

The Decline of the Worldly Church

Listed Scriptures

2 Kgs 22–23:30; Ezek 8, 11, 13–15

Lesson Aim

1) To realize the importance of good leadership within the church.

Memory Verse

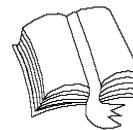
““These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.””

(Mt 15:8, 9)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Neh 1; Dan 9; Jn 17; 1 Tim 3; 2 Tim 2

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D



The year 800 was a significant year. Pope Leo III crowned a new king to be emperor of the Romans. He was Charlemagne, and he saw his position as king of the Christian empire, rather than the old Roman Empire. His son integrated more of the Roman imperial ideals, but with Charlemagne’s successors, the idea of the Holy Roman Empire came into being.

Under this arrangement, the Pope and the Emperor each had dominion over his own sphere but would cooperate with each other and promote the interests of the other. However, in reality, the papacy and the rulers periodically engaged in power

struggles. In people's minds, the Holy Roman Empire was really the same as Western Christendom. In the whole western area, everyone born within the empire was baptized in the Roman Catholic faith and remained within the church for life. Beyond the empire, in England and Spain, the Roman church was also the recognized religious authority.

Charlemagne won control of an empire that stretched from the Atlantic eastward to the Elbe and Danube Rivers, from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, and included much of Italy and parts of Spain. He therefore maintained a rather effective control of the pope and the Roman church. His laws had to do with both church and secular affairs. Unfortunately, his son was not as able a ruler as him, and his grandsons split the empire into three ways in 843 at the Treaty of Verdun. Thereafter, the empire declined rapidly. External attacks increased. Vikings terrorized the northwestern and western parts of the empire in the ninth century. Muslims ravaged Sardinia, Corsica and the coasts of southern France and western Italy. There were also attacks by the Magyars from Russia.

With the empire's decline also came the decline of the papacy. Rome had to contend with Muslim invaders as well as anarchy within Italy during the period between 800 and 1000. Wealthy families often bought the election of sons to become Popes. Indeed, the chair of St. Peter was occupied by some very unworthy individuals between 880 and 1060. It is surprising, therefore, that Christianity actually spread far and wide between 800 and 1073. Before the middle of the ninth century, there was a bishop at Hamburg. Bohemia and Moravia also became Roman Catholic at this time, followed by Poland a century later, and Norway soon after that. Missionaries went to Iceland and converted the people there to Christianity, and the Swedish king adopted the faith for himself and his people. In the east, the church there went north to Moravia, Bulgaria. Around the tenth and eleventh centuries, Russians became Orthodox Christians.

With widespread beliefs in Christianity, the popes were able to gain enormous power over ordinary people as well as rulers. The threat of excommunication was often enough to ensure obedience to the dictates of the pope. If not, the church would withhold essential services from the people. For instance, there would be no sacrament of the Holy Communion (known as the Eucharist), or last rites for the dead. In such cases, the population brought enough pressure on the rulers to ensure a victory for the pope.

Hence, although Christianity seemed to have flourished at this time, the truth was lost. The church was more about political power than salvation. The ordinary peo-

ple were the ones caught in-between these power plays. Faith was not a choice but something enforced, and often the grace of Jesus Christ was not truly felt by believers. This situation led eventually to the Protestant Reformation, the biggest crisis faced by the Catholic Church, and the most serious schism in church history.

W A R M U P



Discuss changes in social views of morality. Write a couple of issues that could open up the discussion, such as "single parenthood" or "divorce." Point out to the students that people accept these behaviors as socially acceptable. Yet, there was a time in history when they were not. For example, a mere hundred years ago, society tended to view divorced or unmarried women with children as immoral. These women were treated with certain contempt by many people.

Ask the students if they can come up with other social views that have changed over time. Other examples are the reference to "partner" rather than "husband" or "wife," gay rights, and so on.

Point out to the students that we live in a changing society. Not only does technology change, but moral and ethical views change too. In order to keep ourselves pure and pleasing to God, we must constantly measure our views, behavior and morality against the standards set by the Bible. We must avoid the temptation of flowing with the tide of the world, or we will risk sinning against God.

B I B L E S T U D Y



The Decline of the Medieval Church



A. Leadership

Read Ezekiel 8. What were the abominations that Ezekiel saw in his vision? (v.5: image of jealousy north of the altar gate; v.10: creeping things, abominable

beasts, all the idols of Israel around the wall; v.11: 70 men of the elders of Israel, each holding incense in his hand, worshipping idols; v.14: women sitting at the north gate weeping for Tammuz, a Babylonian god of nature or vegetation; v.16: 25 men at the door of the temple, their backs to the temple, faces toward the east worshipping the sun.)

What we have just read in Ezekiel shows us the importance of leadership. A good leader guides his people towards the right path. The religious leaders portrayed in the passage in Ezekiel did not do that. In fact, they themselves committed terrible sins against God. Contrast this with Josiah, who led Israel back to God. Read 2 Kings chapter 22, and take note of some religious reforms undertaken by King Josiah (i.e. repaired the house of the Lord, turned to the Lord for guidance with regards to the Law, realized the people had not obeyed the words of God in the Book of the Law, repented and was humble before the Lord. The reforms of Josiah can be seen in chapter 23 as well.)

The medieval church did not have leaders such as Josiah. In fact, the church was much more concerned with land, wealth, and political power than the faith of the people. Church leaders allowed themselves to be swept away by secular concerns, regarding these as far more important than spiritual concerns. The church gradually suffered a decline in fortune. She no longer provided the necessary spiritual leadership. The truth and the Holy Spirit departed from her. As the Lord said in 2 Kings 23:27, "I will also remove Judah from My sight, as I have removed Israel, and will cast off this city Jerusalem which I have chosen, and the house of which I said, 'My name shall be there.'" Indeed, the apostolic church had disappeared many centuries ago at this point.

B. Reasons for the Decline of the Church

Society may change, but people do not really change. We make the same mistakes. It is therefore necessary to study the mistakes of the past, so that we may learn from them and avoid them. This section will provide some historical insights as to why the medieval church failed. There were many reasons for the decline of the medieval church. Amongst the most important are:

- a. The rise of nationalism: The rise of monarchs accompanied the rise of a sense of nationalism and increased loyalty of people to their rulers. The church claimed a kind of supernatural loyalty that was threatened by this new, more visible type of nationalism. As strong rulers rose, they became more and more jealous of the immense wealth and power that the church had acquired.
- b. The rigid enforcement of doctrine and practice: This was one of the most effective means the church had of maintaining control over the people. It had the feared name of the Inquisition. The Inquisition was designed to look into the spread of heresy and bring Roman Catholics suspected of heretical beliefs before the tribunals. It was meant to keep the faithful in line. However, the movement got carried away, especially in Spain where the Inquisition became linked to terrible tortures and executions. Often, confessions were obtained through torture, and testimony against the accused may have been obtained in the same way. There was no legal representation for the accused since any lawyer who represented a heretic may well have been accused of being one. Those who confessed and were reconciled with the church were subjected to various punishments, including penances (payment of money to the church to obtain forgiveness of sins), pilgrimages, scourging, or fines. Those who refused to admit to guilt were executed, usually by burning. The Inquisition is now known for its violation of human rights and its reign of terror perpetuated by the church.
- c. Maintenance of the church hierarchy: To maintain the various levels of clergy, as well as the numerous churches that had flourished over the past centuries, the medieval church had to use different means of getting money. There were many ways of deception, such as the sale of relics, which alienated many devout Christians.
- d. Lack of moral standards amongst churchmen: Moral standards among the clergy were often questionable. Churchmen who vowed to forsake marriage and family life often had concubines or were often drunks. This did not inspire confidence in churchmen.
- e. Onset of the Renaissance: After the Middle Ages came the period of development known as the Renaissance. This was a period of rebirth of the classical spirit and knowledge. The middle class grew wealthier during this time. Therefore, people began to think of spending their money on making the present life better, rather than giving money to the church to improve the afterlife. Art, music, architecture and theatre flourished while people became more critical of the church.
- f. The Crusades: This contributed to the decline of the church because of the masses of people who went away to fight for Christendom against the Muslim "infidels." Most of these people would have lived their lives within the confines of their ruler's lands, knowing nothing more than what they grew up with.

When they traveled to distant lands, they saw new things and learned new ways of life. The knowledge and ideas they acquired from these distant lands weakened the hold that the church had on them.

- g. The Babylonian Captivity: This was a term used to describe the 70 years when the pope ruled from Avignon in France, between 1305–1377. This was a result of political power struggles between the king of France and the pope. There were seven popes who ruled from Avignon. The papacy did eventually return to Rome. However, this incident further eroded the authority of the church.

Based on the information above, can you find some parallels with our own society today? (I.e. Nationalism, which often leads to violence; greed for wealth of other groups or nations; fundamentalism in any religious group that might hinder our church's work in the future; decline in morality in many societies; wealth leading people away from God; danger of allowing outside influence to affect our faith, especially when we leave home for studies or work; conflict within the church; any other relevant points.)

C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



1

What were the reasons for the decline of the medieval church?

2

Refer to Neh 1, Dan 9, and Jn 17:6–26. What do these passages tell us about strong leadership? Are there any similarities in these passages? (eg. all these leaders prayed for the believers, for the Church, etc.)

L I F E A P P L I C A T I O N



Qualities of a Good Shepherd

You will need a poster board and post-it notes for this activity. In the center of the poster board, write the title: Qualities of a Good Leader in the Church, or Qualities of a Good Shepherd.

As we have seen, good leadership is important. We all have a responsibility to become good leaders in our church. Our pastors, elders and deacons provide us with many good examples of how to be a good leader. We, in our turn, must learn

to lead the younger brothers and sisters within our church.

In pairs or in a small group of no more than 3 or 4, brainstorm what you feel a good leader within the church should be like. Think about qualities such as faith, humility, responsibility, and so on. Try to find biblical examples to back up your views.

Once you have the students thinking, give each student a few post-it notes and a pen. Ask them to write down a few qualities they think a good leader in the church should have. Hang up the poster board somewhere in the classroom. Then stick everyone's post-it notes containing their views around the title. The poster could be left on the wall, and added to in the future.

Discuss what everyone has written. What were the most popular qualities? Most unusual? **Ask the students to write a journal entry with the following topic: If I became a leader in the church, how would I lead my younger brothers and sisters? The class will share their entries with each other next week.**

R E F L E C T I O N & P R A Y E R



It is important to reflect on our faith constantly. We should not follow blindly, but understand why we believe what we believe. The problem with Christians during medieval times was that they didn't really understand their faith and allowed themselves to be led blindly. Unlike the leaders during the time of the apostles, the leaders of the church did not provide the spiritual guidance that they should have. We must ask the Lord to protect us from the same mistakes in the true church. We are the church of the latter rain. The salvation of God will be fulfilled with us. We must always be conscious of our responsibilities towards God and towards our brothers and sisters. Let us pray to ask God for guidance.