

Chapter 39 Addendum – Emperor Constantine to the Protestant Reformation

Early in the development of the church there was a tendency for “false teachers” to attempt to pervert the gospel message. Some early heresies were dismantled even by the apostles themselves. Others were quickly halted by the early church fathers, often through formal statement of creeds.

Ebionism is the heresy of attempting to reach salvation by keeping of laws—tantamount to what the Jews believed and the opposite of the teaching of Jesus of salvation by grace. Ebionism developed in Palestine during the time of the apostles, where people were interested in maintaining a lifestyle of law-keeping. However, the heresy generally denied the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, and the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Ebionism essentially disappeared by the fifth century.

Gnosticism, also having its genesis during the time of the apostles, taught that all matter was evil and that spirit was good. Hence, an immediate dilemma existed of how a good God could create an entirely evil world. While Christ was thought to be an emissary of light, atonement through his death was not considered necessary. Many Gnostics considered the Messiah’s body to be merely an appearance. Salvation could be obtained by ordinary church members by faith and good works (the essentials of the sacrifice of Jesus and the resurrection were denied in regards to salvation). Gnostics denied the Holy Trinity.

Early church fathers (especially Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus) dealt quickly and forcefully with the heresy of Gnosticism. The *Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus* (c. 215 AD) was intended to combat Gnosticism and is believed to be the forerunner of the current day *Apostle’s Creed*. While the early church fathers were quite effective in greatly reducing the threat of Gnosticism, the heresy wasn’t entirely eliminated. Even today, mind science cults (e.g. Christian Science, Church of Religious Science, and Unity School of Christianity) are based in large part on Gnostic doctrine.

Memorize This:

Gnosticism, which denies the role of Christ, was an early Christian heresy that still has lasting impact in that it is the foundation for mind science cults. It was rigorously attacked as heresy by early church fathers, and today’s Apostle’s Creed is largely combat the philosophy.

Monarchianism was essentially a doctrinal error held by groups of people within the early church. Monarchians had difficulty maintaining the unity of the Godhead in the face of Trinitarianism. In other words, like many people today they wondered how three distinct “persons” could exist in one God. To attempt to reconcile this problem, they held various views. Some felt that the Father alone held personal attributes and that the Son and Holy Spirit were impersonal. Others felt that the three persons of the Godhead were not distinct, divine persons; but were essentially modes of expression of who God was. The early church fathers essentially eliminated Monarchianism, although occasionally its doctrinal ideas show up over the centuries.

As indicated earlier, Arianism developed in the early fourth century by a north African priest named Arius (pp. 767). The heresy held that the Father alone was divine and that Christ was a subordinate being. The theological stumbling block for Arian doctrine was the generally accepted philosophical viewpoint that only God, himself, could reconcile a fallen Man to a perfect and holy God. Hence the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross would only have meaning if, in fact, he were God incarnate. Therefore, Arianism was rejected by the early church and was renounced at the council of Nicaea with the proclamation of the Nicene Creed of 325 AD.

Although Arianism had a relatively short life as a *major* factor in the early development of Christianity, it continued to be troublesome and expanded into Western Europe. Its doctrine has persisted in various cults throughout the centuries and was not really absorbed (for the most part) into orthodoxy until the seventh century. Even today, the Jehovah’s Witness cult and extreme Unitarianism supports Arianistic doctrine.

The final of the three ecumenical creeds widely used in Western Christendom (others being the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed) was the Athanasian Creed. This creed was a comprehensive statement of the Christian faith with forty clauses, each carefully constructed to

present a distinct proposition. Among other things, the creed stresses a reconciliation of the paradox of the Holy Trinity—attempting to present it in a way that would rebuke common heresies. It also clearly expresses the church's faith in the incarnation of God and the divinity of Jesus.

Traditionally its authorship was by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in the fourth century. However later scholars (both Protestant and Catholic) agree that there is sufficient evidence to indicate its final form was developed by another author(s) at a later date. Nevertheless, it is a widely accepted statement of faith that was entrenched at the time of the Reformation.

Important Information:

The Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed were the three major creeds of early Christendom that have defined the Christian faith for centuries. Originally they were written to rebuke common heresies.

The Early Medieval Church

Early in Church history, basic guiding principles of obedience to bishops, deacons and elders were established. Ignatius (c. 110), Irenaeus (c. 150), and Cyprian (c. 246) all helped establish the governance of the Church. All stressed obedience to the leadership. By the middle of the third century, it was generally held that outside of the universal Church there was no salvation. Apostolic authority was considered to be given first, to Peter, and thereafter to ruling bishops who were the successors to the apostles. Cyprian further asserted the priestly function of the clergy. The term "pope" (the overall leader of the Church), is now sometimes applied all the way back in history to Peter, with the first popes being Peter (32-67), Linus (67-76), Anacletus (76-88), Clement I (88-97), Evaristus (97-105) and Alexander I (105-115).

By the Council of Nicea (325 AD) the hierarchy of leadership had been established with local authority granted to bishops, who reported to regional bishops with overall authority given to the Roman bishop (today named the pope). This construction is not surprising given that it was Constantine, who initially was the Emperor of Rome (and later the entire empire) who ended the persecution of Christians. Constantine established himself as one of the leaders in the church—which was not unusual at the time given that prior emperors became so involved as to consider themselves to be gods. For example, Constantine was intimately involved in the controversy of Arianism that led him to convene the council of Nicea.

As Constantine later established the new capital of the Roman Empire to be Constantinople (in 330 AD) there was a desire to create a base of religious authority there. The solution was to make the bishop of Constantinople second in importance to the bishop of Rome, at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 BC. Naturally this action subjugated the bishops of Alexandria and Antioch, who were powerful at the time. Thusly, the stage was set for a future power struggle between development of the church in Constantinople in the east, and the Church in Rome in the west.

There are several reasons why Rome predominated in early church development:

1. Its apostolic foundation—the leading apostles, Paul and Peter (considered the first in the apostolic procession); both had strong connections with Rome.
2. The bishop was initially established as superior—as indicated Constantine originally established the bishop of Rome above all others.
3. Political power in Rome declined after 330—this made the power of the Church of Rome more influential than ever since it then took over much of the responsibilities of the government.
4. The doctrine of the Church of Rome was stable—while the church in Constantinople (a later rival seat) had many doctrinal controversies.

The stature of the papacy was greatly enhanced during the first 250 years by some early leaders that used the influence of the Church politically. Bishop Leo I of Rome (440-461) used statesmanship to prevent Attila the Hun from ransacking Rome in 452. Likewise, he prevented the city from suffering from mass murder at the hands of Genseric the Vandal in 455. Leo I also was responsible for establishing uniformity of Church government and doctrine throughout most of the Western Roman Empire. As part of his organization, he defined the chain of authority of

church—asserting that apostolic authority started with Peter and continued through his successors in Rome.

Bishop Gelasius (492-496) placed a key theological role by influencing the populace and political leaders with the concept that there were two realms of rule—the spiritual and the temporal. While the temporal rule was readily granted to emperors and kings, Gelasius maintained that the spiritual rule was by God. His observations caused Gelasius to be granted the title “Vicar of Christ” in 495.

Pope Gregory the Great

One of the most influential people in the Church was Gregory the Great (540-604). Born into a wealthy, noble and devout family, he favored a monastic way of life. However he was educated as a civil administrator and was called into public life by Pope Pelagius II to represent the Roman bishop at Constantinople. His education, experience and natural ability eventually led to his position of Pope.

Gregory’s importance was largely due to an Empire that was in disarray at the time. He raised an army to meet the Lombards, eventually reaching a peaceful arrangement in 592-593. He organized the papal government into a smoothly functioning system throughout the Western empire, which had previously fallen into decay.

Gregory also introduced and standardized many liturgical changes into the church (though he did not introduce the “Gregorian Chant” which was named after him). Gregory also coordinated the convergence of various lines of theological thought within the church. Gregory placed tradition on an equal footing as scripture in determining dogma, something the Protestant Church later disputed during the reformation.

Gregory also had great impact due to his teaching and writings. His book, *Pastoral Rule*, became the standard handbook for the instruction of bishops in the care of their flock. Gregory was the first pope to also be a monk, and he promoted asceticism, especially celibacy for the priests. His teachings still impact the Roman Catholic Church today.

Finally, Gregory was a great missionary. He sent forty monks to England in 596, who had great success, especially in Canterbury, which became the religious capital in England, and the seat of the archbishop.

The seventh century, after Gregory, lost most of the papal momentum he had gained. There were many conflicts between western political systems and the Church. During this period, there was a rise in monastic activity. There were also struggles between monks of Ireland and Roman Christianity. In England, the local monks struggled for supremacy with the Irish monks who were previously there. (The Irish monks had particular missionary zeal ever since the fifth century, when such people as St. Patrick spread the gospel throughout the West.) Eventually the Roman papacy succeeded in gaining control of the conflict.

Important Information:

Pope Gregory the Great was one of the most important popes in church history. He assisted in building an army to defeat the Lombards and in bringing order to a church that was in decay at the time. His teaching and writings had vast impact on the church, some of which still is in place today, especially in the Roman Catholic Church.

Islam

In the seventh century, Islam became a significant threat to Christianity. Mohammed made his famous flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD and began his preaching. The religion quickly gained strength in western Arabia. It was particularly successful because:

1. It promised material and other gains to those who participated.
2. The Roman Empire was decaying from within and being exhausted from the wars it was fighting from without.
3. Romans were taxing people highly to finance wars.
4. They were excommunicating many for a number of heresies.
5. The Muslims did not tax other Muslims, only those conquered who were not Muslim.

6. The development of image worship in the Catholic Church made it appear polytheistic to both Muslims and many Christians.

Memorize This:

In the seventh century Islam rapidly expanded due to a combination of things ranging from more attractive “promises” of the religion, to financial reasons due to heavy taxation.

Following Mohammed, the expansion of Islam continued. After the Arabian peninsula was secured, the Muslims started systematically attacking the Roman provinces. Omar (634-644) conquered Damascus, Jerusalem and much of Egypt. Between 685 and 705, the conquest of Egypt was essentially completed. Successive leaders conquered northern Africa and proceeded into Europe.

Eventually, when Pope Gregory II came into power (715-731) there was a stabilizing force within the Church that allowed for great advance and hope of slowing the Muslims. The Church expanded amongst the pagan people of Holland and Denmark.

Pope Gregory III (731-741) presided over a period of increasing cooperation between the kings and the Church. The Lombards threatened Italy, the Muslims (Moors) threatened Western Europe, and in many cases the king would come to the aid of the Church.

In 751 Pope Zacharias recognized Pepin as the king of the Franks. Later, when the Lombards threatened to take Rome, this appointment resulted in protection of the Pope through the Alps. A continuing state of cooperation between Pope Zacharias and Pepin, eventually resulted in the granting (by Pepin) of territory to the Roman church, which resulted in the birth of the Papal State.

By the end of the reign of Pope Zacharias, the Lombards were advancing through northern Italy and threatening the papacy itself. At this juncture, the Pope turned to the Franks for help.

The Rise of Church-State Influence

Starting in 800 AD, several events occurred that forever changed the development and spread of Christianity. For the first time, there was an integration of various facets of the church with the political systems of the day—initiated in reign of Charlemagne.

Charlemagne & the Holy Roman Church

On Christmas day, 800 AD, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne “emperor of the Romans.” Apparently Charlemagne took that to mean he would be responsible for a new **Holy Christian Empire** (a new alliance between church and state), which he established and which remained until Napoleon abolished it in 1806. As a result, Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. Anyone born into the vast area of the Roman Catholic Church was baptized into the Church, and remained in it through life. The administration of the church was highly systematized, starting with leadership in Rome and continuing down to the local level with a hierarchy of bishops.

Charlemagne’s Holy Roman Catholic Church Empire declined rapidly after his death. Subsequent leaders often engaged in power struggles with the church and corruption became prominent. Often positions within the papacy could be bought, and sometimes military and political actions were taken based on the choice of the pope at the time. In spite of this, the church spread from 800 until 1073, and eventually spread throughout most of today’s Europe.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Split

As indicated earlier, a seat of power for the church was established in Constantinople by Constantine (in addition to the seat of power in Rome). Through the years, this created division and controversy over a number of things, yet in general, the two leadership bodies co-existed for several centuries.

One of the earliest issues that caused the split between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church was the perceived “worship of idols” by the Catholics. The Roman Catholics came under attack by the Muslims and many Christians alike. Emperor Leo the

Isaurian issued a decree against the use of idols. Pope Gregory II (c. 730) countered by denouncing Leo by stating that politics had no place in determining church conduct. The conflict on this issue continued until a council convened in 843 declared that use of images of pictures (but not including statues) was acceptable.

Also theologically, the Roman Catholics believed that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone, while the Eastern Orthodox Church believed that such a belief diminished the role and deity of Jesus.

And a myriad of other differences and problems caused the churches to seek division including: (1) unwillingness to be subservient to each other, (2) a subservience to the government in the east, and independence in the west, (3) numerous cultural and liturgical differences.

Important Information:

The Greek Orthodox Church split away from the Roman Catholic Church over a long period of time (although a traditional "date" of 1054 AD is given for the split). Reasons for the split are several including a difference of opinion over utilization of religious images, unwillingness by either to be subservient, and numerous cultural and liturgical differences.

The Reforms of Hildebrand

The period from 1073 (when Pope Hildebrand came into power) until 1305, represented the peak of the papacy. Hildebrand instituted several reforms including:

1. The election of the pope through the college of cardinals
2. The prohibition of marriage of the clergy
3. The renunciation of the selling of church offices
4. Church administration procedures
5. The investiture of clerics by secular leaders (in which secular leaders granted spiritual "superiority" to their appointments).

These reforms impacted the church for the next 250 years, a period of time when the papacy was at its peak in its relationships with various governments. All was not perfect, however, most evidenced by the struggle between Pope Gregory VII and Henry VI, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. A series of volleys between the two using such tactics as excommunication, deposition and courting of public opinion, eventually led to the exile of Gregory—although the view Gregory fought so hard for (correcting of investiture) eventually prevailed.

The Crusades

Perhaps it was the strength of the papacy in coordination with governments that set the stage for a series of crusades to the holy lands starting in 1095. The advance of the Seljuk Turks from the East ignited the call for a crusade from the Byzantine emperor Alexis I. There were many stories of atrocities and suffering of the pilgrims to the holy land at the hands of the Turks.

In response, a large number of crusaders, primarily from Europe, gathered and eventually took Jerusalem in 1099. There they set up a kingdom, and established crusader states throughout the region.

As years passed, the region was repeatedly attacked and additional crusades took place (in 1147, 1189-1229, and others). The crusaders were often glamorized as (even today as "knights in shining armor"). While many upheld strong Christian principles and were a positive influence, others were guilty of the atrocities they blamed on their enemies—including pillaging, rape and even murder; sometimes even of Christians. Of course the pope denounced such actions. The crusades ended in failure with Jerusalem falling to Egypt in 1244.

The Inquisition and Decline of the Papacy

Although it had been under development a long time, the Inquisition came into its final form under the reign of Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241). In short, the Inquisition was a system of

inquiring into the potential spread of heresy before the Tribunal Roman Catholics. People suspected of heresy were given secret trials (generally by Dominicans or Franciscans). The trials were usually far from fair, since anyone who might consider assisting in a Tribunal defense, would then be accused of heresy himself. Confessions were often excised by scourging, fines, imprisonment or even torture.

The period from the early thirteenth century to 1517—the year Martin Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation—is perhaps the darkest period in the history of the church. While the Inquisition had the noble purpose of eliminating heresy, there were obviously serious biblical and human rights problems with the means in which it was implemented. Yet this was only one of several reasons why the papacy declined.

There were economic-political reasons why the papacy was destined to decline as well. First, the states in the Holy Roman Empire were becoming stronger and more nationalized. This lessened the need or desire to be led by the papacy in Rome. Second, the cost of maintaining a growing system of collecting and securing the oppressive monetary “needs” of the Church was becoming intolerable. Also there was a major decline in moral laxity of the churchmen that accompanied a general secularization of the Church at the time.

The period was also initiated with serious political problems. Near its start (from 1305-1377), the papacy was actually ruled from Avignon, France due to a dispute caused when Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed that all state rulers were “subject” to him as a mandate for salvation. Angry Philip IV of France, had Boniface arrested and initiated a series of papal changes that ruled from Avignon for a period of about seventy years (often referred to as the “Babylonian Captivity”).

Even more serious to the papacy was a schism from the years 1378-1417. It started only a few months after the election of Pope Urban VI, who quickly demonstrated total incompetence. Hoping to correct the problem the electing cardinals left the city and declared the election null and void, electing Clement VII as pope. Urban, however, refused to step down, and as a result, political leaders lined up behind the pope of their choice.

In order to “solve” the problem, a council was called at Pisa in 1409, in which the two popes would be deposed and a third elected in their place. However, none of the popes stepped down, and eventually there were three popes which lasted for a few years. In 1417, all three popes were deposed and a single one was elected to reside permanently in Rome.

Fascinating Facts:

Key events during the church development period are:

- 215 AD – *Interrogatory Creed of Hippolytus* (forerunner to *Apostle’s Creed*)
- 440 - 461 AD – Bishop Leo I prevents Atila the Hun from ransacking Rome
- 592 AD – Pope Gregory the Great reaches peaceful agreement with Lombards
- 622 AD – Mohammed flees from Mecca to Medina
- 715 AD – Pope Gregory II brings stabilizing force to church
- 731 AD – Pope Gregory III, increased cooperation between church and state
- 800 AD – Charlemagne crowned emperor of new Holy Roman Empire
- 1054 AD – Traditional date for split of Greek Orthodox Church
- 1095 AD – Beginning of crusades
- 1227 AD – Inquisition comes into final form under Pope Gregory IX
- 1378 - 1417 – Papacy schism
- 1417 AD – Papacy hits low. Three popes at once, all become deposed

The Reformations

Too much emphasis is often given to the development of Protestantism during the period of the Reformation, and not enough emphasis on the need to heal a Church that had grown very sick. It had become a Church that had strayed far from its apostolic roots and had developed its own dangerous, new heresies. Long before Martin Luther was even alive, there were many within the Church that were outspoken about its decline and heretic practices. As far back as 1176, a wealthy merchant, Peter Waldo, decided to focus away from the traditions and teachings of the Church and back to biblical scripture. In response to Matthew 19:21, he sold most of his holdings and gave the proceeds to the poor.

John Wycliffe, John Hus

One of the most influential of the early reformers was John Wycliffe (1320-1384). Highly educated and born into a noble and devout family, he was effective in reaching both the intellectuals of the time and also the populace—through his team of lay evangelists.

One of Wycliffe's primary missions was to make the Bible available to the common person. To do so, it had to be translated from Latin to English (Jerome's Vulgate, Latin translation, was still the primary translation of the day). Pope Gregory XI condemned Wycliffe for his reformation and translations efforts. Gregory's condemnation was not unique during the darkest years of the church. Its leaders would condemn such new language translations since maintaining the Bible in a language most people did not understand enabled the Church to "tell" the populace "what the Bible said" in order to extract its demands. There ostensible reasoning was that the populace was not intelligent enough to discern the real message of the Bible. Had it not been for Wycliffe's prestige and statesmanship—which was critical to the time because of the Hundred Year's War with France—it is likely that he would have been executed.

Among the reformed beliefs of Wycliffe were:

1. Condemnation of sale of indulgences ("tickets" to avoid purgatory for pay).
2. Rejection of use of relics and necessity of pilgrimages.
3. Rejection of Purgatory as a biblical truth.
4. Reaction against transubstantiation (the idea that the bread and wine of the Eucharist became the actual body and blood of Christ).
5. The belief that Christ was the true head of the Church, not the pope.

In 1401 the followers of Wycliffe were suppressed by force under the direction of the Church. Wycliffe's followers remained, however, and simply went underground.

About the same time, John Hus (1372-1414) of the University of Prague, was independently reaching reformist viewpoints quite similarly to those of Wycliffe. He rejected simony (the buying or selling of church pardons or offices), indulgences and other abuses of church tradition and ritual. Like Wycliffe, he insisted that Christ was the head of the Church, not the pope. A major contribution was Hus's great work *On the Church*, which served as a guideline for the reformation in the years to come. Like Wycliffe, Hus was excommunicated and condemned to be burned at the stake for heresy. Yet his movement did not die upon his death. It simply remained underground until the reformation fire reached its full proportion a century later.

Memorize This:

Some of the things the sick church had become involved in that spawned the reformations were: (1) sale of **indulgences** that supposedly reduced one's torture in "purgatory", (2) **simony**, which was the sale of church pardons or offices, and (3) a number of unbiblical beliefs which had crept into the church.

Important Information:

John Wycliffe was one of the great early protestant reformers. He was involved in translating the Bible into English which the church was against because it wanted to maintain control of what the common man "knew" by telling them what the Bible said. He was also against many non biblical ideas such as indulgences, simony, purgatory, transubstantiation, use of certain relics and mandatory pilgrimages, and the claim that the Pope (not Christ) was the head of the church. Wycliff would have probably been executed if his statesmanship in the Hundred Years War with France not been necessary.