

CHURCH HISTORY

Lesson 3 200 A.D. - 313 A.D.

We discovered in class this past Sunday that the early church got its leadership from the Apostles, and two groups of people - those called from within themselves by the Holy Spirit and appointed by the Apostles to build and minister to the needs of the spiritual church - Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors/Teachers and those called by the local church body and appointed by the Apostles and whose primary function was the governance and administration of the local church - Bishops, Elders (Presbyters), and Deacons whose primary jobs were the governance and administration of the local church.

In all cases the church body and the Apostles were involved in the leadership and governance selection process. As time moved on and the Apostles died off the Bishops quickly became the senior leaders and were responsible for a combination of responsibilities ranging from the spiritual to the administrative. The early Bishops, Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna for one, all personally knew and had studied under one of the Apostles - John was Polycarp's mentor/teacher for example. Again, as time moved on the position of Bishop took on a much greater role in the authority and direction of the growing church, with Bishops of the bigger or more influential churches - the Church at Rome for example, being elevated over the other Bishops and taking on the responsibilities of defending the faith and defining true doctrine as well as defending the local church. The Church at Rome was now held in very high regard - Peter and Paul had both been martyred there, Paul's largest letter was addressed to the Church in Rome and Nero had made a national spectacle out of the Church at Rome blaming it for the big fire in 64 A.D.



As we approach the end of the second century and look at the period between 200 and 313 A.D. we see that even the Bishops who had studied under the Apostles had died off and a new group of Bishops began to lead the Church.

During this time Rome and the Roman Empire began to identify Christians and the Christian faith as a private sect that posed a clear and present danger to the Roman Empire. Rather than swearing complete allegiance to Caesar they swore complete allegiance to Christ, refusing to burn incense and offering burnt offerings on the altars worshipping the Caesar, and they met in secret, in homes and underground – clearly in the eyes of the Roman Government they were plotting to either overthrow the Roman Government or at least plotting to set up a secret state within the Roman Empire.

In spite of the persecution and extreme hardships faced by the Church it began to grow and it grew rapidly in spite of Roman and Jewish attempts to stop it. Referred to as the “Catholic” Church – meaning Universal, the Church would face its most extreme forms of persecution (250-305 A.D.) just prior to the end of its official persecution in 313 A.D. This would be the beginning of the events leading up to the creation of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

With this backdrop in mind, and armed with your favorite church history text, or Bible Dictionary, or Bible Atlas, or your favorite web site; let's consider this week's lesson and the following:

1. Can you identify who the predominate philosophers of the day were between 200 and 313 A.D.?
2. Can you identify at least one piece of information from world history that would have been happening or taken place during this period - there were many, just see if you can cite one?
3. See what you can find out about the following:
 - . Decius and Valerian.

- a. Diocletian.
 - b. The Edict of Milan in 313 A.D..
 - c. The Donatist Controversy.
 - d. The Easter Controversy.
4. Why, during this period of extreme persecution (250 A.D.-313 A.D.) was deciding upon the correct canon of scripture important to church leaders of the day?
5. What can you find out about the following?
- a. Gnosticism
 - b. Apologists
 - c. Polemicists
 - d. Irenaeus
 - e. Justin Martyr
6. Who was Pantaenus and what was the Alexandrian School? Why would knowing about this person and this school be important to us in understanding the growth of the Church?
7. What is the difference between the “Allegorical” method of Biblical interpretation and the “Grammatical, Contextual, Historical” approach to Biblical interpretation?
8. What was the most significant thing about one of Tertullian’s writings that dramatically affected the Theology of God that remains with us today?
9. Who was Constantine the Great and why is he important in the study of Church History?
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I am aware that this lesson, like the last two, will require you to take on much research and thinking, but I believe you are beginning to see how the early Church developed and how the things which effected and attacked the Church in its early development impacted us two thousand years later.

It’s especially interesting to note that, prior to 313 A.D., the Church was primarily home based and secreted away -- completely different from “Church” in America today -- and it was opposed by both the State and, in the earliest stages, by the Jews as well.

Indeed, we begin to see in this week’s study the early foundation being laid for the separation of Church and State and the struggle between those two that continue even today. It’s also interesting to note how much theology, canon, and structure had developed prior to the establishment of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and how that early work was applied to the newly organized Roman Catholic Church -- a church and it’s councils which we’ll study in the next lesson.

I continue to pray that you’ll remain faithful in this study and apply the time necessary to study the birth and construction of the early church. As the study of the Old Testament sheds great light and depth on the study of the New Testament so too the study of the early church will shed great light on the church, traditions, and faiths which today make up the Christian Church as we know it.

May God richly bless you this week as you continue to study with us.

In Christ,

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