Essential Church History

4

Leaven, Leaders and the Word

With persecution from without, and the challenge of heretical teaching and its consequent schisms from within, the Church had to consider what it could do. It was just at this time that the Church Fathers, as they are called, began their notable work. They were a remarkable group of men, both brilliant and devoted — Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and many others. They tackled the situation with determination. Some of their solutions however, as we saw in the last lesson, raised up grave problems for later ages.

Three solutions were decided upon to counter the proliferation of problems within the Church:

- ➲ **Ruling bishops** – City-bishops were installed according to the tradition of "apostolic succession," meaning that only the previous generation of leaders could ordain and install the next generation of leaders. This helped to curb the rise of heresy within the Church.

- ➲ **Creeds** – rules of faith were written and agreed upon by the city-bishops. The Apostle's Creed was one of the earliest example of this.

- ➲ **The New Testament Canon** – the city-bishops also met to determine which of the many Christian letters and documents in circulation were considered authoritative and apostolic, and thus to be included within the New Testament canon.

Each of these solutions was to have dramatic effect upon the Church:

EVENING STUDY

➲ The first solution – the installation of **city-bishops** – had a negative effect on the whole direction of the Church in the future.

➲ The second solution – the circulation of **written creeds** – was a helpful aid to curbing heresy.

➲ The third solution – the establishment of the **New Testament canon** – was God's wonderful, positive answer.

The Development of the Rule of Faith

The Gnostics were found difficult to combat. When opposed they would claim they had secret knowledge – special revelation from heaven. They also used spurious gospels and epistles, and soon began to appeal to a succession of teachers traced back to the apostles (normally Philip, Thomas and Matthias) to whom, they claimed, Jesus entrusted secret wisdom before he ascended. The Jews who founded the church were blinded to this *gnosis* (they said) and so it had been hidden from them. Also, with their allegorical method of interpretation, they could make even the genuine Scriptures appear to bear any meaning they wished.

Yet the early Christians did rise up to cast out the gnostic heresy. They did so by clarifying their own orthodox convictions. From even as early as the first century, candidates for baptism were asked to accept a certain simple creed, or rule of faith. To counteract the false teaching of the gnostics (such as the Docetists who denied Christ's humanity, and the Ebionites who threw doubt on Jesus' unique status as the Son of God), they would summarize what they believed in statements of faith.

One of earliest example of a creed is **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**, where Paul writes:

> "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..."

Sometimes creeds were also incorporated into first century hymns. One of these hymn-creeds is recorded in **1 Timothy 3:16**:

> "...He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."

Another example of a hymn-creed is found in **Philippians 2:6-11**:

> "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

During the second century, however, more formalized creeds began to appear. These statements of belief varied according to the churches or writers who pro-

EVENING STUDY

duced them, and the specific errors or heresies they sought to combat. Each Rule of Faith, however, included an important outline of basic Christian beliefs.

Various Rules of Faith

The first identifiable Rule of Faith recorded was written by Irenaeus (AD 180):

> "...this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race..."[1]

Note Irenaeus' emphasis on the "bodily ascension," for this creed was clearly written as a guard against Gnosticism.

Origen described the Rule of Faith as "the teaching of the church preserved unaltered and handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles."[2] The Rule of Faith was also known as the "Rule of Truth," "the tradition," "the preaching" and just "the faith." Its purpose was not only to stand against heretics, but also to teach the central message of the faith to new converts.

Irenaeus and Tertullian developed Rules of Faith to be used in recognizing the true Christian from the Gnostic. They were a summary of the major biblical doctrines. Other writers reflected not only the battle with Gnostics and heretics, but also their personal concerns. For example, Tertullian (a Montanist) described in length "the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."[3] Origen also includes paragraphs on the free will, the soul, angels and devils.

The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed (the early version of which is also known as "The Old Roman Creed") comes from the late second-century creed used for baptism in Rome.

> "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic* church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."

---

* The Gnostics taught that the most important Christian doctrines were reserved for the initiated few. The orthodox belief, however, was that the fullness of the Gospel was to be preached to the entire human race. The term "catholic" simply means "universal." It refered to the whole of the Church, rather than to schismatic and heretical breakaways. It was a belief that the Church was indeed catholic, or universal, which distinguished orthodox Christians from the Gnostics.

EVENING STUDY

The Apostles' Creed is the best summary of early Christian beliefs and to this day is repeated every Sunday in many churches. In spite of its title, it was not written by the apostles, but rather was seen to be the set of beliefs passed down by them.

Augustine, bishop of Hippo, preached this sermon to those about to be baptized:

> "Receive, my children, the Rule of Faith, which is called the Symbol (or Creed). And when ye have received it, write it in your heart, and be daily saying it to yourselves; before ye sleep, before ye go forth, arm you with your Creed. The Creed no man writes so as it may be able to be read: but for rehearsal of it, lest haply forgetfulness obliterate what care hath delivered, let your memory be your record-roll: what ye are about to hear, that are ye to believe; and what ye shall have believed, that are about to give back with your tongue."[4]

The New Testament Canon

The most positive reaction to the heresies and errors that were challenging the Church was the realization of the need for the Word of God. It was decided that it was necessary to set forth the true canon* of Scripture. Gnostic heretics, such as Marcion, were setting up their own canon and were leading people astray. They demanded that their canon be accepted. A standard of truth had to be agreed upon. The central issue was that of *authority*. The church had to have authoritative ground to refute the doctrines of the false teachers.

The most basic test that any candidate for the canon must pass was that it must edify when read publicly and be in agreement with the rule of faith. But other criteria were also important.

It must be written by an apostle or apostolic associate

Irenaeus insisted that the real test was whether the books were by the apostles, or at least by men in close association with them. He called those which were apostolic, in this sense, "Scriptures."

Its inherent qualities must be recognized

The Church Fathers realized that books that are Scripture have a self-evidencing quality about them, showing themselves to be the Word of God. They have an unparalleled effect on people's lives, showing themselves to be truly inspired by the Holy Spirit. When Tertullian later wrote of the "New Testament," he placed it on the same inspired level as the Old Testament.

It must be worth being persecuted for

It was not long before the Roman authorities began to realize that in order to suppress Christianity they had to destroy the Scriptures. So the last great persecution of Christians included the burning of the apostolic epistles and Gospel accounts. Bruce Shelley describes one such event:

---

* The English word "canon" comes from the Greek word meaning "straight rod" or "measuring rod." It was adopted in Christian language to denote the list of inspired books which was regarded as composing the Word of God – the Bible.

EVENING STUDY

"During the last great persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, early in the fourth century, a believer in Sicily was brought before the governor. He was charged with possessing a copy of the Gospels. 'Where did these come from?' asked the judge, pointing to the books. 'Did you bring them from your home?' 'I have no home,' replied the prisoner, 'as my Lord Jesus knows.' Once again pointing to the Gospels, the judge said, 'Read them!' The Christian opened the Gospels and read, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' He turned to another place and read again, 'If any man will come aftger me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.' That was too much. The judge ordered his prisoner away – to death."[5]

It was accepted universally by the Church

Although the *canon* of the New Testament was created by Church leaders, they were only recognizing what already had the stamp of authority in the churches.

The Church was never, in fact, without Scripture, because the first Christians were all Jews and they had brought with them the Old Testament canon. Jesus himself clearly accepted the Old Testament as God's word to man (see **Luke 24:25-27;44-45; John 5:39;10:35**). However, from the beginning the believers had more than the Old Testament as the Word for their faith. Jesus himself, in his life and ministry on earth, had been the Word made flesh. After Jesus had gone back to the Father, the Church had the living leadership of the eye-witness apostles. Later, these apostles and their associates produced written accounts about the life of the Lord Jesus.

Although the first Gospels were not written until the 50s and 60s, some of their content was already available in written form before this. As Luke says in the introduction of his Gospel, many had "undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (**Luke 1:1-2**).

The letters written to the churches by apostles such as Paul were very quickly recognized as inspired. The Christian writings which were read publicly in the congregations and were regarded as having special authority were gradually collected to constitute the standard or rule of the churches. It was probably around the end of the first century that Paul's letters were first brought together. A collection of his epistles is presumed to exist quite early, for Peter refers to them in **2 Peter 3:15** and equates them with "the other Scriptures."

The works of the Apologists also contain quotations from the most important writings of the apostles. After the middle of the second century, the four Gospel accounts, the book of Acts, the epistles of Paul, the first epistle of Peter, and the first epistle of John, are designated by Eusebius as "Homologumena" (which simply means those books in the New Testament generally held as authoritative and canonical by the early church) and are in common use by the churches in the second century. They were acknowledged to be apostolic, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore authoritative.

EVENING STUDY

The Emergence of the New Testament

The History of Christianity describes the process of the gradual formation of the New Testament:

> "The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) were formed into a group by the middle of the second century. John's Gospel, which appealed particularly to the Gnostics and later the Montanists, was treated with some reserve and took longer to be generally accepted...By the late second century Christian writers felt it vital to spell out which books were accepted by the church...By the early third century, a consensus had been reached throughout the church concerning the main contents of the canon...The Eastern church finally arrived at a consensus by 367. In that year Athanasius' Easter Letter from Alexandria listed solely the twenty-seven books of the New Testament... In the West complete canon lists were approved by the African Councils of Hippo, 393, and Carthage, 397. In time the Western Church followed the East in accepting Hebrews within the canon. Its contents proved so attractive that they overcame doubts about its writer. Christians at Alexandria claimed at an early stage it was written by Paul; this view was eventually accepted everywhere...the eventual shape of the New Testament shows that the early church wanted to submit fully to the teachings of the apostles. It had been created by their preaching and now grounded itself upon their writings."[6]

How grateful we are today for the gift the early Church leaders have given us of the Word of God.

What About the Apocrypha?

The Apocrypha* is the term given for the twelve or fifteen books, depending on how they are grouped, which were part of the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. They were included in the canon used by the Jews outside Palestine. The Jews of Palestine, however, did not include them in their canon, which corresponds to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament. It was this canon that Jesus was referring to when he spoke of the law, the prophets and the psalms (see **Luke 24:44**). Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever quoted from the Apocrypha as Scripture.

Early Christians differed, however, over the question of the Apocrypha. Those in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, nearest Palestine, mostly agreed with the Jews in that area. In the western half of the Empire, however, under the influence of Augustine, the churches mostly accepted the Apocrypha as part of the canon of Scripture. During the sixteenth-century Reformation, most Protestants rejected the Apocrypha as canonical, accepting the view of the early eastern Christians. The Roman Catholic church, however, accepted the books as "deutero-canonical," meaning that their canonicity was recognized only after a period of time.

---

* The word *apocrypha* simply means "hidden," since books that were not considered canonical were not used and were, therefore, hidden away. While it refers specifically to books excluded from the Old Testament canon, it is sometimes also applied to early Christian writings that were once considered canonical by some groups, but are not in the New Testament.

EVENING STUDY

The Church Fathers

Early Church history is more or less divided into two ages:

- ➲ **The apostolic age** – this was the age of the New Testament, when the actual eye-witnesses of the resurrection of Christ were still alive.

- ➲ **The patristic age** – this was the age of the Apologists and Church Fathers (from which we get the name "patristic," which means "father").

The leaders of the early Church (and the decisions they made to deal with the errors and heresies that were attacking the Church) have had a lasting effect on the Church down through the ages, right up until today. Each had a unique contribution, both good and bad. We can learn and gain a vision from the lives of these men, and also be warned by their weaknesses and failings.

A M Renwick and A M Harman write:

> "The passing away of the apostolic band made it more difficult for the Church to read with confidence the path which led into an unknown future. Although Clement of Rome tells us that the apostles, knowing that difficulties would arise as to the oversight of the Church, had made provision for the appointment of ministers (bishops or presbyters, and deacons), we nevertheless become conscious of a great change in the quality of those who led the Church in [the second century]. They were good men up to a point, and their writ-

Early Writings

Apart from the recognized canonical books of the New Testament (those recognized as having apostolic or proxy-apostolic authorship), there were a number of other popular writings circulating among churches in the second century.

The Shepherd

In *The Shepherd,* written about AD 150, Hermas recounts how, originally a slave, he gained his freedom, married and started a business. He then lost nearly everything material, saw his children lapse, but finally, by acts of repentance, brought his family together again. The work abounds in symbols and visions about Christian life and morality. Its main theme is the importance of repentance in life. It was popularly read in the young churches but not recognized as inspired Scripture.

The Didache

The Didache (which means "The Teaching") is regarded by some scholars as a very early writing, although others believe that it was written in some remote quarter of Syria or Palestine sometime later than the middle of the second century. Although it is somewhat legalistic in its approach to the Christian life, it seeks to address abuses within the Church.

Epistle to Diognetus

The *Epistle to Diognetus* was written by an anonymous but brilliant writer in the late second century or early third century. He presents a rational defense of Christianity by showing the folly of idolatry (chapters 1-2), the inadequacy of Judaism (chapters 3-4), the superiority of Christian beliefs and Christian character (chapters 5-12). He likens the role of Christians in the world to that of the soul in the body (chapter 6), and shows the benefits of Christ's coming (chapter 7). He describes the pitiful condition of the world before Christ (chapter 8), and answers the question why he appeared so late (chapter 9).

EVENING STUDY

ings compare favourably with those of the secular authors of the period; but they were obviously neither so spiritual nor so lucid as those who wrote the books of the sacred Canon."[7]

The first church teachers after the apostles were men who knew the apostles personally and are therefore the connecting link between them and the apologists of the second century. Their writings were read in the early churches, but the authority of these documents was always subordinate to that of the Gospel accounts and the apostolic epistles.

We take a look at the Church Fathers in more detail in the supplementary study, **SP113-04**.

Constantine the Great

By the turn of the third century, the Church had grown so explosively that the emperors, even as they sought to stamp it out, began to realize the futility of such an endeavor.

> "By the third century the Christian church was beginning to assume the proportions of an empire within the empire. The constant travel between different churches, the synods of bishops, the letters carried by messengers back and forth across the empire, and the loyalty that the Christians showed to their leaders and to one another impressed even the emperors."[8]

During the third century the Roman Empire was on the verge of collapse due to social, political and economic disorder. Prosperity and stable government was restored under the Emperor Diocletian (AD 284 to 305). Realizing the Empire was too large to be administered by a single central authority he divided it into two – the East and the West – and appointed a co-emperor (Maximian) to rule the Western Empire while he ruled the Eastern Empire. He made Nicomedia (in modern Turkey) the seat of government. Two junior emperors (called Caesars) were appointed under these senior rulers (called Augusti). The Western Caesar was Constantius I Chlorus, and the Eastern Caesar was Galerius. Diocletian's intention was that the Augusti should only rule for 20 years. The caesars would then become the new emperors (with new caesars under them). With this in view Diocletian and Maximian retired in AD 305. However, very soon after this Constantius I died and his son Constantine gained the throne. The system set up by Diocletian collapsed under Constantine's rule and, by military success, he gained control over both the Western and Eastern empires. He changed the seat of government to the eastern city of Byzantium (modern Istanbul) in AD 330, which he renamed Constantinople, after himself.

Constantine ruled from AD 306 to 337. No single emperor was to have so great an effect on the destiny of the Church than Constantine.

EVENING STUDY

The Edict of Tolerance

The story goes that just before the battle at the Mulvian Bridge, Constantine saw, in a dream, a vision of a monogram composed of the two Greek letters *Chi Rho*, which are the first two letters of the name of "Christ." The next day he ordered his soldiers to inscribe that monogram on their shields. Another story says that while marching one day he and his army saw the image of a cross appear before the sun with the words, "By this sign, conquer."

Regardless of what actually happened, Constantine's conversion to Christianity altered the face of history. In the first twenty years of the fourth century, the whole situation changed for the Church. The nature of Constantine's religious beliefs has been disputed, but from the first he was tolerant of Christians, progressively showing himself favorable to them and ultimately accepting Christianity as the religion of the state.

In AD 313, he and the Eastern Emperor, Licinius, met in Milan where they passed an edict granting all people freedom to follow whatever religion they wanted. Constantine also passed laws banning any branding on the face (because it marred the image of God), allowing bishops to decide civil lawsuits, closing workshops and lawcourts on Sunday, and banning gladiatorial games.

He also took an active role in church controversies. He summoned the Council of Nicea in AD 325, which ruled against Arianism (a heresy that denied that Christ as the Son of God was coeternal with the Father). It was the emperor's edict which gave legal force to the Nicean decision. Although he favored Christianity, Constantine was also tolerant of paganism. Pagan themes were engraved on his coins as late as AD 324. In AD 326 he had his son Crispus and his own wife, Faustus, executed on charges of adultery. As the last act of his life, on his death bed, he accepted Christian baptism at the hands of his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia.

The Leaven Sets In

The Church had battled with Gnosticism and other heresies, but the worst of the Enemy's attacks had now come. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul described the heresy that was infiltrating the church there as "leaven" (KJV) or "yeast" (NIV).

Read Galatians 5:9
Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

Persecution had stopped. Courageous martyrs were a thing of the past. The Emperor himself was favorable towards them. Peace had come. You would think that would be of great advantage. But, in fact, it proved the most subtle and dangerous weapon of the Enemy.

The Church saw this new-found freedom as the opportunity to go out into the world and preach the Gospel unfettered. But instead, in a new and dangerous way, the world entered into the Church. Just as Paul had warned, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (**Galatians 5:9**, NKJV).

EVENING STUDY

Faith became superficial

Bruce Shelley describes the situation:

> "...the masses...now streamed into the officially favored church. Prior to Constantine's conversion, the church consisted of convinced believers. Now many came who were politically ambitious, religiously disinterested, and still half-rooted in paganism. This threatened to produce not only shallowness and permeation by pagan superstitions but also the secularization and misuse of religion for political purposes. By 380, rewards for Christians had given way to penalities for non-Christians. In that year the emperor Theodosius made belief in Christianity a matter of imperial command."[9]

Buildings for worship

The earliest Christians had no special buildings to meet for worship. As mentioned in several places in the New Testament, they met in private houses. After Constantine the picture changed completely. Large, impressive churches were built in many places.

The History of Christianity describes this new development:

> "Constantine's pronouncement of freedom of worship for all in the 'Edict of Milan' (313) was soon reflected in the buildings used for Christian worship. The Emperor himself built a new church in Rome which symbolized the dawn of a new era. This Church of St John Lateran was a basilica, and in all the main centers of the Empire this style of church seems rapidly to have replaced the house-church...Most obviously it provided the space needed for the much larger congregations which now gathered for worship. The house-church had usually provided enough room for the persecuted Chrsitians. Now that Christianity was respectable and officially recognized the numbers of worshipers increased rapidly and bigger accommodation was needed. Pagan temples were not designed to house a worshiping assembly, whereas various forms of basilica were commonly built to accommodate crowds attending a law court, market or any kind of assembly...

> "Worship in the house-church had been of an intimate kind in which all present had taken an active part. But by the beginning of the fourth century the distinction between clergy and lay people was becoming more prominent. About this time the liturgy changed from being 'a corporate action of the whole church' into 'a service said by the clergy to which the laity listened.' This may have influenced the choice of the basilica plan for the new churches. Certainly the basilica pattern made it easier for the distinction between clergy and lay people to harden. The apse was reserved for the clergy, and those not actively taking part in the service sat on a bench against the wall. A throne was set up in the centre for the bishop, and this stately chair reflected his position as a trusted imperial servant as much as a pastor of the flock...The ordinary worshippers tended to be confined to the side aisles — men on one side and women on the other..."[10]

EVENING STUDY

Pagan Mixture

The flood of pagans into the now "official" church brought with them many features of their pagan religions. *The History of the Christianity* paints the picture graphically:

> "Churches took over from temples, martyrs replaced the old gods in popular devotion, and the festivals of the Christian year took the place of the high-days and holy days of paganism…The Christian church took over many pagan ideas and images. From sun-worship, for example, came the celebration of Christ's birth on the twenty-fifth of December, the birthday of the Sun. *Saturnalia*, the Roman winter festival of 17-21 of December, provided the merriment, gift-giving and candles typical of later Christmas holidays. Sun-worship hung on in Roman Christianity and Pope Leo I, in the middle of the fifth century, rebuked worshippers who turned round to bow to the sun before entering St Peter's basilica. Some pagan customs which were later Christianized, for example the use of candles, incense and garlands, were at first avoided by the church because they symbolized paganism."[11]

The seeds of Marionism (the worship of the Virgin Mary) were also sown in the fourth century, as the pagans flooded into churches around the Empire. The worship of Artemis (Diana) in Ephesus (the place where Mary lived until she died) probably was one stimulus. But there were numerous other parallels within paganism. For example, Isis, the Egyptian goddess whose worship had spread throughout the Empire in the early Christian era, was known as "the Great Virgin," "Queen of Heaven," and the "Mother of God." Some statues of Isis holding the child Horus are remarkably similar to the earliest images of Madonna and Child.

The pagans of the pre-Constantine era had tended to view Isis, Artemis and other mother figures as the archetypical "universal mother," and when paganism was outlawed, it was all but natural for many of the former devotees of the Mother Goddess to shift to the worship of Mary as "Queen of Heaven."

Other religious practices characteristic in later years could be seen taking shape during this formative period. As the *History of Christianity* goes on to explain:

> "The cult of saints and martyrs grew rapidly in the fourth century, another example of the blending of the old paganism with Christianity. Chapels and even churches began to be built over the tombs of martyrs, a practice which influenced church architecture. Competition for saintly corpses soon degenerated into a superstitious search for relics. In parts of the East it sometimes became a fight for the bodies of saintly hermits, still alive but expected to expire shortly. The cult arose among the people, but was approved and encouraged by the great Christian leaders of the age — Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine…The Christian historian Theodoret boasts that in many places saints and martyrs took the place of pagan gods, and their shrines the place of pagan temples."[12]

EVENING STUDY

The Council of Nicaea

In AD 325, Constantine summoned the First General Council of Nicaea (in north-west Asia Minor) to deal specifically with the controversy of Arianism. As emperor now of both East and West, he had been dismayed to discover that his new territories were divided over a 'theological trifle.' He therefore urged the bishops to achieve peace and unity. Hundreds of bishops from most of the lands of the Empire – from Spain to Persia – attended. It was a remarkable gathering with the maimed limbs and blinded eyes of many of those present bearing testimony to their faithfulness in the time of great persecution. They had experienced the deepest suffering for the name of Christ. Now they were gathered in the imperial palace in the presence of an emperor who welcomed them. It was, indeed, a new era.

The problem of Arianism

Arianism was one of the most crucial heresies to come at the formative stages of the Church. A M Renwick and A M Harman describe its serious effects:

> "The Arian controversy split the Church for a time and had repercussions which were felt for about three centuries. Arius, who originated the dispute, was a presbyter in Alexandria. About the year 318 he began to propagate views as to the divinity of Christ which were contrary to the accepted doctrine of the Church. He taught that Christ 'had come into being out of non-existence'; that 'once He was not'; and that 'He was created and made.' On this view, the Son was inferior to the Father in nature and dignity although the first and noblest of all created beings. Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, took action in 320 and declared that he believed the Son to be 'consubstantial and eternal with the Father.' Arius was not straightforward in his controversial methods and cleverly tried to cloud the issues. He was deposed in 321, but being an able and charming man he was befriended by eminent ecclesiastics like Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Eusebius of Caesarea, the historian."[13]

Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea because every effort at reconciliation between Bishop Alexander and Arius had failed. After much discussion, the decision was reached and the Council declared that Christ was 'the Son of God, only begotten of the Father...of the substance of the Father...very God of very God'. The importance of this decision in the history of the Church is immeasurable.

Arius was excommunicated. After an unsuccessful attempt to be received back, he died soon after in Constantinople. Arianism was not dead, however. It persisted, often in high places, until it was finally condemned at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381.*

The Creed of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea produced a creed as a declaration against Arianism. It is called the Creed of Nicaea (to distinguish it from the Nicene Creed), and states:

---

*   Arianism lives on today in the doctrine of sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Christadelphians.

EVENING STUDY

"We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance (*ousia*) of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten not made, of one substance (*homoousios*, consubstantial) with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and the dead; And in the Holy Spirit. And those who say: 'There was a time when he was not,' and: 'Before he was begotten he was not,' and: 'He came into being from nothing,' or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'Of another substance (*hypostasis*), or essence (*ousia*)' [than the Father] or 'created' or 'alterable' or 'mutable,' the catholic and apostolic church places under a curse."[14]

A new era was inaugurated by the Creed of Nicaea. The old creeds had been for converts. The new creed was for bishops. Whereas the old creeds had been local, the new creed was binding universally. It replaced the old Rule of Faith as a test of orthodoxy.

The Canons of Nicaea

There were also twenty "canons" (or legal documents) issued by the Council of Nicaea. These were to regulate various aspects of Church life and they became the core of later canon law.

"They dealt with the admission of members of splinter groups, restrictions of the functions of deacons and on business activities by the clergy, the giving of the eucharist to those about to die out of communion, probation before ordination after baptism, and a ban on clergy transferring from one city to another. Other canons strengthened the organization of the church into provinces and recognized that the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea and Jerusalem had superior authority. While Rome alone is mentioned in the West, the four in the East were soon joined by Constantinople...The Council of Nicaea set many precedents. The Emperor called it, influenced its decision-making and used his civil power to give its decrees virtually the status of imperial law. The Council introduced a new kind of orthodoxy, which for the first time gave non-biblical terms critical importance. The Creed's own form of expression was influenced by the heresy it outlawed. Only in the long term did the whole church recognize that Nicaea had decisively developed its understanding of the divinity of Christ."[15]

The Monastic Movement

Monasticism (a way of life defined by monks living in a monastery) was a living criticism of the society of its day. Once again we see Christians responding to one error by going into another error. One extreme gave birth to an opposite extreme.

EVENING STUDY

Two main influences contributed to the rise of monasticism within the ancient Church:

⊃ **The influence of Gnosticism** – Gnostic thought, particularly the dualistic view of flesh as evil and spirit as good, had an continuing effect on the thinking of the Church. Retirement from the world would, it was thought, help the individual to crucify the flesh and to develop the spiritual life by meditation and ascetic acts.

⊃ **A reaction to the world coming into the Church** – Monasteries became a haven for those in revolt against the many semipagan practices in the Church and the increasing moral deterioration.

Earle Cairns describes its rise in this way:

"Monasticism went through four main stages during the perod of its emergence in Western civilization. At first, ascetic practices were carried on by many within the church. Many later withdrew from society to live as anchorites or hermits. The holiness of these hermits attracted others, who would then take up residence in nearby caves and look to them for leadership in what was called a *laura*. A cloister for common exercises might be built. In the final stage organized communal life within a monastery appeared. This process had its beginnings in the East in the fourth century, and from there it spread to the church in the West."[16]

The man credited as the founder of Monasticism is Antony (AD 251-356). At the age of twenty, soon after his parents died and left him all their wealth, he heard the words Jesus had said to the rich young man, "If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor" (**Matthew 19:21**). Anthony sold all his possessions, gave the money away to the poor, and retired to a solitary cave to lead a life of meditation. Gradually his reputation brought others to live in numerous caves and huts that were nearby.

"That community of ascetics, desiring to be discipled by Antony, persuaded him to break his solitude and give them spiritual leadership. When he came forth, they were surprised to find him vigorous in mind and body. He began to instruct his followers, who called themselves Antonians, paying special attention to means of overcoming temptation as well as to the gift of discernment of good and evil spirits. He organized his followers into a great body of monks. Then he spent the last forty-five years of his life with them in an inner desert between the Nile and the Red Sea."[17]

One other man made a significant contribution to the rise of monasticism in the fourth century. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, devoted forty-five years in the struggle against Arianism, for which he was exiled five times. He did more than anyone else to establish the orthodox creed for future generations, and played an important role in defining the doctrine of the Trinity.

He was also a personal friend of Antony and wrote a book called *The Life of Antony*, which described the pattern of Antony's life and helped shape the Christian ideal

EVENING STUDY

of monasticism – monks who saw themselves as following in the footsteps of Elijah and John the Baptist – "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (**John 1:23**, NKJV). His book brought the concept of monasticism out of Egypt and spread it throughout the Empire.

Conclusion

In this lesson, we have looked at an overview of Church history spanning from the end of the first century to the end of the fourth. We saw that this history was shaped by the heresies that arose and the men that stood up to combat them.

But ultimately the very solutions that were proposed to deal with aberrant theology ended up shaping the Church into a structured organization very different from the vibrant Body that had been born on the Day of Pentecost. The seeds of decline had taken root, and a hybrid plant was now growing in pagan soil. Even though the theology of the Church was now securely orthodox, the practice of the Church was not.

[1] Irenaeus, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.115.

[2] Origen, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.115.

[3] Tertullian, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.116.

[4] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Creed: A Sermon to Catechumens*, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1307.htm.

[5] Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.57.

[6] *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.106.

[7] A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.24.

[8] Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.33.

[9] Bruce L Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1995), p.96.

[10] *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), pp.158-160.

[11] *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.81.

[12] *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.141.

[13] A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.53.

[14] *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), pp.166-167.

[15] *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), pp.166-168.

[16] Earle E Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p.152.

[17] *Who's Who in Christian History*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

The Online Bible College can be accessed at www.online-bible-college.com

EVENING STUDY