

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

When Knights Were Bold

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds.”

2 Corinthians 10:4

While Islam was tightening its grip on Africa and the East the popes were tightening their grip on Western Europe.

More Power To The Pope

By the end of the 5th Century the Germanic tribes ruled the lands the old Western Roman Empire had once controlled. Many of them, especially those in the North and West, being pagan and having followed a policy of what would be called ethnic cleansing today had virtually wiped out Christianity in their regions.

Before long, the kings of the Franks, who were one of those pagan tribes, embraced the Christian faith and by the 7th Century they had set about Christianising of the still pagan tribes of the Netherlands and Germany. It was part of their strategy for spreading their own influence. They reasoned that Christian neighbours would be less troublesome and promoted the activities of Celtic missionaries from England. Territory that had been lost was regained and once again came under the influence of the Catholic Church.

The bond between France and the papacy grew stronger and by the middle of the 8th Century French kings were being crowned by the pope — an acknowledgement that they owed their legal authority to him.

Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, became sole ruler of France in 771. A wise and powerful monarch, he extended his kingdom to such dimensions that many acclaimed it as a re-creation of the old Roman Empire. On Christmas Day 800, when Charlemagne knelt at the altar of St Peter’s Church in Rome to receive communion, Pope Leo III, to his surprise, produced a crown and named him Holy Roman Emperor setting him up as supreme ruler of the Western world. It was a shrewd move on the part of the pope for Charlemagne was very popular. It also planted in the minds of the people of the Middle Ages the idea that the crown of the Empire was the gift of the pope: an idea Charlemagne himself resisted.

In the years that followed, in spite of resistance from successive Emperors and in spite of further Muslim invasions from the South and pagan invasions by the Magyars from Asia and the Norsemen, or Vikings, from Scandinavia the popes continued to strengthen their position. By the end of the first millennium, although the major countries of Europe had their individual kings, the pope claimed authority to appoint and depose those kings and demanded their allegiance.

More Control Of The Church

Another consequence of the events of the time was widespread decline in the level of education of the clergy. Most limited themselves to reading a standardised liturgy and performing the sacraments. By the 8th and 9th Centuries this had become the norm. If any sermon was preached at all it was a homily prepared by someone else that was read to the congregation.

Holy Communion, or the “mass”¹ as it had come to be called, was the central feature of worship. Lay people were discouraged from taking part not, at first, because of any deliberate policy of the Church. A well-intentioned emphasis by the more spiritually-minded clergy on the need for holiness among those who received the sacrament lay behind it. Feelings of awe and unworthiness were further deepened by growing belief that the bread and wine were miraculously converted into the actual flesh and blood of Christ.²

We first hear of musical instruments being used in Church worship in 757 when an organ was presented to the church in Compiègne, near Paris, by the Frankish king of the time.³ From the 10th Century on organs were a common feature of abbey churches and cathedrals but even then they were only used on special occasions and it was not until the 14th or 15th Century, and after some controversy, that the playing of musical instruments became a regular and accepted feature of church worship.

Previously the established style of singing had been Gregorian chant but with the introduction of musical instruments “part-singing” became more popular. As church music became more complex it became the responsibility of trained singers or choirs.

Little by little worship became something which the ordinary people observed and the Church became more dependent on its hierarchy whose power and influence increased.

More Control OF The Fighting Men

In the 8th Century the Frankish king Charles Martel created a permanent class of warriors on horseback — knights — to keep the Muslim cavalry in check. In return for swearing an oath of loyalty each knight was given a grant of land. The knights developed into a powerful military and landowning aristocracy who in turn made smaller grants of land to lesser lords who swore loyalty to them. Those lesser lords, in turn, did the same — and so on. This was the basis of the feudal system of government. It created a chain of loyalty from the king, at the top, to the peasants who worked the land, at the bottom.⁴

In the 10th and 11th Centuries the Church attempted to bring the excessive violence of the knights under control by introducing a moral and spiritual code to govern their behaviour — the code of chivalry. Taking Charlemagne as the supreme example, it provided a complete set of values for the Christian knight including, courage, justice, chastity, sobriety, loyalty and prudence. When a young noble reached maturity, the church ceremonially blessed his sword. In return he swore to follow the code of chivalry and use his sword to defend women, orphans, the poor and servants of God and to fight against injustice and the enemies of Christianity. This did not just regulate the activities of the knights, it also had the effect of bringing them more fully under the control of the Church and Western Catholics came to see them as spiritual figures, like priests and monks.

The knights became the military power behind the Crusades.

The Crusades

From the days of their first conquests the Muslims had held and expanded their territory in Africa and the East. Until the Seljuk Turks took control of the Muslim lands in 1055 Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land had generally been treated well. The Turks changed that. Soon

1 The name “mass” comes from the closing words of the Latin Liturgy, *ite, missa est* (Go, the congregation is dismissed).

2 This had been spoken of in the 4th Century and possibly earlier but the majority disagreed, believing that the bread and wine are symbols only. Both views existed together and it only became a matter of controversy in the 8th Century. The belief that the bread and wine are miraculously changed gained more widespread acceptance over time and by the 11th Century it was established as the only acceptable view. But it was not until the 13th Century that Thomas Aquinas worked out a clear doctrinal expression of it in his doctrine of “transubstantiation.”

3 After that time harps and violins are also mentioned.

4 When a person swore an oath of feudal loyalty he would clasp his hands and bow his head. This passed over into the religious practice of the West as the posture for prayer, God being the supreme feudal lord.

pilgrims were returning from Palestine with horrific tales of Muslim persecution and Catholic Europe was outraged.

The Christian reconquest of Spain began in the early 11th Century and between 1060 and 1090 the Muslims were expelled from Sicily. There was growing feeling that it was time to expel the Muslims from the Christian lands they had taken.

Pope Urban II saw an opportunity to strengthen his own position in Europe and in November 1095 he summoned a council of clergy and nobles in southern France. He called on the leaders of Europe to unite to rescue the Holy Land from the Turks. The assembled crowd responded enthusiastically and caught up by the wave of popular religious enthusiasm that ensued hundreds of thousands of men enlisted to free the tomb of Christ.

Although we speak of a number of separate Crusades, in reality, after the First Crusade there was a steady stream of Catholic soldiers going to the Holy Land to join those who were already there. The later Crusades were times when specific concentrated attempts were made to destroy Turkish power.

The First Crusade

Before the first official Crusade was called by Pope Urban there was what has become known as the people's Crusade.

A French monk — Peter the Hermit — went about preaching the Crusade. He met with great success. People wept for their sins, reformed their lives, forgave their enemies mended their broken marriages and freely gave money to the church. Peter gathered an army of some 20,000 people, most of them peasants, who marched on Palestine, massacring Jews on the way. However when they reached Asia Minor they were themselves massacred by the Turks. Peter escaped the slaughter and lived to fight another day. He was present when Jerusalem was captured in 1099.

By contrast the knights of the first official Crusade were an impressive assembly of Europe's finest nobles. Unfortunately the expedition was cursed by constant quarrelling among its leaders. The armies assembled at Constantinople in the winter of 1096 — a force of about 300,000. They conquered the Turkish armies, who were at this time warring among themselves, one by one, captured Nicea and then Antioch. In 1099, after a siege of six weeks, they captured Jerusalem, even though by this stage their numbers had been reduced to 20,000 by battle, famine and pestilence.

Once inside the Holy City the noble knights of the Crusade slaughtered the entire population: Muslim and Jew; women and children.

As a result of the Crusade, Asia Minor was restored to Byzantine rule and four Latin states were established in Syria and Palestine, including the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Wherever the Crusaders were victorious they appointed bishops loyal to Rome and forced Eastern believers to submit to them. This did more to confirm the division between Eastern Orthodox believers and Western Catholic Christians than the major schism of 1054 had done. In fact many of the Orthodox people of the Middle East fought alongside the more tolerant Muslims in an attempt to expel the oppressive Crusaders.

The Second Crusade

The second Crusade was proclaimed by pope Eugenius III but the real force behind it was Bernard of Clairvaux.

Bernard, a Cistercian monk called "The Honey-flowing Teacher" because his sermons seemed to drip with the love of Christ, was renowned as a godly man and one of the greatest preachers of the Middle Ages.⁵ Although he was never anything more than the abbot of

⁵ Bernard was highly acclaimed by Martin Luther who, in his commentary on Galatians, calls him "a man so godly, so holy, so pure, that we should commend him before all the theologians of the Church." He is also believed to have been the author of some of the hymns we still sing today including "Jesus the very thought of Thee," "Jesu, Thou joy of loving hearts," "O Jesus, King most wonderful" and "O sacred head, sore wounded."

Clairvaux, he became a man of great influence in the church of his day. Kings, emperors and popes sought his counsel.

When Edessa fell to the Turks in 1144 Eugenius, himself a former pupil of Bernard asked him to act as the promoter of a Crusade. Bernard agreed and his appeals were successful but this time the armies met with disaster. Most perished in Asia Minor and Catholic Europe was shaken to the core. Bernard blamed the failure on the sins of Western Catholics: it was a punishment from God, he said.

The Third Crusade

The Turks, under the command of Saladin, recaptured Jerusalem in 1187 prompting the third Crusade which was led by the three greatest kings of Europe — Philip Augustus of France, The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and Richard I (Richard the Lionheart) of England. They did not recapture Jerusalem but Richard's amazing exploits in battle won him the admiration even of the Muslims. He made a treaty with Saladin in 1192 which guaranteed Christians right of access to Jerusalem. To this day the third Crusade is the one that most captures the imagination and Saladin and Richard the Lionheart have gone down in history as two of the greatest warrior-leaders of any age.

The Fourth Crusade

The Fourth Crusade was proclaimed by Pope Innocent III. This time the Crusaders — an entirely French army — were diverted from their original intention by the prospect of material gain and, in spite of the pope's disapproval, ended up besieging and looting the Byzantine capital Constantinople in 1204 and forcing the Orthodox Church into subjection to the pope.

Even though the Byzantines recaptured their city in 1260 an enduring hatred of the Western Catholic Church was left among the Eastern Orthodox.

Other Crusades

There were other Crusades. The most tragic was known as the Children's Crusade. Stephen, a French boy claimed that Christ had appeared to him and told him that what knights and kings had failed to do children would accomplish with the Lord's promised help. He said that if an army of children would gather at a certain port in the south of France God would part the sea and allow them to cross on dry land to Palestine. Thousands of children from France and Germany — their average age was about 12 — made the journey to the coast. Many died on the way and the sea did not divide before them. Most turned back but some 5,000 were taken on board ships. Two of the ships struck rocks and sank and the owners of the others proved to be slave-traders who sold the children to Muslims. They were never seen again.

Perhaps the most important of the remaining Crusades was the sixth Crusade of 1228. Actually it was more of a state visit to the Holy Land by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. Frederick was a determined enemy of the papacy who had great sympathy for Muslim culture. Without fighting, by diplomacy alone, he secured possession of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. He then crowned himself king of Jerusalem which remained in Christian hands until it was recaptured by the Muslims and permanently lost to the west in 1244.

The last of the Latin territories in Palestine fell in 1291. After that Crusades were talked about but none was ever launched.

The Legacy Of The Crusades

The Crusades gave rise to a number of great religious-military monastic orders such as the Knights of St John of Jerusalem (the Hospitallers) and the Knights of the Temple (The Templars). Both orders fought with outstanding courage against the Turks. Both became vast and wealthy organisations. After 1291 the Hospitallers moved their headquarters first to Rhodes and then to Malta where they defended Europe against Muslim attack for another 300 years. The Templars settled in France but were forcibly disbanded in 1312 on the basis of false charges of heresy.

The Crusades had many lasting effects in Europe and the Middle East.

- They heightened the prestige and influence of the papacy, casting the popes as champions of Christianity.
- They encouraged the use of indulgences. Initially the popes promised forgiveness of sins for those who went on the Crusades. Soon they were selling such “indulgences” for cash. Eventually it would come to be that indulgences could be purchased on behalf of souls already in purgatory.
- They inflicted lasting damage on relationships between Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Christians and left a legacy of bitterness between Christians and Muslims. Whatever respect they had held for one another was now gone.

Some Questions for Discussion

1. How do you understand the apparent blessing of God upon the preaching of men like Peter the Hermit and Bernard of Clairvaux?
2. Was it right for the Church to embark upon the Crusades?
3. When, if ever, is it right for Christians to take up arms and go on the offensive?

For Further Study

It seems likely, from the evidence available, that the earliest believers were pacifists. It was only after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire at the time of Constantine that Christians became involved in warfare and it was in that era that Augustine first put forward the concept of “the just war”: He said that war should have as its goal the establishment of justice and the restoration of peace. He said it must be fought under the authority of the legitimate ruler and be conducted in a just manner.

By the Middle Ages, the Germanic invasions had forced the Church to think again. The enemy came to be considered as the representative of Satan and the just-war theory was abandoned. But which is the biblical position, to be a pacifist, to follow the just-war theory of Augustine or to adopt the crusading spirit of the Middle Ages? Historically the Augustinian view has been adopted by Lutherans and Anglicans, those of a Reformed persuasion and Roman Catholics have seen themselves as Crusaders and pacifism has been the approach of Anabaptists and Quakers.

As you think further about these things, you may find the following passages helpful.

- Matthew 5:38 – 48
- Romans 12:17 – 21
- Romans 13:4