

Church History, Lesson #6

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

From last week...

Constantine's conversion dramatically affected the church. There was a new found prominence, the worship of the church began to become luxurious, church buildings were impressive, and incense, relics, and processions became a part of the services of the church.

What do we think about these changes?

3 Ancient Responses to the "Constantinian" Changes in the Church

1. "Official Theology" and Eusebius of Caesarea

- a. Eusebius was born around 260 AD, most likely in Palestine. He was the bishop of Caesarea and spent most of his life there. This bishopric had responsibility for all of Palestine, including Jerusalem.
- b. He was one of Constantine's admirers.
- c. Eusebius wasn't a courtier in Constantine's pocket, but he wasn't as critical of the Empire and Constantine as he should have been.
- d. His "theology" was a philosophy of history that taught that Christianity was the ultimate goal of history.
 - i. The Hebrew Scriptures and pagan philosophy were both given to prepare the way for Christianity.
 - ii. Constantine's conversion was a key to his argument.
 - iii. He saw the cessation of persecution and the acceptance of the church into the "establishment" as the point to which history had been leading.
- e. Eusebius does not seem to be aware of the dangers of the wealth and ease that the church was now experiencing.
- f. In fact, he writes with pride of the ornate churches that were being built.
- g. However, these churches and their finery seemed to promote a clerical hierarchy that simply reflected the structures of the aristocracy of the empire.
- h. Eusebius and those like him seemed to set aside the emphasis on the coming kingdom of God!
- i. Possible conclusions:
 - i. We need to remember that at least half of what we know about the first 3 centuries of Christianity is due to Eusebius' "Church History".
 - But we have to remember that he was motivated to paint Constantine in a good light.
 - ii. We also have to recognize that MANY Christians like Eusebius were overawed by the mercy of God in ending the persecution.
 - However, we are called to live in an "already / not yet" state of mind and heart, and Eusebius and those like him almost forget the "not yet".

2. Monasticism

- a. The almost exact opposite approach from Eusebius' was monasticism.
- b. Those who chose a monastic life deplored the state of a wealthy and comfortable church. They sought to resist these temptation by going to the desert for solitude and devotion.
- c. Roots of the monastic movement –
 - i. 1 Corinthians 7 – remaining unmarried like Paul provided greater freedom to serve the Lord.
 - ii. Also, if Christians live in constant expectation of the coming of the Lord, why marry and settle down? Instead, just seek and serve the Lord.
 - iii. But there was still a gnostic influence that looked at the body as the prison of the soul and tended to "neglect" the body.
- d. "Monk" comes from the Greek word for "solitary".
- e. The earliest monks that we know much about...
 - i. Anthony we know through Athanasius, and Paul we know through Jerome

f. Pachomius and “communal monasticism”

- i. Pachomius was born around 286 AD in a small village in southern Egypt. His parents were pagans.
 - ii. At a very young age, he was taken from his home and forced to join the army.
 - iii. A group of Christians came to comfort those who were conscripted.
 - iv. He eventually became a monk after being released from the army. Because his brother joined him, they started “communal monasticism”.
 - v. Their basic rules were:
 - give up all your worldly goods
 - absolute obedience to your superiors
 - but since mutual service was a priority, even the superior monks had to serve the others
 - vi. They had services every morning all together that included singing, Scripture reading and prayer. The evening service was similar but in smaller groups.
 - vii. An abbot was in charge of several monasteries.
 - viii. Because these monks were never ordained as priests, they had to go to a nearby church to receive communion. Some almost never received communion.
 - ix. Candidates to join the monastery were forced to stay outside the gate for several days and nights begging to be admitted.
 - x. Many of those admitted weren’t even Christians. They had to be taught and then baptized.
- g. Most early monks lived in the deserts of Egypt. However, monasticism spread throughout the Eastern Roman Empire through those who traveled to Egypt to learn from the monks and then returned home.**
- i. Some of these monks expressed their “discipline” and “solitude” in ostentatious ways, like living on the top of a column in an abandoned temple.
 - ii. But others simply brought a sense of discipline and dedication to the church during times of wealth and comfort.
- h. Martin of Tours**
- i. gave half of his cloak to a beggar... then had a dream of Jesus coming to him with half a cloak... the origin of the meaning of the word “chapel” (cloak) as a small church...
 - ii. When the bishopric of Tours became vacant, the people wanted Martin, but the bishops objected because he was a monk who was often dirty and clothed in rags.
 - iii. However, the people prevailed when Psalm 8.2 was read, and in this way, monks began to be ordained and some of the values of the monastery began to influence the church.
 - iv. In some ways, the monastics became the charitable and the missionary arm of the church.

3. Schism – the Donatists

- a. Some accepted the new comfort of the church after Constantine, some withdrew to solitude and an ascetic lifestyle, some in northern Africa decided that the church had been corrupted and established a parallel church with a separate bishopric.
- b. Once again, there was a division over those who had failed to confess Christ during persecution.
- c. Those who were more rigorous claimed that the new bishop of Carthage (Caecilian) had actually given copies of the Scriptures to the Roman authorities just before persecutions had ended under Constantine. And they appointed their own bishop of Carthage named Majorinus. He died shortly after this and was replaced in his rival bishopric by Donatus who led the group for 50 years. They became known as the Donatists.
- d. Part of the controversy was over theology. If Caecilian was ordained by a “traitor” as the Donatists claimed, then was his ordination valid? The Donatists claimed not, the established bishops said it was valid even if an ordaining priest was disqualified.
Related to this was the question of whether or not communion served by an “unqualified” priest was effective.
- e. The heart of the controversy was the encroaching values of the Roman Empire into the church.
- f. BUT... Some Donatists became so fanatical that they thought that those who died defending the true faith from “heretics” were just as honorable as martyrs from previous days of persecution. Some of them actually jumped off cliffs en masse to achieve this honor.
- g. The Donatist church did not end until the Muslim conquest of North Africa in the 7th Century.