

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#6. Summary of The Church in the Fifth Century

The world of Christianity in the fifth century should be viewed against the backdrop of two significant events. First of all the Roman Empire, at least as it was understood at the time, was disintegrating. Inwardly, abuse and excess were eroding the foundation of Pax Romana. Outwardly, barbarian tribes were physically invading the empire and tearing the city of Rome apart (410 and 455). Many Roman citizens blamed the decline on Christians. In the days of Augustine, the barrier between kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of Heaven would once again be made clear. This was the "outer tension" with which the church had to grips. Second, there was the Pelagic Controversy. This was the "inner tension."

The invasion of Rome must be understood in its context. As is the case with most empires, especially those with some degree of religious devotion (whether true or false), the idea of national collapse is unthinkable. Jeremiah was imprisoned for treason when he suggested God would allow Jerusalem to fall before Nebuchadnezzar. Hitler assured Germans that the Third Reich would stand for centuries, when in actuality it lasted only a little more than a decade.

Augustine had explained that since the fall of our race, mankind had sought to build a kingdom based on Humanism and self-effort, but that in the end, only the Kingdom of God would survive. That was the premise of The City of God. Augustine would declare to his congregation, even as Rome was besieged and the blame was laid at the feet of the Church, "This accusation is not a surprise to us. We expect to see the kingdoms of men rising and falling. Our commitment is not to eternal Rome, but to Jesus Christ and exclusively to the Kingdom He is building." The first century church knew our home is not here. The fifth century church was receiving a refresher course in that truth.

Now, let's look at the "inner tension." Pelagius was a British Monk who disagreed with the teachings of Augustine. Augustine preached that we are saved by grace alone, apart from self-worthiness. Pelagius, however, leaned heavily into the idea of works as a vital part of securing one's salvation. You could be saved, Pelagius taught, if you could "just live better." The most destructive lies are those which contain a kernel of truth. Perhaps that is why Satan approached Jesus with words of Scripture during the great temptation in the wilderness. Puritan John Owen (1616-1683) has been credited with this warning to the saints of his generation, "Never believe the devil, even when he tells the truth." Pelagius' teaching spread throughout the church and re-ignited the controversy Paul dealt with in his letter to the Galatians. The heresy of Pelagius pressed Augustine into developing clearer, more articulate teaching about grace, depravity, and man's inability to save himself. It seems that controversy drives the church to more clearly articulate Truth. God used Augustine to rise to the occasion. Though there is still division between the Calvinistic and Arminian branches of Protestantism, both sides strongly agree that salvation is by grace, through faith, and not by the works of man. Obedience and works are part of the Christian life, but they are not the basis upon which God declares us righteous. The writings of Augustine helped save the church and redirect her toward the teaching of Grace.

This was also the century which saw a man named Patrick rise to his God-given mission in Ireland in about 436 until 460. Kidnapped as a young man of 16, he was taken to Ireland and served as a slave. Upon his escape, he devoted himself to the priesthood and returned to Ireland where he would be credited with being the driving force in the Christianization of an entire nation and culture. The next century would see similar transformation in the land of Scotland.