

HEROES AND HERETICS:
An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

WEEK 11 **May 15, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Pickens**

Gregory – The Movement to Papacy

Life:

- Gregory was born about 540 AD in Rome.
- He was born into a distinguished Roman aristocratic family who participated in the political system in Rome over the generations.
- His father (Gordianus) had been the Prefect of Rome and his mother (Silvia) also came from the upper class of society. His great-great-grandfather was Felix III, who was appointed the Bishop (pope) of Rome by the Gothic King Theodoric. After the fall of Rome you begin a phase where politics influence the appointment of the Bishop of Rome.
- Around a hundred years ago by this point the Goths had captured Rome. This marked the end of the Western Roman Empire. During the 540's the Eastern Roman Empire retakes Rome. However, Constantinople remains the capital. Rome in many ways stands as the division between the Roman area and the Middle Ages at this point and the division between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon people.
- Gregory receives a thorough education throughout his childhood. At 33 he becomes the Prefect of Rome.
- After the death of his father, Gregory leaves the public life and becomes a monk. He turns his property into a monastery and gives away his wealth. He adopts the ascetic monastic life, which he will continue to encourage later as he becomes the Bishop of Rome.
- Gregory is appointed as a deacon and from 579-585 Pelagius II (Bishop of Rome) sends Gregory to Constantinople as a clerical ambassador to appeal to the Emperor for aid.
- Gregory returned to Rome where in 590 Pelagius II passed away due to a plague. Gregory was appointed his successor as the Bishop of Rome and the following year his appointment was approved by imperial decree from Constantinople, as was the practice at the time.
- After (and before) his appointment as Bishop, Gregory takes note of the dismal condition of Rome. The city and the people are hard-pressed. He calls on Christians to make donations and be active in showing mercy. He even goes so far as to appeal to the Lombards, the Germanic people assaulting Rome at the time, for relief. He does so independently of the Emperor.
- During his time as Bishop a man named John rises to the position of Bishop in Constantinople. John begins to appropriate for himself the title "universal bishop." Gregory rebukes him for his use of such a title. Over the course of time Gregory will even go so far as to excommunicate John.
 - The progress to papacy: The term 'Pope' comes from the Greek word 'pappas' (παππας). It is an affectionate term for a father. This word was first used of bishops in the 3rd century. Presbyter/elder (πρεσβυτερος) and bishop/overseer (επισκοπος) are both biblical terms. However in the NT these terms are used interchangeably (Tit. 1:5, 7). In the first century bishops were significant and came into prominence in large part due to heresies. In the 2nd and 3rd century these bishops were further established as the leadership of the church. Throughout the first five centuries the authority of the church resided primarily in the plurality of bishops. In 444 Leo was named the head of the church in the west. However, Calvin understands Leo to have taken this role because of the abuse of the office that he saw around him. At that point there does begin a practice, not widely accepted, of tracing the Bishop of Rome back to Peter. "Gregory the Great...completed the move [to papacy]. He asserted that the bishop of Rome had always been the de facto leader of the church and was the true successor to the apostle Peter.

Gregory's use of history was rather selective at best."¹ The practice of the church at the time of Gregory is to view the offices of deacon, presbyter, and bishop as progressive in authority. The highest authority being that of the bishop of Rome.

- With the fall of the Roman Empire Gregory understands that the world as he knows it is changing. The Roman Empire had endured throughout the entire life of the Church at this point. Gregory recognizes that as the Church endures she must reach out to a shifting culture. Gregory sends missionaries out to these Germanic tribes around Rome at the time. He also sends a mission work into Britain to the Anglo-Saxons. This work is significantly effective. Christianity which so significantly impacts western society can be traced back through this point.
- Gregory passes away in 604.

Thought:

- Church authority:
 - Very different approaches have been taken to Gregory's view of Church authority. Two very different positions have risen to the forefront. He has been viewed as "the last great catholic" (John Calvin) on the one hand. And on the other hand he has been viewed as the one who solidified papal supremacy.
 - Those who view Gregory as the 'last great catholic' do so in light of his quotes against John which renounce this term 'universal bishop.' "It is one thing that we should preserve unity of faith; another, that we ought to repress self-exaltation. But I say it confidently, because whoever calls himself 'universal bishop,' or wishes to be so called, is in his self-exaltation Antichrist's precursor, for in his swaggering he sets himself before the rest."²
 - Those who view Gregory as understanding himself as Pope appeal to his use of the term 'apostolic (or holy) see' in reference to Rome. They also appeal to the actions which he took. He assumed the authority to excommunicate another bishop. He prescribed standards for the church at large. Others before Gregory had claimed papal supremacy but it's in Gregory that the idea finds wide traction and acceptance.
- Missions:
 - As in Patrick, with Gregory we see an understanding that the gospel ought to go out even to 'barbarians.' Gregory understands that a shifting culture does not mean the end of Christianity. Gregory realizes that an influx of pagan culture does not mean the end of Christianity.
- Satan and the Atonement:
 - Gregory had a high view of Christ as Victor. He understood Christ as conquering over sin and Satan. However, in his theology this did lead to a misconception in terms of the ransom price paid. Gregory believed that through the fall Satan had claim to sinners as his own in some way. As such, he believed that the ransom price paid was paid to Satan. Christ came in the form of sinful man and Satan laid claim to him without realizing he was accepting the ransom price. This takes seriously a real and powerful devil. Yet it does diminish the depths of the redemption which God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. We are saved from the wrath of God by the grace of God.

Take Away:

- Jesus is the Head of his Church:
 - Optimism should win out: Jesus will not let his church fail. Though the world rage against her, the church will never perish. "The Church shall never perish; her dear Lord to defend, to guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end. Though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale. Against a foe or traitor, she ever shall prevail." Jesus abides with his church until the end of the ages (Matt. 28:20). This is certainly comforting as we think about our individual lives but also as we think about ourselves corporately.

¹ Nichols, 100

² Gregory in Calvin, Institutes IV.VII.4

- He leads us in love (Eph. 5). He guides us by his Word and by the government he's put in place (Matt. 16; 18; Eph. 2; Tit. 1). Church government (even discipline) is an expression of Christ's love for us and care of us.
- Christ binds himself to his church. We may be sure that he takes the greatest of interest in us. As he binds us to himself in covenant union (Eph. 5) we may be sure that he is anything but indifferent. We can slip into the mindset: "Christ may have saved me from hell, but he sure as hell doesn't care about me" when life is difficult. Nothing could be further from the truth. He gave himself for us and invites us to continually come to him who is our life (Matt. 26).

For Further Reading:

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Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Pres.

Dowley, Tim. *The History of Christianity*. Minneapolis: Lion Publishing, 1990.

McGrath, Alister E. *Historical Theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998.

Nichols, Stephen J. *For Us and for Our Salvation*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007.