

Sunday, January 2, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 16 The Age of Christian Empire: The Pilgrim Church, Monasteries, and Missions

The Pilgrim Church

- Thus far we have been tracing the development of Christendom and its main proponent the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, we have said little about specific groups that stood against Rome's increasing power.
- E.H. Broadbent, author of *The Pilgrim Church*, offers the following explanation of the term pilgrim church.
 - “The union of Church and State was in all times looked upon by many of the Lord's disciples as contrary to His teaching; but whenever the Church had the power of the State at its command, it used it for the forcible suppression of any who dissented from its system or in any way refused compliance with its demands, and great numbers through indifference or interest or fear yielded at least an outward obedience. There were, however, always some who could not be induced to do this, but who still endeavored to follow Christ, keeping His Word and the doctrine of the apostles. These were continually objects of persecution. (Broadbent, 63-64)
- During the centuries after Constantine, the worldliness and ambition of the clergy grew until they claimed dominion over the possessions and consciences of mankind and enforced their claims with violence. At the same time saints in various places chose to suffer all things at the hands of the Christendom rather than deny Christ or be turned back from following Him. (Broadbent, 64)
- As we have already seen many times throughout this class the word heresy is subjective depending on who is using it and in what context. Many of the people branded heretics in church history are said to be such based upon where they stood in relation to the organized church of Christendom.
- “Their writings, sharing the fate of the writers, have been destroyed to the full extent of the power allowed to their persecutors. Not only so, but histories of them have been promulgated by those in whose interest it was to disseminate the worst inventions against them in order to justify their own cruelties. In such accounts they are depicted as heretics, and evil doctrines are ascribed to them which they repudiated. They are called “sects” and labels are attached to them which they themselves would not acknowledge.” (Broadbent, 64)
- “They usually called themselves Christians, or Brethren, but numerous names were given to them by others in order to create the impression that they represented many new, strange, and unconnected sects . . . It is therefore difficult to trace their history. What their adversaries have written about them must be suspect; words from their own lips wrung out by torture are valueless.” (Broadbent, 64)

- While all their beliefs do not jive with view the views of mid-Acts dispensationalists we can observe much more in common with these saints than the church branding them heretics.
- For organizational purposes, we will consider only those pilgrim groups that fit best into The Age of Christian Empire between 313 and 590 AD. We will only briefly consider the views of each group.
- *Donatists (313-411 AD)*—located in North Africa they had a dispute over whether or not a person who lapsed under the persecution of Diocletian could be ordained as a bishop. The Donatists held that the church must be a church of saints, not sinners, and that sacraments, such as baptism, administered by traitors (Christians who surrendered the Scriptures to the authorities who outlawed possession of them) were invalid. Probably in 311, a new bishop of Carthage was consecrated by someone who had allegedly been a traitor; his opponents consecrated a short-lived rival, who was succeeded by Donatus, after whom the schism was named. The bishops of Rome and Constantine sided with the Catholic faction which argued that a properly penitent person could serve as a bishop. Donatist groups lingered until the time of Augustine in 411, who openly support the use of force to put down rivals to the church. (Shelley, 127-218)
 - Rejected infant baptism in every form while the Catholic Church accepted it. They would baptize no one but adult believers at a time when every Roman Catholic congregation in Africa, Asia, and Europe was dunking or sprinkling babies. The Donatists were killed in large numbers when they refused to submit to Constantine’s ruling. (Ruckman, 84-85, 163-164)
- History is unclear about exactly what the Donatists believed for salvation. In actuality they probably remained fringe Catholicism. The Donatists are important though because they demonstrate the willingness of the state church to kill those who even nominally did not submit to their authority.
- *Priscillian (?-385)*—was a Spaniard of wealth and position, a learned and eloquent man of unusually attainments. In common with many of his class, he was unable to believe the old heathen religions, yet was not attracted by Christianity, and preferred classical literature to the Scriptures. At some point he was converted to Christ and began a life of devotion to God and separation from the world. Only a layman at first he preached and taught the Scriptures diligently. Eventually Priscillian was made Bishop of Avila, but it was not long before he encountered trouble from other Spanish clergy. Synods held in 380 and 384 accused Priscillian of Manichaenism, Gnosticism, witchcraft, immorality, and labeled his followers as “Priscillianists.” Duly condemned, He was turned over to the civil authorities for execution in 385. The prominent bishops, Martin of Tours, and Ambrose of Milan, protest in vain as Priscillian and six other were beheaded. (Broadbent, 58-59)
- E.H. Broadbent records this event as the first instance of the execution of Christians by the Church. The Synod of Treves approved of Priscillian’s execution thereby giving the official sanction of the Roman Church to the execution. “This was confirmed by the Synod of Braga held 176 years later, so that the ruling Church not only persecuted those whom it called Priscillianists, but handed down as history that Priscillian and those who believed as he did were punished for holding Manichean and Gnostic doctrine and

because of the wickedness of their lives. This continued for centuries to be generally received opinion of them.” (Broadbent, 59)

- Remaining true to form, the Church executed a systematic campaign to eradicate Priscillian’s writings. In 1886, eleven of his works were discovered in the library of the University of Wurzburg. Priscillian’s writings reveal that the account handed down about him and his followers was wholly untrue; he and his followers were of high character and were sound in doctrine. He constantly quotes Scripture in support of what he advances, and shows an intimate knowledge of both the Old and New Testament. Moreover, he maintained that salvation was not a magical event brought about by some sacrament, but a spiritual event subject to every man’s conscience. “There is no special official grace, laymen have the Spirit as much as clergy.” (Broadbent, 60-61)
- The clergy felt threatened by men like Priscillian because “they saw in the ordinary believer that which assailed their peculiar position. The power of ‘apostolic succession’ and of the priestly office was shaken by teaching which insisted on holiness and constant renewal of life by the Holy Spirit and communion with God. The distinction between clergy and laity was broken down by this, especially when the magical working of the sacrament was exchanged for a living possession of salvation through faith.” (Broadbent, 61)
- *Nestorius (?-451)*—“the churches which spread so rapidly in Syria and the Persian Empire were shut off from many of the influences which affected the Western churches by difference of language and by political circumstances . . . The Eastern churches kept their simple and scriptural character longer than those of the West. Even in the third century there was no definite organization of the separate churches into one system, the country was not divided into diocese (there might be several bishops in one church at the same time), and the churches were active and successful in spreading the testimony into new regions.” (Broadbent, 90-91)
- “When Constantine made Christianity the state religion in the Roman Empire, the kings of Persia began to suspect those in their own country, whom they called Nazarenes, of having sympathies with, and leanings towards, the rival empire, which they hated and feared.” As a result, the Persian kings subjected the Persian saints to 40 years of persecution resulting in the deaths of some 16,000 believers.” (Broadbent, 91)
- Circumstances in the west would soon have a great impact on the churches in Syria and Persia. Nestorius, a preacher from Antioch was made Bishop of Constantinople in 428. Despite his preaching abilities, Nestorius ran into trouble when he openly questioned the emerging trend to make the Virgin Mary an object of worship. (Broadbent, 96)
- Running contrary to popular opinion, Nestorius was accused of denying the deity of Christ by refusing to exalt Mary. Cyril of Alexandria, a rival bishop seized the opportunity to attack Nestorius and called council at Ephesus to settle the matter. Cyril dominated the meeting and condemned Nestorius before dissenting bishops arrived. After much political wrangling, Nestorius was deposed and banished. (Shelley, 112-113)

- “He did not hold or teach the doctrine attributed to him, and his exclusion, though nominally on a point of doctrine, was really due to personal jealousy on the part of the his Episcopal colleague, Cyril.” (Broadbent, 96)
- A considerable number of bishops, refusing assent to the judgment pronounced on Nestorius were expelled and took refuge in Persia. Where they provided fresh impetus for the spread of the gospel into the Far East. (Hill, 111)
- “The name Nestorian was applied to all the Eastern churches (though they did not themselves accept it, but protested against it) and they were supposed to hold the doctrine improperly attributed to Nestorius and equally unacceptable to them. They were distinct from, and opposed to, both the Byzantine and the Roman churches, and one of themselves wrote of them: ‘they are unjustly and injuriously called Nestorians; whereas Nestorius was never their patriarch, nor did they even understand the language in which he wrote; but when then heard how he defended the orthodox truth of two natures and two persons in one Son of God and one Christ, they gave their confirmation to his testimony because they themselves had entertained the same doctrine. So if may be said that Nestorius followed them, rather than that they were led by him.’”(Broadbent, 96-97)
- When the Eastern Churches, outside the Roman Empire, came under the stigma of Nestorianism” and were branded as heretics, the Persian rulers saw that there was no longer any danger of their becoming allies of Constantinople or Rome, so there was given to them a liberty great than they had ever before enjoyed. This, with the impetus given by exiles from the West who had found a refuge among them led to further development of energy and zeal in preaching the gospel among the heathen round about and beyond them.” (Broadbent, 99)
- It was missionaries from these Eastern churches that spread the gospel throughout Central Asia, Mongolia, and as far East as China. Archeologists have excavated two Nestorian cemeteries as far East as Russian Turkestan indicating the strong presence of the gospel amongst the Tartar race by the middle of the 13th century. (Braodbent, 101)
- Over time the Eastern Churches succumbed to power of the State Church as they increasing looked to bishops from the cities of Seleucia or Baghdad for guidance rather than the free working of the Holy Spirit within their midst. The subsequent introduction of Icons into these churches weakened their testimony to the idol worshiping gentiles around and destroyed their power to resist the waves of Muslim invaders that would subdue the region. (Braodbent, 105)
- From these early examples we learn the following regarding the Pilgrim Church:
 - They resisted the church/state union
 - They resisted the hierarchy of the Catholic Structure
 - They were labeled as heretics for refusing to submit to Church authority
 - The organized church/state would not hesitate to kill them
 - The Pilgrim Church was more interested in preaching the gospel and maintaining power and authority.

Monks and Monasteries

- One extreme reaction to the church’s newfound power was the rise in monasticism. The desert began a haven for monks who lived in extreme poverty, eating only enough to stay alive. (Jones 42)
- “The most famous early monk was Anthony. We know of him chiefly from a biography which is attributed to Athanasius, the great Bishop of Alexandria . . . and which by its early and wide circulation did much to stimulate the spread of the monastic life.” (Latourette, 225)
- According to Latourette, there were three types of monasticism:
 - *The hermit*—where a monk lived in solitude
 - *Modified hermit*—possessed individual dwellings (cell, cave, or hut) yet were sufficiently near one another for shelter.
 - *Monastery*—monks lived in a community where they were governed by a head monk and by rules. (Latourette, 226-227)
- Over time the monastery emerged as the preferred form of monasticism.
- “About the beginning of the sixth century (480-550), Benedict of Nursia, Italy, gave a great impetus to this movement and his rule of life for the monastic bodies prevailed beyond all others. He occupied the monks less exclusively with personal austerities and turned their activities to the performance of religious ceremonies and the service of men, given special attention to agriculture.” (Broadbent, 54)
- Mark A. Noll, author of *Turing Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, takes favorable view of the monastic movement. Noll states, “For over a millennium, in the centuries between the reign of Constantine and the Protestant Reformation, almost everything in the church that approached the highest, noblest, and truest ideals of the gospel was done either by those who had chosen the monastic way or by those who had been inspired in their Christian life by the monks . . . If we read the Scripture in our native languages, we benefit from a tradition of biblical translation inspired by the Monk Jerome (342-420), If we sing together the praises of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we follow where the hymn-writing monks Gregory (540-604) and Bernard of Clairvaux led the way. If we pursue theology, we inevitably find ourselves indebted to the monks Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.” (Noll, 84-85)
- Broadbent, is very critical of the various monastic movements. He writes, “A monastery, however, differed widely from a church in the New Testament sense of the word, so that those souls that felt themselves impelled to flee from the worldly Roman Church did not find in the monastery what a true church would have provided. They were bound under the rules of an institution instead of experiencing the free workings of the Holy Spirit . . . These religious houses, for both men and women, during the dark and turbulent times were sanctuaries for the weak and centers where learning was preserved amid the prevailing barbarism, and where the Scriptures were copied, translated, and read. Yet they were fruitful soil for idleness and oppression and the religious orders came to be active instruments in papal hands for the persecution of all who endeavored to restore the churches of God on their original foundation.” (Broadbent, 54-55)

- Miller adds, “Until the close of the fifth century, the monasteries were placed under the superintendence of the bishops; the monks were regarded as simply laymen, and had no claim to be ranked among the sacerdotal order. Circumstances, however, in the course of time, led the monks to assume a clerical character. Many of them occupied in the work of reading and expounding the scriptures, and all of them were supposed to be engaged in the cultivation of the higher spiritual life; so that they were in great favour with the multitude, especially as they began to exercise their clerical function beyond the confines of their establishments. Jealousies soon sprung up between the bishops and the abbots: the result was, that the abbots, to deliver themselves from dependence upon their spiritual rivals, made application to be taken under the protection of the Pope at Rome. The proposal was gladly accepted, and very quickly all the monasteries, great and small, abbeys, priories, and nunneries, were subjected to the authority of the See of Rome.” (Miller, 272-273)
- For the few good things the monasteries may have done the biggest problem with them is that they are unscriptural. Now where in the New Testament pattern for the body of Christ do we see Paul instructing men and women to hide away from the world. Rather we see calls for all believers to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ. The true Bible Believers were not seeking to hide away in some unscriptural institution but were preaching in the streets of European cities under constant fear at the hands of the Roman authorities.
- Jerome a famous monk translated the Bible in Latin using Origen’s *Hexapla*, as his text. (Jones 43) This helps explain how Apocryphal books were included in the Catholic Bible. (Ruckman 258-263)
- The true text of the Bible was not preserved by monks in unscriptural institutions but amongst the Bible believing Christians in local churches that were preaching it and dying for its witness.

Missions

- As we have already seen the Nestorian missionaries carried the gospel into China and Siberia, while Greek Christians from Constantinople opened new frontiers for the gospel in Bulgaria and Russia.
- In Europe, many Roman warriors were captured by the Goths (268) and were carried away as captives. Many of these people were Christians who despite being slaves preached the gospel to the barbarians and saw many convert to Christ. So prevalent was the gospel amongst some of these people that they sent bishops to the Nicaea Council. (Miller, 278-279)
- Ulfilas, commonly referred to as “the Apostle of the Goths” invented an alphabet and translated the Bible into the Gothic language about the middle of the 4th century. (Miller, 279) Miller insinuates that the Gothic people were so receptive of the gospel that Alaric and his Gothic warriors that sacked Rome were actually Christians. (Miller, 279)
- Perhaps the most important so-called conversion of the 5th century was of the Frankish King Clovis. Clovis was a pagan warlord whose wife Clotilda was a Christian who constantly begged her husband to convert. Much like Constantine, in his hour of military

- peril, Clovis called up the Christian God vowing that if his forces won he would become and Christian. On Christmas Day, 496, Clovis was baptized at Rheims. (Miller, 280)
- “Here we have another Constantine. Clovis found the profession of Christianity most favorable to his political interest, but it produced no change for the better in his life. His object was conquest, his ambition was boundless, his deeds were daring and cruel. From being only a Frankish chief with a small territory, he became the founder of the great French monarchy.” (Miller, 280)
 - How did Clovis spread his new found faith? The entire population of Gaul converted to Christendom after Clovis issued the following decree: “Knowing that those who do not present themselves with me at the river tomorrow for baptism will incur my displeasure.” (Price and Collins, 79)
 - “. . . when kings came to confess Christianity, the principle of Church and State led to the forcible outward conversion of multitudes of their subjects to the new State religion. Instead of churches being founded in the different towns and countries, independent of any central organization and having direct relations with the Lord, as in the apostolic days, all were drawn into one of the great organizations which had its center in Rome or Constantinople or elsewhere.” (Broadbent, 56)

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- Note: The Handout on Monasteries was taken from *Handbook to the History of Christianity* by Johnathan Hill