

## Summary of Early Church History

When Christianity first emerged as a religion in the ancient world, it was viewed as a sect of Judaism, one that had loyalties to a man named Jesus. The earliest followers of Jesus continued to participate in Jewish life, including life in the synagogue and temple. The religious leaders were the first to question whether or not Jesus' followers were good Jews. They were, at best, sectarians and trouble makers. Furthermore, when Christians came into the synagogue they raised new questions that did not fit well with the received Tradition. In the end, the Jewish leaders of the First Century sought to distinguish traditional Judaism from this new, upstart community of believers.

The break between Christianity and Judaism emerged within a very short time of the Resurrection, and soon people such as Saul of Tarsus began to hunt down these religious "heretics." As long as Jews and Christians lived in a state of peaceful co-existence, the Roman government was willing to overlook their differences. However, when the Jews came to the Roman leaders and demanded that they do something to stop the Christians the state of relations between Jews and Christians became very different.

One of the highest values that any Roman emperor had was peace because with peace came stability. When the stability of the Empire was threatened, the Roman Emperors felt like they had to resort to extreme measures. As a result, while the Romans were willing to allow the Jews with whom they had a history, a form of religious autonomy, they chose not to do the same with the Christians. The Christians had no agreement with the State regarding Christian faith and practice, and as such they were soon labeled by Rome as "atheists," as seditionists, and as potential violators of the *Pax Romana*. These labels became the grounds for the persecution of Christians.

By the time this persecution began, the Apostles were an aging group of individuals. Something had to be done to see that those who had committed their lives to follow Jesus Christ were kept together. They would need a trustworthy leadership who could care for them and teach them what they had received from the Apostles who had lived with Jesus. These earliest Christian leaders, most of whom, had been appointed directly by the Apostles, became known as the Apostolic Fathers. They would keep order in the growing Christian community and see that the doctrine embraced by those that followed would be the same was what they had received.

Persecution was, for the most part, regional and unevenly applied. It wasn't really until the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century that persecution became something that was implemented empire wide. In either case, many Christians found it to be a difficult time. Among their earliest writers were the Christian apologists, who wedded philosophy and Christian faith in such a way as to present the Christian message to a broader audience. On the one hand there were the Jews. The Christian apologists who interacted with Judaism attempted to demonstrate that Christianity was the fulfillment of God's plan in Judaism, and that Jesus was the Jewish messiah. The Christian apologists who interacted with the Gentiles attempted to show how many earlier philosophers had been cryptic Christians or they had been moving in the direction of Christian faith when they spoke of or raised questions about the problem of evil, or invoked aspects of dualism, or when they talked about the unknowable God.

Through good apologetic arguments, the accounts of God's love, care, and goodness toward his people, and the testimonies of faithfulness of Christian Confessors and Martyrs, many people expressed faith in Jesus Christ and joined the Church. In spite of Rome's official position toward Christianity, many people even slaves in leading Roman households came to faith. When Constantine came to power in the early 4<sup>th</sup> Century, he came with the belief that the Christian God had willed it. In AD 313, Constantine and Licinius met in Milan where they issued an Edict of Toleration. This law gave Christians equal rights and equal protection under the law for the first time, and brought an end to the official persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor.

Constantine paved the way for the ascendancy of Christianity as the official religion of the empire when he threw his allegiance to the Christian God, developed prayers to be prayed in the military, and instructed his soldiers to baptize those that they conquered. It was he who called the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, where he hoped to work out a doctrinal statement that was acceptable to all Christians everywhere. With that behind him, the following year, AD 326, he declared the empire to be Christian. He also took the extraordinary step of moving the center of political power for the Empire, from Rome, eastward to Byzantium or Constantinople, now known as Istanbul, Turkey.

The commitment of Constantine and most of his successors to embrace Christianity, and to use it to support a new form of social accommodation not unlike the earlier Greek plan of "Hellenization," bringing a common faith and common standards throughout the Empire and its newly conquered lands, was intended to provide both peace and prosperity to the Empire. At the same time, it

dramatically changed the face of the Church. Some Christians viewed the wedding between Church and State as a good one that brought the Church within range of political power thereby allowing the Church to become heavily involved in the political process and the development of public policy. Other Christians viewed it as compromising the Church in the concerns of the State, allowing the State to become heavily involved in the concerns of the Church, thereby compromising the faith of the Church and manipulating the Church in service of agenda of the State.

Doctrinal differences during this time had to be weighed over against pragmatic politics. On the one hand, the Church was unified through a common creed (or Rule of Faith) and an allegiance of loyalty to a hierarchy that could be traced back, through direct succession, to the time of the Apostles. On the other hand, the Church developed several splinter groups or schisms.

In Asia Minor and in Egypt, Gnostic Christians had emerged, with new writings that some wanted to call Scripture. In Asia Minor and in North Africa, the Montanists emerged, suggesting that the Holy Spirit or Paraclete was now adding new teachings to the Christian tradition, and that the heavy emphasis upon hierarchy that was so aligned with the State had suppressed the voice of the Spirit among official Church leaders. In Egypt and North Africa, the Donatists and Circumcellions had risen, concerned about the permanent effects of persecution, and about the social welfare of the people in the region. Then there were the discussions, debates, and even disagreements over the nature of Christ, the Trinity, and the extent of the canon of Scripture that allowed Arian Christians and Nestorian Christians to emerge.

Some were also concerned about what it meant to take up the cross daily and follow Jesus. Their desire to follow Jesus through self denial, to embrace a monastic lifestyle, and to commit themselves to prayer and meditation was their way of living out the Great Commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27). Thus began the monastic movement, a movement that would contribute to the ongoing spirituality and practice of the Church as did the priestly role.

Although the Church survived the persecution of the State, it did not overcome all the enemies of the Empire. Invaders came from the North and the East, even as the Empire sought to expand its influence to the North and the West. People groups such as the Franks (a group coming from the region of the Netherlands, Belgium, northern Gaul and extending southward, the Vandals (a group originating in the

region of central and eastern Germany with a possible Slavic influence), the Goths (a group originating in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany, the Ostrogoths (literally, eastern Goths), the Persians (Iranians), and the Huns (a group built from political alliances that included Eurasian influences) put increasing pressure on the Empire, especially in the West. In AD 456, Rome fell to invasion, and the East became the undisputed political center of the Empire. On the other hand, the traditional view of the Bishop of Rome as the “first among equals” among the major Sees of the day, left the Church and especially the Bishop in Rome with considerable power.

When Justinian and his wife, Theodora came to power in Byzantium in AD 527, he attempted to heal earlier rifts with Rome. He set forth a doctrine of *symphonia* by which the Church came to be viewed as the spiritual arm of the State. The Emperor was responsible for issues of the State, that is, for all temporal issues. The Bishop was responsible for issues of the Church, that is, for all spiritual issues. Theoretically, neither was more powerful than the other for they governed mutually exclusive spheres. Theirs was to be a wedding of separate but equal powers communicating back and forth and through which together they would work for the common good of all humankind.

Because of continuing questions on the nature of Christology created by Arianism, the Nestorians, and the Monophysites, Justinian took a more or less mediating line. Officially, he agreed to support Rome’s insistence on the Chalcedonian definition. Unofficially, he held sympathies with the Monophysites and their spread in the eastern part of the Empire. Continuing questions about the nature of Christology as well as the Trinity would lead to confusion and other problems in the East. It is at this point that we stand at the line between the Patristic Era and the Middle Ages.

A remarkable figure of the period was Pope Gregory the Great (540 – 604; pope 590 – 604). Under him, the papacy began to emerge as the great political as well as spiritual power to dominate Western Europe for a thousand years.