Controversy

A. Pelagius and His Teaching

- British monk who arrived in Rome c. 383
- Taught that all humans are born sinless — Adam's fall was a bad example, not a corrupting event
- Any person can achieve moral perfection through determined effort

- "Grace" = free will, the moral law, and Christ's example — not transforming power
- Heaven is essentially a reward for living a good life

B. Augustine's Response

- Humanity is not weak but dead in sin — foundational question: Is justification in Christ alone?
- Famous fourfold schema of human moral condition:
 - State of Innocence (pre-Fall): able to sin / able not to sin
 - State of Sin (post-Fall): not able NOT to sin
 - State of Regeneration: able not to sin
 - State of Glory: not able to sin
- Only sovereign grace moves us from bondage to freedom

C. Resolution & Legacy

- Pelagianism condemned at the Council of Carthage (418) and declared heresy at Ephesus (431)
- Semi-Pelagianism: admitted need for grace but held the first move toward God could be human
- Council of Orange (529) sided with Augustine against both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

III. The Christological Controversies (431–451)

A. The Question

- After Constantinople (381) settled Arianism: Christ is fully God and fully man
- New question: HOW do his two natures relate to each other?

B. The Two Schools

- Antioch (Theodore, Nestorius): stressed distinction between the two natures
 - Fear: blurring the natures would revive Arianism by attributing human limits to the divine nature
- Alexandria (Cyril, Eutyches): stressed the unity of Christ's person
 - Fear: a divided Christ cannot be the saving act of God Himself
- Both had valid concerns; both, taken to extremes, produced heresy

C. Nestorius and the Council of Ephesus (431)

- Nestorius: wrong to call Mary "birth-giver of God" (Theotokos); proposed "birth-giver of Christ"
- Condemned and exiled at the Council of Ephesus (431)

D. Eutyches and the Council of Chalcedon (451)

- Eutyches: Christ's human nature absorbed into the divine — "like a drop of wine in the sea"
- Controversy boiled over at Ephesus (449) — literal fighting in the streets
- Council of Chalcedon (451) issued the Definition of Chalcedon:
 - One person, two natures
 - Without confusion or change (against Eutyches)
 - Without division or separation (against Nestorius)
- Accepted by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant traditions — remains the standard

IV. The Fall of Rome and the Germanic Kingdoms

- Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 — shockwaves throughout the empire
- Germanic tribes pushed west by the Huns from 375 onward
- Most Germanic tribes had converted to Arianism (not paganism)
- Pagan tribes worshipped Wotan, Thor, Tiwaz, Freya, Saeter

- 476: German general Odoacer overthrew the last Western emperor — Western Roman Empire ended

V. Patrick of Ireland (c. 385–461)

- Captured by Irish pirates as a youth; sold into slavery as a shepherd
- Believed God opened his heart to the gospel during years of hardship
- Escaped Ireland in his early twenties; devoted himself to Christian service
- Returned to Ireland after a visionary experience; labored tirelessly — baptized thousands
- Described himself simply as "an unlearned man and a sinner"
- Testimony: God plucks people from obscurity and hardship and channels them for extraordinary service

VI. Lessons from the Fifth Century

- Human kingdoms never last — only the kingdom of Christ endures (City of God)
- Salvation is by grace alone through faith — not human accomplishment (anti-Pelagian writings)
- The full humanity and full divinity of Christ are not abstract — they are the foundation of redemption
- God delights to take people from obscure and difficult backgrounds for extraordinary service (Patrick)