

Sunday, November 28, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 11 The Patristic Period: The Evolution of the Catholic Church

The Role of Early Heresies

- Just as the controversy surrounding Marcion played a role in the formation of the canon, so did early heresies play a role in the formation of the Catholic Church hierarchy.
- One of these great early heresies was Gnosticism. Consider the following summary of Gnostic beliefs.
 - “One could hardly call Gnosticism a movement; it lacked a unifying cause. It was more like a variety of movements, each one offering some way of enlightenment prescribed by a guru, a philosopher who possessed the gnosis or knowledge of the way of life.” (Shelley, 50-51)
 - “From the perspective of the Gnostics, everything physical was corrupt; only spiritual things were pure. In this, the Gnostics drew heavily from Greek philosophers such as Plato. Certain persons could—the Gnostics claimed—experience secret knowledge of God. This knowledge transported these persons into a higher realm, beyond the limitations of their flesh.” (Jones, 23)
 - “Because they detested everything physical, Gnostics rejected or reinterpreted verses like John 1:14 ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ According to many Gnostics, Jesus Christ never became flesh; instead, Christ was a spirit that temporality possessed an ordinary human being named Jesus.” (Jones, 23)
- Another early heresy was espoused by the Ebionites. The Ebionites taught the following:
 - Jesus was merely a man, a prophet or a spokesman for God like the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament. While some Ebionites believed in the virgin birth, most maintained that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary and that Christ descended upon him in form of a dove at his baptism. (Latourette, 121)
 - Jesus now inhabited by Christ proclaimed an unknown Father. In addition, Ebionites held that Christ, who could not suffer, departed from him (Jesus) before his crucifixion and resurrection. (Latourette, 122)
 - Persisting in small minorities until the 4th century, the Ebionites repudiated Paul, declaring him to be an apostate from the law. (Latourette, 122)
 - “They taught that Jesus was a mere man who by his scrupulous obedience to the Law was justified and became the Messiah.” (Shelley, 50)
- A third early heresy was Docetism. Originating from the Greek verb, “to seem” Docetism maintained that Christ was not really a man, but a supernatural appearance. He only “seemed” to suffer for man’s sins since we all know divine phantoms are not capable of dying. (Shelley, 50)

The Need to “Protect” the Truth

- In an effort to strengthen their positions, Gnostics and other heretical teachers often tried to trace their traditions back to an apostle. No fewer than three heretical tracts were supposedly written by Thomas. (Jones, 28)
- With so many false claims circulating, how could Christians protect the true teachings of the New Testament? In an attempt to protect authentic apostolic traditions, some bishops began tracing their beliefs back to apostles who may have lived in or passed through their cities. (Jones, 28)
- By the third century, not only were the bishop's *teachings* traced to the apostles, but overseers also traced their *authority* back to the apostles thereby making themselves the official trustees of the apostle's teachings. (Jones, 28)
- Consequently, the power and influence of the bishop's expanded rapidly, particularly in large cities. Since city bishops nurtured Christians through entire regions they began calling one another "popes" the Latin word for "fathers." (Jones, 28)
- If we are going to understand the evolution of the Catholic Episcopacy we need to consider the following issues in greater detail.
 - Emerging distinction between clergy and laity.
 - Increasing power of the bishops.
 - Apostolic succession

Distinction Between Clergy and Laity

- Andrew Miller, author of *Miller's Church History*, has much to say about how the establishment of a distinction between clergy and laity replaced the organic working of the Holy Spirit according to the word of God within the church.
- Miller writes, "It may be fair to suppose that those good men, by whose means a new order of things was brought into the church, and the free ministry of the Holy Spirit in the members of the body excluded had the welfare of the church at heart." (Miller, 184)
- Christianity in the beginning had no separate priestly class. The divine order of the churches established by the apostle Paul had no distinction between clergy and laity. All believers stood on the same ground as to the priesthood, worship, and access to God. There was no outer court worship, every believer enjoy direct and unbroken access into the throne room of God for prayer and supplication. (Miller, 186)
- "The separation of a privileged class—a sacerdotal order—is unknown in the New Testament. The distinction between clergy and laity was suggested by Judaism, and human invention soon made it great but it was Episcopal ordination that established the distinction and widened the separation." (Miller, 186)
- In place of God speaking directly to the heart and conscience of believers through his written Word the emerging priesthood came between the believer and God thereby causing believers to stand in the opinions of men rather than God's written word. (Miller, 186)

Increasing Power of the Bishops

- We have already seen in previous studies that God ordained two offices within the local church.
 - Bishop/overseer/elder—I Timothy 3:1, Titus 1:5, 7, Acts 20:28
 - Deacons—I Timothy 3:8
- We have also seen that according to the scriptural pattern there was to be a multiplicity of elders/bishops in every city and every church.
 - Titus 1:5—in every city
 - Acts 14:23—in every church
- The evolution of the bishop’s power can be seen by summarizing the writings of three church fathers that lived about one life time apart from each other.
- *Ignatius* writing about 112 AD says that when Paul sent from Miletus to Ephesus he called the bishops and presbyters, thus making two titles out of one description. In addition, Ignatius states that these men were from Ephesus and neighboring cities thereby obscuring the fact that one church Ephesus, had several overseers or bishops. (Broadbent, 32)
- Consider the following primary source quotations of Ignatius:
 - “Being subject to the **bishop and presbyters** you may in all respects be sanctified.” (Bercot, 70)
 - “If the prayer of one or two persons possesses such power, how much more will that of the **bishops and the whole church!** . . . Therefore, in order that we may be subject to God, let us be careful not to set ourselves in opposition to the bishop. . . It is clear, therefore, that we should look **upon the bishop even as we would the Lord Himself.**” (Bercot, 70)
 - “I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, while **your bishop presides in the place of God**, and presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with your deacons.” (Bercot, 70)
 - “There is one bishop, along with presbyters and deacons, my fellow servants.” (Bercot, 156)
 - “The Lord grant forgiveness to all those who repent, if they turn in penitence to the unity of the God, and to **communion with the bishop.**” (Bercot, 71)
 - “Let that be deemed a proper **Eucharist** if it is **administered either by the bishop**, or by one to whom he has entrusted it . . . **It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast** . . . Wherever the bishop appears, let the congregation be there also . . . It is well to reverence both God

and the bishop. He who honors the bishop has been honored by God.” (Bercot, 71)

- From the writings of Ignatius we can see the emergence of the following heretical teachings within the first 10 years of the 2nd century, not more than 50 years after the death of Paul:
 - Three offices: bishop, presbyters, deacons
 - Preeminence of one bishop instead of a multiplicity in every city and church
 - Special liturgical function of the bishops not given to them in Scripture
- Moving forward in time less than one life time, the works of *Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons* written in the 180s AD continue to advance the narrative started by Ignatius.
- According to Mark A. Noll author of *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* Irenaeus taught that bishops guarded the handing on of Christian traditions from the apostles and argued that an unbroken succession of presiding bishops in the various churches guaranteed the continuation of apostolic authority in the church. Furthermore, Irenaeus took special pains to trace the handing-on of authority from bishop to bishop in the Church of Rome.
- Consider the teachings of Irenaeus in his own words:
 - “It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the world. And we are in a position to reckon up those **how were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches**, and the success of these men to our own times . . . For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries. . . they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the churches themselves. For they were desirous that they man should be perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men.” (Bercot, 71)
 - “Now all these (heretics) are of much later date than the **bishops to whom the apostles committed the churches.**” (Bercot, 71)
 - “True knowledge is the doctrine of the apostles and the ancient constitution of the church throughout all the world and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the **successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that the church exist in every place.**” (Bercot, 31-32)
- By the time one gets to writings of *Bishop Cyprian of Carthage* between 225 and 258 AD a fully established Episcopal system is functioning within the emerging Catholic Church. Cyprian freely uses the term ‘the Catholic Church’ and sees no salvation outside of it. (Broadbent, 34)
- Cyprian states:

- **“You should know that the bishop is in the church, and the church is in the bishop. If anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the church.”** (Bercot, 72)
- “Our Lord . . . describing the honor of a bishop and the order of His Church, speaks in the Gospel and says to Peter: “I say unto you, ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.’” . . . From there, through the changes of **times and successions, the ordering of bishops and plan of the church flow onward**. So that the church is found upon the bishops. **And every act of the church is controlled by these same rulers**. Since this then, is found on the divine law, I marvel that some, with daring temerity, have chosen to write to me as if they wrote in the name of the church. **For the church is established in the bishop, the clergy**, and all who stand fast in the faith.” (Bercot, 72)
- “What kind of people do you think they are who are the enemies of the priests and are rebels against the Catholic Church? . . . Heresies have arisen and schisms have originated from no other source than this: that God’s priest is not obeyed.” (Bercot, 162)
- **“Outside the Church there is no salvation.”** (Shelley, 75)
- Cyprian is an interesting case study; He is probably more destructive of New Testament Christianity than anyone outside of Origen. In Cyprian we have a genuine perverter of Biblical truth who loved the Lord enough to die for him. The writing of Cyprian prove that one can be right about the Virgin Birth and Deity of Christ and so wrong about salvation that you can spend eternity with those who don’t believe in either birth or the deity of Christ. (Ruckman, 80-81)
- Over time bishops in metropolitan areas began to assert their authority upon outlying areas. Ecclesiastical provinces were thus gradually formed, which the Greeks afterwards denominated dioceses. “The city bishops claimed the privilege of appointing office-bearers to these rural churches and the people to whom they committed their instruction and care were called district bishops.” (Miller, 188) Thus was a new Episcopal class was formed laying the foundation for the modern Catholic structure.
- E.H. Broadbent, author of *The Pilgrim Church*, suggests that the means adopted by the Church to counteract early heresies affected the Church more than the heresies themselves. It was the emergence of Episcopal power that altered the charter of the churches and resulted in the anti-Spiritual system still observable today. (Broadbent, 30)

Apostolic Succession

- Bishops quickly moved to bolster their position by appealing to the transference of apostolic authority. Consider the following examples
 - *Tertullian*—**“Let them produce the original records of their churches. Let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that the first bishop of theirs can show for his ordainer and predecessor one the apostles or apostolic men—a man,**

moreover, who continued steadfast with the apostles. For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmitted their registers. For example, the church of Smyrna records that Ploycarp was placed their by John. Likewise, the church of Rome demonstrates Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter. In exactly the same way, the other churches similarly exhibit, whom, as having been appointed to their Episcopal places by apostles, they regard as transmitters of the apostolic seed.” (Bercot, 32)

- *Tertullian*—“No other teaching will have the right of being received as apostolic than that which is at the present day proclaimed in the churches of apostolic foundation.” (Bercot, 33)
- *Cyprian*—“**He cannot be reckoned as a bishop who succeeds no one.** For he has despised the evangelical and apostolic tradition, springing from himself. For **he who has not been ordained in the church can neither have nor hold to the church in any way . . .** How can he be esteemed a pastor, who succeeds to no one, but begins from himself? For the true shepherd remains and presides over the church of God by **successive ordination.** Therefore, the other one becomes a stranger and a profane person, an enemy of the Lord’s peace.” (Bercot, 32)
- *Cyprian*—“How can he who is himself unclean and in whom the Holy Spirit does not dwell, **cleanse and sanctify the water (of baptism).** For the Lord says in the book of Numbers, ‘And whatever the unclean person touches will be unclean.’ . . . After all, what prayer can a priest who is impious and a sinner offer for a baptized person? For it is written, ‘God does not hear a sinner (John 9:31)’ . . . Who can give what he himself does not have? How can he discharge spiritual functions who himself has lost the Holy Spirit? . . . There can be no spiritual anointing among heretics. **For it is clear that the oil cannot be sanctified nor the Eucharist celebrated at all among them.**” (Bercot, 33)

Implications

- The last quote by Cyprian highlights the emergence of the sacramental system that could only be administered by bishops or members of the priestly class.
- As we alluded to earlier, the Eucharist was one of the sacraments that were already being practiced as early as 100 AD.
 - *Ignatius*—“. . . breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, so that we should live forever in Jesus Christ.” (Bercot, 251)
 - *Ignatius*—“**I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life—which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . .** And I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.” (Bercot, 251)
 - *Justin Martyr*—“We do not receive these as common bread and common drink. Rather, Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation. So, likewise, we have been taught that the food **which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood**

and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.” (Bercot, 252)

- *Irenaeus*—“Our opinion is the accordance with the Eucharist, and, in turn, the Eucharist established our opinion. For we offer to Him His own announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit. **For the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist**—consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly. So also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.” (Bercot, 252)
- *Irenaeus*—“**The wine and bread having received the Word of God, become the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ.**” (Bercot, 252)
- *Cyprian*—“These disregarding the honor that the blessed martyrs maintain for me with the confessors, . . . communicate with the lapsed and offer and give them Eucharist . . . Those presbyters, contrary to the Gospel law . . . before penitence was fulfilled . . . dare the offer on their behalf and to give to them Eucharist. That is, they dare to profane the sacred body of the Lord.” (Bercot, 252)
- *Cyprian*—“He says that whoever will eat of His bread will live forever. So it is clear that those who partake of His body and receive the Eucharist by the right of communion are living. **On the other hand, we must fear and pray lest anyone who is separate from Christ’s body—being barred from communion—should remain at a distance from salvation.**” (Bercot, 253)
- During the first two centuries most Christians believed that baptism cancelled sins committed up to that moment in the believer’s life. Serious post-baptismal lapses called for special treatment. Three sins in particular—sexual immorality, murder, and denial of the faith—were considered forgivable by God, but never by the church. The penalty for committing any of these sins was exclusion from the fellowship of the church and deprivation of the Eucharist. Since the Lord’s Supper was viewed as a special channel of divine grace, withholding it placed a person’s salvation in peril. (Shelley, 74)
- There is also early evidence in the writings of the Church Fathers that they believed and taught baptismal regeneration. That is to say that the waters of baptism save, regenerate, or justify the sinner in the eyes of God.
 - *Irenaeus*—“When we come to refute them (the Gnostics), we will show in its proper place that this class of men have been instigated by Satan **to a denial of the baptism which is regeneration to God.** Thus, they have renounced the whole faith . . . For the **baptism** instituted by the visible Jesus was **for the remission of sins.**” (Bercot, 52)
 - *Clement of Alexandria*—“Being baptized, we are illuminated, we become sons . . . This work is variously called grace, illumination, perfection, and washing. **Washing, by which we cleanse away our sins.** Grace, by which the penalties accruing to **transgressions are remitted.** Illumination, by which the holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly.” (Bercot, 52)

- *Cyprian*—“. . . from that death which once the blood of Christ extinguished and from which **the saving grace of baptism** and of our Redeemer has delivered us. (Bercot, 54)
- In 250 AD the most violent persecution the churches had yet faced was instigated by the Emperor Decius. He commanded all citizens of the empire to sacrifice to the traditional Roman gods. Those who did so were given certificates as evidence that they had obeyed the order. Those who refused to obey or were unwilling to obtain false papers from sympathetic or corrupt officials faced death. (Shelley, 75)
- To save their lives many Christians compiled or received falsified documents. Unknown others were imprisoned or executed among them were the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem. (Shelley, 75) Believers who did what the Romans wanted under torture were referred to as the “lapsed.”
- When the persecutions subsided in 251 AD questions about whether or not these “lapsed” believers so be admitted back into the church emerged. According to Cyprian there was no salvation outside of the church. (Shelley, 75)
- In short, this led to the emergence of a graded system of penance. “Only after varied periods of sorrow for sin (penance) were the sinners allowed to return to the Lord’s Supper. The bishop extended forgiveness to the fallen, provided they proved their sorrow by coming before the congregation in sackcloth and with ashes on their heads. After this confession and act of humility the bishop laid his hands upon the penitent as a symbol of restoration to the church.” (Shelley, 76)
 - *Cyprian*—“In smaller sins, sinners may do penance for a set time and come to public confession according to the rules of discipline. They then receive the right of **communion through the imposition of the hand of the bishop and clergy.**” (Bercot, 4)
 - *Cyprian*—“I entreat you, beloved brethren, that each one should confess his own sins while he is still in this world—while his confession can still be received and while the satisfaction and remission made by the priest are still pleasing to the Lord.” (Bercot, 4)
 - *Clement of Alexander*—“Those who fall into sin after baptism are those who are subjected to discipline. **For the deeds done before baptism are remitted in baptism. However, those committed after baptism are purged through discipline.**” (Bercot, 215)
- Finally, there is also evidence that the Church Fathers taught replacement theology as a precursor to what would ultimately become postmillennialism. The Fathers are very clear that God is done with Israel and that the church inherits the covenant blessing promised to Israel.
 - *Cyprian*—“According to what has been foretold in advance, the Jews had departed from God. They had lost God’s favor, which had been given them in times past and had been promised them for the future. **Instead the Christians**

have succeeded to their place, deserving well of the Lord by faith.” (Bercot, 365)

- *Cyprian*—“Two peoples were foretold: the elder and the younger. The elder people are the Jews. The younger one consists of us. In Genesis it says, ‘And the Lord said unto Rebekah, Two nations are in your womb.’ The church, which had been barren before, is to have more children from among the Gentiles than what the synagogue had had before . . . **The Jews were to lose, while we were to receive the bread and the cup of Christ and all his grace. The new name of Christians is to be blessed in the earth . . . So the Gentiles, rather than the Jews, attain to the kingdom of heaven.**” (Bercot, 365)
- *Cyprian*—“The vineyard of the Lord of hosts was the house of Israel. But Christ taught and showed that the people of the **Gentiles should succeed them and that by the merit of faith we should subsequently attain to the place that the Jews had lost.**” (Bercot, 377)

Conclusion

- The seeds of the papacy are not found in Constantine’s council of Nicea in 325 AD. Constantine is dealing with a fully rooted plan who’s seeds were planted in the writings of Cyprian.
- So what have we seen in this study? By the year 250 AD the following aspect of the Roman Catholic system can be clearly seen:
 - Priestly class
 - Prominence of Bishops
 - Doctrine of Apostolic Succession
 - Development of dioceses and Metropolitan Priesthood
 - The Church is spiritual Israel
 - Sacramental System that Could only be administered by the priesthood
 - Baptismal Regeneration
 - Eucharist
 - Penance

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Recommended Reading

- McGrath, Alister. *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*. New York, NY: Harper One, 2009.