

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH - LESSON 1: BEGINNINGS OF APOSTASY (A.D. 30-325)

INTRODUCTION: For the next three months, we will study the history of the church. Such a study has the following worthwhile goals:

1. To have a greater appreciation for the "church" as it is revealed in the New Testament.
 - a. To appreciate the "how" of unity being exposed to the
 - b. "how" of division.
 - b. To appreciate the plea for being a church according to the New Testament pattern.
2. To serve as a warning against departures from the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, regardless how small or inconsequential they seem at the time.
3. To know the beginnings and background of major religious groups in order to help others find their way out of the maze of the many conflicting religious doctrines and practices.
 - a. An acquaintance with church history may be the opening you need to lead those searching for undenominational Christianity to Christ.

I. EARLY CHURCH WARNED OF APOSTASY

A. Acts 20:28-30

1. "perverse" - to distort, twist
2. Would arise among them.

B. 2 Thess.2:3,4

1. The apostasy is coming - fact beyond question.

C. I Tim. 4:1-4

1. Abstain from meat.
2. Forbidding to marry.

II. APOSTASY BEGINS: DEPARTURE IN ORGANIZATION

A. Changes in eldership.

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1. New Testament Description:
 - a) Elders, bishops, presbyters, pastors all refer to the same men (Acts 20:17,28; I Tim. 4:14; I Pet.5:1; Eph. 4:11)
 - b) Plurality in each congregation (Acts 14:23; 20:17, Phil.1:1).
2. Distinction between bishop and elder began to occur.
3. Monarchical bishops.
 - a) Ignatius wrote between A.D.110-117.
 - (1) One bishop becomes the leader (monarch).
 - (2) He mentions monarchs in at least 5 cities, but not including Rome: Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia and Smyrna.
 - (a) by A.D.160, monarchs were almost universal.
 - (3) He also writes about the "catholic church", meaning universal as opposed to local or particular.
 - (a) Later, the term came to imply orthodoxy.

B. Foundation Being Formed For The Catholic Church

1. Distinguishing characteristics were developed between A.D. 160-190.
 - a) Strong episcopal organization - Bishops generally believed to be the successors to the apostles.
 - b) Credal Standard - "I Believe" - orthodoxy
 - c) Authoritative Canon - Almost all the books now acknowledged as the NT were accepted.
2. The clergy - laity distinction.
 - a) The priesthood of all believers was practically forgotten.
 - b) The laity became dependent upon the clergy for spiritual intercession and priestly service.
3. The Importance of Rome.
 - a) It was claimed that Rome was the only link to the apostles in the West.
 - (1) The destruction of Jerusalem in the second Jewish War (A.D.135) removed it from any claim to the apostolate.
 - b) Irenaeus (late 2nd. century) speaking of the Roman church: "It is a matter of necessity that every church would agree with this church"
 - (1) Exaltation of Mary: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosened by the obedience of Mary. What the virgin Eve had

bound fast through unbelief, thus did the Virgin Mary set free through faith."

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- c) The Roman church called her bishop, "papa", hence "pope". The papacy would not come into focus in the modern sense for several more centuries.
- d) Cyprian (A.D. 200-258)- speaking of Rome:
 - (1) "The chief church whence priestly unity takes its source."
 - (a) While not claiming that Rome should be the judicial head, he did say that the Roman bishop is "first among equals."
- e) As Rome gained in stature, churches in the East became more provincial.

III. NEW DOCTRINES:

A. Asceticism.

- 1. Self-discipline. Suffering and denial was thought to make one closer to God.

B. Ebionism.

- 1. Hebrew "Ebion" means "poor"
 - a. Historian Eusebius equates it with the poor or mean opinion that they had for the person of Christ.
- 2. Some believed he was just a man; others believed he was begotten by the Holy Spirit but denied his pre-existence other than being word or wisdom.
- 3. Position held by some Jewish Christians. Held to some of the teaching of the Old Law.

C. Gnosticism.

- 1. Combination of Pagan and Christianity.
- 2. "knowledge" was mystical.
- 3. Many types but they manifested the following beliefs:
 - a) All matter is evil.

- b) Jesus' deity is disputed.
 - c) His incarnation is denied.
4. Leading gnostics: Height of influence A.D. 135-160
- a) Basilides of Alexandria
 - b) Valentinus of Rome

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D. Marcion (A.D.139)

1. He collected and edited 10 of Paul's letters, and with the gospel of Luke comprised his canon (cf. Lk.5:36-37).
 - a) Rejected those N.T. books which seemed too Jewish.
2. In churches organized by Marcion, celibacy was enforced, since sexual union perpetuated the flesh, which was evil.

E. Montanism (A.D. 156)

1. It is claimed that at his baptism, he spoke with tongues.
2. Believed that Jesus' return was imminent.
3. 1,000 year reign of Christ.
4. He professed to be inspired.
5. Two prophetesses assisted him: Prisca and Maximilla.
6. He and his followers were ascetic.

IV. COUNCIL OF NICEA (MAY OR JUNE - JULY A.D. 325)

A. Called by Constantine:

1. Beginning with decisive battle on Oct. 28, A.D. 312 on the outskirts of Rome, He became sole Ruler of Empire by A.D. 323.
2. Sympathetic to Christians - Christianity given full legal equality, persecution ends, confiscated property returned in A.D.313.

B. Controversy: Eternal Nature of Christ

1. Arius (late 2nd century-early 3rd.century) was a presbyter of a church near Alexandria.
 - a) The Son had a beginning, but...God is without beginning"
 - (1) Since Christ was a created being, he was a different substance from the Father. He was neither fully God nor man.
 - b) At a synod in Alexandria (A.D.320-321), Arius was condemned.

2. Council called to settle this controversy.
 - a) Approximately 300 bishops attended; 6 bishops were from the West.
 - b) Other issues:
 - (1) Celebration of Easter - East vs. West controversy
 - (2) Meletian schism.
 - (3) Baptism of heretics.
 - (4) Status of the "lapsed" in the persecutions.

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V. GREAT CHANGES IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

A. Congregational organization

1. The spirit of the age was centralization, which carried the church toward the episcopate.

B. Clergy - Laity distinction.

C. Doctrinal Defections:

1. Jesus and his relation to the Father was a major source of contention - eventually leading to an East-West division.

D. The emergence of the State/Church alignment.

1. The church becomes the extension of the emperor.
2. Stage set for confrontations between the emperor and bishops.