

Sunday, November 14, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 9 Overview of the Patristic Period

Divergent Views of Church History Emerge

- We have discussed at length the lack of historical evidence that exists between the end of the Acts period and the middle of the 2nd century.
- Mark A. Noll, author of *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, suggests that when historians reflect back on this era of historical darkness that Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant views of church history develop.
- “Responsible historians, Christian or not, try to base their accounts of the early church as securely as possible on the best available evidence. Yet precisely because that evidence is so sparse, the standpoint of the historians—that is, the systems of belief and assumption that historians bring to their tasks—becomes a most important factor for interpretations of early Christian history.” (Noll, 32)
- The Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant interpretations of early Christian history hinges on the basic assumptions of each theological system concerning the way in which God guides the church. (Noll, 33)
 - *Roman Catholic*—belief in the apostolic origin of church tradition and the apostolic character of the bishop’s office means that Catholic interpretations of the early church are likely to see a more central, more positive role for the actions of the early bishops in construing the institutions, organizing the sacred writings, and guiding the worship of believers. (Noll, 33)
 - *Orthodox*—see God’s guidance of the church through organic processes of worship, liturgy, and corporate actions means that Orthodox interpretations of the early church are likely to see common patters of prayer, gradually evolving habits in New Testament churches, and consensus growing up around creedal statements as the crucial shapers of early Christian history. (Noll, 33)
 - *Protestant*—belief in *Sola Scriptura* along with Protestant suspicion of human institutions means that Protestant interpretations of the early church are likely to stress the foundational role of the New Testament writings and to be more willing than either Catholics or the Orthodox to find flaws in early church practices or decisions. (Noll, 33)
- While I agree with the Protestant perspective articulated by Noll it is still incomplete, because it fails to take into account II Timothy as a handbook on the apostasy of the New Testament church.

Naming the Time Period

- Church historians have offered various titles to describe the time period between 100 and 315 AD

- “The term “patristic” come from the Latin word *pater*, “father,” and designates both the period of the church fathers, and the distinctive ideas which came to develop within this period.” (McGrath, 7)
- According to Alister McGrath *The Patristic Period* is vaguely identified as the period from the 100 AD and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. (McGrath, 7)
- Generally speaking there are three classification used for the church fathers.
 - Ante-Nicene Fathers—those living before the Council of Nicaea
 - Nicene—those living contemporary with the Council of Nicaea
 - Post-Nicene Fathers—those living after the Council of Nicaea
- Bruce L. Shelly, author of *Church History in Plain Language*, offers a alternative titled for the period between 100 and 312 AD. Shelly calls it The Age of Catholic Christianity.
- Shelley states the following as justification for this title,
 - “In this period Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and probably east to India. Christians realized that they were a part of a rapidly expanding movement. They called it “catholic.” This suggested that it was universal, in spite of pagan ridicule and Roman persecution, and it was the true faith, in opposition to all prevision of Jesus’ teachings. To face the challenges of their times Christians turned increasingly to their bishops for spiritual leadership. Catholic Christianity, therefore, was marked by a universal vision, by orthodox beliefs, and by Episcopal Church government.” (Shelley, 25)
- While I don’t like calling this time period The Age of Catholic Christianity there is little doubt that the ecclesiastical monster know to history as the Roman Catholic Church has its roots in this time period.

Centers of Theological Influence

- *Antioch*—as we have already seen it was from Antioch of Syria that Paul and Barnabas were sent westward on their missionary journeys. As the third largest city in the Roman Empire, Antioch the church in Antioch exerted widespread influence throughout Syria. By the end of the fourth century Antioch was a city of half a million people and half of these were Christians. (Shelley, 29)
- *Rome*—as the heart of the Roman Empire that church at Rome was obviously influential. Modern historians have estimated that despite persecutions some 30,000 Christians lived in Rome by 250 AD. With clear spiritual ties to Paul, and legendary ties to Peter the church at Rome gained the respect and admiration of Christians throughout the empire. Eventually, the bishop of Rome is going to emerge as the leaders of Catholic Christianity. (Shelley, 31)
- *Alexandria*—named after Alexander and Great and located in modern Egypt, the church at Alexandria emerged as a center of Christian theological education. A distinctive style of theology came to be associated with this city reflecting its long-standing associating

what Platonic philosophy. (McGrath, 5) In the end, we will see that Alexandria became a leading center for theological and textual corruption.

Scriptural View of the Church Fathers

- It is a commonly held view amongst Protestant Evangelical Christians that the writings of the church fathers are the most organic and accurate interpretations of Christian Scripture and theology in existence.
- When one compares to the writings of the church fathers with the Pauline revelation clearly recorded in Scripture the realities become vividly clear:
 - The pace of apostasy that was already underway during Paul's life time quickens with the ministry of the church fathers. "In short, Christendom's apostasy was for the greater part, amplified and intensified by the early church fathers and the writings they left behind." (Barlow, 118)
 - The church fathers disregard Colossians 2:8 and introduced pagan Greek philosophy into the theological discussion rather than relying solely upon Scripture as their authority. (Barlow, 115-116)
- In *The Bible or the Church*, Sir Robert Anderson writes, "What the Old Testament scriptures were to the writers of the New Testament is what the writings of the Greek philosophers and the cults of classic paganism were to the church fathers." (quoted in Barlow, 116)
- Sir Robert Anderson points out that the patristic fathers were the primary group of men who laid the foundation of errors upon which apostate Christendom has been built. Consider the following telling quotes from Sir Robert Anderson:
 - "But on this subject, our present day theology, so far from reflecting the wisdom and knowledge of God, partakes of the ignorance and the errors of the patristic theologians. Plain words, I repeat, are needed here. For the writings of the church fathers affords a vantage ground from Rominish attacks upon the citadel of divine truth and the insidious efforts of German skepticism to undermine its very foundation." (*The Bible or The Church*, quoted in Barlow, 120)
 - "A forgotten truth I call it, for in common with the Mystery truths of the distinctively Christian revelation, it was lost in the interval of time between the Apostolic Age and the era of the Patristic Theologians. And our standard theology is so dominated by the writing of the fathers that it is still untouched by the light of the evangelical revival." (*Forgotten Truths*, quoted in Barlow, 120)
- The far reaching influence of the Patristic Fathers is felt in modern times. The unique message, ministry, and apostleship of Paul is not mentioned in modern catechism classes, or mainline denominational literature because it is not found in the "traditional" writings of the church fathers.
- The reason Pauline truth is not tolerated in modern denominational circles is because it is breaks with tradition. In the end, event the Protestants which scream so loudly for the

final authority of Scripture based much of their doctrine and practice on traditions that date back to the church fathers.

- Modern replacement theology is a prime example of how tradition continues to cloud the theological viewpoint of modern evangelicals. Consider the following example.
 - “It is noteworthy that while the writers of the New Testament, one and all, were men who, like Timothy, had known the Hebrew Scriptures from infancy, the patristic theologians were converts from paganism and having regard to their comparative want of acquaintance with the Old Testament, it is not strange perhaps that in the then condition of the Jewish people, crushed apparently beyond hope of recovery by the judgments that had overwhelmed them, the belief prevailed that God has cast away his people, forever whom he foreknow. . . and Old Testament prophecy relating to the future glory of Israel was spiritualized to mean the present glory of the church.” (Sir Robert Anderson, *The Bible or the Church*, quoted in Barlow, 124)
- Once this mistaken notion was assimilated into Christian thought it became logical to assume that since God was forever finished with Israel that the Church must be “Spiritual Israel. As a result, all of Israel’s promises were spiritualized and applied to the church the body of Christ. (Barlow, 124-125)
- Essentially there are two ways in which false teaching crept into the teachings and traditions of Christendom.
 - Extra-Biblical—these are beliefs and practices that are undeniably rooted in sources other than Scripture.
 - Extra-Dispensational—doctrines that are in the Bible but were never intended to be part of the theology and practices of this present dispensation.
- The most tragic impact of the church fathers was that the Body of Christ lost the glory of its present mission and purpose by becoming a hybrid, a bastard offspring of Christianity and Judaism. This mixture of pagan philosophy, Judaism, and Scripture results in formation of Christendom.

Topics Requiring Further Study

- It is not possible or prudent to study every possible event, person, doctrine, or heresy from the Patriotic Period. Therefore, we will focus our study of this time period on the following important topics.
 - The Canon of Scripture
 - Episcopacy and the Emergence of the Catholic Church
 - Alexandria—Hot bed of Theological and Textual Corruption

Works Cited

- Barlow, R. Dawson. *The Apostasy of the Christian Church*. Erie, PA: Seedsower Publications, 2005.
- McGrath, Alister. *Christian Theology An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1994.
- Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.
- Shelly, Bruce. *Church History in Plain Language*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1982.