

### Chapter Objectives

- List eleven answers historians have given for the fall of Rome.
- Explain how the medieval church emerged from the Roman period.
- Identify three important Church Fathers during this transitional time.

We now turn our attention to the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of the ancient world. After this, we are going to be turning to the period known as the Middle Ages. Thus, we are now in a pivotal point in western history. It's a very difficult period in many ways to understand and reduce to simple terms—but we'll do our best.

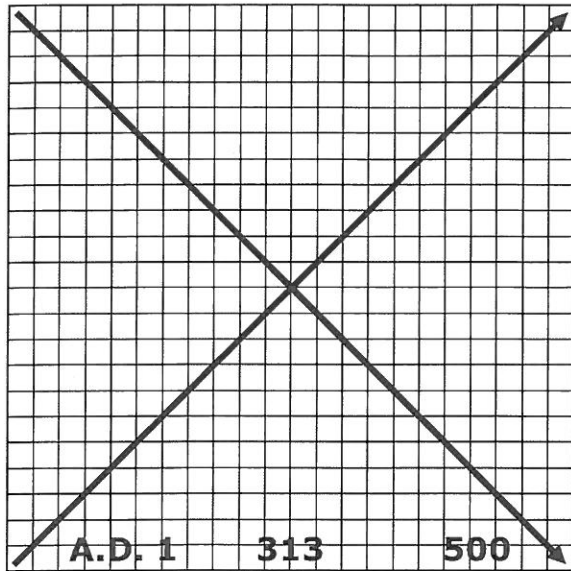
This is a difficult period to understand because we are really ushering out one great period of history and ushering in another. We should, therefore, tackle the question of how the ancient world becomes the medieval world, or (as we'll see later) how the medieval world turns into the modern world. It looks easy on paper—when you look back from the vantage point of several centuries and all the interpretations are laid out for you in a textbook. But if you think about it, it's a very difficult challenge to account for historically.

Think of it this way: People didn't go to bed one night in the ancient world and wake up the next morning and look at the newspa-

per and say, "Oh, we're in the medieval world now!" It doesn't happen that way. We make it look like a simple process, as I said, because we slice up periods and put labels on them. But the reality is that these kinds of changes occur over vast periods of time. The people living through these periods may recognize that "the times they are a-changin'" (as Bob Dylan put it); they may recognize that some sort of transition is underway. But they can't necessarily see it clearly when they're living in the midst of it.

What I'm describing here is historical and cultural change on a big scale. I'm not talking about the day-to-day kinds of changes, the things we read about in newspaper headlines. I'm talking about big change, such as going from the ancient world to the medieval world, or going from medieval world to the modern world. This is, as I said, something that occurs over a very long period of time, and it's a very complex phenomenon. It's important to keep this clearly in mind as we talk about the issues before us. This is really the central issue that I want us to try to grapple with in this chapter.

Let's simplify the matter. Imagine that we have a piece of graph paper in front of us and we are going to draw two trend lines on this sheet of paper to illustrate the two main things that are occurring during this transitional period from the ancient world to the medieval world.



There are two institutions that experience very different destinies during this period of time. One of them we can represent as a trend line going precipitously from the upper-left to the bottom-right. So, obviously, the fortunes of one institution are steeply on the decline in this period. But there is another institution which is sharply on the rise, represented as a trend line from the lower-left to the upper-right. One institution is on the rise while another is on the decline.

What are these two trends that define the shift from the ancient to medieval world? One is the rise of the medieval church. Clearly, the fortunes of the church have improved markedly in this period of time, as we have seen. What is the great institution that's on the decline? The Roman Empire. So you have the empire that's declining and the church that's increasing in power. If you want to give numerical values to our improvised graph, we can put the years down as AD 1 and AD 500. Over the course of this five hundred years we see the beginning of the empire and its steady decline to its eventual fall around 476. Over the same period, we see the birth of Christ, the beginning of the church, and its growth to dominance. The lines describing these two trends cross at a certain point. The most logical point at which to plot this moment

would be at about 313 A.D. when Constantine came on the scene, was dramatically converted, and then legalized Christianity within the Roman Empire. From this point on, there was no turning back; Christianity would become the official state religion of Rome. When Rome collapsed and fell off the scene, the Roman Catholic Church would become the dominant institution that shaped the Middle Ages.

This graph, then, represents the large-scale changes that tell the story of this period—how the ancient world gradually gave way to the medieval world, how one dominant institution (the Roman Empire) was gradually replaced by another (the Roman church). I would describe this as a “changing of the guard” between empire and church. Looking at the Middle Ages and particularly at medieval Christianity, we are going to see that the story is not entirely a pretty one. In fact, a lot of ugly things happened as a result of the politicization of the church as it began to act more and more like the empire it replaced. The church began to act like a political bureaucracy, and the practice and the doctrine of the church became corrupted. Whenever the church becomes a political institution, it becomes corrupt by definition, and its doctrine and its practice will be adversely affected. This is the framework I want us to keep in mind as we discuss, first of all, the collapse of the Roman Empire in late antiquity. So, let's start with the negative trend line.

### The Fall of Rome

We're going to survey very quickly eleven explanations that historians have given for the fall of Rome. They really cover the whole range of possibilities. Still, this is not at all a comprehensive list; rather, this is meant to give you an introduction to some of the dominant explanations that have been offered.

A popular explanation in conservative Christian quarters, which I have heard as a sermon illustration many times, is that Rome was undone by immorality. The argument is that Rome was corrupted by moral license

and luxury. The prevailing ethic of the late empire was that you did whatever you wanted to, and that wealth and laziness, combined with immoral values, contributed to the decline of the stoic virtues and the sense of Roman discipline.

That is certainly part of the equation, but it's much more complex than that. If you want to account for the fall of the Roman Empire on the basis of just moral issues, then you are going to have to explain why Rome stuck around as long as it did. Rome was always immoral, and it always tolerated a whole range of immoral acts throughout its history; therefore, this alone doesn't account for why Rome fell when it fell. This is hence a caution against the overly simplistic claim that Rome fell because it was immoral. That is obviously ultimately the explanation for why all human societies and empires collapse—because of their sinful nature—but it doesn't account for the specifics of why Rome fell when it did.

Second, there is a so-called Christian, or more accurately "Augustinian," answer. Augustine, in the *City of God*, said that Rome fell because it had to make way for the City of God that was to be established on earth. We now know, however, that Augustine, despite his impressive contributions to biblical interpretation, was wrong on that count. His eschatology was off, but this was nonetheless the interpretation he gave as he was struggling to understand the historical phenomenon that was playing out during his lifetime.

Third, we see that historians of the eighteenth century gave what is known as the rationalist answer for the fall of Rome. The historian Edward Gibbon, who wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, is the best-known exponent of this view. (See portrait below.) Gibbon's belief was similar to that of the pagans back in Augustine's day, who claimed that the church was to blame because the people's allegiance had changed. Christians no longer cared whether Rome lived or not, or survived another day, because, after all, their citizenship was in heaven. Personally, I think there is some

credibility to this argument, in that Christians did in fact turn their allegiance to the church and certainly to the values of their faith, and away from the political and materialistic values that had held up the Roman Empire.



A fourth explanation that has been offered is called the political answer. There are many variations of this; some would say that the concentration of power in the office of Caesar corrupted Rome, such that Rome could no longer effectively be governed. The loss of public spirit and the failure of civilian control of the army meant that powerful generals would rise up in the provinces and, like Julius Caesar way back in Rome's history, march their armies to Rome and seize power. This was sufficiently destabilizing to the Roman Empire to cause it to collapse. Furthermore, the state had become unwieldy. It could no longer govern itself and therefore collapsed for political reasons. This is certainly part of the reason, but by no means the full story. Notice how we're finding that that's the case as we go through each one of these. There is some truth in each answer, but none comes close

to telling the whole story.

Fifth, the social answer is espoused by historians who emphasize that there was a fundamental war of the classes in Roman society. This was caused by the injustice of slavery on which Roman society was based, where a majority of those living in the Roman Empire were not free. History tells us that any society structured like that will collapse, and that certainly was the case with the Roman Empire.

Sixth, some historians emphasize economic reasons for Rome's collapse, such as stagnation in trade that led to less wealth. There was also low productivity at the end of the Roman Empire for various reasons, along with a scarcity of gold and silver. Less economic activity means less wealth. When dire economic conditions prevail, you can't pay the army; and if you can't pay the army, then it's not going to fight to defend Rome. It's easy to see the interconnectedness of all these ideas. In other words, Rome is collapsing in every way possible.

A seventh explanation that has been offered is the physical or environmental answer, which considers the long-term effects of, say, the depletion of top soil, deforestation, climatic change, and drought. These are very contemporary ways of looking at Rome's fall. We have more of an appreciation today of the environmental consequences of certain actions than they did in the Roman Empire. If you keep planting in the same field, century after century, you know you are going to have a decrease in crop yields and you are not going to be able to feed the Roman population. This is all going to have a very destabilizing impact on Roman society, which in turn is going to have political consequences.

Related to this is the eighth answer, the so-called pathological explanation for the fall of Rome. According to this view, pathogens like the plague and malaria might have destabilized Roman society. Some contemporary historians have even looked at the role of lead poisoning in the collapse of Rome. The Romans had indoor plumbing and the

pipes that brought the water into their city, into their buildings and so on, were made out of lead. They also cooked in lead pots. We know today, of course, that lead doesn't combine well with brain cells. Could this be the reason why Rome fell—because of lead poisoning? Certainly not. Perhaps it was a contributing factor, however, as part of the overall equation.

The ninth explanation represents an outdated and even repugnant view known as the genetic answer. It is associated with German historians of the nineteenth century, when German scholars began toying with the idea of a "master race" and "pure" ethnic lines and so on, which would ultimately result in the tragedy of the rise of Nazi philosophy in the twentieth century. This strand of German pseudo-scholarship argued that there was a breakdown of what they called the purity of the old Roman stock in the late Roman Empire through intermarriage, such that people basically no longer cared anymore whether Rome survived or not since their bloodlines had been compromised. I think we can put that one aside by placing it within its own troubled context of racist ideology; but I mention it simply as a curiosity of historical explanations for why Rome fell, much as we did with Augustine's outdated explanation.

The cyclical answer, our tenth explanation, also comes from the dustbin of nineteenth-century Germany historiography. It's a curious explanation that doesn't really explain anything at all. Basically, the cyclical answer tells us that Rome fell because Rome was an empire—and that's what empires do as part of their "life cycle." Empires have an origin; they mature, reach their strength, and then they decline and collapse. As you can see, that doesn't take you very far by the way of explaining the specifics of why Rome collapsed.

Finally, our eleventh answer looks at Rome's military situation. This explanation claims that Rome couldn't any longer defend itself from the barbarian tribes that were invading the Empire. This explanation is best seen as the proverbial straw that

broke the camel's back. Rome had been weakened socially, politically, economically, and in other ways such that the empire was no longer strong enough to withstand invasion.



So, then, why did Rome fall? We don't know exactly. The best answer is to say some combination of all of these factors. A more important issue, to my mind, is: *What does the fall of Rome illustrate to us?* The fall of the Roman Empire illustrates the classic example of what we call a historical problem. When we use the phrase **historical problem** we mean *a set of historical circumstances so complex that it defies easy explanation.* An easy explanation is exactly what you and I want; but that's exactly what we *can't* get when we talk about a historical problem such as why Rome fell.

Are we ever going to explain why Rome fell? No, there is not a chance that we'll ever arrive at a comprehensive, final answer. And once again that suggests to us the important principle of how we need to approach the complexity of the past. It should remind us of the limits of our knowledge, and it should reinforce once again this attitude of humility that we need to bring to these incredibly complex problems when we study the past. We need to recognize what we can claim and what we can only guess at; we need to remember that some explanations are better than others, but that we are never going to get the full picture—certainly not in this world, and not in this lifetime with the limited resources we have.

## The Rise of the Church

We're going to turn now to the second trend line. We are going to try to account for the fact that the church became the dominant institution in that 1000-year period that we are going to be talking about, from roughly 500 to 1500. As we try to explain the rise of the Church, we'll look first at *three great figures* who contributed to the church's growth. Second, we'll look at *three historical factors* that enabled the church to replace the Roman Empire in the early Middle Ages.

I want us first of all to look at some of the towering figures in this period of late antiquity. We call them Church Fathers. I want us to look at three of them in particular who were instrumental in establishing the practice, beliefs, and doctrine of the early church at this period of time: Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome. I am guessing that Augustine is the best known name on this list, and for good reason. We are going to find out that he was, without doubt, the most influential church figure of this age.

It's very important to understand that these were men who saw the fall of Rome all around them. Augustine lived from 354 to 430, Ambrose from 339 to 397, and Jerome from roughly 342 to 420. They saw what was happening in the world around them. Rome's power as a political institution was diminishing and these men were part of that important process of change whereby the church established itself as the dominant institution of this age.

You should note as well that these three men knew each other. They lived in different parts of the Roman Empire—Augustine in North Africa, Ambrose in northern Italy, Jerome in Palestine—but they corresponded with one another. We have some of the letters that they wrote. Of course, these are very different from how you and I would correspond today. We sit down to type and send off an email that's almost instantly received on the other side of the world. But back then, it would take them several weeks for a letter to travel from one part of

the Roman Empire to the other. Nevertheless, they did correspond about the big issues of the day, political and theological.

Augustine was without a doubt the most important of this group of early church fathers. He was born in the Roman province of North Africa, but he traveled to Italy, which was still the center of the Roman Empire; he came under the ministry of Ambrose, the second man on our list, and he was baptized by Ambrose in the city of Milan in northern Italy.

Augustine has the reputation of being the greatest theologian in church history—at least outside the pages of the New Testament. When you think of all the great theologians—John Calvin, Martin Luther, and so on—Augustine towers above them in his influence, the greatness of his conception of biblical teaching, and the original nature of his thinking. He was certainly a great thinker and a great theological mind; but he was also a brilliant apologist. He defended the faith during a time when Christianity, though already the official state religion, was still under attack by pagan philosophers and pagan politicians. These pagans looked at the shrinking power of Rome and the collapse of the Empire and blamed the Church for it. Augustine decided that this allegation required a response, which he gave in his treatise known as the *City of God*, a sweeping look at history and biblical teaching on eschatology.

In this book Augustine he defends the faith against those who charged that Christianity was to blame for the collapse of Rome. He turned the tables and claimed that Roman paganism had done a pretty good job of ruining Rome on its own. He further argued that the Roman Empire had to fall in order that the "City of God" (i.e., Christ's reign on earth) could be established in its place. Augustine was an amillennialist; he believed that the Kingdom of God would be established in our time in this world system and that God's kingdom would be ushered in as a historical reality.

Another one of the great works that Augus-

tine wrote is his spiritual autobiography, known as *Confessions*. It's a beautiful work, and one that's worth reading today. Christians can still benefit from reading this because Augustine lays out the story of his coming to faith in Christ and his personal struggles with the flesh and the world. The book is called *Confessions* because that is what he is doing in it: baring his soul and placing it all out there for us to read and to be challenged by as we look at one of the great figures of church history and how he himself struggled with temptation. It's certainly the greatest spiritual autobiography, and Augustine established a literary tradition that runs all the way down to the twentieth century. One example of this tradition is the great autobiography that C. S. Lewis wrote, *Surprised by Joy*. C. S. Lewis's autobiography is very consciously written in the Augustinian mold. Lewis tells the story of his own coming to faith in Christ and his struggles with doubt and so on. We look back to Augustine as the one who first established that type of autobiography.

Ambrose is the second figure that I want us to consider. He was born into one of the great ruling families of Rome that traced its lineage back to the republican days before Caesar Augustus. He served the church as Bishop of Milan, one of the great cities in the late Roman Empire. Just as it is in Italy today, Milan was arguably the cultural and economic capital even as Rome was the political capital. Ambrose is an important figure for his work in organizing the church's teaching and practice. For example, he formulated principles of biblical interpretation. He didn't have as original a mind as Augustine, but he had a knack for organization. He took the church traditions and the practice of hermeneutics (how you interpret scripture) and he organized these, establishing when it's appropriate to interpret the Bible allegorically or to use a typological approach to understand the meaning or significance of a passage. Again, he didn't originate these principles, but simply organized them and systematized the way the Bible would be interpreted throughout the Middle Ages.

Ambrose also brought his organizational ability to the practice of the church and he was involved in developing church **liturgy**. When you read scripture, when you deliver the sermon, when you stand up and sing a hymn—all of these aspects of church liturgy are things that he developed and systematized. It can be seen that he was therefore very important in establishing the highly ritualized mode of the service that would become the standard in the medieval Catholic Church. He also wrote church hymns, some of which are still used in translation in some churches today.

The third figure is Jerome. He lived from around 342 to 420, was born into a Christian family, and was educated in Rome. He thus received the best classical education one could get in the late Roman Empire as he studied the Latin and Greek languages. This gave him the credentials he needed to make his great contribution to the early church. The contribution that we associate with Jerome is that he single-handedly translated the entire Bible into Latin.

Consider just how monumental an accomplishment that was. Today, when translations are made, they are made by a committee of people, a committee of scholars, each one of who has his or her own individual specialization—Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, maybe focusing on a particular part of the Bible as their specialization. What's amazing again to keep in mind is that Jerome translated this by himself. He was a committee of one, and his translation is still considered one of the greatest and most accurate translations of the Bible. Why did he do this? What was the passion and the burden on his heart that led him to tackle this great challenge?

Well, what was the language of the late Roman Empire? Latin, and the Bible was not written in Latin. It was written in Greek, Hebrew, and portions were written in Aramaic. Jerome wanted to bring the Bible into the language of everyday Romans, the language of the street, the language spoken in the fish market. The great irony of this is that the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages

took his translation and made it the official version of the Catholic Church, which it continued to be well into the twentieth century long after ordinary people stopped speaking Latin. Imagine that you are a medieval Frenchman in the thirteenth century and you go to church and hear the parish priest delivering the homily or celebrating mass. The priest will be reciting from the Bible, but he will be speaking Latin. You won't have a clue what he's saying. This became the practice for hundreds of years in the Catholic Church, which is exactly the opposite of what Jerome had wanted.

That was one of the big issues in the Reformation: to bring the Bible back into the language that ordinary people like you and me actually speak. So, during the Reformation, we see Martin Luther translating the Bible into German. We see the King James Version of the Bible at the end of the period of the Reformation striving to accomplish, once again, what Jerome wanted to do—bring the Bible into the language of the people. We see the same thing with the ongoing translations into contemporary English. We call Jerome's translation of the Bible the **Vulgate**. This word comes from the same root as the English word "vulgar." The meaning of vulgar in this sense is "common," as in "the common language."

Each one of these church figures had a different set of gifts that they gave to the church, but each one was important in contributing to the rise of the church in the late Roman period. Let's now look more specifically, now, at three historical factors behind the rise of early medieval Catholicism. I want us to consider once again the question of why and how. We know that Rome was on the decline, but how is it that this institution, the church, was positioned so well to become the dominant institution in the Middle Ages? I am going to give you three quick answers.

The first of these relates to the way the church inherited the influence and structure of the Roman Empire—what I call the "imperial connection" of the Church. The "changing of the guard" between empire

and church meant that the church began to acquire the trappings of old imperial Rome—and this legitimized the Church. Constantine, of course, had played a crucial role in bringing church and state together. Geographical factors came into play. Rome was the center of political power, so it logically became the center of religious power as well. It's not a coincidence that we call it the *Roman* Catholic Church, just as it's not a coincidence that the Pope has his headquarters in the Vatican, in Rome. As this changing of the guard occurred, the church gradually became the mirror reflection of the Roman Empire by adopting the imperial structure of Rome. The Catholic Church to this day is a rigidly hierarchical structure. At the top of that hierarchy is a Pope who looks very much like an emperor. He wears imperial clothing, he has a scepter-like object in his hand, he has a crown-like object (a mitre) on his head, and he has a big imperial ring on his hand. Where did all these trappings of imperial power come from? Certainly not from the New Testament! They came from the period of time when the church adopted the structure, the style, and even the hierarchy of the Roman Empire. Just as the Roman Empire had governors stationed in the provinces, the Catholic Church has its cardinals.

None of this is a coincidental development, but rather a logical transference of power from one to the other. We need to always keep this in mind as we look at the nature of the early medieval Catholic Church, because this is when errors begin to creep into the church. The church begins to become corrupt in its teaching and practice, because it's becoming more and more of a political and economic institution.

Second, medieval Catholicism emerged as the dominant institution in the West as the office of the pope centralized its power and authority. We see two figures in particular in the late ancient world and early Middle Ages who are influential in this process. The first of these so-called early popes was Leo. His name means "lion." He was a courageous figure and thus appropriately named. He was the Bishop of Rome (they weren't

called popes at this time), and his reign was from 440 to 461, right at the end of the Roman Empire. During this period, Attila the Hun was threatening the Roman Empire and invaded Italy. Leo left the city of Rome and went out and met Attila the Hun face-to-face in one of the most remarkable encounters in all history. Leo must have been a pretty impressive man, because he convinced Attila to turn away and not to destroy Rome. What do you think that did for his reputation? It spiked up pretty considerably, enhancing the prestige of his office, Bishop of Rome; this event, therefore, contributed to the rise of what would ultimately be recognized as the office of Pope.

The second thing Leo did that was very important was that he consolidated his authority over the church. He was the first Bishop of Rome to specifically lay claim to what we call Petrine authority. This is the authority given to Peter. The Catholic church teaches that when Jesus turned to Peter and said, "You are Peter; and upon this rock, I will build My Church," that Jesus was establishing an office that carries down to the latest Pope in Rome. Of course, Protestants have a very different interpretation of what Jesus was actually saying to Peter, but this teaching began to be developed as a way of enforcing the authority of the Bishop of Rome, and Leo was very instrumental in developing that doctrine.



The second figure who was very influential in the rise to power of the papacy was a man named Gregory who lived a century

and a half after Leo. He was Bishop of Rome from 590 to 604. In fact, he was the first bishop formally to be given the title Pope, which is a variant of the Latin word for "father."



We know him as Gregory the Great. Consider, for a moment, how something has really gone wrong with the church when its leaders are given the epithet "the great." We think of military leaders such as Alexander the Great bearing that title, but certainly not church leaders. For one thing, it indicates how far the church had come from that image of service that Christ illustrated in his life.

Gregory was a talented administrator and he tirelessly promoted the interests of the church. He is best remembered for his work on church music. We all know what Gregorian chants are. He didn't write these, but he organized them and his name became attached to them from that point as as "Gregorian chants." Gregory's contribution to the church was very much that of an activist pope who promoted missionary activity throughout the former Roman Empire and especially into northern Europe.

The third reason is a negative way of explaining the rise of the medieval Catholic Church. By this I'm referring to a growing threat from outside Europe that we know as the rise of Islam. As you know, there is

nothing like a good threat from the outside to pull people together. Families illustrate this well. Families can really fight and squabble among themselves, and even have knock-down, drag-out fights sometimes; but the minute somebody from outside that family challenges them, they'll close ranks pretty fast. The same thing is true in the case of medieval Europe, and it's a good way to understand the process we're discussing. There was a lot of division in early medieval culture, but the minute Mohammad appeared on the scene in the early seventh century and, in the century following his death, Islam spread rapidly across all the areas around Europe. Christendom was, in a sense, surrounded by this rising militaristic power to the south and east. Medieval Europe rallied around the church and they put aside a lot of differences. The church's power grew in response to this, because they were the dominant institution, and they were perceived as the ones who could organize the response to Islam.

We date the origin of Islam from the so-called flight, the **hegira**, into exile of Mohammad in 622; and in the century that followed, Islam spread remarkably quickly across North Africa, ultimately establishing a foothold in Europe itself.



Spain was a Muslim-ruled country for several centuries in the Middle Ages, and this long influence left its mark on the architecture, art, music, and language of Spain. Hence, Europe was directly and immediate-

ly threatened by Islam, and we can't fully understand the dynamics of medieval culture without recognizing that Christianity and Islam were at odds, very directly and in a military sense, during this period. Ultimately, this conflict would culminate in the tragedy of the Crusades at the end of the Middle Ages—and we'll turn to that part of the story in a later chapter.