

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (5)

The Imperial Church (AD313-476) - Reactions

A. Introduction

1. The Imperial Church was the period of church history between these two significant events: The Edict of Milan in AD313 and the Fall of Rome in AD476.

The Edict of Milan, after Constantine became Emperor of the western part of the Roman Empire, granted religious freedom to Christians.

The Fall of Rome, led to a dramatic increase in the power and influence that the Pope in Rome had.

2. During this period of church history, three big changes took place in the church, the effects of which are still seen in the church today.

Formalism – the church was shaped by the world around them; the services began to reflect the pomp of the civil ceremonies.

Nominalism – suddenly everyone in the Roman Empire was now a Christian; the church was now a mixed community of believers and unbelievers.

Hierarchicalism – the structure of the church emulated Roman organisation; the church was now under state control with the Emperor as the head of the church.

3. With the influence of the world, the presence of unbelievers and the power of the state, the danger was that the apostles' teaching about what to believe and how to live would be lost.

How did the Christians during the time of the Imperial Church respond to these changes?

B. Some responded by embracing it

1. After years of persecution, there were some Christians who saw Constantine's victory and the subsequent Edict of Milan as a direct intervention by God.

Something similar to what happened at the time of the Exodus.

And they were thoroughly grateful for this.

2. One who embraced the changes to the church that came about after Constantine became emperor was Eusebius.

Eusebius was the bishop of Caesarea.

He was responsible for writing a book on church history (Ecclesiastical History) that tells us most of what we know about many of the people who lived, and the events that happened, during the time of the early church.

Although he was neither a close friend of Constantine, and did not have much contact with him, Eusebius was convinced that Constantine was God's chosen instrument and supported the idea of the Emperor being both head of the state and head of the church.

"Looking westward or eastward, looking over the whole earth, and even looking at heaven, always and everywhere I see blessed Constantine leading the same empire." (Eusebius of Caesarea)

3. The common feeling amongst many Christians was with the coming to power of Constantine and the peace he brought to the church, that this was the final triumph of Christianity over its enemies.

It's no surprise that some Christians took their gratitude and embrace of these changes a step further than Eusebius did, and offered sacrifices to the statue of Constantine.

For those who embraced these changes, a moment of crisis would come in AD410 when the city of Rome fell to Alaric and his Goths. Augustine would address this in his book *The City of God*.

C. Some responded by dividing from it

1. In North West Africa, the church was divided over the question of what to do with those Christians who had denied their faith during the time of persecution.

A large number of Christians refused to recognise the new bishop of Carthage, Caecilian, because during the period of persecution under Emperor Diocletian, he had allegedly handed over Bibles to be burned.

Not only did they not recognise him as the bishop, they did not consider his administration of baptism or the Lord's Supper valid either.

2. A rival church was set up, led by a rival bishop named Donatus.

Each church claimed to be the only true 'catholic' church.

The disagreement between the two churches wasn't just over Caecilian's role as bishop; it was also over who made up the church.

The Donatists said that the church on earth must be a pure community made up of only believers. They said the Catholic Church had been corrupted by the world.

The Catholic Church said that the church on earth would always be a mixed community of believers and unbelievers, pointing to the parable of the wheat and tares.

3. Constantine in 312 sent Miltiades, the bishop of Rome to investigate.

A synod was convened and ruled in favour of Caecilian, and so Donatus was excommunicated from the church.

Further synods were held to try and bring reconciliation and peace between the Catholic church and the Donatists, but these failed.

4. In 317 Constantine ordered that if they could not keep the peace or come back into fellowship with the Catholic Church, the Donatists were to be exiled, and their church buildings confiscated.

Donatist churches and their leaders in Carthage and the surrounding area were attacked.

This would be the first time an Emperor used the power of the state to try to force non-conforming Christians to conform.

In this instance, Constantine would be unsuccessful, which he acknowledged in 321 by granting toleration to the Donatists.

This bitter division between the Donatists and the Catholic Church in North West Africa would continue for many more years.

D. Some responded by escaping it

1. There was one final group who did not embrace the changes, but were not willing to divide from the church, so they escaped from it.

They sought to live a holy life away from the corrupting influences of those who had less interest in following Christ.

They were called 'monks' from the Greek meaning 'solitary' or 'a person who lives alone.'

2. Monasticism was not new to this period of church history.

Prior to 313 some Christians were driven out to the desert because of persecution.

Others chose to separate themselves from the world by leaving behind all their wealth, family, comfort, career and ambitions to live the life of a Christian ascetic.

The encouragement to do this came from both the Bible, and Greek philosophy.

They read verses like:

"Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'" (Mark 10:21)

"But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this." (1 Corinthians 7:28)

"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matthew 5:29-30)

But they were also influenced by asceticism that taught the abstinence of worldly pleasures.

The desert (particularly in Egypt) was a popular destination for those who wanted to pursue this lifestyle.

Desert monks lived in extreme poverty, eating only enough to stay alive. Life for them was extremely simple. Most of them earned a living by weaving baskets and mats that they traded for bread and oil. This occupation had the advantage that while weaving they could pray, recite a psalm, or memorise a portion of Scripture.

3. Two famous monks were Paul and Antony.

Paul (228-343) was a young man who fled the persecutions under Decius and Valerianus by going into the desert. There he found a hiding place and spent the rest of his life in prayer living on a diet that was almost exclusively dates.

Antony (251-356) gave all his wealth and went into the desert. He was pursued by other monks who wanted to learn from him, about prayer and contemplation. Eventually he would live near a number of disciples on the condition that they did not visit him too often.

4. The desire for monks to learn from a teacher led to the development of two forms of monasticism.

Skete monasticism – where a small group of up to 12 monks lived together with a more experienced monk who acted as their spiritual director. Sketes would often meet with other sketes for joint services on Sundays.

Cenobitic monasticism – where a number of monks would live together as a community in a monastery (the word originally meant a hermit's cave).

Monks now no longer lived in solitude from people, but in solitude from the world. They saw the truth of Genesis 2:18 which is that people weren't created to live alone.

5. Pachomius is known as the founder of cenobitic monasticism.

He established his first monastery between 318 and 323.

Each Pachomian monastery had a wall around it; several houses in which the monks lived (2-3 in a cell; 20-40 in a house); a common room, kitchen, chapel, hospital and library.

The monks in the monastery lived a common life, working (weaving and farming) and praying and eating together and sharing all their property. Self-denial was not required.

Pachomius wrote a rule. This laid down a schedule or timetable for the daily activities of the community – when the monks were to work, pray, study and so on.

One important aspect of the community was strict obedience to its leader (the Abbot from Aramaic meaning father).

6. Christian women also established communities too.

These women were called nuns, from the feminine form of the Latin word for monk, and their communities, nunneries or convents (meaning gathering place).

There were a variety of reasons why women joined a convent:

Some because they believed God was calling them to live lives of meditation.

Some because of distasteful marriages.

Others were forced to become nuns because their fathers did not want to pay for their weddings.

7. The rise of monasticism brought a number of positive developments to the church.

a) Training – over time churches saw monasteries as the best training ground for ministry, eventually setting the ideal standard for all bishops.

"Godly men normally prepared themselves by monastic discipline to exercise office in church, so that the monasteries might make them fitter and more effective for so great a ministry... these fathers themselves were first trained in monasteries and then became bishops."

b) Translation – a monk named Jerome put together an entirely fresh translation of the Bible into Latin from the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. People at first did not like his translation calling it vulgate (Latin for common or vulgar). It would be the accepted translation of the Bible until the Reformation.

c) Preaching – a monk named John Chrysostom (Golden Mouth) preached verse by verse through the books of the Bible focusing on the original intent of the authors. At the time there was a tendency to look for allegorical meanings that were often unrelated to the text.

d) Educating Children – over time monasteries and convents would be established in the cities, and the monks and nuns would teach thousands of children (as well as nursing the sick and giving hospitality to travellers).

8. Although originally monks and nuns wanted to escape from the changes that had happened, eventually they would become part of the Catholic Church.

By the end of the Imperial Church period of church history, only a bishop could establish a monastery.

E. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. There are things we can learn from each of the different responses of these Christians:

We can and should praise God when the state allows us to get on with the job of making disciples of Jesus, but at the same time we must not confuse the role of the state and the role of the church.

We must be careful about who we allow to be members of the church, but at the same time we must realise that there will be Christians in church traditions or tribes different to ours.

We should be challenged by those men and women who gave up everything for the sake of following Christ, but at the same time we must realise that not everyone will be called by God to do this literally.

2. The positive developments to the church that came about through monasticism should be priorities for us today.

Training – we want churches to be led by men who have received the best training and preparation that's available to them.

Translation – we want the Bible to be translated into language of the people so they can understand what it says.

Preaching – we want expository preaching to be the staple diet of the church.

Educating Children – we want to see children from non-Christian families have an opportunity to hear about Jesus and what He's done for them.