

Life Notes

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

Pastor Stephen Chitty

The Age of The Christian Roman Empire 312-590 AD

#31. The Influence of the Alexandrian Thinkers

Let's go a little deeper into the idea of the Alexandrian thinkers.

Jerome of Bethlehem is best known for his translation of the Scriptures into Latin (The Vulgate, meaning "common"). He also wrote many commentaries and books that helped strengthen Christianity, especially among the common folk. Once during the earlier years of his Christian formation, this 27 year old Monk had a dream that he was standing before the judgment seat of God. According to Jerome, the verdict was that *"You are not a Christian, but a Ciceronian."*

This moment of crisis in St. Jerome's faith was typical of this period in church history. He loved the Scriptures, but also loved the work of classical authors, like Cicero. As long as Christianity was within the realm of Judaism, the matter of conversion was simply a matter of whether or not Jesus was Messiah. The earliest Christians shared a fairly uniform cultural and intellectual background. As the Gospel spread, evangelism efforts faced a myriad of philosophical paradigms that made sharing the gospel more complex. The question arose over whether the Church was to be "culturally relevant" or a "counter-culture" that opposed the system of the world.

To incorporate secular systems and philosophies was thought by some to be a slippery slope that would result in a compromised message and contaminated morals. On the other hand, we see Paul somewhat altering his approach to evangelism when he was in Athens. In fact, the answer is probably a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" proposition. The debate has resurfaced in western Christianity, largely as a by-product of the Church Growth

Movement. Traditionalists believe in anchoring to the idea of being counter-culture, while proponents of the CGM hold loosely to past approaches and sometimes do not embrace the importance of orthodoxy (in worst-case scenarios). Both views can be used by God, and both views can be guilty of hindering the work of God. Both views have merit, and each generation must decide what it means to be "in the world, but not of it" (John 17:16-18).

Bruce Shelley sums it up well: *"This suggests that in God's plan, the church feels the rhythm of detachment and involvement: detachment because the gospel and eternal life are not from men but from God, yet involvement because God sends the church into the world to shine as light and lead men to the truth. This means struggle, because Christians often differ with each other over the boundaries of withdrawal and engagement. Witness to some is compromise to others"*

Three primary names are associated with this era:

Tertullian of Carthage (a Berber from Tunisia; 155-220) was probably the most outspoken opponent of embracing elements of philosophy during this era. His famous declaration, *"What do Athens and Jerusalem have in common?"* was fueled by the conviction that secular philosophy was the breeding ground for heresy. His idea was rooted in faith alone - when a Christian believed, he needed to go no further than to believe. He wrote over 30 books, and though he was educated in the philosophical systems of Greece and Rome, he held the line for an embracing of Scripture alone (energized by the work of The Holy Spirit) as the basis for faith and understanding. Like many church fathers, he was controversial, but is considered by many to be the "Father of Western Theology."

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was just as controversial, but was somewhat successful in tying theology to philosophy.

Origen of Alexandria (184-253) was a student of Clement, and excelled in the defense of Christianity against pagan ideas of the time.

All three of these men were alternately vilified or praised, but each made substantial contributions to the formalization of church doctrine and theology in the Christian Roman Empire.

There are three essential lessons from the Alexandrian era: First, there may be value and wisdom in different approaches to evangelism, but all efforts must involve total fidelity to the Word of God. Second, no evangelistic effort can be successful without the anointing and convicting power of the Holy Spirit. Third, Christian brotherhood and love must not be sacrificed in the name of style and preferences.

¹ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History In Plain Language: Fourth Edition*, Thomas Nelson Publishers; page 85