

“Church History: Heroes, Heretics & Holy Wars”

Sunday School Notes

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CLASS 2 – Constantine and Early Church Heretics

Constantine

Constantine was born in 280 in what is present-day Yugoslavia. He was the son of the emperor Constantius Chlorus, whose wife, Helena, was a Christian. After Diocletian’s death, there were 7 emperors, all waging war on each other. Constantine eliminated his rivals one by one.

312- night before his final big battle, at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine saw a glowing cross in the sky bearing the words: “In this sign conquer.” They won the battle and he pursued Christianity, though he stayed high priest of pagan religion and wasn’t baptized until his deathbed. In fact, he ordered the death of his father-in-law, 3 brothers-in-law, a son and his wife. Not the most model Christian around!

313 – Constantine, who was ruling the West, and Lucinius, who was ruling the East, met and passed the “Edict of Milan” which gave tolerance for the Christian faith. Eventually it was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. (Of course, they ended up fighting each other and Constantine had Lucinius assassinated.) He also established a new capital for the Roman Empire in the East; he renamed Byzantium Constantinople. Made it the “2nd Rome.” This would be an important city or years to come.

Positives of Christianity becoming “legal”:

- At first, many Christians proclaimed that God’s kingdom had come to earth; all of God’s enemies had been defeated; Eusebius a Christian historian saw Constantine as the “new David” and God’s blessing to bring the church and the empire together
- Ended the “Age of the Martyrs”
- Church buildings built, often financed by the state- the basilicas of St. Peter of the Vatican, the Holy Sepulcher in Bethlehem & beautiful churches in Constantinople
- Humane laws relieved suffering; killing a child or sending them to slavery a crime
- Concubines illegal, wives had property rights, slaves were treated a bit better
- Prisons reformed, hospitals established
- A united Christian Kingdom makes it harder for Islam to penetrate and conquer

Negatives of Christianity becoming “legal”:

- Too easy to be a Christian; socially respectable. The aristocracy embraced what they had formerly scoffed at and scorned
- True faith harder to find when it’s popular, not when it costs you your life
- Eventually the persecuted become the persecutors
- Church “imprisoned” in a political and cultural framework which dulled its fervor for the gospel

380 – Christianity made official and only religion in the Roman Empire by Theodosius. Heretics and pagans were to be persecuted. Pagan temples were demolished.

395- Theodosius splits the Western and Eastern Roman Empires.

EARLY CHURCH HERESIES

Gnosticism – conglomerate of ideas and schools, no distinct churches. Christianity should be a secret, exclusive sect. 1) negative attitude towards material world, salvation is escaping from matter (very Platonic, anti-physical world), 2) salvation gained thru special knowledge (gnosis, where the title comes from). They even went so far as to say that the soul would need to know special passwords to pass through the spheres of the heavens.

Denied: 1) creation, that the present world is God's good creation,
 2) incarnation, that God would take human flesh,
 3) resurrection, eternal life in a body.

Nice thing about denying the physical realm's importance is that you could choose whether to be a libertine and indulge the flesh or an ascetic (fasting, sleep deprivation, etc)!

Hard to pin down a date, their teaching seems to be countered by Paul throughout NT, but seem to be more 2nd and 3rd century.

->Clement of Alexandria ridiculed the Gnostics by comparing them to an old shoe: full of holes but with new tongues!

Marcion – Marcion hoped that completely splitting Christianity from Judaism would help them avoid persecution. He threw out the Old Testament (OT). Excommunicated from the church in Rome in 144 as a heretic. He started up his own church-like structure.

-like Gnostics, good God could not have created this material world; Jesus did not have a true human nature. He taught that after you were baptized, you would not have sex.

-Yahweh, the God of the OT is not the same as God, the Father of Jesus. OT Yahweh was vengeful and cruel, NT God is loving and forgiving. Rejected OT, made list of NT books that were inspired by the true God- Luke was the only Gospel + only 10 letters of Paul (left out the pastoral epistles).

->Irenaeus opposed him, wrote against him in his *Against The Heresies* (though Marcion wasn't the only target). Polycarp called Marcion the "firstborn of Satan"! The church decided it needed an official canon precisely because of teachers like Marcion who would name their own books.

It's tempting to still think like a Marcionite, isn't it? I used to work for one – a pastor who never preached from the OT. He didn't think the God of the OT and NT were different gods necessarily, but he treated the OT as though it were a distraction, not really the truth, too easy to confuse people. Better to teach them the red letters of Jesus.

Montanists:

Everybody know who Harold Camping was? Just died recently, but he predicted the end a lot and urged people to get out of churches. The Montanists were the most like Harold Camping!

In 177 Montanus lived in Turkey and was excommunicated from the church. Gathered his own followers, including 2 female prophets, Maximilla and Priscilla, who ministered with him.

Basic idea was that there were 3 ages linked to the Trinity: the OT was the age of the Father, the first 150 years AD was the age of the Son, and now they were in the age of the Spirit. Sort of an early dispensationalism. It was a forerunner of charismatics, since the moving of the Spirit was stressed. And the world was going to end soon. Celibacy was encouraged, marriage was discouraged, strict rules for fasting, etc; not like Gnosticism, but just because the end was coming.

The excitement of Christianity being new was wearing out, the church was becoming institutionalized, and people saw Montanism as a way to return to a new, exciting form of Christianity. Also, they sought out martyrdom, which the church at large discouraged. The church said to endure persecution if it came, but don't seek it out.

Tertullian, who had been an important apologist for the earlier church became a Montanist. Irenaeus wrote against them, said the Holy Spirit age had come with Pentecost, but it wasn't just the Holy Spirit age.

Donatists:

When persecution comes, many Christians cannot bear up under it and renounce Christ or do whatever they need to do to escape being beaten or killed or having their property taken from them. What do you do with those Christians after the threat of persecution has been removed? The Donatists would say that they messed up and they are permanently out of the church, no chance to come back since they denied the faith. Specifically after Constantine came to power and the persecutions died out, many in the church didn't want to admit priests or bishops who had cooperated with the government. After all, didn't Jesus say that if you deny me before men, I will deny you before my heavenly Father?

A man named Donatus ("the Great") came to the fore in the middle of the protests in 313. Anyone who recognized the new Bishop of Carthage was not a true church. Therefore the only true church was their community in North Africa. Constantine wanted a united Christian empire, so started to put down the Donatists.

Augustine developed the theology that in baptism & Lord's Supper the key part is Jesus; the faith of the priest does not validate or invalidate the baptism, nor make the Supper invalid. As long as water and Trinitarian formula were used, a baptism was valid. Augustine also described the "visible" and "invisible" churches somewhat in response to Donatists.

Significance of Heretical groups?

Reminded the church to be more precise in its theology, and to continually have a good balance of teaching people to obey the Scriptures and exhibit changed lives.

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