Jerome, Augustine, and the Fall of Rome:

An Object Lesson for American Christians

When an alien spaceship destroyed the White House in the 1993 science fiction film *Independence Day*, I'm told that pre-9/11 moviegoers were not horrified at the possibility and that some even cheered (perhaps because they were a bit cynical about the current occupant of the Oval Office). As the world's lone superpower, we believe there is no nation on earth that would dare invade our nation and occupy our territory. While terrorists may do great damage and cause huge loss of life (as they have done), from a strategic point of view, a terrorist strike is of little consequence when it comes to challenging the military and economic might of the United States. At this point in our history, the fall of the American Republic to a foreign adversary (space aliens aside) is unthinkable.

Similarly, the citizens of the Roman Empire once thought themselves invincible and therefore safe from invasion. That is, until a Visigoth general named Alaric led an army of Germanic tribes over the Alps into northern Italy. The audacity of Alaric's incursion into the heartland of the Roman Empire enabled him to quickly occupy much of northern Italy, before laying siege to the rest of the Italian peninsula to the south. It was not long before Alaric's army was outside the gates of the City of Rome. When Alaric's forces broke through the Eternal City's remaining defenses on August 24, A.D. 410, his men ransacked and looted the symbolic heart of the empire. Ironically, this "barbarian" army included a significant number of Arian Christians who did little damage to the churches in the city and minimal harm to orthodox Christians.

Spared from invasion for eight hundred years, the unthinkable had now happened: Rome had been sacked. How on earth did an army of barbarians pull off the impossible? History had come to a dramatic turning point, and everyone living at the time seemed to know it, even if they were not sure what this meant for their collective futures.

If Edward Gibbon's assessment is correct, the myth of Roman invincibility obscured the moral and economic rot (what Gibbon calls the loss of "civic virtue") that had eaten away much of the foundation of Roman society. Rome's battle-hardened armies were off guarding the far-flung territories of the empire. The empire's treasury was empty; and a government, which prided itself on providing both bread and entertainment for its citizens, had nothing left to give them when the barbarians finally came. In the wake of the unthinkable, all that remained was the blame game—how and why did the invincible empire come to such an ignominious end?

The purpose of this essay is to briefly consider how the Fall of Rome provoked different reactions from two prominent church fathers living at the time: St. Jerome and St. Augustine. Their response to Rome's fall serves as an object lesson for many American Christians, who may see the health and success of the American Republic as in some way connected to the success and vitality of the kingdom of God.

Once the blame game began, many Romans blamed Christianity for Rome's defeat. The widespread embrace of Christian virtues encouraged people to focus upon loving one's neighbor and doing good to others. Christians were preoccupied with heavenly things, not the things of this earth; but the pagans saw these virtues as vices, contributing to a soft and complacent military.

BY KIM RIDDLEBARGER

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Others saw the seeds of the empire's defeat in Constantine's conversion to Christianity after the battle of Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312. Now that Christianity was the the favored religion throughout the empire, the conversion of so many pagans surely meant that traditional Roman "gods" were not summoned with sufficient zeal to rally them to Rome's defense. Many opined that the Fall of Rome was the ultimate revenge of Rome's jilted deities. What more proof was needed than when Romans stopped sacrificing to their gods, the gods stopped aiding the Roman army in battle?

While many Romans blamed Christians for the calamity, it is important to understand that Christians were just as taken aback as the pagans. From a Christian perspective, the Fall of Rome was terribly perplexing. To the Christian mind, this event must be tied to the eschatology of the New Testament, which taught the Lord's imminent return after a brief period of unprecedented upheaval in the political and natural orders. Although in the mid-fifties of the first century Paul instructed Christians in Rome to consider the Roman Empire (even if pagan) a "minister of God" (cf. Rom. 13:1–7), about forty years later the apostle John viewed that same Roman Empire and its emperors as the God-hating beasts of the land and the sea, empowered by the dragon (Satan) to openly persecute the people of God (Rev. 13).

After enduring a series of Roman emperors, many of whom were self-proclaimed deities as well as zealous persecutors of the church (Nero, Titus, Domitian, Decius, and later Diocletian), it seemed nothing less than a miracle when in 312 Emperor Constantine saw his famous "sign in the sky," claimed to be converted, and became what some consider to be the first Christian emperor of Rome. How did the emperor turn from professing his own divinity into an ardent supporter of Christ and his church? Constantine's conversion changed everything. As church historian Henry Chadwick puts it, "The conversion of Constantine marks a turning-point in the history of the church and of Europe." Although much of the persecution of Christians ceased, Constantine's conversion also led to a situation in which the church became "more and more implicated in high political decisions."[1] The great pagan empire and Christ's church suddenly had many mutual and deeply entangled interests. Christendom was born.

Before Constantine's conversion, some theologians (such as Tertullian, 160–220) did not believe that, since the empire was so steeped in paganism, a Christian could be emperor of Rome. But after Constantine's conversion, the emperor saw himself as a protector of the church, even calling the Council of Nicea in 325 to deal with something as weighty as the Arian controversy. Paul's "minister of God" became John's "beast" of the Apocalypse. Now, two centuries later, the Roman emperor was calling an ecumenical council to deal with a controversy over the deity of Christ. No wonder Christians struggled to make sense of the mysterious providence of God.

It is easy to see why the Fall of Rome would come as a shock to Christians who had seen the emperor go from arch-persecutor to devoted protector. Christians were not only citizens of the Roman Empire, they were also members of the kingdom of God. With Rome's fall, numerous questions arose about how these two kingdoms (the civil kingdom and the kingdom of Christ) were related to each another. Did the Fall of Rome mean the fall of the church was at hand? How would the Fall of Rome impact Christendom? Had Christ's triumph over Caesar been reversed by a pagan army?

It is illustrative to consider the reaction to these events of Jerome and Augustine. St. Jerome (347–420) is best known for the Vulgate, his translation of the Scriptures into Latin. Jerome was born into a Christian home and as a young man spent significant time in the City of Rome, indulging the weakness of the flesh, as well as learning about the virtues of a Roman education (including rhetoric, philosophy, Greek and Latin). After receiving some sort of vision, Jerome devoted himself to a lifelong study of Scripture. Convinced by Christian hermits to adopt an ascetic life, Jerome spent extended periods of time in relative seclusion in Bethlehem, periodically returning to Rome, as well as to other centers of Christianity in service of the church.

Greatly influenced by the church fathers Hippolytus and Irenaeus, in his *Commentary on Daniel* (written in 407) Jerome defended the idea (in his discussion of Daniel 11:24 *ff.*) that the Christianized Roman Empire was the mysterious "restrainer" mentioned by Paul in 2 Thessalonians, who staved off the antichrist. Jerome also believed that at the time of the end, the restrainer would be removed and the antichrist would appear, leading ten "pagan" tribes to victory over Rome, dividing the spoils of the Roman Empire, and culminating with the return of Christ.

Upon learning of Rome's fall just three years after completing his commentary on Daniel, Jerome was despondent. He wrote in the preface to his commentary on Ezekiel,

> 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...the whole world perished in one city. Who would believe that Rome, built up by the con-

> quest of the whole world, had collapsed, that the mother of all nations became their tomb?[2]

Jerome describes how pilgrims from Rome, having lost everything, made their way to Bethlehem. It was the end of the civilized world as he knew it. Christendom had been overcome by pagans. Jerome concluded, "If Rome can perish, what can be safe?"[3]

Jerome died in 420, no doubt feeling as though the Fall of Rome was somehow tied to the end of time and that the only way to survive in a world once again under barbarian (and pagan) control was to do as he had done—withdraw into the wilderness, maintain whatever Christian virtues he could, and wait for the end. Through sixteen hundred years of hindsight, it is apparent that Jerome's worries proved unfounded. Christendom remained and even gained in influence. Although Rome had fallen, the end did not come. In fact, Rome's luster eventually returned, and Jerome became a Catholic saint. Not quite what he had anticipated.

St. Augustine (354–430) likewise lamented the Fall of Rome. A man of great learning and also steeped in Roman culture, by 410 Augustine was an influential bishop with enough troubles to occupy his time—the Pelagian and Donatist controversies were raging, along with the endless church politics that went with such controversies. When Augustine learned what had happened in Rome, he wrote a number of letters to refugees attempting to comfort them. Augustine even preached a series of sermons attempting to calm the fears of those living in Roman North Africa who saw in the Fall of Rome their own eventual fate—which, ironically, came to pass in 430, the year of Augustine's death.

The Vandals (another Germanic tribe) eventually laid siege to Hippo, the city in North Africa where Augustine's bishopric was located and in which Augustine lay dying.[4] Although Augustine knew his health was failing, he hung on long enough to witness "violence destroy his life's work in Africa."[5] Despite his own difficult circumstances, Augustine's perspective on the Fall of Rome was much different from Jerome's.

Augustine believed it was futile to ask what specific sins (either on the part of Christians or pagans) brought about the events in Rome. Augustine believed that ours is a fallen race, and he reasoned, "Who are we to complain should God allow such things to come to pass?" Both Christians and pagans deserve such judgment. It was a Christian's duty to pray and to ask God for strength to endure these trials, not spend time lamenting the outcome of God's mysterious providence. In a sermon preached in late 410, Augustine told his congregation, "Do not lose heart brethren, there will be an end to every earthly kingdom. If this is now the end, God sees. Perhaps it has not yet come to that: for some reason—call it weakness, or mercy, or mere wretchedness—we are all hoping that it has not yet come."[6]

It is out of Augustine's growing concern to understand the relationship of the purposes of God in relation to the affairs of men that in 413 he began work on his famous *City of God*, eventually completing it in 426 at seventy-two years of age. While *City of God* deals with the Fall of Rome, this volume (Augustine's longest) developed into a full-fledged apologetic for the superiority of Christianity to even the most sophisticated and learned forms of paganism.

In book nineteen of *City of God*, Augustine undertakes a groundbreaking discussion of how Christians ought to distinguish between an earthly city and a heavenly one—just as Babylon stands apart from Jerusalem throughout redemptive history. The earthly city (the City of Man) is centered upon earthly things such as power, conquest, wealth, and comfort, while the contrasting values of the heavenly city (the City of God) can be seen in the church and are identified (in certain ways) with the kingdom of God.[7] Both cities will exist side by side until the time of the end when the earthly city will perish, even as the heavenly city anticipates its final consummation when the Lord returns.

While Augustine believed the conversion of Constantine was a great blessing, he also did not think this fundamentally changed the distinction between the two cities. The church and its members will always be pilgrims on the earth. Such is the nature of God's economy. While Christians must render obedience to Caesar and the civil law with our bodies, Augustine believed that our minds must remain in submission to Christ. After all, we are "wayfarers on the earth." Christians are not to take issue with "diversity of customs, laws, and traditions whereby peace is sought and maintained," provided these do not "stand in the way of faith and the worship of the one true God."[8] The seeds of the much more thoroughly developed Lutheran and Reformed doctrines of "two kingdoms" had been planted.

No doubt Augustine felt sickened much like Jerome did upon learning of the sack of Rome. In earthly terms, this was a disaster, plain and simple. Rome's fall brought fear and hardship on many whom Augustine knew and loved. As a pastor, Augustine sought first to comfort his flock. "Be of good cheer," he told them. Through his pen and pulpit, Augustine did his best to explain the calamity to God's people and to point them to the heavenly city that cannot be shaken by earthly troubles.

Yet, unlike Jerome, Augustine did not think that the Fall of Rome in any way altered or slowed the progress of the kingdom of God. While a blow to peace and stability, Rome's fall did not necessarily mean that the end of the age was at hand or that all was lost. On the contrary, Augustine had come to believe that Christendom was the problem, not the solution. Tragedies like this are part and parcel of the fallen world. But Christ's kingdom does not depend upon the health and vitality of Rome for its success. Christ's is a spiritual kingdom grounded in Word and Sacrament, not armies, national treasuries, or civic virtue. What happened in Rome was horrible. But the heavenly city is a spiritual kingdom and will triumph, regardless.

The reactions of Jerome and Augustine to the Fall of Rome reveal two distinct views of the relationship between

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things earthly and things heavenly. Augustine's response is particularly helpful in this regard. His response should remind American Christians that the progress of God's kingdom does not in any sense depend upon the wealth, technology, or military power of the United States. 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.

Jerome and Augustine also demonstrate differing eschatologies and understandings of God's providence. Augustine reminds us that American Christians are absolutely justified to be concerned about public morality, the coarsening of our culture, and the irresponsible behavior of politicians (such as how they handle the national economy). But these things by necessity belong to the City of Man. We share these same concerns with our non-Christian American neighbors, who likewise desire public morality and responsible public conduct. We may be pilgrims in the City of Man, but we are not merely "passing through." The City of Man is also ordained by God and ruled by Christ. It is here in the midst of the daily affairs of the earthly city that God chooses to advance his heavenly kingdom. This kingdom is embraced by faith, and yet its members function as salt and light in the earthly kingdom where their civic virtues help restrain the evil around us.

Although many of us would have a hard time accepting that an economic disaster or a moral meltdown might actually serve the mysterious purposes of God, this too is the lesson taught us by Augustine. As sinners, we have no right to question God's purposes should they include either personal or national calamity. God has his reasons, and we should not spend time lamenting what God has wrought. Instead we should seek God's strength to be resolute and faithful in whatever trials God sends our way. In this way, the City of God advances in the middle of the travails of the City of Man.

Even if the City of Man should fall, there is still a heavenly city in our midst, and it is founded upon Jesus' death and resurrection. Although all earthly kingdoms will perish in time (even our own), the heavenly kingdom advances through the preached Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and through the power of God. It is Augustine who reminds us that in the end, when all the kingdoms of this world finally pass away, one kingdom will remain—the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. ■

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[1]Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin, 1967), 125.

[2]Jerome, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Volume VI: St. Jerome, Letters and Select Works*, eds. Philip and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 500.

[3]Jerome, *The Christian Church in the Epistles of St. Jerome* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1923), 123.

[4]Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 190.

[5]Brown, 425.

[6]Augustine, Sermon 103, *Sermons* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 11.

[7]Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 100.

[8]Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Image, 1958), XIX.17.

Speaking Of…

"The situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him. Hence, it was necessary for the Son of God to become for us 'Immanuel, that is, God with us,' and in such a way that his divinity and our human nature might by mutual connection grow together. Otherwise the nearness would not have been near enough, nor the affinity sufficiently firm, for us to hope that God might dwell with us."

—John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*