

LIFE CHURCH OF NEW JERSEY
FROM PENTECOST TO THE PRESENT

An Apostolic History of the Church

MEMBER STUDY GUIDE

Week 6 — The Long Eclipse

A.D. 500 – 1500

“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.”

Hebrews 13:8 (KJV)

A Note Before We Begin

Tonight covers a thousand years — the longest single stretch in our whole series. It's also the hardest stretch, because for most of this period, the visible church drifted further from the apostles than at any other point in its history. But don't let that discourage you. God never left Himself without a witness, even in the darkest centuries, and this guide ends with three names you'll be glad you learned. Follow along, mark your Bible where a reference comes up, and use the discussion questions at the end to talk it through with your family or your small group this week.

I. Where We Left Off

A. In Weeks 4 and 5, we studied the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381), and the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). These councils were wrestling with a real question: who is Jesus, exactly? By 451 they had landed on the right answer — Christ is fully God and fully man, one person — a truth already stated plainly in Scripture.

God was manifest in the flesh. (1 Timothy 3:16)

B. Getting that one doctrine right did not stop the church from drifting in almost every other area — how it was governed, how people were baptized, how worship was conducted, and who believers were taught to pray to. That drift is the whole subject of tonight's lesson.

C. Historians call A.D. 500–1500 the “Middle Ages” because it sits between the ancient and modern worlds. Some call it the “Dark Ages” because education and literacy collapsed across much of Europe for centuries. We will ask one question at every stop tonight: what did the church preserve from the apostles, and what did it lose?

II. A Church Becomes an Empire (A.D. 590–800)

A. Gregory the Great became bishop of Rome in 590, after the Western Roman Empire had already collapsed. He did real good — feeding the poor, ransoming captives, protecting Rome from invaders. He also refused the title “universal bishop,” calling anyone who claimed it a “forerunner of Antichrist.” Yet within a few years of his death, his successor accepted from the emperor the very title Gregory had refused — naming Rome “head of all churches.”

B. Benedict of Nursia founded the monastery at Monte Cassino in 529 and wrote a Rule that shaped Western monastic life for a thousand years. Monks preserved Scripture and ancient learning by hand through centuries of chaos — a genuine gift to us today. But monastic life also quietly taught that withdrawing from ordinary life was a higher form of holiness than the New Testament describes.

Ye are the salt of the earth... Ye are the light of the world. (Matthew 5:13–14)

C. Beginning in 622, a new religion called Islam spread out of Arabia. Within about a hundred years, Muslim armies had conquered nearly every city that mattered in the book of Acts — Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria — permanently shifting the center of Christian influence to Rome and Constantinople.

D. On Christmas Day, A.D. 800, Pope Leo III crowned the Frankish king Charlemagne “Emperor of the Romans.” This fused church and state together for the next thousand years — even though Jesus Himself said plainly, standing before Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

III. A Church Divided (A.D. 809–1054)

A. The original Nicene Creed said the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” Beginning in Spain in 589, Western churches began adding three Latin words — filioque, “and the Son.” Rome itself didn’t officially adopt the change until about 1014 — just forty years before the final split.

B. On July 16, 1054, papal legates laid a document of excommunication on the altar of the great church in Constantinople, and the patriarch there excommunicated them right back. This is the moment “Roman Catholic” and “Eastern Orthodox” became two separate, divided traditions — a division that, remarkably, was not formally lifted until 1965.

C. Notice what neither side did in the middle of this fight: neither one went back to Scripture to settle it. *Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)*

IV. Doctrine Drifts Further From Scripture (A.D. 1100–1300)

A. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council made transubstantiation official church doctrine — the teaching that the bread and wine of communion literally change into Christ’s body and blood. Jesus Himself called the Lord’s Supper a memorial, something done “in remembrance” of Him, not a repeated re-sacrifice.

This do in remembrance of me. (Luke 22:19)

B. Purgatory, indulgences, and prayer to saints all became widespread teaching in this same period. None of these ideas come from Scripture — purgatory traces back to the Greek philosopher Plato, centuries before Christ was even born.

There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

C. Scholars called “Schoolmen” — especially Anselm and, later, Thomas Aquinas — tried to explain Christian doctrine using the philosophy of the Greek thinker Aristotle. Some of this work was genuinely valuable (Anselm gave us a much better explanation of the atonement than what came before). But building doctrine primarily out of philosophy, instead of Scripture, moved the church further from the plain preaching of the apostles.

V. The Church Militant (A.D. 1095–1300)

A. The Crusades (1095–1291) were military campaigns to reclaim the Holy Land, in which popes offered full forgiveness of sin to anyone who fought. Jesus told Peter the opposite: “Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

B. The Inquisition, fully organized by 1229, hunted down and punished people accused of “heresy” — often using torture, and often targeting people whose only real offense was owning a Bible in their own language or asking honest questions.

These were more noble... in that they... searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. (Acts 17:11)

C. This is the hardest part of tonight's lesson, and it's worth naming plainly: the apostles spread the gospel through preaching and willing suffering, never through force. A church can do real good in one era and still betray its own founding pattern in another — both can be true, and Scripture remains the standard either way.

VI. Voices Crying in the Wilderness (A.D. 1170–1453)

A. Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant in Lyon, France, gave away his fortune around 1170 and devoted his life to Scripture. He commissioned one of the first vernacular Bible translations and sent preachers out two by two. Condemned and driven into the Alps, his followers — the Waldensians — survived brutal persecution for over three hundred years, into and past the Reformation.

B. John Wycliffe, an Oxford scholar, taught that Scripture alone — not church tradition — is the final authority for what Christians believe. He directed the first complete English Bible translation, finished around 1382–1384. Decades after his natural death in 1384, church officials dug up his bones and burned them.

C. John Huss carried Wycliffe's convictions into Bohemia, preaching in the language of the people and condemning the sale of indulgences. Promised safe conduct to defend his views at the Council of Constance, he was arrested, tried, and burned at the stake on July 6, 1415, when he refused to take back what he knew was true.

D. Around 1450, Johannes Gutenberg perfected the printing press, making it possible to spread Scripture faster and further than ever before. In 1453, Constantinople — the last piece of the old Roman Empire — finally fell. By the year 1500, everything needed for reform was in place: the tool to spread it, the argument for it, and the abuse that would finally light the fuse.

VII. Closing Thought

A thousand years of institutional drift — popes claiming authority no apostle held, a church splitting over three Latin words, unbiblical doctrine made official, holy war replacing preaching — never managed to put out the light entirely. In monasteries, in Alpine valleys, in the courage of a scholar and a preacher who would not recant, God kept a living witness burning the whole time.

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Discussion Questions

1. Gregory the Great personally refused the title “universal bishop,” yet within a few years his successor accepted it. What does this teach us about how unbiblical practices can grow, even when the person who starts a process didn't intend the final result?
2. What did monasticism genuinely preserve for the church, and where did it quietly teach something Scripture doesn't teach? Can you think of a modern example of the same “two-tier” thinking — the idea that some Christians are more “serious” than others?
3. The Great Schism of 1054 was never resolved by either side returning to Scripture. What does that suggest about how we should handle disagreements in the church today?
4. Purgatory, indulgences, and prayers to saints all developed because people wanted more certainty and more help than they felt Scripture alone provided. How do we make sure we're not tempted toward the same instinct in our own walk with God?
5. The Crusades and the Inquisition both used force to accomplish what the apostles accomplished through preaching and suffering. Why do you think institutions are so often tempted to reach for power instead of persuasion?
6. Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe, and John Huss all paid a heavy price for insisting that ordinary people should have Scripture in their own language. What would you have been willing to risk in their position?
7. What is one thing from tonight's lesson you want to remember and be able to explain to someone else this week?

Notes
