

The Controversies of the Imperial Church

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – a discussion of some of the controversial issues of the Imperial Church
2. aim – to cause us to consider what happens when the church becomes complacent in easy times

b. outline

1. The Monastic Movement
2. The Donatist Schism
3. The Arian Controversy

c. overview

1. **note:** this series is casting a **wide net** – many specific issues and details will be passed over
 - a. the goal is to give you a “feel” for the church as it passes through time
 - b. **e.g.** there are a number of individuals worth discussing re: monasticism, but they will not be
2. our **timeline**
 - a. the conversion of Constantine has done away (mostly!) with persecution, and Christianity has become the *de facto* standard of religion in the Roman empire
 - b. many have “embraced” Christianity in order to be a “part” of the life of the empire, and the church has enjoyed a newfound period of prosperity and peace
 - c. however, it is this very reality that has introduced *significant* issues, and we will look at some ...

I. The Monastic Movement

Content

a. the definition of the movement

1. monk (*monachos*) = solitary; to escape from ordinary life to a place of meditation and discipline
2. monasticism = a fourth-century movement of people away from the church into the Egyptian desert
 - a. to escape the excesses of the now-culturally embraced church
 - b. to pursue intellectual pursuit away from the low-church standards of the imperial church
 - c. to avoid the temptations that permeated normal life amongst other people (even Christians)
 - d. to escape the demands of the state into daily living (**i.e.** taxation)
 - e. to provide a *communal* life of sharing possessions and worldly goods (**i.e.** as in **Acts 2**)
 - f. to chart a life of discipline and *ascetism*; finding holiness in a world where holiness is lost
 1. including **celibacy** and **nunnery**

b. the forms of the movement

1. included three (3) forms: solitary, communal (cenobitic), hierachal
 - a. solitary = individuals who moved away from the population centers to pursue a solitary life of discipline and ascetism – having little contact with others as a way to foment holiness
 - b. communal (cenobitic) = communes of “solitary” individuals that worked together in an ascetic life
 1. breaking away from the population centers and the “popular” church to seek discipline together
 - c. hierachal = the “effects” of the monastic life being embraced by members of the hierarchy itself
 1. bishops adopting the ideals of celibacy, asceticism, and discipline within the clergy itself

c. the importance of the movement

1. the various forms of monasticism shared a common thread: the ideal Christian life was one of personal poverty and sharing of goods
 - a. over against the general church, which no longer needed to *think* in that way, being well-accepted in society and enjoying the fruits of a prosperity alongside everyone else
 - b. **application:** in some ways, the modern American Church is like the Imperial Church – the relative “peace” surrounding the church has made her adherents *much* less drawn to *holiness*
 1. **IOW:** how do we respond *now* to a church where the primary appeal is to personal *happiness*?
 2. **e.g.** the *Benedict Option* and *Live Not by Lies* by Rod Dreher

II. The Donatist Schism

Content

a. the basis of the schism

1. instead of *withdrawing* from the imperial church, some declared it *corrupt*, and splintered off
2. the question of “the lapsed” reared its head again: what do we do with those who *lapse* in their faith during a time of persecution and want to return to the church now that persecution has stopped?
 - a. in N Africa, persecution had been particularly strong, and the issue once again appeared
 - b. this included *bishops* who had handed over *Scripture* to the Romans to avert persecution
 - c. a new **rigor** seemed to be needed by the *confessors* in readmitting the *lapsed*
 - d. particularly, bishops who had lapsed (sometimes referred to as *traditores* [traitors])

b. the history of the schism

1. the movement derived its name from a *rival* bishop elected in Carthage (N Africa) – **Donatus**
 - a. the bishopric was originally given to Caecilian (but he was not popular amongst the **rigorists**)
 - b. so, a rival bishop was appointed (Majorinus), but he died and Donatus replaced him
 - c. Constantine eventually named Caecilian as the true bishop
 1. and, only those who were in communion with Caecilian could receive the “gifts” of the emperor (*i.e.* freedom from taxation, etc.)
 - d. so, the Donatists “split away” over a number of specific issues with the church under Caecilian:
 1. they considered the consecration of a bishop by a *traditor* (*i.e.* Caecilian) to be invalid (*i.e.* one of Caecilian’s appointers had been a *traditor* himself)
 2. they considered the church to be *pure* and *holy*; the holiness of individual members determining the holiness of the church itself (an early form of **perfectionism**)

c. the results of the schism

1. the Donatists were labeled as *heretics* by the church-at-large because:
 - a. since no person is *sinless*, no act performed by an elder or bishop could ever be perfect
 1. the authority of a person is derived from the *office*, not his own personal holiness
 - b. since the church *will* have both saved and unsaved in it (*i.e.* the wheat and the tares), the judgment of the church regarding its own holiness must be left up to God
2. ultimately, the Donatists became the *catalyst* for Augustine’s treatises on the doctrine of the church, the centrality and importance of the sacraments, and Just War Theory
3. **application:** when will it be necessary to “split” away from a “movement” that has lost her way and has abandoned the fundamentals of the faith (*i.e.* see **Jude**)?

III. The Arian Controversy

Content

a. the beginnings of the controversy

1. the controversy began in Alexandria (even before Constantine became the single emperor)
2. the beginnings of the controversy were over the concept of the *Logos*:
 - a. largely an issue in the E (Greek-speaking church); in the W, the issue was largely moot
 - b. particularly as expressed by Jerome and Origen:
 1. that the Supreme Being was *immutable* (unchangeable) and *impassable* (unchanging)
 2. but, the creation was constantly changing and being changed
 3. however, the *Logos* (or Reason of God) was personal and capable of relationship
 4. so, the *Logos* was that aspect of God which could communicate and relate with humans
 - c. but, what was this *Logos*, and how did it “come into being” in Jesus Christ?
 1. although *Trinitarian* Christianity had existed from the foundations of the church, this was the first *real* attack upon it from *inside* the church
 2. strangely, it was an attempt to *defend* orthodoxy against outside interpretations of Christian thinking (*i.e.* polytheism), but it swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction

b. the substance of the controversy

- a. Alexander (the bishop) insisted that the *Logos* was *coeternal* with God
- b. Arius (a presbyter) insisted that the *Logos* was *not* eternal, but *created* (the first-born)
 1. **his motto:** “there was when He was not” (*i.e.* there was a “time” when the Son was not)
- c. both agreed that Jesus *pre-existed* his own Incarnation, but Arius insisted he was *created* by the Father in eternity past (Arius attacked the position as *polytheistic*; *i.e.* of embracing “two” Gods)

- d. both agreed that Jesus had secured a salvation by entering into human history, but Arius insisted that Jesus' obedience was *meaningless* if he was divine

c. the resolution of the controversy (the Council of Nicea, 325)

1. it all came to a head when Alexander deposed Arius, who began appealing to other bishops
 - a. ultimately, Constantine intervened and called the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea (325; Iznik)
2. the Council first dealt with a number of issues relating to the new Imperial Church
 - a. standard procedures for the readmission of the lapsed
 - b. standard procedures for the election and ordination of presbyters and bishops
 - c. the establishment of the "order of precedence" of the various episcopal sees
 - d. regulations regarding the transfer of leaders from one city to another
3. the Council then dealt with the Arian controversy from Alexandria
 - a. Arius (not a bishop) and his small group was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia
 - b. Alexander represented the small group opposed to Arius' position
 1. his deacon, Athanasius, could not attend (but became the champion of Nicene orthodoxy)
 - c. ironically, it was the *exposition* of the Arian position by Eusebius that fueled their response
 1. most of the bishops considered it a "localized" squabble and were looking for a compromise
 2. but, Eusebius' claim that Christ was but a "mere creature" provoked cries of heresy
 - d. at first, they tried to build a case against Arianism from Scripture, but soon realized the difficulty
 1. the Arians had "answers" to all of their proof-texts
 - e. so, the council decided to develop a *creed*, which would clearly state the nature of Jesus
"and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, through whom all things were made."
 - f. most of the bishops signed the new creed (with the Arians excepting)
 1. those who refused were declared heretics and deposed
 2. Constantine added a *civil sentence* and banished the deposed bishops from their cities

d. the results of the controversy

1. Arianism did not go away after Nicea, but *grew*, and this spread was largely *political* in nature
 - a. Eusebius was distantly related to Constantine, and eventually convinced Constantine to change his position regarding the Arians (he also baptized him on his deathbed)
 - b. after Constantine's death, a series of "political intrigues" and civil wars eventually led to a place where the whole world "woke to discover it was Arian"
 - c. **note:** a future lesson will deal with Athanasius and the recovery of biblical Trinitarianism
2. **application:** Arianism is alive and well today (in the Jehovah's Witnesses and amongst the Mormons)
 - a. there will *always* be heretical teachings – Christians must be on-guard against them
 - b. there will *not always* be clear and easy solutions for dealing with such matters
 - c. there will *always* be a need for Christians to *understand* what others believe
 - d. there will *always* be a need for Christians to *defend* the truth both biblically and systematically