

Lesson 9  
The Early Church To  
Early Reformation

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# Class Schedule

- **The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)**
- 1. Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church
- 2. The Church in Jerusalem and the Mission to the Gentiles
- 3. 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Conflicts with the State
- 4. Early Apologists
- 5. Defining the Faith
- 6. Christian Life

# Class Outline

- **The Imperial Church (313 to 476 A.D.)**
- 7. The End of Persecution and Beginnings of the Imperial Church
- 8. The New Order
- 9. **Reactions to the New Order**
- 10. The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicea

# Reactions to the New Order

## Lesson 9

“Monks who leave their cells, or seek the company of others, lose their peace, like the fish out of water loses its life.”

– Anthony

# Reactions to the New Order

# Reactions to the New Order

- Amid sweeping change a few Christians sought to show that Constantine was chosen by God to bring the history of both church & empire to its culmination, where both were joined.
- Among those who remained in the church there was a great deal of intellectual activity. There were many theories & doctrines that the rest of the church felt it had to reject. An important one of these theories was Arianism.

# Reactions to the New Order

- Many Christians saw the emperors declaring themselves Christians, & for that reason people flocking to the church was not a blessing, but a significant loss.
- Some who saw matters under this light, but did not want to break communion with the rest of the church, withdrew to the desert, and there led a life of meditation.
- The 4<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a massive exodus of many devout Christians to the deserts of Egypt & Syria.

# Reactions to the New Order

- Others with a negative reaction to the new state of affairs felt that the best course was simply to break communion with the church at large.
- Most Christians' reacted to the new situation with neither total acceptance nor total rejection.
- Since both danger & opportunity was great, leaders faced a difficult task. Perhaps not all of their decisions & attitudes were wise; but even so, this was an age of giants who would shape Christianity & its theology for centuries to come.



# Three Reactions to the New Order

# Accommodation or Striving for Unity?

- As theological debate threatened to rend the church asunder some leaders seemed to not fully understand what was at stake. For many peace & unity of the church were of prime importance.
- Many saw that after many years of great trials, Constantine, & his successors, had been raised up by God to consolidate the faith & the Empire. Faith & empire was not incompatible.

### 3 Examples of How Theology was Beginning to Accommodate the New Situation

- 1. From Poor & Weak to Wealthy & Powerful
- The gospel at 1<sup>st</sup> was all good news to the poor, & the rich had particular difficulty in hearing it or receiving it.
- One of the theological issues that caused concern of some early Christians was how was it possible for a rich person to be saved. Now, riches & pomp came to be seen as divine favor.
- Many could not see the radical change that was taking place as the church became powerful, nor of the dangers involved in that change.

### 3 Examples of How Theology was Beginning to Accommodate the New Situation

- 2. Clerical Aristocracy
- Many were joyous of the ornate churches that were being built, & of the ritual & pomp that evolved to fit them.
- The church began to imitated the customs of the empire, not only in its ritual, but in its social structure.
- Some seemed to be unaware of the clerical aristocracy that was forming from these changes.

## 3 Examples of How Theology was Beginning to Accommodate the New Situation

- 3. The Expectation of the Full Reign of God
- Some set aside or, at least attempted to postponed, this fundamental theme found in the preaching of the early church.
- If Constantine & his successors were the fulfillment of God's plan, they were a representative & agent of the Reign of God.
- Christians no longer had to decide between the two powers (earthly vs. heavenly)

## 3 Examples of How Theology was Beginning to Accommodate the New Situation

- 3. The Expectation of the Full Reign of God
- Christian hope became to be relegated to the future life, & seemed to have little to do with the present world.
- Religion tended to become a way to gain access to heaven, rather than to serve God in this life & the next.
- The earlier notion that with the resurrection of Christ a new age had dawned, & that by baptism & communion service Christians become participates in it, was now abandoned.
- Christian hope was now limited to the afterlife.
- It would be many centuries before eschatology would once again become a central theme in Christian theology.

# Monastic Reaction

- When peace of the church seemed assured, many saw that very assurance as a snare of Satan.
- Many found an answer in the monastic life: to flee human society, to leave everything behind, to dominate the body & its passions, which gave way to temptations.

# Origins of Monasticism

- Before Constantine, there had been Christians who, for various reasons, had felt called to an unusual style of life.
- “Widows & virgins” – those women who chose not to marry or to remarry, but to devote all their time & energies to the work of the church.
- Paul wrote, “those who chose not to marry had greater freedom to serve the Lord.”
- If the end of time was at hand, it made no sense to marry & to begin the sedentary life of those who are making plans for the future.
- Jesus said that in heaven, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage.”
- Stoic doctrine, widespread at that time, held that passions were the enemy of true wisdom.



# 1<sup>st</sup> Monks of the Desert

- The word “monk” is derived from the Greek word *monachos*, meaning “solitary.”
- One of the driving motivations for early monks was solitude. Society, with its noise and many activities, was a distraction from monastic goals.
- Deserts were not attractive due to their hardship, but because of their inaccessibility.
- Monasticism was not the invention of an individual, but rather a mass exodus, that suddenly affected thousands of people.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Monks of the Desert

- The earliest monks fled society and lived the life of a hermit.
- Some planted gardens, but some of them earned their living weaving baskets & mats that they then traded for bread & oil.
- Their belongings were limited to strictly necessary clothing, and a mat to sleep on.
- In some areas, buildings were erected where the hermits gathered on Sat, & on Sun for communion & a common meal.
- Most frowned on the possession of books. They taught each other, by heart, entire books of the Bible, particularly the Psalms & the NT.
- Some monks came to live together for a time. Especially young monks who wanted to garner wisdom from those highly regarded.

# Communal Monasticism

- Increasingly, solitary monasticism gave way to a communal form of monastic life.
- “Solitary” came to mean not that they lived alone, but that they lived in solitude from the world.
- If the center of Christian life is love, there was some who questioned how one living absolutely alone, could practice loving of neighbor.
- Communal life was born of natural tendency to gather around particularly saintly leaders, and out of the very nature of the gospel.
- Some communities came to believe that exaggerated poverty was not necessary. However, a highly frugal, disciplined lifestyle remained.

# Communal Monasticism

- As communities grew housing units became separated by distance.
- Each monk had to obey his superiors, a hierarchical order was clearly defined. The head of a housing unit reported to the overall superior or his deputies. These were called “abbots.”
- Women’s communities were organized in a similar fashion, & where ruled over by the abbots.

# Change With In Monasticism

- As years went by, many monks came to the conclusion that since their life was holier than most bishops, it was they who should decided what was proper Christian teaching.
- In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, it came to a point were rioting monks would seek to impose by force & violence what they considered to be orthodox doctrine.

# Spread of the Monastic Idea

- Eventually, a number of bishops & scholars saw the value of monastic witness for the daily life of the church. Some leaders sought to organize their life in such a way to reflect the monastic ideas of discipline & renunciation.
- In its earliest times monasticism existed apart & even in opposition to the hierarchy, eventually its greatest impact was made through some of the members of the hierarchy.
- The idea of a monastic life slowly spread far beyond the deserts and well into the western reaches of the Empire.

# Summary of Monasticism

- All in all, there was a common thread: the conviction that the ideal Christian life was one of personal poverty & sharing of goods.
- The earlier practice of Christian communities, sharing their goods among members, now became the hallmark of monasticism.
- This was expected of monks & nuns, but not the rest of the church.

# Factoids

- 1. It was during the period of early monasticism the mainline church began to use the title “priests” for their ministers.
- 2. In France a monk by the name of Martin, who had no money, tore his cape in half to share with a beggar. For centuries, in a small church, a piece of cloth reputed to be Martin’s cape was hung. From that pieced of cape – capella – the little church came to be called a “chapel,” and those who served in it, “chaplains.”



# The Donatus Fracture

# Schismatic Reactions

- One of the earliest fractures of this period was later called “Donatism,” which died out in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- This fracture had not only theological, but had political & economic consequences.
- The issue evolved around the question of what to do with those who denied the faith under persecution & those who turned over Scripture to the Roman officials.
- Some church leaders sought an easy return to the church, while others sought harsher treatment.
- In the end it all centered on the election of a bishop & the government’s reaction to this division.

# Fracture

- When Caecilian (easy restoration) was elected bishop of Carthage, a rival bishop, Donatus (hard restoration) claimed the election had be irregular.
- Followers of Donatus claimed that baptisms, communion, etc. offered by Caecilian was invalid.
- The boarder church was concerned by this division.
- Constantine, who sought unity in his empire, sent instructions to acknowledge only Caecilian & those in his communion.
- Constantine's legislation had important practical consequences since the government offered many perks to officially recognized church leadership. (i.e. tax exemption, etc.)

# Fracture

- Caecilian & his followers responded that validity of the sacraments and other acts cannot be made dependent on the worthiness of the one administering them. Otherwise, all Christians would be in constant doubt about the validity of their own baptism or the communion of which they had partaken.
- Caecilian followers accepted the baptism of Donatists, but the latter did not receive the former.
- For one party the holiness of the church consisted of the holiness of its members: for the other, it was grounded in the holiness of the Lord.

