

The Eight Stages of the Rise and Fall of Civilizations

Cultures and civilizations go through cycles. Over time, many civilizations and cultures have risen and then fallen. We who live in painful times like these do well to recall these truths. Cultures and civilizations come and go; only the Church (though often in need of reform) and true biblical culture remain. An old song says, "Only what you do for Christ will last." Yes, all else passes; the Church is like an ark in the passing waters of this world and in the floodwaters of times like these.

For those of us who love our country and our culture, the pain is real. By God's grace, many fair flowers have come from Western culture as it grew over the past millennium. Whatever its imperfections (and there were many), great beauty, civilization, and progress emerged at the crossroads of faith and human giftedness. But now it appears that we are at the end of an era. We are in a tailspin we don't seem to be able to pull ourselves out of. Greed, aversion to sacrifice, secularism, divorce, promiscuity, and the destruction of the most basic unit of civilization (the family), do not make for a healthy culture. There seems to be no basis for true reform and the deepening darkness suggests that we are moving into the last stages of a disease. This is painful but not unprecedented.

Sociologists and anthropologists have described the stages of the rise and fall of the world's great civilizations. Scottish philosopher Alexander Tyler of the University of Edinburgh noted eight stages that articulate well what history discloses. I first encountered these in Ted Flynn's book [The Great Transformation](#). They provide a great deal of perspective to what we are currently experiencing.

Let's look at each of the eight stages. The names of the stages are from Tyler's book and are presented in bold red text. My brief reflections follow in plain text.

- 1. From bondage to spiritual growth** – Great civilizations are formed in the crucible. The Ancient Jews were in bondage for 400 years in Egypt. The Christian faith and the Church came out of 300 years of persecution. Western Christendom emerged from the chaotic conflicts during the decline of the Roman Empire and the movements of often fierce "barbarian" tribes. American culture was formed by the injustices that grew in colonial times. Sufferings and injustices cause—even force—spiritual growth. Suffering brings wisdom and demands a spiritual discipline that seeks justice and solutions.
- 2. From spiritual growth to great courage** – Having been steeled in the crucible of suffering, courage and the ability to endure great sacrifice come forth. Anointed leaders emerge and people are summoned to courage and sacrifice (including loss of life) in order to create a better, more just world for succeeding generations. People who *have* little or nothing, also have little or nothing to *lose* and are often more willing to live for something more important than themselves and their own pleasure. A battle is begun, a battle requiring courage, discipline, and other virtues.
- 3. From courage to liberty** – As a result of the courageous fight, the foe is vanquished and liberty and greater justice emerges. At this point a civilization comes forth, rooted in

its greatest ideals. Many who led the battle are still alive, and the legacy of those who are not is still fresh. Heroism and the virtues that brought about liberty are still esteemed. The ideals that were struggled for during the years in the crucible are still largely agreed upon.

4. **From liberty to abundance** – Liberty ushers in greater prosperity, because a civilization is still functioning with the virtues of sacrifice and hard work. But then comes the first danger: abundance. Things that are in too great an abundance tend to weigh us down and take on a life of their own. At the same time, the struggles that engender wisdom and steel the soul to proper discipline and priorities move to the background. Jesus said that man's life does not consist in his possessions. But just try to tell that to people in a culture that starts to experience abundance. Such a culture is living on the fumes of earlier sacrifices; its people become less and less willing to make such sacrifices. Ideals diminish in importance and abundance weighs down the souls of the citizens. The sacrifices, discipline, and virtues responsible for the thriving of the civilization are increasingly remote from the collective conscience; the enjoyment of their fruits becomes the focus.

5. **From abundance to complacency** – To be complacent means to be self-satisfied and increasingly unaware of serious trends that undermine health and the ability to thrive. Everything *looks* fine, so it must *be* fine. Yet foundations, resources, infrastructures, and necessary virtues are all crumbling. As virtues, disciplines, and ideals become ever more remote, those who raise alarms are labeled by the complacent as “killjoys” and considered extreme, harsh, or judgmental.

6. **From complacency to apathy** – The word apathy comes from the Greek and refers to a lack of interest in, or passion for, the things that once animated and inspired. Due to the complacency of the previous stage, the growing lack of attention to disturbing trends advances to outright dismissal. Many seldom think or care about the sacrifices of previous generations and lose a sense that they must work for and contribute to the common good. “Civilization” suffers the serious blow of being replaced by personalization and privatization in growing degrees. Working and sacrificing for others becomes more remote. Growing numbers becoming increasingly willing to live on the carcass of previous sacrifices. They park on someone else's dime, but will not fill the parking meter themselves. Hard work and self-discipline continue to erode.

7. **From apathy to dependence** – Increasing numbers of people lack the virtues and zeal necessary to work and contribute. The suffering and the sacrifices that built the culture are now a distant memory. As discipline and work increasingly seem “too hard,” dependence grows. The collective culture now tips in the direction of dependence. Suffering of any sort seems intolerable. But virtue is not seen as the solution. Having lived on the sacrifices of others for years, the civilization now insists that “others” must solve their woes. This ushers in growing demands for governmental, collective solutions. This in turn deepens dependence, as solutions move from personal virtue and local, family-based sacrifices to centralized ones.

8. **From dependence back to bondage** – As dependence increases, so does centralized power. Dependent people tend to become increasingly dysfunctional and desperate. Seeking a savior, they look to strong central leadership. But centralized power corrupts, and tends to usher in increasing intrusion by centralized power. Injustice and intrusion multiplies. But those in bondage know of no other solutions. Family and personal virtue (essential ingredients for any civilization) are now effectively replaced by an increasingly dark and despotic centralized control, hungry for more and more power. In this way, the civilization is gradually ended, because people in bondage no longer have the virtues necessary to fight.

Another possibility is that a more powerful nation or group is able to enter, by invasion or replacement, and destroy the final vestiges of a decadent civilization and replace it with their own culture.

Either way, it's back to crucible, until suffering and conflict bring about enough of the wisdom, virtue, and courage necessary to begin a new civilization that will rise from the ashes.

Thus are the stages of civilizations. *Sic transit gloria mundi.* The Church has witnessed a lot of this in just the brief two millennia of her time. In addition to civilizations, nations have come and gone quite frequently over the years. Few nations have lasted longer than 200 years. Civilizations are harder to define with exact years, but at the beginning of the New Covenant, Rome was already in decline. In the Church's future would be other large nations and empires in the West: the "Holy" Roman Empire, various colonial powers, the Spanish, the Portuguese, and the French. It was once said that "The sun never sets on the British Empire." Now it does. As the West began a long decline, Napoleon made his move. Later, Hitler strove to build a German empire. Then came the USSR. And prior to all this, in the Old Testament period, there had been the Kingdom of David, to be succeeded by Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

The only true ark of safety is the Church, who received her promise of indefectibility from the Lord (Matt 16:18). But the Church, too, is always in need of reform and will have much to suffer. Yet she alone will survive this changing world, because she is the Bride of Christ and also His Body.

These are hard days, but perspective can help. It is hard to deny that we are living at the end of an era. It is painful because something we love is dying. But from death comes forth new life. Only the Lord knows the next stage and long this interregnum will be. Look to Him. Go ahead and vote, but put not your trust in princes (Ps 146:3). God will preserve His people, as He did in the Old Covenant. He will preserve those of us who are now joined to Him in the New Covenant. Find your place in the ark, ever ancient and yet new.

This video of psalm 121 is sung in an ancient language and manner, but its message is still current:

I lift mine eyes to the Mountains from whence cometh my help (Psalm 121).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2rusJaXcrc>