



The fifth century began with some notable advances for anti-Christ as false religions continued their expansion throughout the globe. Notably, Buddhism was enhanced through the work of a Chinese Buddhist monk named Fa-Xian, who traveled throughout Sri Lanka and India to gather Buddhist writings, particularly the Buddhist Books of Discipline.

After the Roman Empire was ostensibly Christianized by the alleged conversion of Constantine in the previous century, the Roman church began to assume more power over the faith of the people through ecclesiastical councils. The empire's power began to weaken as corrupt "Christian" emperors focused more and more on personal political ambitions and the Roman Senate continued its decline into corruption. It was a time of tremendous instability for the Western Roman Empire which came to an end in AD 476. A succession of weak emperors left the empire tottering on the brink of destruction.

As the empire became increasingly threatened by invading hordes of barbarians, Christians would be tested in much the same manner the Jews had been during the time of Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70.

With the adoption of Christianity as the religion of Constantine and his successors, the Roman Empire became the focal point of Anti-Christ's battle. His approach was two-pronged: 1) the destruction of the empire by the pagan barbarians; 2) the corruption of the religious authority within the empire.

THE TEMPORAL FRONT

On the temporal front, the empire began to experience a series of invasions that would eventually fragment it into several provinces, none of which could sustain itself for long.

Around AD 400 the conquest of Britain began with the withdrawal of Roman troops. By the end of the century Britain would be settled by large contingents of Angles, Saxons and Jutes.

In 401 the Visigoths, led by their king, Alaric I, invaded Italy, but were defeated by the Roman general Flavius Stilicho at Pollentia in April, 402. He was again defeated at the Battle of Verona in June, 402. In 408, Emperor Flavius Honorius had Stilicho and his family executed, thus inciting the Romans to

massacre the families of Goths serving in the Roman military. In response, a large contingent of Gothic soldiers—some 30,000—defected to Alaric to avenge their murdered wives and children. Eventually Alaric would sack Rome in 410.

During this time a group of Eurasian nomads migrated into Europe and established a large empire. The history of these people, the Huns, is speckled and relatively indistinct. It is believed that they were descendants of the Xiongnu, northern neighbors of the Chinese, and were possibly the antecedents of the Turkic peoples who settled in western portions of Asia and in Asia Minor.

From AD 434 until his death in 453, a fierce warrior known only as Attila (Popularly known as "Attila the Hun"), ruled the Hunnic Empire, which encompassed the area from the Ural River to the Rhine River and from the Danube River to the Baltic Sea. He was among the most feared enemies of the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. As Attila conquered numerous barbarian tribes and incorporated them into his army of conquest, he dubbed himself "the Scourge of God." Known for his savage violence in combat, Attila is portrayed as just the opposite in his civilian administration through which he strengthened central authority among the Huns. His self-proclaimed title "The Scourge of God" amply described Attila's attacks against both the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. Yet although he devastated many parts of the empires, he was unable to take either Constantinople in the east or Rome in the west.

In 455 Rome was again sacked, this time by Germanic Vandals. As each attack on Rome and the outlying provinces of the empire in both the west and the east further weakened the empire, the line of emperors would come to an end with Romulus Augustulus (ca. 460 - ?). On September 4, 476, a German soldier named Flavius Odoacer led a revolt that deposed Augustulus. Odoacer assumed the title "King of Italy," and his revolt marked the end of the Western Roman Empire. Although Odoacer was an Arian Christian he did not impose himself upon the now fully-entrenched Roman Catholic Church.

The Eastern Roman Empire would continue for several more centuries as the Byzantine Empire, successfully defending its holdings and even recovering some territories it had previously lost to the Western Roman Empire. But it is the Western Roman Empire that would continue to exist, if not as a distinct, unified empire, as the infrastructure of Western Civilization until today. The Roman Empire's influence in language, culture, jurisprudence, art, and virtually all aspects of Western Civilization, combined with the former Greek influences, would result in the greatest achievements in science, the arts, and technology the world has ever known. Unfortunately, anti-Christ would use all these to continue his battle against the Lord of the Universe.

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire came the beginning of what historians have called "The Middle Ages."

THE SPIRITUAL FRONT

As we have seen previously, Satan's attack against faith in Jesus Christ was well underway by the time the last apostle went to be with the Lord. Ecclesiasticism began to take over the local assemblies of believers with the installation of "bishops," and the recognition of the "bishop" of Rome as the supreme pontiff. By the fifth century the hierarchical system was well established with the political and military backing of the Roman Empire. Although this brought protection to Christians it also brought a weakening of the faith and the apostasy that would spread throughout the world under the force of the Roman pontiff.

For the past few centuries many Romans—particularly within the military—had adopted the Mithraic mystery religion from Persia, devised from Zoroastrian sources. The Persian god Mithras was worshipped through a complex system of seven stages of initiation involving ritualistic meals. Like most mystery religions it centered on symbolism of the Sun or "Sol."

Having melded faith in Jesus with the mystery religions of pagan Rome, particularly Mithraism, Roman Catholicism devised its own esoteric system of belief and ritual which would become the Mass. Soon it would be imposing upon believers in Christ a new set of laws, statutes and ordinances that would destroy the biblical truth of salvation imputed through faith by God's grace. This departure may be largely attributed to the increased acceptance of the fourth/fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo (Nov. 13, 354–August 28, 430). Augustine was born in Thagaste (present-day Souk Ahras, Algeria) in Roman Africa to a pagan father and Christian mother, Monica, who raised him as a Christian. As a teenager he left the church to engage in a hedonistic lifestyle for a while. In his thirties he developed an attraction to Manichaeism (a philosophy combining Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism). He would later embrace skepticism and also study Neoplatonism. The influence of Ambrose, bishop of Milan, a master of rhetoric like Augustine, caused Augustine to rejoin the Roman Catholic Church. In 391 he was ordained as bishop of Hippo Regius (present-day Algeria).

Augustine's writings were among the most influential in the development of western Christianity. As the Roman Empire continued its decline Augustine wrote his *City of God*, in which he posited that the Roman Catholic Church is the spiritual abode of Christians in contrast to the material earthly city. As

such, the City of God (Roman Catholicism) should enjoy dominion over the earthly cities (nations), with the Supreme Pontiff (as Vicar of Christ) ruling in the place of Christ. With the collapse of the Roman Empire Augustine's writings had profound influence on the medieval worldview as Roman Catholicism presided over, and much contributed to, the Dark Ages (5th to 15th centuries).

Augustine's *The City of God* remains a classic theological dissertation among Roman Catholics and Protestants (particularly Calvinists), the latter considering him the father of the Reformation due to his teachings on salvation and grace. Calvinists and other Reform Theologians today form the intellectual cadre for the Christian Reconstruction movement's dominion theology.

We can see now, how far removed from the purity of the simple Gospel anti-Christ managed to steer believers in Jesus through the writings of such theologians and bishops who formed the hierarchical system of Roman Catholicism.

Yet Christianity was hardly united in its understanding of some important doctrinal issues. The first seven ecumenical councils of the established hierarchy, from the First Council of Nicaea (325) to the Second Council of Nicaea (787) were attempts to establish an orthodox consensus on what Christians must believe in order to be in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. This was seen as not only important to the cohesiveness of Christianity, but essential to maintaining Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Under Julian the Apostate, emperor of Rome from 361 to 363, Christianity lost much of its influence in the empire. Toward the latter part of the fourth century the Roman Church began to regain that influence, and it wanted to be sure that the scare it had received under Julian would not be repeated. This required a consensus on the authority of the church which necessitated consensus on doctrine and practice. Again anti-Christ had the opportunity to sully the waters of faith in Christ through the fomenting of power grabs among the church's theologians and clergy.

We saw how in the fourth century the First Council of Nicaea produced the Nicene Creed in its original form, later modified by the First Council of Constantinople in 381. The Nicene Creed was the first attempt to establish the Trinitarian doctrine on the nature of God, and the beginning of Roman Catholicism's view of Jesus' mother Mary as "the Mother of God."

Four more councils came together during the fifth century: The First Council of Ephesus (431); The Second Council of Ephesus (449); The Council of Chalcedon (451); The Third Council of Ephesus (475). Of these, the most important were The First Council of Ephesus and The Council of Chalcedon.

The First Council of Ephesus

Like the first two councils, this was convened to address disputes among major theological positions that were vying for supremacy. The disputes were between Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, and other church leaders, primarily Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria. Present were approximately 250 bishops.

On trial was Nestorius's teachings, which he developed at the School of Antioch, one of which rejected the accepted title

Theotokos (“Mother of God” or “God Bearer”) for Jesus’ mother Mary. Also in question was Nestorius’s Christology.

Nestorius emphasized the dual natures of Jesus, seeking middle ground between those who insisted that Christ, as God, had been born a man (hence, Mary bore God), and those who posited that the eternal God could not be born; He has existed from eternity. Nestorius called into question how Jesus Christ, being part man, could not be partially a sinner because man by definition is a sinner since the Fall. His solution was that Mary gave birth to the incarnate Christ, not the divine Logos who existed before Mary and even before the creation. Thus, he said, Mary should be called Christotokos (“Birth Giver of Christ”), not *Theotokos* (“Birth Giver of God”).

Nestorius did not believe that the union of human and divine was possible—that Christ could not be con-substantial with God and con-substantial with man, because He would grow, mature, suffer and die, which God cannot do. He would also possess God’s power which would separate Him from humanity in terms of equality.

Nestorius’ detractors accused him of detaching Christ’s humanity from His divinity, which would mean that there would be two persons existing in one body. This, they said, would deny the reality of the Incarnation—that God (specifically the Word [Logos] of God) became a man through a miracle of God.

Accusing Nestorius of heresy, Cyril of Alexandria appealed to Pope Celestine I for Nestorius to be excommunicated. Celestine gave Cyril his authority to serve Nestorius with notice to recant within ten days or be excommunicated. Before acting, Cyril convened a synod of Egyptian bishops which also condemned Nestorius. Cyril then sent to Nestorius a letter known as “The Third Epistle of Saint Cyril to Nestorius.” In it Cyril cited the most famous article of Alexandrian Orthodoxy, “The Twelve Anathemas of Saint Cyril,” stating, “Anyone who dares to deny the Holy Virgin the title *Theotokos* is Anathema!”

Despite appeals from others such as John of Antioch, Nestorius refused to compromise his position. Instead he convinced Emperor Theodosius II to call a general council through which Nestorius hoped to vindicate himself and have Cyril convicted of heresy. On Pentecost (June 7) 431, the Sacra called for by Theodosius met at Ephesus, involving the metropolitan bishops. In spite of Nestorius’s desire to censure Cyril, Theodosius wanted the council to consider only the Christological controversy. The result was the council passing five canons condemning Nestorius (and Caelestius) and their followers as heretics, conferring excommunication on any who did not accept the council’s decree.

Nestorius was not only excommunicated, but exiled through the influence of Theodosius’s sister, the Empress Pacheria.

We are far removed today from this dispute, but we can see that Nestorius misunderstood the nature of Jesus Christ. We have God’s inspired Word which declares that Jesus is the Word of God who existed with God from “the beginning,” and that the Word of God is God (of the same nature and substance as the Father), and that the Word of God became a man (John 1:1-14). So we can see how The First Council of Ephesus was

correct in censoring Nestorius. Yet Nestorius was correct in challenging the idea that Mary should be called “the Mother of God,” because Mary was nothing more than a human girl. God has no mother. Nestorius was correct in saying she should be called “the Mother of Christ” or “The Mother of the Messiah” because she gave birth to His body (not to His soul or spirit), which housed the divine nature in His spirit. The council’s insistence on calling Mary “the Mother of God” was an overreaction to Nestorius’s errors.

Anti-Christ uses such issues to sow discord among the brethren. The dispute over Nestorius resulted in many eastern churches separating from Rome around 424.

As individuals we are subject to the Lord Himself, not to man except insofar as elders within the local, autonomous assemblies are charged with preserving and defending the truth of God’s Word and overseeing the purity of the assembly as regards to unrepentant sin. One may still be in the assembly even if one does not understand as well the truth that the elders hold, but he may be required not to spread his ideas to the assembly at large. It is hoped that sufficient exposure to the truth through humble submission will result in the error being purged from his thinking by the Holy Spirit. But when a hierarchical system backed by the power of the government imposes its beliefs upon all people under the penalty of excommunication and/or corporal punishment, then not only truth may be solidified within the body of believers, but errors may also be solidified. Error then becomes law and men must then choose sides. Thus, the more men try to impose unity, the more schisms develop. That is the history of Christianity: schism after schism, not all of which have been based on biblical truth.

That is also the history of the Roman Catholic Church’s empirical authority. It imposed many truths, but it also imposed many errors. Truth, however, is the domain of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, not man, leads us into all truth (John 16:13). Hierarchical systems seek to act in the place of the Holy Spirit. And that was the foundation for Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholic “truth” is embodied in one who seeks to act in the place of Jesus Christ Himself—the pope as the “Vicar of Christ.” “Vicar of Christ means “in the place of Christ.”

The greatest schism occurred when the churches of the Eastern Empire separated from the western Roman Church largely as a result of the various church councils.

The Second Council of Ephesus

In AD 449 Emperor Theodosius II convoked The Second Council of Ephesus to further address the disputes surrounding the nature of Jesus Christ. This council was dominated by Theodosius, Dioscorus and supporters of the Monophysite theory of Christ’s nature. Monophysitism originated in the fifth century AD, its chief proponent being a monk named Eutyches who stated that in Jesus Christ the human nature was absorbed into the divine nature (similar to how a cube of sugar dissolves in a cup of water), thus leaving Christ with only one nature—divine. This found disfavor with the Oriental Orthodox churches that professed miaphysitism (in Jesus Christ divinity and humanity are united in one nature without separation).

Presiding over the council, Dioscorus ignored the Roman legates and refused Flavian and six bishops to sit as judges. Dioscorus's domination of the proceedings resulted in many bishops who opposed him being deposed, including Flavius.

For this reason, this council came to be labeled *Latrocinium* ("Robber Synod") by the Roman Catholic Church, which convened The First Council of Chalcedon to deal with the errors.

The First Council of Chalcedon

After being snubbed by Dioscorus at The Second Council of Ephesus, the Roman prelates, through Pope Leo, demanded the convocation of a new council, but Emperor Theodosius II declined to accommodate them. This led to growing dissension and threatened to leave the decrees from Ephesus II in force. After Theodosius's death, his successor Marcian convened the Council of Chalcedon (a city in Bithynia in Asia Minor) in 451 to annul The Second Council of Ephesus. With greater representation from the western churches, The Council of Chalcedon condemned the decrees of Ephesus II and reaffirmed the doctrine of the Incarnation. Dioscorus was condemned as a heretic by a sitting minority of the delegates (most refused to attend his trial), and all of his decrees were nullified. Marcian in turn exiled Dioscorus.

Much dissension and anger were displayed as bishops took different sides, but Pope Leo's dissertation on the Incarnation was finally approved by a majority present. The outcome was The Confession of Chalcedon which states:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person (*prosopon*) and one Subsistence (*hypostasis*), not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

Prior to The Council of Chalcedon, the Constantinople See had no ecclesiastical prominence. But after Constantine moved the seat of the Roman Empire to Constantinople from Rome, its proximity to the bishop of Constantinople caused the church to elevate the See of Constantinople to equal standing. The

Council of Chalcedon's 28th canon granted equal privileges to Constantinople on the basis of that city being the "New Rome." The council "apportioned equal prerogatives to the most holy See of new Rome" because "the city which is honored by the imperial power and senate and enjoying privileges equaling older imperial Rome should also be elevated to her level in ecclesiastical affairs and take second place after her." In 453 Pope Leo confirmed all the council's canons, but with a formal protest of canon 28 because he didn't want anyone else to enjoy the same power he enjoyed. Eventually, to honor the older See of Rome the council took the formal step of placing the See of Constantinople in a position "second in eminence and power to the Bishop of Rome."

More eastern churches rejected Chalcedon's decrees in favor of Ephesus II and separated themselves. The most significant among them was the Church of Alexandria (today, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria), which laid the groundwork for an even greater schism that would occur five hundred years later solidifying the earlier schisms between east and west.

At the Council of Chalcedon, anti-Christ achieved a great advancement in getting the Roman church to equate ecclesiastical authority with imperial authority, to set the groundwork for the pope to take the place of the Roman emperor as *Pontifex Maximus* and to meld the imperial and ecclesiastical authorities to form the Holy Roman Empire. As the superstitions of Roman pagan/Christianity captured the minds of the religious authorities it would lead to a time of intellectual darkness known as "the Middle Ages" or "the Dark Ages."

Anti-Christ also used this period to create conditions for the greatest schism to arise within Christianity: the separation of the eastern Roman churches from the western Roman churches.

The history of this period is far too complex to relate in this brief article. Our concern is not with all the details, but with the outcome of how anti-Christ has managed to deceive those who claim faith in Jesus Christ, primarily through the dictates of religious authorities whom God did not ordain. This is what comes of men trying to define the Godhead, which is beyond man's ability to define outside of what Scripture reveals, and then impose their definition upon everyone else. If Scripture doesn't give us sufficient evidence of God's nature to define the Godhead in human terms and labels then we must be content to allow God to be God. And our brethren who love Jesus but do not have perfect understanding must be allowed to have their relationship with Him. He will judge; we must not.

If there is to be any separation it must be on the basis of rejection of God's clear teaching in His Word. I emphasize "rejection" as opposed to misunderstanding.

Human labels may mean one thing to one person and quite a different thing to another person. This is why Paul tells us not to consider what men say above what is written (1 Cor. 4:6).

The power play of the Roman Catholic Church to impose its will upon all who name Christ Jesus as their savior has for centuries been the motivation behind its church councils. And these caused serious schisms that remain today.