



The Lot is Cast

The Affect of the Fall of the Roman Empire on the
Christian Church

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Introduction

"This used to be such a great country..." "America is going down the tubes..." "People used to be more moral in the United States!" Have you ever heard one of your members say this? Maybe you've even caught yourself speaking or thinking this way. Unsurprisingly, many of us are concerned about where our "Christian Nation" is heading. It's hard to make sense of what God is doing.

You're not alone if you or your members have had this feeling of disappointment or apocalyptic national doom. Many people throughout history have had similar feelings of shock when their world changes. This shock is often due to perceived stability that they thought would last. They believe the sky is falling, and we could agree with them somewhat.

No finer example of this surprise is the Roman Empire's collapse. Edward Gibbon, the renowned Roman historian of the eighteenth century, called its fall the "most awful scene in the history of mankind."¹ In this paper, we will examine the reaction of the ancient world to this historical event. The affect of the fall on the Christian Church is of specific interest to us.

The Venerable Bede once stated, "As long as the Coliseum stands, Rome shall stand; when the Coliseum falls, Rome will fall; when Rome falls, the whole world will fall."² As this Empire collapsed, unbelievers and Christians noted the event's significance. This paper will examine the latter's reaction: How did the fall of the Roman Empire affect the Christian Church?



The Coliseum

This study is not without its challenges. The fall of the Roman Empire has fascinated historians and others for centuries. Among the many challenges we will encounter, *where do we begin?* Gibbon explains: "The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and, instead of inquiring why Rome declined, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long."³ Part I will provide background for the fall. However, we must remember that this is a massive topic spanning many centuries. We won't be able to cover every part of this engaging story.

We will examine the fall's affect on the Church in Part II. While the Empire collapsed, "a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of

1. Edward Gibbon, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Vol. VI, Chapter LXXI" *Online Liberty Library, Liberty Fund*, https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/gibbon-the-history-of-the-decline-and-fall-of-the-roman-empire-vol-6#lf0214-06_head_010.

2. Bede, *Collectanea* (may not be exact source for Colosseum quote). I came across this quote several times in my research, but had trouble tracking down the original source for this saying. It is well known.

3. Gibbon, "Decline and Fall," Vol. VI, Chapter XXXVIII.

men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from the opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol."⁴ Many historians write on this subject. If this is something that interests you, I encourage you to read about the Roman Empire's decline and fall. The bibliography can give you an idea of where to begin.

In Part III, we will look specifically at Jerome & Augustine, and hear them explain the Empire's collapse. These Church figures will remind us that people thousands of years ago weren't so different from today. Their perspective though is very informative to how we can approach the Fall of Rome.

This historical topic may seem random and unimportant to our daily work in the ministry. Luther said empires like Rome are "God's little puppet show."⁵ Augustine calls them "great dens of thieves."⁶ What can we learn from this history lesson to help us in the pastoral ministry? How can keeping Rome in mind help me minister to my members? The big question is, "So what?" Part IV will answer these questions.

I invite you to keep the hypothetical dialogue with your member from the beginning in mind. Also, observe the title I selected. I borrowed the words from Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (NIV). It may seem like the fall of the Roman Empire was a random event. It is sometimes difficult to rationalize how or when this superpower fell.

With careful examination, however, we'll be reminded that a significant event like the collapse of Rome isn't just a random roll of the dice or a casting of lots. We'll learn to see the sky falling as an ongoing thing. We'll remember that our people often think more narrowly than broadly regarding their historical setting. God can use seemingly random and shocking events for his people's good. If there's anything to gain from this study, may we all draw closer to the one who endures forever, even beyond the fall of empires.

Part I: Background for the Fall of Rome and the Rise of the Church

The first question in this study is, "Why did the Roman Empire fall?" That is a compelling question for many historians. You could give many answers: too big, too pagan, too poor, etc. For now, I will use Edward Gibbon's four causes for the ruin of Rome to orient ourselves for how some approach this study:

1. The Empire faded away with time, as most things do.
2. The attacks by the Barbarians and the Christians weakened the Empire.

4. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. I, page 487.

5. LW 45:329.

6. *City of God*, IV, 4, Patrologia, Series Latina, XLI, page 115. (Found the quote in LW 25:21).

3. The lack of control regarding resources quickened the Empire's decline.
4. The domestic quarrels of the Roman elite led to a lack of Italian pride in heritage.⁷

Some of these make sense—others we might take issue with, particularly #2. The point is that there's more than one possible correct answer.

The second question in this study is, "When did the Roman Empire officially fall?" That is a loaded question. Again, there isn't a clear answer. In *Church History: Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*, Everett Ferguson, Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Abilene Christian University, proposes a variety of possible transition dates for the time from the Ancient world to the Middle Ages.⁸ These transition dates can also mark when the Empire possibly fell. They include:

1. 330 A.D. – Constantine moves the capital to Byzantium, but Rome has already ceased to be an administrative capital.
2. 395 A.D. – Theodosius I dies, the last of the great emperors.
3. 410 A.D. – Alaric sacks Rome, an event that shook the Roman Empire.
4. 430 A.D. – Augustine, who had written the *City of God* to explain the fall of Rome in 410, died during the siege and fall of Hippo in North Africa to the Vandals.
5. 451 A.D. – Attila and the Huns from central Asia invade Western Europe but are defeated by an alliance of Romans and Germans led by Aëtius. Pope Leo persuades them to turn back from Rome. The same year, the Council of Chalcedon began meeting in the East. 451 is also considered the end of the Patristic Age.
6. 455 A.D. – Aëtius and Emperor Valentinian III are assassinated, and the Vandals under Gaiseric sack Rome.
7. 476 A.D. – The last Emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus, is deposed by the Germanic chieftain Odoacer. Some view this event as the symbolic end of the Roman Empire. Since the Roman Empire continued in Constantinople, however, contemporaries did not mark it as all that significant. Note the significance of the names Romulus ("legendary founder" of Rome) and Augustulus (taken from the founder of the Roman Empire).
8. 604 A.D. – The death of Pope Gregory I (an alternative to 451 in patristic studies).

7. Edward Gibbon, "Fall of the Roman Empire in the East: Volume 2, Chapter 71." *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume2/index.htm>.

8. Everett Ferguson, *Church History: Volume One – From Christ to the Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), pages 287–289.

9. 600–700's A.D. – The Arabs attacked the Mediterranean world, limiting contact across the Mediterranean between East and West and weakening the cultural continuity of the region.
10. 754 A.D. – Pope Stephen II anoints Pippin as king of the Franks, an event marking the turn of Rome's attention to the West instead of the Mediterranean and the East.

A list like this demonstrates the difficulty of our task. If you wanted to, you could pick your preferred date. The problem is that as soon as you choose a date for when the Empire "fell," you could have nine other dates to contend with and prove why your choice is better. Popular options among scholars usually include Constantine's rise in the fourth century and Alaric's sack of Rome in 410. That said, we are dealing with a considerable chunk of time in which we are supposed to figure out how Christians feel about everything.

Why should we try and identify when the Empire fell? I thought we were focusing on its affect on the Church. The answer is that if we want to observe how the Christians felt during a specific point in Church history, pinpointing possible dates for the fall of Rome could (in theory) help. However, as the previous paragraphs have demonstrated, it's not simple. If you choose the time of Constantine as the end of the Roman Empire, then you can't use the accounts of Jerome and Augustine to describe how Christians felt about Rome's fall to the barbarians in their day. Do you start with one event? Two? Three? Where you start matters!

A standard approach explains the fall of the Empire in stages. We can see the symptoms of a gradual fall over time. The Empire's problems plagued it for many years. As it grew, these problems became more pronounced. We'll take a look now at some specific features of these stages.

One reason the Empire fell was because of its internal political problems. Ancient Roman historian Michael Grant calls this a huge issue, particularly when it comes to empirical succession:

"The succession to the throne had never been effectively worked out, but now things were much worse since the army... proceeded to kill the reigning emperor and appointed a successor, who was killed not very long afterward."⁹

This instability would not help the Empire continue. Emperors like Diocletian, Constantine, and Theodosius I each tried to reorganize the Empire to be more effectively managed, but it seems that these attempts would be only temporary solutions.

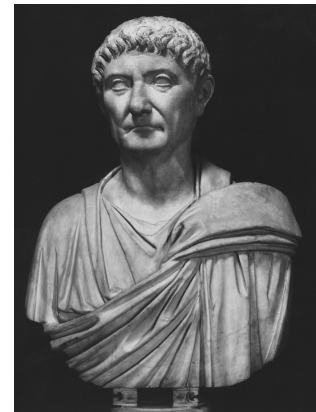
9. Michael Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire* (London, UK: Routledge, 1999), page 3.

Besides succession problems, there were also civil wars, military mutinies, and military usurpers. These were only a few significant issues the Empire would face. Grant calls this constant vulnerability a "testimonial to the weakness of the imperial position, and indeed of the Empire."¹⁰ Combined with the "folly of society" (of ordinary and influential people alike), the fall of Rome was inevitable.¹¹

Another factor contributing to the fall over time was the economic health of the Empire. It was poor for many years. The government sometimes tried to reform the currency (especially in later years), but that didn't stop many from abusing the modified economy.¹² The result was a weak currency, and the Empire eventually ran out of money.¹³ For as big as the Empire became, a lack of funds would not help their efforts at survival.

Besides internal politics and economic woes, the Empire also suffered from continuous waves of migrants from barbarian peoples. Because of these waves, frontier boundaries "ceased to exist over a prolonged period."¹⁴ The typical people(s) we think of are the German barbarians from the north. But they weren't the only ones pressuring the Empire's borders.

Grant points out that the Sassanids and the Persians were a significant threat over time in the East.¹⁵ They may not have been immigrating, but the constant military threat from these two powers required soldier presence in the East for most of the Empire's existence. This continuous threat would be another example of how the Empire was slowly dying since the military, government, and resources stretched in every direction. For any empire, Rome not being excluded, large size and success will inevitably lead to a "terrible price" at the fall: "the price was terrible, and so will the price be today."¹⁶ Being a great empire/nation might mean



Emperor Diocletian

10. Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery*, page 13.

11. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987), pages 58–60.

12. Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery*, page 44.

13. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 85.

14. Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery*, page 16.

15. Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery*, page 19.

16. Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery*, pages 67–68.

you experience expansion and visible success, but too much of either can disguise a slow decay. Perhaps American Christians should keep this in mind.

Other factors could explain the gradual fall of this "retired athlete" in the later centuries.¹⁷ For now, we will transition to a look at the Church throughout the fall. The Christians were not immune to the decline. British historian and Ancient Rome specialist Adrian Goldsworthy says:

"The Romans wanted the Empire to exist, and most could not imagine a world without it, but they did realize that it was facing great problems. Most were inclined to see moral decline as the root cause of these: the Empire was struggling because people lacked the stern virtue of the earlier generations who had made Rome great. This was a traditional - and particularly Roman - way of thinking. There was also often a religious element. Pagans blamed everything on the Christians for neglecting the old gods who had guided and protected the Empire. In turn, Christians blamed pagans for clinging to the old mistaken beliefs, while a few began to link the end of Rome with the end of the world."¹⁸

The idea that Christianity caused the fall of Rome is not new. The argument is that Christians took advantage of the faltering pagan environment.¹⁹ Where the pagan religion was failing, Christianity could succeed. A more practical explanation by some is that the Church filled a vacuum left by the Empire's once-dominant position: "'Decline and fall' for the old Empire meant at the same time 'rise and triumph' for the new church."²⁰ When one power fell, another rose to take its place.

What could be beneficial is if we observe that while the Empire faded, the Christian religion survived. The Empire died while Christianity lived on. Why? We here today would point to the power of the means of grace.²¹ The scholarly world isn't so inclined to do that.

While looking for resources for this paper, I found a YouTube video on the History Channel's page. This video is titled "How Christianity Divided the Roman Empire." It is a dramatic portrayal of the martyrdom of Ignatius in 107 A.D. I found it reasonably effective in demonstrating how Christians were (at times) persecuted in the early Church. Dr. Patrick Wyman describes the ancient environment as tense,

17. Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), page 414-415.

18. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, pages 16-17.

19. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 62.

20. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 27.

21. Mark 16:16; Luke 16:31-32; Luke 24:27; Acts 2:21; Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 3:11; Titus 3:5; James 1:18; 2 Peter 3:18.

with an ominous threat of a new religion. The new movement undermined "Roman conceptions of how power and authority were supposed to work."²² Let me try to rephrase what this scholar is saying: obeying God instead of men would have seemed strange in the light of imperial patriotism. This philosophy naturally would cause conflict with the state and undermine its authority.

Wyman explains in the video that martyrdom, not the message, made Christianity effective and different (and dangerous). These unwieldy, dying believers demonstrated that it was possible to stand up to tyranny. Wyman's view shouldn't surprise us, for even early Church members, including Ignatius himself, thought martyrdom was a worthy goal.

But this is a flawed or incomplete comment at best. Just because people today and back then may consider martyrdom a unique symptom in the Empire's gradual decline does not mean it was the only significant factor. Keep the Gospel in view. We cannot explain the movement's success without it.

I emphasize this point because of what Paul says in Romans 13 (EHV):

"Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God. **2** Therefore, the one who rebels against the authority is opposing God's institution, and those who oppose will bring judgment on themselves. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to evil. Would you like to have no fear of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will receive praise from him, **4** because he is God's servant for your benefit. But if you do wrong, be afraid because he does not carry the sword without reason. He is God's servant, a punisher to bring wrath on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore, it is necessary to submit, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. **6** For this reason, you also pay taxes because the authorities are God's ministers, who are employed to do this very thing. **7** Pay what you owe to all of them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed."

It's not as if the early Christian Church schemed to overtake the Empire. On the contrary, they were trying to survive. And God blessed their efforts to spread the Gospel throughout this early period and into the coming centuries via means, not martyrdom.²³

22. "How Christianity Divided the Roman Empire." <https://youtu.be/7IRPGKP1kJc>, accessed 6 April, 2023; Wyman's comment is from 1:37– 1:46.

23. The Book of Acts is full of evidence that the Lord was blessing the Church in their work of spreading the Gospel.

Luther points out that even before Ignatius, God had given the apostles the tool of languages, Greek and Latin.²⁴ The Empire had international connections via these languages; thus, the Church had a network or "means" to accomplish its goals. The Church would continue to use this linguistic system left behind by the faltering Empire. That would be reason enough to demonstrate why the Church didn't want the Empire to go anywhere immediately. Why would believers overthrow the Empire if they needed the Empire's stability to help spread the Gospel?

Lest we think that God blessed early Christians through the connection to the Roman Empire alone, Gibbon reminds us that Christianity was a global religion early on and, as a result, was not "confined to the Roman Empire."²⁵ The disciples had done well following Pentecost in bringing the good news to all creation.²⁶ A few of them, if the legends are true, went far beyond the boundaries of the Empire. In my viewpoint, and I pray in yours, this makes Christianity's position next to the fall of the Roman Empire not just coincidental but something only God could orchestrate.²⁷ He ensured things were where they needed to be to bless his people. He cast some lots and made them fall how he desired.

Let's focus on the fourth century. Christians managed to survive several centuries and were emerging from Diocletian and Galerius' persecution at the beginning of the century. We can have two tempting thoughts regarding Christianity in the fourth century. The first is that the movement had grown exponentially. Charles Freeman, a Yale scholar, has this take on the matter:

"It is easy to exaggerate the success of Christianity by 300: 90 percent of the Empire's population were not Christian, and there were vast areas of the Empire where there is no community recorded. We cannot assume that growth would have continued at a significant rate. There is no record of sustained growth of Christianity in the Persian Empire in the fourth century—in fact, the church there was persecuted as a reaction to Constantine granting toleration to his Empire's Christians and appears to have declined. It was the sudden and unexpected boost of support from the Emperor Constantine that was the catalyst which transformed Christianity into a

24. LW 45: 359.

25. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. I, Chapter XV, page 551.

26. As noted on the previous page (footnote 23), see the Book of Acts for evidence.

27. Psalm 78:3–4; Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 10:11.

social and dynamic force in the Empire. In doing so, it broke dramatically with its roots."²⁸

The Church's growth had occurred, but we must guard against the thought that things had shifted in totality as Constantine arrived (as Freeman indicates). The next paragraph will expand on that.

The second tempting thought concerns Constantine and his effect on Christianity's rise. Can we say that things changed *only* for the better when Constantine arrived? Pelikan suggests that some Christians saw Constantine's rise as a sign of God's control of history.²⁹ Gibbon, however, cautions against this approach. He points out that while Constantine's attitude gradually shifted toward a favorable view of Christianity, pagans and Christians alike had anxiety about Constantine, but for different reasons:

"Christians and the Pagans watched the conduct of their sovereign with the same anxiety but with very opposite sentiments. The former were prompted by every motive of zeal, as well as vanity, to exaggerate the marks of his favor and the evidence of his faith. The latter, till their just apprehensions were changed into despair and resentment, attempted to conceal from the world and from themselves that the gods of Rome could no longer reckon the Emperor in the number of their votaries."³⁰

What's the point? Don't assume that because Constantine has arrived, Christianity is now the absolute favorite in the Empire. The reality is there were still other religions. This truth is something to keep in mind in our American history. Just because Christianity appeared to be the constant religious factor on the American scene since before 1776 does not mean that this was a Christian nation. Appearances can be misleading.³¹

We might want to be careful in making Christianity the new face of the Empire during Constantine's reign because it was not the only legal religion. WLS Professor Emeritus James Korthals explains it would take some time, until the end of the fourth century, when Theodosius I issued a proclamation that made Christianity the



Emperor Constantine I

28. Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) page 222.

29. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 74.

30. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol II, Chapter XX, page 250.

31. An example from the Bible could be the Jewish people as "God's chosen people." They had that special status, but without faith in the Lord, it was only a title. The Pharisees and teachers of the law boasted with this badge in the Gospels. But the badge amounted to little without the relationship with the Messiah.

only legal religion.³² I found particularly helpful in Korthals' paper that it wasn't empirical pressure that necessarily turned people towards the one true God. Instead, "The obvious answer is the Lord brought it about, but from a human perspective a number of things had happened..."³³ There was something different with the development of Christianity in the Empire, and it was noticeable. Korthals goes as far as to say that when pagans saw the victorious march, attractive teachings, and charitable nature of the Christian faith, "they wanted what Christians had."³⁴

Keep in mind Constantine's own interests. Was he gravitating towards Christianity? No question. Did he still commit to being the Roman Emperor? You bet. Pelikan calls Constantine's gradual shift transitory, as this wasn't the end of the Empire. It was "its preservation and continuity in the new form of a 'Christian Empire' with a 'Christian capital' at new Rome, Constantinople."³⁵ In the *Past Speaks for Itself*, Sainted Theodore Hartwig describes the downside to Constantine's interest in both Church and state:

"Imperial protection invited imperial favor, and the favor hardened into fiat: the state legislated the belief of the church, and the emperor as lord of both church and state decreed the correct faith and life for all residents of the empire."³⁶

We only need to look at his involvement in the Nicene Council to understand that Constantine, at the very least, had some interest in the functions of the Church.

So, from the Church's perspective, things should have looked amazing. The government fought for them, society was beginning to shift its attitude, and many former pagans were joining the Church! This situation was a good one, right?

While having unbelievers join God's family is a blessing and our mission, don't underestimate the challenges involved. Suppose there was a cultural shift in our society, and hundreds of "extra" people are filling your church on Sunday. Good thing? Absolutely! But who's going to teach all of them? You may have to conduct hundreds of membership/BIC classes; have you considered the pre-marital courses for couples who didn't know they were living in sin? What about the strange ideas

32. *Decrees of Theodosius I from 381, 392, and 451.*

33. James Korthals. "Lessons from the History of the Christian Church for Modern Christians Living in an Increasingly Anti-Christian Society: Parts 1 and 2" (Chesapeake, VA: WLS Essay File, 2014), pages 22-23.

34. Korthals. "Lessons from the History of the Christian Church for Modern Christians Living in an Increasingly Anti-Christian Society," pages 22-23.

35. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 26.

36. Theodore J. Hartwig, *The Past Speaks for Itself: Documents in Western Civilization, Vol I: Western Civilization in a Religious World* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1986), page 367.

the people bring into the church, their old beliefs? Are you sure you know what they believe about their faith?

Again, see these as challenges rather than downsides. Freeman (a critical scholar) doesn't see things quite so rosy. For him, the ancient Church to begin having mass conversions wasn't a blessing: "Communities converted en masse are notoriously unstable, and many of the new Christians must have lapsed (as Pliny's own comments suggest)."³⁷ I think this is a tad pessimistic, but it does raise the issue that the early Church may have faced with bringing up a ton of new believers into the faith simultaneously.³⁸

Glen Thompson, retired WLC and Asia Lutheran Seminary history professor, calls this sudden interest from all levels of society "a potential curse."

"People were now attracted to the church because of its power and influence, not so much because of the power and influence of Jesus Christ. The fourth century would bring not only security for the church but new challenges of false teaching from within."³⁹

With many new converts comes the potential for many new ideas. Having enough pastors on hand for so many people to help with doctrinal purity wasn't a luxury many of the churches had.

These challenges didn't stop some Christians from seeing the new regime as a Christian Empire. Eusebius of Caesarea, specifically, provides us with a window into the past of how Christians viewed this environment:

"As in the time of Moses himself and of the ancient God-beloved race of the Hebrews, 'he cast Pharaoh's chariots and host into the sea...,' in the same way Maxentius also with his soldiers and bodyguards 'went down into the depths like a stone,' when he fled the power of God which was with Constantine."⁴⁰

The rise of a Christian emperor meant that God ordered history for such a moment. We would agree with Eusebius, wouldn't we? Keep this in mind when we hear the how Jerome felt about the fall of the Rome.

A comment caught my eye in my research in an article in the magazine *Christian History*: "By 380, Christians constituted a majority of the

37. Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*, page 129.

38. A bit of a hyperbole, I'll admit it. But take that time commitment to training people seriously. Think of the disciples appointing helpers in Acts 6:1-7.

39. Glen L. Thompson, *The Ancient and Medieval Church (to A.D. 1400): An Elementary Textbook* (Mong Kok, Kowloon, HK: Asia Lutheran Seminary, 2019), page 63.

40. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 9.9.5, quoting Exodus 15:5.

Empire's population."⁴¹ Did it, though? Like American history, could the supposed "Christian environment" have just been in people's minds? What made it "Christian?" Or should we go a decade further to the decrees of Emperor Theodosius, who outlawed paganism altogether?

Constantine may have carried on a new/hybrid version of the Roman Empire, but we must understand that calling it "Christian" comes with issues. For example, in 390, Ambrose confronted a thorny problem. Theodosius I, the one who had made Christianity the only legal religion, supposedly allowed (encouraged?) a massacre against civilians in Thessaloniki. Ambrose knew his Christian duty as a leader to call out the Emperor for this atrocity.⁴² With the rise of Christianity, sin was still around and needed to be addressed by the leaders, even when the sinner rebuked was the Emperor.⁴³

This need for strong leadership in the Church led to the rise of new authorities, such as the papacy in Rome. Things blended over time, though, as the papacy began to see itself less as only Church leadership and more as a Church and state institution, just like Constantine.⁴⁴ Luther doesn't seem to think that this is because of some papal supremacy but because they were the last institution standing in the place of the Roman Empire (the vacuum theory).⁴⁵

Much more could be said on the background of this topic, and I probably have failed to mention much. The rise of the Church occurred amidst a dying Empire. In Part II, we will observe the affect of Rome's fall on the Church. Again, some things will be left out due to content and time constraints, but what will continue is the theme that God controls history.

Part II: Some Observations about the Fall's Affect on the Church

"To the victor belongs the spoils—and the history."⁴⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan's comment should be in our minds as we turn towards a more specific look at the Church during the fall of the Empire. We have already examined the Church but will

41. John O. Gooch, "The Emperor Strike Back: How the Once Illegal Religion Became the Law of the Empire." *Christian History* Issue XVII:1 (1998).

42. Hartwig, *The Past Speaks for Itself*, page 377–378.

43. 1 Samuel 13:9–14; 2 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 18; Luke 3:19; Acts 7:51–53.

44. One of the reviewers of my paper advised me that it would be worthy to mention an unintended consequence of Constantine's moving of the Empire's capital to the East in Constantinople: it set the stage of the division of the Church into Eastern and Western Christianity. It's another moment of Constantine's glorious rule that may have led to more problems for the Church than the Church wanted or could anticipate.

45. LW 41:371–372.

46. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 16.

pivot slightly in this section. Rather than trying to observe how Christianity survived, we will now see how believers behaved as the Empire fell.

As with the case of how to handle martyrdom, the Church wasn't always consistent with how to explain its position on new issues. There were those, thankfully, who always returned to God's Word for doctrinal disputes. But as the fall of Rome gradually continued, there was a new age of conflict between those committed to the Bible and those who desired to uphold pagan tradition. Who would win this fight? Who would oversee it?

This new environment produced more confusion about the role of the emperor. Did he have a say in how things went in the Church? He seemed to think so. In a decree in 341 A.D., sixteen years after Nicaea, Constantine's son Constantius II had this to say about non-Christian religions:

"Let superstition cease; let the folly of sacrifices be abolished. Whoever, after the publication of this law, continues to sacrifice shall be punished according to his deserts."⁴⁷

Are you tempted to say, "Way to go?" Hold on. Was this a good thing? Is having the Christian identity associated with public policy reasonable or good?

Athanasius didn't think so. With the rise of Christian popularity came the issue of why believers abandoned their former sinful lifestyle. What made them do it? Athanasius correctly realized that the force of the Emperor was not going to help matters:

"How can there be anything like persuasion when the fear of the emperor rules?"⁴⁸

The persuasion he has in mind is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word.⁴⁹ Attacking the pagans seemed like a good Christian thing to do. However, the "submit or suffer" mentality was a mindset that the Christians were enduring themselves just a generation previously. The Church was beginning to flex muscle with its new imperial sponsorship, not in a good way.

While the Empire changed, Christians began to change too. For a time, the Christians struggled with their new environment, a rising movement amidst a crippling power. But then again, it seemed that everyone was losing a bit of touch with the way things used to be—or should be:

"Not everything changed in this new Rome, and certainly not all at once. The population of the city, Christian or not, were still enjoying spectacles in the Colosseum, probably wild beast hunts rather than gladiators, until well into

47. Gooch, "The Emperor Strike Back."

48. Gooch, "The Emperor Strike Back."

49. Ezekiel 36: 26–28; John 14:15–26.

the fifth century CE, and emperors in Constantinople sponsored popular entertainments on the old model of benefaction, often in the form of chariot racing. But many of the political continuities were superficial or even misunderstood.”⁵⁰

As people began to lose touch with their history, their view of how society worked changed. This fluidity caused conflict, even among believers.

The last thing Christians wanted was discord in their own house. Yet, as the Bible explains, even in God’s house, there will be those who seek to suppress the truth.⁵¹ Sometimes, the fights among Christians weren’t about doctrine but instead were about things like the use of pagan literature and learning.⁵² If they were going to build up the kingdom of heaven, how could they allow the use of such ungodly materials?

Some argued that they could use these materials and not have a problem. Others disagreed. They wanted paganism “extinct.” The irony is that with such a mindset, they created conflict among one another:

“After the extinction of paganism, the Christians in peace and piety might have enjoyed their solitary triumph. But the principle of discord was alive in their bosom...”⁵³

Conflict among believers is probably most recognizable in the form of doctrinal controversy. Luther points out the irony that under Constantius (the Emperor who tried to outlaw pagan sacrifice mentioned previously), the Church was experiencing conflict with the Aryan heretics.⁵⁴ Just because the Empire was gradually declining did not mean things were so cozy for the Church.

In a letter to Elector Frederick dated 1519, Luther touches on something that Augustine will explain: Church history is messy. Suppose we point to the triumph at Nicaea or the age of Constantine as the defining victory for the Christian movement. In that case,



St. Nicholas “punches” Arius

50. Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), page 532. Beard shares an amusing anecdote that illustrates how people can often become foreign to their own history: Constantinople had its own senate house, Someone attempted to explain the name of this building in the eighth century, and decided that it must have been built by a man called “Senatus.”

51. Matthew 7:15–20; 23:1–29; 24:23–24; Acts 20:28–30; 2 Timothy 4:3–4.

52. Harwig, *The Past Speaks for Itself*, page 395.

53. Gibbon, “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” Vol. IV, Chapter XLVII.

54. LW 41:210–211.

we need only look past those events to the ones in the immediate future: Athanasius and the Orthodox Christians were persecuted by "other Christians," and the Arian heresy was far from extinct. Was the Church still on the rise? When we wrestle with this, we need to listen to what Luther says about history:

"If God decreed such a thing for the church in those blessed times, then I am not much surprised if I am to be defeated too, poor man that I am, but the truth has remained here and will forever."⁵⁵

Perhaps that is something American Christians need to remember. If the sky is falling on the American Christian movement that seemed once great, maybe the Lord decrees such things or allows them, that is, for our good. One thing is sure: the truth will remain, just as Luther said. He is merely restating what Isaiah 40:8 (EHV) says:

"Grass withers, flowers fade,
but the Word of our God endures forever."

Something that made the heresies rather challenging to deal with was the prolonged exposure to pagan thought. Paganism never really died away. In a letter to Pope Innocent I, Augustine showed that a heresy like Pelagianism drew on pagan ideas struggling to coexist with the new Church teachings.⁵⁶ The battle between false doctrine and truth was (and is) ongoing.

Another battle concerned how Christians saw their identity in the world. Pelikan says that as time passed, some noticed a change in how Christians behaved.⁵⁷ Pointing to Galatians 3:28 (EHV), we learn what he might be getting at:

"**28** There is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one and the same in Christ Jesus."

According to Pelikan's theory, some Christians were beginning to confuse their mission in the kingdom of God. They were tying their spiritual success to their earthly success. Our identity in Christ, as Paul is speaking of in Galatians 3:28, is not the defining characteristic of our faith, but what we do with it is. How we are charitable becomes our Christian identity.

This shift becomes easier to understand when we realize that some were paying "only lip service to their ostensible faith and remained pagans at heart."⁵⁸ Some recognized the advantages of being a Christian, whether status or a growing tendency to satisfy the *opinio legis*. It didn't matter to them whether they believed or not.

55. LW 48:105.

56. Harwig, *The Past Speaks for Itself*, pages 385–387.

57. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 19.

58. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1953) Page 97.

Can you blame them when they saw what Christians were doing? Some looked at the martyrs, monks, and relics with awe and amazement. The emphasis on doctrine could take second place to these saints and their works. Others realized a practical problem arise, directly affecting the Empire: the people “most fitted for governance in the state were now becoming monks, priests, and bishops.”⁵⁹ The Old Empire was suffering from a lack of capable officials. But for some that didn’t matter, because Rome was now in the East:

“The continuity of ‘Old Imperial Rome’ lay now with ‘New Rome,’ the city of the most holy and God-fearing emperors.”⁶⁰

Those at the Council of Chalcedon saw the church of Constantinople as the embodiment of “New Rome.”⁶¹ This shift from “Old” to “New” may have benefited some, but not necessarily those still in the West. Christians in Italy still watched in horror in 410 A.D. as Alaric came with the Goths to sack the ancient city on the Tiber. The transfer of the Empire to the East may have provided some sense of continuity, but the Old Empire was theoretically dead when Alaric sacked Rome. “New Rome” would fall in 1453 when Constantinople would fall.⁶²

Why should we study the decaying stages of the Roman Empire? Why do we care? We are setting ourselves up for this: that we may step into the shoes of Christians in the fifth century. Where do you turn when things get dark in the Western world? Back to the Church, except the Church that you’d expect to see had morphed:

“Soon after 400, tribes of barbarians began to invade the western part of the Roman Empire. They spread over Gaul, Spain, Italy, and North Africa destroying everything in their path. By 476 the last of the western emperors was dethroned. In the western half of the Empire barbarian kingdoms were established which slowly assimilated the remaining classical culture of the Romans. As the Western Empire was falling apart people naturally looked to the church at Rome and its bishops for support because it was the strongest institution in the West. Men such as Leo the Great, who prevented the destruction of Rome by the Huns in 452, certainly added to the prestige of the papacy.”⁶³

59. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 114.

60. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 76.

61. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 76.

62. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 77. Again, remember that this is just one theoretical date for the fall of the Roman Empire.

63. Gaylin Schmeling, “Two Thousand Years of Grace,” (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay Fille, historical essay uploaded on 25 June, 2015), page 14.

A new power had replaced the presence of the emperors in the Roman West. In the following century, Gregory the Great (590–604) supported Italy when it needed help the most. Unfortunately, Gregory’s leanings led toward some of the fundamental errors of the papacy.⁶⁴



Pope Gregory the Great

Papal power provided support in the declining Roman Empire world. The pope's position gave him control ("in theory if not in practice") over Church and state. This unfortunate consequence was a side effect of the Church's rise during the Western Empire's fall.⁶⁵

How do we analyze all this data to walk away with something for our ministry? We will look at that in the “So What?” section, but for now, consider how often we hear believers putting up straw men or even a bogeyman to blame our problems on. Is it impossible for us to think that Christians did that in the ancient world? When things went wrong, could they have looked for someone to blame, or to better times in the past? Sometimes, the Christians could blame a pagan emperor for their sufferings. Other times, they couldn’t. Whose fault was it when the sky was falling then?

This problematic attitude will become a little more evident in the writings of Jerome. We will see a rebuttal to Jerome’s attitude from Augustine. Their perspectives may tell us more about how Christians should feel about the fall of Rome, then and now.

Part III: “Eye Witnesses”

To gain some perspective, we need to hear from some voices who “experienced” the fall of the Roman Empire. As Pelikan phrases it, let’s get behind the “social thought of the church.”⁶⁶ Let’s accomplish this by letting them tell us what’s going on.

There are two possible problems with this approach, though. First, where do we start if we want to look for a voice that can give us a firsthand account of what it was like when Rome fell? We already touched on that in the first few parts of this paper.

The second problem is this: some say that Church history's traditional sources are impartial to Rome's fall. Cambridge scholar Mary Beard calls the

64. Schmeling, “Two Thousand Years of Grace,” page 14.

65. Hartwig, *The Past Speaks for Itself*, pages 378–379.

66. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 18.

records that we will examine "triumphalist history."⁶⁷ Since Christians emerged victorious after the fall, they wrote their letters, treatises, etc., to reflect how they wanted the situation to appear. In other words, there's obvious bias!

The irony, though, is that it wasn't all "triumph" preached by the Christian writers as they saw their government collapse. Salvian, a Christian writer and contemporary of Jerome and Augustine in the fifth century, writes about the fall from a rather creative approach: Rome got what it deserved. Listen, however, as he talks in the first person plural:

"If we claim that we do not deserve our sufferings and are unworthy to endure our present misfortunes, surely we are calling God, who bids us endure undeserved evils, unjust. You say, however, that he does not bid, but merely permits us to endure them. Suppose we grant this point, still I ask how far he is from ordering what he permits? For he who knows we endure such woes and can prevent our suffering them, proves beyond a doubt that we ought to endure whatever he permits. From this it is manifest that his acquiescence is part of his judgment, and that we are enduring a sentence from heaven."⁶⁸

That doesn't sound like someone who's trying to doctor up history. That sounds like someone who is suffering. Salvian says in the same writing, "We are the authors of our own misery."⁶⁹ Even though he is from Roman Gaul and not the city of Rome itself, Salvian considers himself part of those feeling the effects of a dying Empire in the fifth century.

Hearing voices like Salvian's helps us understand that not everyone saw the fall of Rome the same way. A scholar by the name of Jürgen Bühler identifies three possible views that an ancient Christian could have had about the fall of Rome:

1. The Progressive View – The idea that a kingdom of God will gradually be established in our world. The fall of Rome was a step in which God would use the remains of the Empire to continue to spread the Gospel, thus moving the world toward a better future.
2. The Apocalyptic View – The end was near with the fall of Rome since it was a sign of the Antichrist's arrival. People of this view often jump to conclusions that the sky is indeed falling for the final time.
3. The Spiritualized View – The world has been falling apart since the fall into sin. We have been in the "End Times" since Christ came into our world. We shouldn't view any earthly kingdom ("city") as the established success of the

67. Beard, *SPQR*, page 517.

68. Salvian, *On the Government of God*, Book 8, Section 1, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/salvian/govt/cache/govt.pdf>, pages 165-166.

69. Salvian, *On the Government of God*, page 166.

Lord in our world. Rather, we should look to that city of God that the Lord brings about in our hearts via the means of grace. This kingdom is not of this world and can't fall. In conclusion, we live with our eyes fixed on heaven as sojourners and pilgrims in this world.⁷⁰

We won't pursue the Progressive View in this paper, but we will look at Jerome's Apocalyptic (2) and Augustine's Spiritualized (3).

Jerome's experience of Rome's fall is dramatic. The fall of the Empire was undoubtedly traumatic but as he recorded his accounts of the fall (usually in regard to Alaric's sacking), Jerome tended to

"interweave the apocalyptic language of Scripture about the decline and fall of Rome with the apocalyptic lines of Virgil's *Aeneid* about the fall of Troy."⁷¹



St. Jerome

Maybe Jerome had a reason for thinking of things this way.

Listen to his commentary on Daniel 2:2:⁷²

"Let us not marvel, therefore, whenever we see kings and empires succeed one another, for it is by the will of God that they are governed, altered, and terminated. And the cases of individuals are well known to Him who founded all things. He often permits wicked kings to arise in order that they may in their wickedness punish the wicked. At the same time by indirect suggestion and general discussion he prepares the reader for the fact that the dream Nebuchadnezzar saw was concerned with the change and succession of empires."⁷³

At first his take is legit: Jerome acknowledges that God is in control of history, and can bring about the rise and fall of kings as he wills. He also agrees with the traditional interpretation of the fourth beast in Daniel 7,

"... that at the end of the world, when the Roman Empire is to be destroyed, there shall be ten kings who will partition the Roman world amongst themselves."⁷⁴

70. Jürgen Bühler, "Lessons from the Fall of Rome." *International Christian Assembly Jerusalem* (24 November 2010), <https://www.icej.org/blog/lessons-from-the-fall-of-rome/#>.

71. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 50.

72. Daniel 2:2 – The king gave orders to summon the magicians, the spell casters, the sorcerers, and the astrologers to relate the king's dream to him. So they came and stood before the king. (EHV)

73. Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel*, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_daniel_02_text.htm.

74. Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel*, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_daniel_02_text.htm.

Jerome seems to depart from how we would continue to interpret this chapter when the “little horn” rises up in 7:8.⁷⁵ He acknowledges that as Rome falls the Antichrist will rise up. For Jerome, however, the Roman Empire and its mother city were the only things “restraining the end.”⁷⁶ Rome, in essence, keeps the Antichrist away.

Why this specific thought? In order to understand this point, we need to keep in mind Jerome’s apocalyptic view of history, something morphed by his own context. Who was the power in Rome at this late stage in the Empire? It’s not the Emperor since he’s moved to Constantinople. It was the pope. For Jerome, the pope is not the Antichrist that arrives at the end. However, if he misses the point that the pope is the Antichrist, it’s understandable then that he’s looking for a different kind of apocalyptic outcome. When the fourth beast falls, the Antichrist will arrive. If Rome goes along with the papal throne established by St. Peter, the world is doomed.⁷⁷

“Pagan Rome had fallen; Christian Rome had arisen. It was no longer the old Rome of the Caesars but had become instead the new Rome of the popes and of intellectuals and martyrs...”⁷⁸

For Jerome, it was impossible to break the connection between the Roman city that was before him (filled with popes and saints) and the city that once was (the city filled with pagans):

“Thus the fall of Cicero's city to the Gothic barbarians was for Jerome no less than for his pagan contemporaries a tragedy of major proportions, one to which he responded in the language of Christian and of Virgilian apocalypse.”⁷⁹

Jerome was tied to his culture and church in Rome, so the city's fall in 410 A.D. wasn't just historical but it was also a personal tragedy for him.

Jerome thinks the Empire has fallen, because the city has fallen. However, he made the same mistake many make when they study this history: he assumed he knew the answer to when Rome had fallen. But when did Rome fall? The city or the

75. Daniel 7:8 – I was thinking about the horns when suddenly another horn, a little one, came up among them. Three of the horns that had already been there were uprooted to make room for it. I noticed eyes like human eyes on that horn, and it had a mouth which was speaking boastfully. (EHV)

76. Jerome, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 25.26 & *Commentary on Daniel*, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_daniel_02_text.htm.

77. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 46. The irony being that as Rome falls, the Antichrist had already arrived, since the papacy was already one the scene. Jerome was looking for the Antichrist as Rome fell, but didn't realize that the Antichrist was already in his midst.

78. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 52.

79. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 51.

Empire? If the Antichrist was set to arrive at the fall of the fourth beast, how can Jerome be right that he is experiencing it? How can he even handle the circumstances in a healthy way when he isn't aware that the Antichrist has already arrived?

After the Visigoths had begun their sieging of Rome in 409 A.D., Jerome wrote a letter to a wealthy widow about the Empire's troubles:

"I shall now say a few words of our present miseries. A few of us have hitherto survived them, but this is due not to anything we have done ourselves but to the mercy of the Lord... For thirty years the barbarians burst the barrier of the Danube and fought in the heart of the Roman Empire. Long use dried our tears. For all but a few old people had been born either in captivity or during a blockade, and consequently they did not miss a liberty which they had never known. Yet who will hereafter credit the fact or what histories will seriously discuss it, that Rome has to fight within her own borders not for glory but for bare life; and that she does not even fight but buys the right to exist by giving gold and sacrificing all her substance? This humiliation has been brought upon her not by the fault of her Emperors who are both most religious men, but by the crime of a half-barbarian traitor who with our money has armed our foes against us... But now, even if complete success attends our arms, we can wrest nothing from our vanquished foes but what we have already lost to them... Even what I have said is fraught with danger both to me who say it and to all who hear it; for we are no longer free even to lament our fate. and are unwilling, nay, I may even say, afraid to weep for our sufferings."⁸⁰

In the same letter, Jerome makes a statement about the fall of Rome and the Antichrist. As Rome was falling, Jerome indeed saw the Empire as the last defense against the arrival of the Antichrist. With the fallen fourth kingdom ("beast") from Daniel, there is nothing to stop this individual from rising up. He says to the wealthy widow,

"Yes, Antichrist is near whom the Lord Jesus Christ shall consume with the spirit of his mouth (2 Thessalonians 2:7-8)."⁸¹

From 410–414 A.D., Jerome wrote his commentary on Ezekiel and described the final sack of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in August 410 A.D.:

"But alas! Intelligence was suddenly brought me of the death of Pammachius and Marcella, the siege of Rome, and the falling asleep of many of my brethren and sisters. I was so stupefied and dismayed that day and night I

80. Jerome, *Letter CXXIII. To Ageruchia*. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/409jerome-lamentforrome.asp>.

81. Jerome, *Letter CXXIII. To Ageruchia*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001123.htm>.

could think of nothing but the welfare of the community; it seemed as though I was sharing the captivity of the saints, and I could not open my lips until I knew something more definite; and all the while, full of anxiety, I was wavering between hope and despair, and was torturing myself with the misfortunes of other people. But when the bright light of all the world was put out, or, rather, when the Roman Empire was decapitated, and, to speak more correctly, the whole world perished in one city, "I became dumb and humbled myself, and kept silence from good words, but my grief broke out afresh, my heart glowed within me, and while I meditated the fire was kindled..."⁸²

While Rome fell, so did Jerome's heart. He couldn't see how this wasn't a sign of the final end times. His fallen city convinced him that something terrible was happening.

Augustine's take is a little different. In the *City of God*, Book IV, he says

"Thus that god Terminus, who according to these books was the guardian of the Roman frontiers, and by that most beautiful auspice had not given place to Jove, would seem to have been more afraid of Hadrian, a king of men, than of the king of the gods."⁸³



St. Augustine

What does this mean? Augustine is pointing out the irony that the Roman Empire's invincibility was a bit of a contradiction. While the Roman god of boundaries, Terminus, could hold off the will of Jove (Jupiter), the god could not hold off the will of Hadrian, an emperor who began to lose territory after the furthest conquests of another, Trajan. The point was God was in control of the growth and contraction of the Empire, not anyone else.

This concept is a similar take to the beginning of Jerome's approach to Daniel's prophecies. However, after looking at their other writings, we see that Jerome and Augustine were looking at the fall from two different angles. In a sermon dated 410–411 A.D., Augustine proposes some possible questions that could arise in the the Christian community. Believers could take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and try to use it to rationalize how the fall of Rome could happen.⁸⁴ They could ask these questions,

82. Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206/npnf206.vii.iv.x.html>.

83. Augustine, *City of God*, Book IV, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120104.htm>.

84. Genesis 18–19.

"Weren't there fifty just men in Rome? ... Couldn't even fifty just persons be found, even forty, even thirty, even twenty, even ten? But if it is impossible to believe that, why did God not spare that city for the sake of those fifty, or even of those ten?"⁸⁵

Augustine is anticipating the reaction of believers. When we see a tragedy in our world, one that affects us, we often try to make sense of it. There must be a reason; in this case, it's because of a lack of righteous people. But Augustine cautions against this later on in the sermon:

"There were fifty just men in Rome, or rather, if you reckon it by human standards, thousands of just people; if you are looking for the standard of perfection, not a single just person would be found in Rome."⁸⁶

While we may look at the city and see wicked people whose actions and lives condemn the city, we can also see normal people who don't seem like they deserved this punishment (in a civil righteous way). Augustine doesn't want his congregation to assume that because there seems to be a lack of just people, that's why a city suffers. Many cities and countries full of unjust people suffer. There certainly can be righteous among the unrighteous, and God can allow calamity to affect both: punishment for those hostile to him; discipline for his children.

The problem for believers, Augustine says, is that we are looking at God's role in this all wrong. It's not about finding out why he allowed Rome to fall, but just the fact that he let it fall. For the believer who survived, seeing God as a loving Father who chastises his children is critical:

"And people are surprised and if only they were just surprised, and didn't also blaspheme--when God takes the human race to task, and stirs them up with the rod of fatherly correction, disciplining them before passing judgment; and frequently he doesn't pick out anyone in particular for chastisement, not wishing to find anyone whom he has to condemn. You see, he chastises the just and the unjust together..."⁸⁷

He continues the sermon by acknowledging that the fall of Rome is a terrible thing to consider:

"It's true, we've heard many things, we've lamented them all, often shed tears, found little to console ourselves with. I don't brush it all aside, I don't

85. Augustine, *Sermon 397: On the Sack of the City of Rome*, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/conant/augustine.pdf>, page 436.

86. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 439.

87. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 436. I suppose we would quibble about the word "chastise" here, thinking that it's a word only meant for God's children (similar to discipline). I think that the translators of this sermon weren't as worried about that distinction as we might be. This explains why Augustine sounds like God is chastising both unbelievers and believers at the same time.

deny that we've heard many things, that many bad things were done in that city." ⁸⁸

Augustine acknowledges that horrible things may have happened when Rome fell to Alaric and the Visigoths. The average citizen was not necessarily unaffected by the news spreading throughout the Empire. It would be understandable that Jerome reacted the way he did.

And yet, even when believers go through trials, we remember that we carry a cross in this life (Matthew 16:24–26⁸⁹). Augustine says we need to compare our earthly troubles only with eternal punishment in hell. Our trials, while challenging to endure, are not the worst things that we could ever face.⁹⁰ There is also something better to look forward to:

"Even if a believer lost their life in Rome's fall, there is inevitable victory: But even those who died were spared by God. After all, they died while leading a good life, in a state of true justice and good faith; so weren't they now rid of all the distress of human affairs, attaining at last to their rest in God? They died after many tribulations, like that poor man at the rich man's gate. But they endured hunger, you say? So did he. They suffered wounds? So did he; perhaps the dogs didn't come and lick theirs. They died, did they? So did he; but listen to how it ended: It happened that the poor man died, and was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom (Lk 16:22)."⁹¹

Note how Augustine describes the "inevitable victory" for the Christians at the fall of Rome, even if they are stuck behind the walls when the city crumbles. Whether we live or die, the Lord will be with us and will bear us to heaven:

"If only we could see the souls of the saints who died in that war, then you would see how God spared the city. Thousands of saints, after all, are now at rest, rejoicing and saying to God, 'We thank you, Lord, for snatching us from the distresses and torments of the flesh. We thank you, because now we are not in dread of either barbarians or devil; we are not afraid of famine on earth, or of the enemy; we are not afraid of any persecutor, not afraid of any oppressor. But we died on earth, and are with you, O God, never going to

88. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 437.

89. Matthew 16:24–26 – Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?"

90. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, Pages 438–439.

91. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 440.

die, safe in your kingdom by your gift, not by our merits.' What a city of humble citizens that can say all that!"⁹²

The Christians who survived and lived on also had something (or someone) else to keep in mind: Jesus. As we compare our present sufferings in life, can they compare to anything that Jesus went through?

"What that whole city suffered, one man also suffered."⁹³

As Christians keep the proper perspective in mind, they see history as a swinging of the pendulum. For Augustine, events like the fall of Rome are merely a "characteristic of the historical process"⁹⁴ that God brings about in his own time. The cities and empires of this world may fall, but a city of God is awaiting us. As history continues, God casts lots and allows us to see how they fall.

Part IV: So what?

You're probably getting ready to shout, "Get on with it! What does this have to do with me and my ministry?" As we saw with Jerome, Christians tend to see history through colored glasses. Pelikan notes that during the events of the Roman Empire, it would be natural for Christians to see things a certain way.⁹⁵ However, what may interest us is whether believers view the fall of Rome from a Biblical perspective.

While some believers may have seen Rome's fall as a "social triumph of the church," some at the same time viewed it as the "social tragedy of the ancient church."⁹⁶ One only needs to look at the corruption that infected the Church for so many centuries to see, like Jerome did, that (at times) Rome and the Church were intertwined identities. The Reformers saw this and consistently pointed out that, over time, the Church had lost its way.⁹⁷

This history becomes important because of how Christians often mix the two kingdoms.⁹⁸ Christians do live in the kingdom of this world, but they also belong to

92. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 440.

93. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 442.

94. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 101.

95. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, page 15.

96. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire*, pages 26–27.

97. Perhaps the Donation of Constantine would be a "good" example?

98. We heard Augustine hint at this in his sermon, and he deals with it more thoroughly in the *City of God*.

the kingdom of heaven. Believers often confuse these, as we heard at the 2023 WLS Symposium on *The Two Kingdoms*.⁹⁹

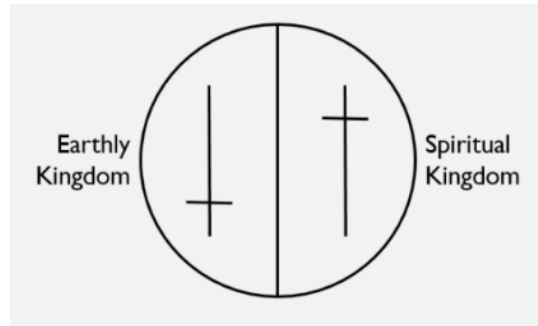
Christians and unbelievers alike can tie external circumstances to success. For some, the only reason the Church succeeds is because of those external factors:

“At the same time, the success of Christianity was rooted in the Roman Empire, in its territorial extent, in the mobility that it promoted, in its towns and its cultural mix. From Pliny's Bithynia to Perpetua's Carthage, Christianity spread from its small-scale origins in Judaea largely because of the channels of communication across the Mediterranean world that the Roman Empire had opened up and because of the movement through those channels of people, goods, books and ideas. The irony is that the only religion that the Romans ever attempted to eradicate was the one whose success their empire made possible and which grew up entirely within the Roman world.”¹⁰⁰

Unlike Beard, Bible-believing Christians would point to the Word as the foundation for any church's success. Visible success or failure does not necessarily reflect how Christ's Church marches on.¹⁰¹

Yet, as Christians live more and more in the kingdom of this world, their earthly success can be alluring. We may succeed before the eyes of the unbelieving world, but at what cost? Worldly success may mean doctrinal laxity. We can begin to close our eyes to how the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh work. We begin to tie our success only to those external circumstances. Sainted Richard Balge says,

“The history of the church has demonstrated that while favor and establishment may give the church security and outward prosperity, the price of such privilege is the loss of independence and freedom of conscience.”¹⁰²



The Two Kingdoms

99. Go to <https://www.wisluthsem.org/symposium-archives/> to find the papers by Paul Koelpin, Wade Johnston, and Jon Bauer.

100. Beard, *SPQR*, page 520.

101. Psalm 119:105; 119:160; Proverbs 30:5; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 4:4; 24:35; 26:52–53; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 4:12

102. Richard Balge, “Key Events in Church History, Part I” (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, historical essay uploaded on 5 May, 2015), page 7.

Church becomes less about “God says,” and more of “I think.” If we want to succeed, the Church has to be “a certain kind of Church,” at the expense of what God actually calls for us to be. How often do we hear our own people speak more narrowly about church “success” in our country? How often do we think it?

What does this tell us about Christians with the fall of Rome and our people today? Gibbon realized that the lesson must be drawn from this distinction: how some Christians focused on heaven versus how other Christians focused on this earth. The difference informs us how the Empire’s fall can be perceived:

“The Christian, who founded his belief much less on the fallacious arguments of reason than on the authority of tradition and the interpretation of Scripture, expected it with terror and confidence as a certain and approaching event; and as his mind was perpetually filled with the solemn idea, he considered every disaster that happened to the empire as an infallible symptom of an expiring world.”¹⁰³

Christians who began to lean less on Scripture were now beginning to feel the effects of such a move: fear in the face of disaster. They saw the fall of Rome coming, but were they prepared to face it? Would they rely on the Lord as they saw the city falling and burning, or would they blame him? Would they panic or pray?

Perhaps this is where we find the most practicality in this study. How often do our members, or even ourselves, forget not to worry as Jesus tells us (Matthew 6:25–34)? If we forget Jesus’ words, it becomes easy to start seeing the fall of society around us as a sign of something more ominous.

But the Lord of history teaches us that empires will fall and decline. Look at Babylon, Rome, Great Britain, or even the United States, and realize these powers will not last forever. Goldsworthy says,

“In spite of its propaganda, no empire – or, for that matter, superpower - is guaranteed its supremacy. This is as true of modern America, as it was of Rome.”¹⁰⁴

This truth can be hard for American Christians (even WELS Lutherans) to accept. When we see the decline of Christianity in America, the “better” past looks tempting. After all, wasn’t this a better, more moral, Christian country?

But therein lies the problem. When we tie Christianity to external America, we are making the same mistake the Roman Christians made before the fall of the Empire. Things looked good! How could they get so bad? Kim Riddlebarger, a professor of systematic theology for Westminster Seminary in California, sees this tie between Rome’s fall and America’s “decline:”

103. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. I, Chapter XV, page 517.

104. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, pages 422.

“Like the Fall of Rome, a fall of the United States would be a horrible event. Much as it did for the citizens of Rome, our illustrious national history and our apparent military invincibility actually sets up American Christians to unwittingly confuse things earthly and things heavenly. If the first step down the slippery slope toward confusing the City of Man with the City of God is to equate the worldly successes of the American Republic with the blessing of God, then the second step comes easily-to equate the political, military, moral, and economic health of our nation in some sense with the kingdom of God. There are many who would weep at the fall of America, not only because of the nature of such a tragedy, but because they have confused the success of their nation with the progress of the kingdom of God. In this, they follow Jerome-the fall of America must mean defeat for the kingdom of God. Not true.”¹⁰⁵

To feel like Christianity is losing when our Empire is burning contradicts what it means to be Christian; Jesus promised the disciples a cross.¹⁰⁶ We are not guaranteed earthly success with the work we have before us. Often, we will see swords, bear infirmities, and carry heavy burdens as we try to make sense of our world. However, we have promises from the Lord that sustain us throughout our trials.¹⁰⁷

After Constantine's day, Christians could have faced a temptation, like we do today: to look back to the good old days¹⁰⁸ when the Empire "wasn't" falling. That may sound like speculation, but is it when our people do it today? In an essay on how God works in history, Mark Braun, professor emeritus of theology at WLC, says that the Church often looks back at the old days and thinks that the body of Christ was indeed better off.

"But how easily do we see things the same way in the church? In the old grammarians' joke, we tend to consider the 'present tense' but the 'past perfect.' We recall better times when the surrounding culture was, if not more Christian, then at least more moral. Lutherans were staying Lutheran and having lots of babies. Our parochial school classrooms were crowded,

105. Kim Riddlebarger,, "Jerome, Augustine, and the Fall of Rome," *Modern Reformation* (30 October 2009), <https://modernreformation.org/resource-library/articles/jerome-augustine-and-the-fall-of-rome>.

106. See footnote 89.

107. Joshua 1:9; Psalm 23:4; 34:8; 100:5; Proverbs 3:5-6; Isaiah 40:31; 41:10; Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 6:31-32; 11:28; 28:20b; Romans 8:39; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 3:20-21.

108. Exodus 16:2-3 – The entire Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat around pots of meat and ate as much food as we wanted, but now you have brought us out into this wilderness to have this whole community die of hunger."

and being in the teaching or preaching ministry of the church was an admirable thing. The Wisconsin Synod was breaking out of its Midwestern stronghold..."¹⁰⁹

Braun goes on to demonstrate that while we can look back on this history with fondness, we should be careful about looking back and wishing for better times like days of old. Rather,

"A deeper awareness of our past gives us clearer perspective, keeps us humble, and drives us back to greater trust in God's promises."¹¹⁰

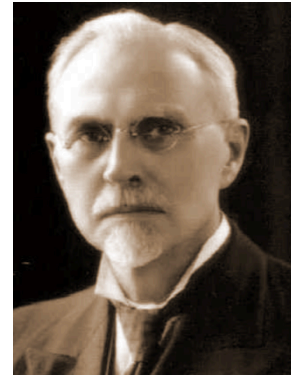
This awareness is precisely what Christians often forget history can teach us though. August Pieper saw the world war eras as prime examples of how society becomes hollow because of external circumstances:

"Under a thin cultural veneer there lay hidden the brutal and satanic nature of the human heart, unbounded greed, unheard-of mendacity, and an insatiable lust to kill."¹¹¹

Pieper is being blunt, but he's also being realistic. Just because we think times might be good and the wars might be gone doesn't mean that sin has disappeared. That speaks to the importance of being bold preachers who talk about sin. Sin is destructive and often overrules reason. We know we should or should not, but we do the opposite (Romans 7:15–20). When we speak of sin and its consequences openly and honestly, believers are less surprised (or at the least better prepared) when it rears its ugly head.

Sainted Arnold Koelpin reminds us that while we observe the history of Rome or the United States, we can observe the history of God's judgment, something else that can often get twisted (or even lost) when analyzing history:

"We can tell the story and learn God's ways from it. The Roman Empire falls from its heights, the German Empire collapses in war, the United States of America rises to the top of the superpowers while rotting from the inside -- all these are judgments in which God is at work among peoples and nations and tribes. Each nation and people acts freely and makes decisions either rashly or by weighing the consequences. But what happens masks God's specific intent in letting things happen. The events alone strike our eye and



August Pieper

109. Mark Braun, "'You Will See My Back: A Lutheran Approach to History,'" (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, 2011) page 9.

110. Braun, "'You Will See My Back,'" page 10.

111. August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, trans. Erwin Kowalke (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), 96.

we can tell the story in all its detail. But the divine governance, by which empires are either established or overthrown, escapes our view. It is God's way to call us to repentance."¹¹²

So when we look at the fall of our own empires, "we do well to see God's hand in everything that happens in life, be it good or bad."¹¹³

But then again, the question might be about God's intent: why does he allow America to go down the drain? Why would he let Rome fall? That's not an answer that we can get this side of heaven. What we do know is that God is love. Luther says that while God can do what he wants in history, he constantly works for the good of his children. In his commentary on Zechariah 14:12-14¹¹⁴, he says:

"Those that persecute the Christians shall not go unpunished. And the punishment shall proceed in this way, that they shall perish in a wondrous way, namely thus: they will rot within themselves, lose their strength and power, even while they think they are still on their feet. Thus the Romans perished without one's knowing how. They had flesh enough, that is, land and people enough, and were also standing well on their feet. Nor did they lack eyes, that is, intelligent, sensible rulers. Nor did they lack tongues, that is, teachers and wise counselors. Yet that did not help them, even as it is written of Troy that it was destroyed at the very time when it had its very finest people. Jerusalem also perished when it was mightiest; likewise Babylon. Why? Because God had ceased being with them, and because the hour had come when they were to be punished and destroyed. It is as he says here: the tongue is to rot in the mouth, and the eyes in their sockets, and the body on its legs: that is, power and strength, good fortune and victory are to be withdrawn from them."¹¹⁵

The Lord's hand is what upholds empires. His hand is also what can bring them crashing down.

112. Arnold J Koelpin, "Teaching History from a Christian Perspective" (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, historical essay uploaded on 25 June, 2015), page 8.

113. Koelpin, "Teaching History from a Christian Perspective" page 12.

114. Zechariah 14:12-14 - "12 This will be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples who have waged war against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are standing on their feet, and their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. 13 On that day there will be a great panic from the Lord among them. They will seize each other by the hand, and the hand of each one will be raised up against his neighbor. 14 Even Judah will fight against Jerusalem, and the wealth of all the surrounding nations will be collected: gold, silver, and clothing in great abundance." (EHV)

115. LW 20:342-343.

And so it should be more natural for Lutherans not to view history as an “upward evolution in goodness or morality,”¹¹⁶ shouldn’t it? If only that were the case. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit helps us avoid this tempting thought. May he keep us from thinking of history as “cyclical, evolutionary, or random.” Let him instead help us, with the means of grace, see and teach history as “teleological and Christological.”¹¹⁷

When we interact with our members and hear their interpretations of current events, American history, etc., a gentle word is needed. At times, we may need to remind them that we “cannot blithely [ascribe] to God-specific events or outcomes.”¹¹⁸ We can encourage them to approach their heavenly Father in prayer. He will listen to and answer their concerns (maybe not in the way or timeframe they would like).

When the sky seems like it is falling, Augustine encourages the people in his sermon that when we suffer, we can't throw up our hands and say the end of the world is here.

"So you shouldn't pay attention to what people suffer, but to what they do about it. What you suffer, my friend, is not under your control; but as to what you do about it, your will is either guiltless or guilty.”¹¹⁹

You don’t know why you suffer. No, but like Job, you can gain some perspective from the Lord on your suffering.¹²⁰

We can't know America's future. It was the same for the Christians during the fall of the Roman Empire. There were signs of decay throughout Roman history, but such symptoms can be visible throughout any country's history.

This paper may make the challenge of pastors seem unique and heavy. We need a healthy perspective of this history, but teaching our people and ourselves about it is often challenging. Pastor Bart Brauer says that while history can often lead to uncertainty about the future or how we interpret the past, that doesn't mean we can ignore it.

“History cannot predict the future, but history does allow us to spot trends and take warning when appropriate. We ignore history at our own peril, plus the peril of the people we are called to serve.”¹²¹

116. Braun, “You Will See My Back,” page 6.

117. Braun, “You Will See My Back,” page 11.

118. Braun, “You will See My Back,” page 4.

119. Augustine, *Sermon 397*, page 437.

120. Job 38–41.

121. Bart Brauer, “The Pastor as Church Historian” (Mequon, WI: WLS Essay File, 17 September 2013) page 15.

Ultimately, we can take our people back to the foot of the cross and tell them a story about their sin and about a Savior who came for them and every citizen of Rome.¹²² That message will stay the same as we see the lots thrown throughout history. Throughout all the randomness, God's Word is still preached. We hear the call to repentance as we observe the effects of sin throughout history. Pieper says, "God and man, grace and sin, the Gospel of salvation and the rage of the devil do not change, but remain the same throughout all times. There is really nothing new under the sun. History keeps repeating itself till the Last Day... the history of man will produce only sin and grace, unbelief and judgment. Human history reaches its climax in the cross of Christ and comes to its final conclusion on the great Day of Judgment. Until then the history of mankind is a constant repetition of the offer of grace and the call to repentance, of the rejection of grace and of judgment. Only the historical, geographical, ethnic conditions, the external and individual peculiarities vary; the essence of what takes place is always the same."¹²³

While we may not know why God allows Empires to rise and fall or why he allows them to affect the Church in the way he does, we can take advantage of our unique time of grace. God's grace still shines on us as we preach the Word within our lands. Luther calls for you and all God's people to pay attention:

"Beloved Germans, buy while the market is close at hand! Gather while the sun is shining and while there is good weather! Make use of God's grace and Word while it is here! For you should know this: God's Word and grace is a passing downpour which does not return to where it has already been. It has been with the Jews; but what's lost is lost, and they now have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; what's lost is lost, and they now have the Turks. Rome and Latin-speaking regions have also had it; what's lost is lost, and they now have the pope. And you Germans dare not think that you will have it forever, for the ingratitude and disdain will not let it remain. Therefore take hold and hang on tightly, while you are able to grab and to hold."¹²⁴

Part V: Conclusion

History can be random at times. It's unfair and confusing. It also seems like we always know how to interpret it. Is America falling apart? Is Christianity at its worst point ever in our country's history? Were we ever a Christian nation? Such questions are likely to bring about discussion and some debate.

122. John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (EHV)

123. Pieper, *Isaiah II*, page 85.

124. LW 45:352–353.

Nevertheless, a proper perspective on the random throw of the historical dice will help us. We sometimes don't know what to make of what God is doing in our world. We do know that he is in control of the outcome of history. We do know that as members of both kingdoms, we can rely on him to control the futures of both. Men like Alexander the Great think they are in charge, like they have the world figured out.

“Nevertheless, it is true that only the prayer of the true church preserves all kingdoms for the sake of the little band of the godly, who are in need of a lodging place in this life.”¹²⁵

Though empires like Rome will fall, others will rise. God will continue to provide for his people. He remains hidden as he moves throughout history:

“For all God’s activities are wrapped up under a cover of history, like a butterfly is concealed in a cocoon. His stormy presence in the rise and fall of nations frightens us, even as a rustling leaf falling from a tree can give an army the jitters in the still of the night. It is as God said, “I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight” (Leviticus 26:36). God hidden in history, therefore, is just another way of telling about his stormy presence in the events that make up our human history. We cannot see through the cracks, try as we may. We are never able to deduce God’s intentions by the facts. And it would be especially presumptuous for us to single out historically only those historical events which are positive and in our favor. God is actively present in both good and evil. He told us as much through Isaiah the prophet who proclaimed this word from God: “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isaiah, 45:3).¹²⁶

So we move forward maybe even amidst our own collapsing empire. We live as members of the kingdom of the right and of the left. While we do live in both, we as sinners and saints will confuse our role in one kingdom, the other, or even both. For all these faulty moments for our people and for ourselves, we ask for the Lord’s forgiveness. We wait for that day when the mask will be removed. God will show us how he works in history:

“But that mask behind which God operates in the cross will not be fully revealed until we see God face to face. Only at the end of time will the full meaning of history become clear to us. The Christian view of history is truly eschatological. World history is not to be its own judge. Nor does the goal of history lie within history itself. The goal of history toward which all life is

125. LW 4:35.

126. Koelpin, “Teaching History from a Christian Perspective,” page 6.

headed lies outside the boundaries of time and space. The goal of history is to be found in God."¹²⁷

As we close this paper, let's ask again: why did the Roman Empire fall? When did the Roman Empire fall? How did the fall affect the Christian Church? Is America falling now? Are the best days of Christianity in our country behind us? Let's let others argue for the answers to these questions. In the end, they are arguing about how the lots look. Let's trust the Lord as he casts them.

Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum
S.D.G.

127. Koelpin, "Teaching History from a Christian Perspective," page 11.

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