

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Early Church History

Session 5, Segment A From Persecution to Privilege

I. Opening Devotions

II. Why Were Christians Persecuted?

- a. What is a Christian? – In the milieu of Roman society there were countless philosophies, cults, and religious pursuits. Most of them were not exclusive of others. Rome was “*in practice, tolerant of any cult provided it did not encourage sedition or weaken morality*” (Chadwick, 25). As long as Christianity remained a Jewish sect, no problem with Rome. As the Church became mostly Gentile, as the tension between Judaism and Christianity escalated and led to breach, the protection disappeared. Christians were just one more cult to be watched, and to Roman eyes, as much as disorder, morality was a problem in the church.
- b. The Church & the Family – The early church was seen as a subversive force that contradicted “family values” in the Empire. Jesus’ teachings placed great emphasis on the ties of community bound by faith over ties of biological affinity.
- c. Women - Women were elevated in the early church to leadership positions. Note Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18. That she is named at all, and further named before the husband is notable. Note Phoebe in Romans. Note the theological statement of Galatians 3:28 – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” Later documents seem to stray from this early development and Paul is very “contextual” in the way he addresses matters of gender. But, the early church, built upon the foundations of Jesus who welcomed women to his inner circle, caused a stir in the world.
- d. Slaves – Slavery was a fact of life for the culture that surrounded the early church. The slavery could at times be more civil than they kind practiced in North America, but was still dehumanizing and brutal. The early church did not oppose slavery in obvious ways. Paul felt that Christ’s return was so near that nothing of this world should be too worried about. However, as we see in Philemon and other places, the church did something much more crippling to slavery in the long run. It treated slaves and owners equally within the community.
- e. Religious Values of the Day – Religion, from Rome’s (and perhaps Washington’s) perspective essentially served and revolved around the state and emperor. Christians refused to participate in conventional religion, and so angered officials and were seen as disrupters of “the Roman way of life.” Religion was one way Caesar held power, and Christians did not cooperate.

III. Major Persecutions (Persecutors)

- a. *Palestinian – (33-70)* – This period began with the crucifixion of Jesus and included the stoning of Stephen, the death of James the Apostle, the persecution of Paul. It centered around the desire of the followers of Jesus to remain part of Judaism (perhaps because it was a recognized religion by Rome, and so protected). Conflict erupted over Jesus identity, resurrection, the day of the Sabbath, among others.
- b. *Nero (64-66)* – Little is known here, except that Nero blamed the burning of Rome on Christians. Paul & Peter seem to have died at Rome during this period.
- c. *Domitian – (95-96)* First Caesar to be called “Lord & God.” Emperor in power as Revelation is written and passed on.
- d. *Septimus Severus (193-211)* Martyrdom of the 12 from Scillium in North Africa. Also records of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity.
- e. *Decius – (249-251)* First universal persecution of the church. Fabian, Bishop of Rome killed, Cyprian of Carthage & Dionysius of Alexandria arrested and imprisoned. Origen tortured.
- f. *Valerian (257-258)* Continues universal persecution of the church.
- g. *Diocletian (303-305)* – Burning of churches, St Sebastian used for target practice.
- h. *Galerius (305 – 313)* Hates Christians, but finally ends persecution officially in 313. It goes on unofficially another 11 years.
- i. Christians were generally good citizens, taught to obey civil authority. The sticking point was usually a refusal to acknowledge or respect the gods, Caesar as a god, or the lordship of the emperor. Being a Christian was a crime in and of itself. The authorities rarely had lists of Christians and relied on the testimony of others who were motivated by a host of things. A sacrifice to the gods or production of a *libelli* – a certificate confirming sacrifice – was all that was usually needed to avoid arrest, torture, or death.
- j. Death was not always the outcome – though at times of the games, it was more certain, due to the appetite for “entertainment” in the empire. Imprisonment, torture, exile, exclusion from work could all play a role.

IV. How the Church Joined the Establishment

- a. By the end of the third century, the Roman Empire was far past its glory and to an extent, was coming apart at the seams. The empire had been divided in half, east and west, with an “Augustus” heading each half, assisted by a “Caesar.” In order to stem the chaos, one strategy was to unite the empire under one dominant religion. Getting Christians to go

along with this was a problem. This left three alternatives: 1) become a secular state – an idea unknown to this era; 2) exterminate the Christians; 3) adopt Christianity.

Time Line

303	In the east, Diocletian decrees that church buildings and scriptures are to be burned. Christians lose their legal rights and civil status.
	In later decrees he acts against church leaders, and orders death for all Christians.
312	Constantine defeats Maxentius at the Milvan Bridge on the River Tiber. Constantine had just announced his conversion to Christianity. Ends persecution in west. In the east Galerius admits failure of persecutions and orders tolerance in 311. They continue however under his successor.
313	Constantine and Licinius agree on toleration at Milan. It doesn't hold. However, restoration of property to Christians and ordinances granting them privilege are put in place.
314	Constantine excuses clergy from public responsibilities. Bishops and others start to receive money from empire,
321	Christian symbols are beginning to be seen on coinage and architecture. Becoming the official religion of empire.
324	Constantine defeats Licinius. Becomes sole ruler of both east and west.
325	Constantine convenes Council of Nicea to address the Arian controversy.
356	Constantine decrees that all pagan temples and sites be closed.
361	Julian the Apostate becomes emperor – threatens Christianity
379	Theodosius becomes emperor. Christianity official.
390	Ambrose excommunicates the emperor for his actions at Thessalonica – massacre at circus after they lynched the governor.
391	All pagan cults outlawed – the persecuted becomes persecutors

- VI. The Lasting Impact – Constantinian Christianity holds sway until the Enlightenment, and on into the 20th Century. Prevailing mind set of many today.

Session 5, Segment B **The Papacy & Monasticism**

- I. The Papacy and the Monastic movement both rise, once again, as the Church expands in all dimensions and as it struggles – constantly reforming – to remain faithful to the gospel.
- II. The Papacy
 - a. The place of Rome as a center of the faith has early roots. Paul seems to hold it as center of the gentile church. Peter ends his ministry as leader of the church at Rome.

- b. Clement of Rome, by the end of the first century, establishes a role for the bishop of Rome as one who intervenes in the disputes of other congregations and localities – i.e. Letter to Corinth.
- c. By the end of the second century, Victor of Rome calls for the standardization of Easter. His approach claims much for his office and his autocratic style does not endear others to his role.
- d. Stephen of Rome invokes Matthew 16:18 – the authority of Peter – for the see of Rome in his dispute with Cyprian of Carthage.
- e. The Matthew text is used more and more beginning with Damasus in 382.
- f. Geography plays a big role in the development of Rome as center of the church in the west. Rome is the only “see” with apostolic roots in the western half of the empire. In the east, this is not so, so the “metropolitan” system settles in there.
- g. Politics plays a big role. Rome is center of the political power in the west, and has long standing as the glorious home of the empire.
- h. By the end of the fourth century, the conciliar (calling a council together) form of settling dogmatic disputes was falling into disfavor. Partly this was due to the travel and distance; partly due to the long term nature of the decision making (months and years); perhaps even because they became so closely identifies with the political power of the emperor.
- i. This leads to the practice by leaders in the outlying parts of the west of writing to Rome for guidance. This is common by the fourth century.
- j. Leo I (440-61) advances the authority of the Roman See by consistent claim of authority. His Tome addressed to the Council at Chalcedon is presented not as a voice in the discussion, but as the very words of Peter. It is accepted as such because it is brilliant and completely orthodox. Leo begins the expansion of the papacy into political matters mostly by default. He negotiates with Attila to avoid the complete destruction of Rome in 452 and again with the Vandals in 455.
- k. Gregory the Great in the sixth century faces the collapse of the western half of the empire and cements his place in history – as well as the papacy itself – by insuring the survival of the Church. He turns the attention of the west away from the east and toward the spread of the faith to those who are enemies of the empire – the people of northern Europe. He figures out how to fund the Church without imperial help, and even sets time in place with his calendar.

III. Monasticism

- a. As the Church gains power, prominence and prestige in the empire in the fourth century, a question arises: Is this all compatible with the Christian faith? One attempt to answer this is in the roots of the monastic movement.
- b. The roots of the movement are in the gospel, especially as it relates to the poor, caring for others. And consistent suspicion of the rich and powerful.

- c. Martyrdom is both a means and end of the early ascetic approaches to monasticism. Clement of Alexandria and Origen both apply very rigid and demanding understandings of what it means to follow Jesus.
- d. The desert Fathers in Egypt – like Anthony and Pachomius – lived incredibly ascetic lives and became hermit holy men who were sought out for spiritual guidance.
- e. Basil of Caesarea (330-379) rejected the hermit as a model, calling the communal aspect of Christian life a necessity to its faithful expression. His organization of community and rule for life together is the first of its kind and still the backbone of eastern monastic orders.
- f. Augustine formulates guidance for monks in 401, providing a future foundation for monastic life in the west.
- g. Cassian, around the same time, is critical of Augustine’s thought on the subject. His writing influence Benedict of Nursia (480-547), who will provide a formidable base for western monasticism, still vital to this day.
- h. Celtic Monasticism begins early in the fifth century in the wake of the work of Patrick and is different than continental monasticism, providing the basic structure and order of church life for all.

Session 5, Segment C
The Ancient Church and Our Own Time

- I. The Church struggles with recurring issues, not necessarily new ones.
 - a. Who is Jesus?
 - b. Authority – who speaks and represents the Church?
 - c. The changing world
 - d. Relationship to the world.
 - e. Expansion in all dimensions
- II. Constantinian Christianity is dead.
 - a. Privilege exacts a price.
 - b. Power corrupts
 - c. “Normative” Christianity may be an oxymoron.
- III. The Spirit works in, through and in spite of the Church.
- IV. Ancient-Future Faith
 - a. The post-modern challenge
 - 1. The church at the margins
 - 2. The “decline” that may not be decline
 - b. *“The cultural revolutions are in the process of ushering us into a new era. In this swirl of change, many are seeking to honestly incarnate the historic faith in an emerging culture. The goal will not be accomplished by*

abandoning the past, but by seeking out the transcultural framework of faith (i.e., the rule of faith) that has been blessed by sociocultural particularity in every period of church history. Therefore, the point of integration with anew culture is not to restore the cultural form of Christianity, but to recover the universally accepted framework of faith that originated with the apostles, was developed by the Fathers, and has been handed down by the church in its liturgical and theological traditions... Our calling is not to reinvent the Christian faith but, in keeping with the past, to carry forward what the church has affirmed from its beginning.” (Robert Webber, Ancient-Future Church, Baker Books, 1999, 17).