

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#8. Summary of The Church in the Seventh Century

The church would face two tremendous challenges in the 7th century. The first would rise from the inside, the other from the outside.

The first challenge is relatively easy to understand and evaluate - it was the rise of Islam under Mohammed. He was born in the late 6th century, and spent the early part of his life as a trader which carried him to differing locales. Reports are that Mohammed suffered from some type of epilepsy and perhaps other various illnesses, and was married to an older woman who was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. As he travelled, he came into contact with Jews and Christians, and listened to their teachings on various theological topics. The consensus of church historians is that Christian groups with which Mohammed interacted were fringe groups - unorthodox, and probably gnostic groups at best. So, we are certain that his exposure to Christianity was from deeply flawed sources.

As the years progressed, Mohammed claimed to experience various visions. One of which indicated the Angel Gabriel was calling him to be a prophet of God. Though his claim is rejected by orthodox Christians, Mohammed responded to the vision and began to teach what we know today as the tenets of Islam.

He had only a few followers in Mecca, but in 622 he went to Medina where large numbers began to follow him. It is estimated that within ten years he had of following of perhaps 50,000 converts. As the end of the century approached, Islam began to sweep through the Middle East. In eighty years, the spiritual landscape of North Africa and the Middle East had

changed. The method of Islam was absolute brutality, but the advance of the new religion was stopped in Spain. Before the rise of Islam was contained, half of the Roman Empire was conquered, and Christian communities of the Holy Land and North Africa were reduced to zones of oppressive occupation and persecution, or were destroyed outright.

Unlike Christianity, Islam teaches that salvation does not come from the substitutionary work of Jesus, but from self-willed submission to Allah (the name of the god of Islam).

The other problem was what many historians see as corruption within the established church in Rome. Gregory the Great became the Bishop of Rome. Though he was a man of considerable talent, his approach to Christianity appeared to be based on a political model rather than a spiritual one. His goal, it seems, was to galvanize Christianity into a political force, not just a spiritual one. A careful review of the period leads me to believe that Gregory's Christianity was that described by Paul to Timothy - "a form of Godliness, but devoid of (life-changing) power" (2 Timothy 3:5). Gregory's leadership provided growth and organization, but generally produced a nominal Christianity with which the Church continues to struggle, even to this day.

Why do we reject Islam, though Mohammed claimed to receive direction from God? For two basic reasons, the teaching of Islam is diametrically opposed to the teaching of Christianity in almost every matter. Paul told the Galatians that anyone who presents a gospel that contradicts the teaching of the early church was to be considered cursed, even if an angel seemed to be the source of the supposed revelation (Galatians 1:6-9).

Paul also warned that false teaching would pull the church away from its mission, and that it could arise from within church leadership itself (see Acts 20:29-31). Though we should be slow to criticize our brothers and sisters, at the very least, Gregory led the church down a path from which she has still not fully recovered.