Church History, Lesson 4:
The Ancient Church, Part 3:
The Age of the Christian Roman Empire (313 – 590)

8. Church-State relations

   a. Up until 313, Christianity had been a persecuted minority, with the worst persecutions coming around 300 under the reign of Diocletian (284 – 305).

   b. Constantine (274 – 337)

      i. Battle of Milvian Bridge (312): In a dream he saw a cross in the sky with the words, "In this sign conquer." This convinced him to advance upon his enemy, Maxentius. He won the battle, rising to power as the Emperor. Constantine attributed his victory to God. "In the long view, Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge was much more important for the history of Christianity than for the history of Rome."[18]

      ii. Constantine moved the capital city to a city in the East (330). It was originally called Byzantium. But Constantine changed the name to Constantinople. In 1930, Turks changed the name to Istanbul. With this move to Constantinople, it further divided the East and West.

      iii. Edict of Milan (313): Christianity, though it did not become the state religion, did receive full legal status.

   c. Theodosius I (379 – 395): in 391 Christianity become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

   d. Ambrose, bishop of Milan (ca. 340 – 397)

      i. Christian provincial governor in north Italy.

      ii. Became bishop of Milan in 374.

      iii. Magnificent preacher, whose sermons influenced Augustine.

      iv. Outspoken on church-state relations. "The emperor is in the church, not above it."

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[18] Noll, *Turning Points*, 50.

v. Opposed Theodosius on the Thessalonica massacre. Ambrose refused Theodosius Communion until he confessed his sin. Thus, the bishop had the power of excommunication, which it would wield for centuries to follow.

e. Main question: what is the relationship between the church and state? Advantages and disadvantages for the Christian Roman Empire:

   i. Advantages:

      1. persecution ended for Christians;

      2. Christianity spread more easily;

      3. Christian morals were promoted in society (e.g., just treatment of slaves, gladiatorial shows were eliminated, legislations became more just, etc.).

   ii. Disadvantages:

      1. government intruded into spiritual and theological matters (e.g., the Council of Nicaea, see below);

      2. many people "came to faith" for political reasons;

      3. persecution of non-Christians (e.g., the Thessalonian massacre, see above).

f. The decisions of Constantine and Theodosius marked the birth of the Christian Roman Empire, later called Christendom. Speaking of the impact Constantine's "conversion" and rule had on Christianity, González writes:

   That the impact was such that it has even been suggested that throughout most of its history the church has lived in its *Constantinian era*, and that even now, in the twenty-first century, we are going through crises connected with the end of that long era. . . . Constantine's religious policies had such enormous effect on the course of Christianity that all of [from the Reformation up to the present day] may be seen as a series of reactions and adjustments in response to those policies.[19]

9. Church controversies and councils

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[19] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, rev and updated (New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 2010), 131 (italics in original).

a. Overview

    i. During 313 to 451 several theological controversies result in several councils attempting to define and defend orthodoxy.

    ii. The reason these controversies didn't occur during the age of Catholic Christianity (70 – 313) is because persecution forced the church to be a united front, clinging to Christ and the Scriptures.

    iii. There were seven councils that were representative of the entire ("ecumenical") church (East and West). See Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 28, for a summary of these councils. (Note: the Eastern Church considers only these seven councils as binding.)

b. Donatism

    i. Schismatics that believed the "lapsed" shouldn't be allowed back in the church.

    ii. Donatus didn't accept the authority of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage because he was appointed by a bishop who became a traitor ("lapsed") during the Diocletian persecution.

    iii. Constantine ruled against Donatus.

    iv. Another council of bishops in Arles in 314 ruled against Donatus. They argued that the validity of the sacrament (in this case ordination) was not dependent on the moral standing of the minister. Thus, implicitly, the bishop became the channel in which God's grace flowed. This became more pronounced many years later by the Roman Catholic Church.

c. Trinity controversies

    i. Arianism (Subordinationism)

        1. The debate

            a. Arius (ca. 250 – 336): believed that Christ was the first created being; that Christ was of different (*heteros*) essence from the Father; Christ was subordinate to the Father.

   b. Athanasius (ca. 296 – 373): insisted that Christ was coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial with the Father.

  2. The resolution

   a. Council of Nicaea (325)

    i. Constantine called for the council because a Christianity divided could not help keep a crumbling empire together. He presided over the first session.

    ii. The council drafted the original form of the Nicene Creed (not its final form that we have today).

    iii. The council declared Son *homoousios* (coequal, consubstantial, and coeternal) with the Father.

    iv. Also opposed the "Semi-Arianism" position which said Christ was "of similar *(homoiousios)* essence" with the Father.

    v. Nicaea did not fully settle the matter so another council convened.

   b. Council of Constantinople (381)

    i. Theodosius called for the council.

    ii. Revised the Nicene Creed and re-affirmed and extended the teaching at Nicaea.

    iii. Also affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit over against Macedonianism (Pneumatomachism).
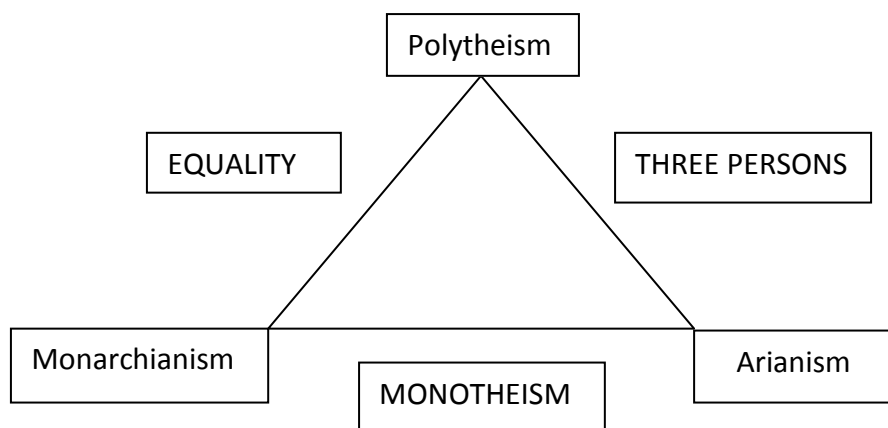
 ii. Monarchianism

  1. Dynamic Monarchianism (Adoptionism)

   a. Taught that Jesus became Christ at his baptism, was adopted by the Father after his death. Stressing the unity of God.

   b. Condemned finally at the Council of Constantinople (381).

2. Modalistic Monarchianism (Sabellianism, Modalism, Patripassionism)

    a. One God reveals himself in three different ways, or modes, at different times. Stressing, again, the unity of God.

    b. Condemned finally at the Council of Constantinople (381).

iii. Diagram[20]

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                    ┌─────────────┐
                    │  Polytheism │
                    └─────────────┘
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  ┌──────────────┐      /     \      ┌────────────────┐
  │   EQUALITY   │     /       \     │  THREE PERSONS │
  └──────────────┘    /         \    └────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────┐/            \┌─────────────────┐
│  Monarchianism   │    ┌──────────┐│    Arianism     │
└──────────────────┘    │MONOTHEISM│└─────────────────┘
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d. Christ controversies

    i. Apollinarianism

        1. Taught that Christ had no human spirit but the Logos replaced it. Thus, over-emphasized the divine nature of Christ.

        2. Condemned at the Council of Constantinople (381).

    ii. Nestorianism

        1. The Logos indwelt the person of Jesus, making him a God-bearing man rather than the God-man. Thus, it was a mechanical and not an organic union of the two natures of Christ. Emphasized the human nature of Christ.

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[20] Diagram adapted from: James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1998), 30.

        2. Council of Ephesus (431) declared Nestorianism heretical.

   iii. Eutychianism (later revived as Monophysitism)[21]

        1. The divine nature absorbed the human nature of Christ, thus emphasizing the divine nature of Christ.

        2. Condemned at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Declared Christ's two natures "unmixed, unchanged, undivided, and inseparable."

   iv. Monothelitism

        1. Christ had no human will just the one divine will.

        2. Council of Constantinople (680 – 81) asserted that Christ had two wills in harmonious unity.

e. Pelagian controversy

   i. The debate

        1. Pelagius (ca. 360 – ca. 420): believed that man is born free as Adam. Man is essentially good, capable of doing what is necessary for salvation. He only sins because he follows bad examples, not because he has original sin. Christ came, therefore, to set a good example.

        2. Augustine (354 – 430): man is completely dead in sin and salvation is totally by the grace of God which is given to the elect.

           a. Important writings: *Confessions, The City of God, The Trinity*.

           b. Was converted in Milan in 386 after a period of intense struggle with lust.

           c. Was named bishop of Hippo in 395.

           d. In addition to opposing Pelagians, he also opposed Donatists (see above) and Manichaens (see Lesson 3).

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[21] Monophysites still exist today in the Coptic churches of Egypt, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Turkey, and Russia.

    e. A note about Augustine: Everybody loves Augustine. Protestants generally embrace his views of sin and salvation; Roman Catholics embrace his views of the church.

  ii. The outcome

    1. Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431).

    2. However, the church did not embrace Augustinianism.

    3. John Cassian (ca. 360 – 435) argued that the grace of God and the will of man must work together in salvation. This was called "Semi-Pelagianism." This was condemned at the Synod of Orange in 529.

    4. Finally, a "Semi-Augustinianism" view was embraced that said that God comes to all, enabling a person to choose and perform what is necessary for salvation.

f. The need for creeds

    When the Council [of Nicaea] entered on the examination of the subject [of Arius's view of the divinity of Christ], it was found extremely difficult to obtain from Arius any satisfactory explanation of his views. He was not only as ready as the most orthodox divine present to profess that he believed the Bible; but he also declared himself willing to adopt, as his own, all the language of the Scriptures, in detail, concerning the person and character of the blessed Redeemer. But when the member of the Council wished to ascertain in what sense he understood this language, he discovered a disposition to evade and equivocate, and actually, for a considerable time, baffled the attempts of the most ingenious of the orthodox to specify his errors, and to bring them to light. He declared that he was perfectly willing to employ the popular language on the subject in controversy; and wished to have it believed that he differed very little from the body of the church. Accordingly the orthodox went over the various titles of Christ plainly expressive of divinity, such as "God"—"the true God", the "express image of God", etc.—to every one of which Arius and his followers most readily subscribed—claiming a right, however, to put their own construction on the scriptural titles in question. After employing much time and ingenuity in vain, in endeavoring to drag this artful thief from his lurking places, and to obtain from him an explanation of his views, the Council found it would be impossible to accomplish their object as long as they permitted him to entrench himself behind a mere general profession of belief in the Bible. They, therefore, did what common sense, as well as the Word of God, had taught the church to do in all preceding times, and what alone can enable her to detect the artful advocate of error. They expressed, in their own language, what they supposed to be the doctrine of Scripture concerning the divinity of the Savior; in other words, they drew up a Confession of Faith on this subject, which they called upon Arius

and his disciples to subscribe. This the heretics refused: and were thus virtually brought to the acknowledgement that they did not understand the Scriptures as the rest of the Council understood them, and, of course, that the charge against them was correct.[22]

10. Church organization and practice

    a. Church order: the rise of the papacy

        i. Historical development

            1. By the time of the Council of Nicaea (325) "archbishops" were acknowledged for their location in major populated cities.

            2. By the time of the Council of Constantinople (381) special honor was given to five "patriarchs": Rome (only patriarch in the West), Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.

            3. Leo I (ca. 400 – 461): became bishop of Rome and claimed authority over the whole church on the basis of his succession from Peter (cf. Matt 16:17-19).

            4. At the council of Chalcedon in 451 the bishop of Constantinople was given authority equal to that of the bishop of Rome. Thus, the church had two figured heads: one in the East and one in the West, which further divided the church into East and West.

        ii. Factors contributing to the supremacy of the bishop of Rome

            1. Theological: apostolic succession based on Matt 16:17-19.

            2. Religious:

                a. The Latin-peaking West was able to cut through theological problems better than the Greek-speaking East because Latin was not as precise of a language as Greek.

                b. Many missionaries went out from Rome and had better success than in the East.

            3. Geographical:

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[22] Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions* (reprinted A Press, 1987), 33-35; quoted in: Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 London Baptist Confession*, 3d. ed (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2005), 11-12.

   a. Rome was the place where Peter and Paul where supposedly martyred.

   b. Rome was the imperial capital with the largest church and largest city population. The church was also the wealthiest in Rome.

   c. Rome was the only city with a bishop in the West.

  4. Leadership: Rome had great leaders, Leo I and Gregory I (see Lesson 5).

  5. Political:

   a. With the shift of the political throne to Constantinople by Constantine, this left the bishop of Rome the most powerful person in Rome.

   b. Other major cities like Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem were eventually sacked by Islam.

b. Monasticism

 i. Causes

  1. After the period of persecutions, the way to serve Christ was not to suffer at the hands of enemies but to suffer at the hands of self in removal of life from earthly pleasure. This was the case because Christianity was heavily influenced by Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism which considered the spirit good and flesh evil.

  2. Christians retreated to monasteries as a reaction against the corruption of pagan influences from the state and the broader world that were creeping into the church.

 ii. Historical development

  1. Anthony (ca. 250 – 355), considered the first monk, took Christ's words in Matt 19:21 to heart: "Go, sell our possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At age 20 he took of a life of solitude in a tomb.

2. Pachomius (ca. 290 – ca. 346) in 320 instituted the first Christian monastery, where monks would live together and not in solitude.

3. Eventually the monasteries became places of scholarship. Jerome (ca. 345 – 420) translated the Bible into Latin, known as the Latin Vulgate, the authorized version of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church until recent years.

4. Anthanasius first introduced monasticism in the West when he was exiled for his orthodox view of Christ. He helped monasticism spread with his biography on the *Life of Saint Anthony*.

5. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480 – 543) founded the Monte Cassino (the most famous monastery in Europe) where he wrote the Benedictine Rule.

6. By the fifth and sixth centuries, monasticism was so large that every leader in the church was either a monk or was closely linked to monasticism in some form.[23]

   iii. Evaluation

1. Pros:

   a. Protection against warfare; refuge for the needy and sick.

   b. Provided a place for study and scholarship, especially during the Dark Ages (500 – 1000), including the copying of sacred texts.

2. Cons:

   a. Unbiblical view of sin nature and humanity. "You can take the man out of the world, but you can't take the world out of the man."

   b. Withdrawal from society contradicts biblical commands to be a light and witness in the world. Evaluating monasticism, Schaff concludes, "Without love to God and charity to man, the severest self-punishment and the

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[23] Shelley, *Church History In Plain Language*, 129.

utmost abandonment of the world are worthless before God."[24]

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[24] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1910), 163.