

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

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The Age of The Christian Roman Empire 312-590 AD

#30. Blending Christianity and Rome 284-390 AD

There are two noteworthy trends in this era of Church history.

There is the idea of the Alexandrian Theologians and their influence upon evangelism and expressions of faith. But first, let's consider the rise of political power within the Church. This is the story of how Rome was brought to her knees, literally.

We are now introduced to Emperor Constantine. Under his rule, the Church moved from hiding and persecution into favor and prosperity. Within 100 years, the Church moved from severe persecution to the preferred religion of the Empire. As we shall see, some saw this era as the victory of the Church over the Empire. Others believed the pagan culture had successfully captured the Church.

In 284, Emperor Diocletian (ruled from 284 until 305) initiated the most horrendous of all the Roman persecutions of the Church. Diocletian ruled effectively for 18 years, and did an outstanding job of restructuring the failing Empire. He was certainly a pagan, and simply ignored Christianity until the 19th year of his reign. We aren't sure of the reason why he unleashed such fury against the people of God. Indeed, his wife and daughter considered themselves Christians, and churches enjoyed freedom under his rule. Then, in 302, his army was purged of Christians, church buildings were destroyed, Christian worship was prohibited, and pastors were imprisoned, tortured, or killed. Galerius, the successor of Diocletian, stopped the killing, but by then a great dissension had spread throughout the population in general and the armies in particular. The massacre had been unpopular with Roman citizenry, and on October 12, 312, a showdown between Maxentius (the son of Galerius) and Constantine occurred on the Milvian Bridge, just outside of Rome.

In a dream, Constantine saw a cross in the sky, and the words "In this sign conquer."

Scholars still debate whether Constantine's conversion was truly spiritual or merely political. He surely wasn't perfect, but considerable evidences support the idea of genuine conversion. It is my opinion that Constantine was a true Christian, though he certainly made mistakes that stand in glaring contradiction of true faith.

Along with changes in the law, Constantine provided a new city for Christianity—the City of Constantinople, previously known as Byzantium. The city embraced the new name for 1600 years until being renamed Istanbul in 1930.

The Church's rise to power came with great cost. Many historians believe that in gaining imperial favor, she lost divine anointing. By 380, non-Christians were being marginalized by Christian authorities. The new emperor, Theodosius, made Christianity a matter of law. The result was the dilution of the Church, since now membership was required by law. No genuine profession of faith was necessary for membership, and in many cases the idea of Christianity was nothing more than membership in a club.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, stood against the casualness of such Christianity and challenged the Emperor Theodosius to publicly repent for his sins. Ambrose refused to grant communion to Theodosius until such repentance occurred. Though months passed, the Emperor eventually acquiesced. The idea of excommunication was not new. Paul had counseled against fellowshiping with heretics and hypocrites, but in the view of many, the idea was about to become weaponized by the imperial church.

As we study the following decades we will see the influence of the Alexandrian Theologians, and witness the battle over the nature of Christ and the Trinity.

Jerome, a monk who translated the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin, was among the first to express concern over the propensity of the Church to embrace pagan culture. His was a leading voice in the call to the Church to return to her purity.

The Church has always struggled to balance the ideas of detachment from society with cultural involvement and understanding. There is a fine line between “come out of Babylon,” and “be a light in a dark place.”

Tertullian had scorned the Church for her compromise. When the Church tried to make the Gospel more palatable by embracing cultural relevance, it was Tertullian who declared, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” He had seen the life and death struggle of the Church with Gnosticism, and knew that “friendship with the world is to be an enemy toward God.”

In Alexandria, a school led by Clement and Origen united Biblical theology with a framework of secular philosophy. The intent was not intentional compromise, but the creation of a tool to help pagans better understand the claims of Christ and the Gospel message. During the third century, the influence of Clement and Origen grew as many in the Church accused them of compromise. Clement felt that orthodox teaching needed strengthening—not of its content, but of its presentation. In other words, Greek thinking was being united with Christian thought. He is the father of what is called “allegorical interpretation” of Scripture. In this system, there is first of all the literal meaning, then the moral application, and finally the spiritual sense. Basically the idea is that we begin with the clear, literal meaning of Scripture. We then make moral applications that are drawn from the text. Finally, there may be further applications that usually have to do with the revelation of spiritual mysteries. Other translators feel that only the first two applications are legitimate. Clement, then Origen, tried to stretch the Early Church to understand the Scripture in a modern world while remaining true to its ancient roots.

While not without errors and dangers, Origen and Clement helped the Church reach into society by their approach to Scripture. Origen would become known for espousing universalism—the idea that all moral creatures, even the devil, would eventually be reconciled to God. But many historians believe this was Origen taking his third level of interpretation too far. “That doctrine, above all others, caused him no end of trouble. Origen’s error lay in turning a dream into a doctrine. Origen simply went too far.

He proposed as a doctrine what we can only retain as a desire.” (Bruce Shelley - pp. 91-92 of Church History in Plain Language).

Sincere Christians disagree as to whether Clement and Origen went too far in their attempts to accommodate unbelievers. The fear is always that the love of the worldly system can contaminate sound doctrine.

While they did show that the best of classical culture could find a home within Christian living, modern Christians remain divided over whether such charity is productive or polluting.

This set the stage for the clarification of two vital doctrines: the nature of Christ and the nature of the Trinity.

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