

## LESSON SEVEN – The Rise to Prominence of the Church of Rome/Problems Facing the Early Church Fathers

### **The Rise to Prominence of the Church of Rome**

- By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the church in Rome was beginning to assert itself as the leading church in the Christian world.

**A number of factors contributed to the increasing prominence of the church in the empire's capital:**

- 1. Administrative ability of the bishops – they may have been undistinguished theologically, but they acted prudently in holding the diverse elements in the church together.**
- 2. The size of the church – the Roman church grew enormously in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, both through people moving in and through converts, and it had international contacts.**
- 3. The capital city – people naturally looked to Rome for leadership, a political habit that influenced thinking in the church.**
- 4. Orthodox reputation – in a century of considerable theological variety, Rome maintained a reputation of steadiness and balance in preserving the apostolic tradition.**
- 5. Charity – the Roman church acquired considerable wealth and used it to care for its poor and send money to the relief of Christians elsewhere. Money attracts authority.**
- 6. Influence in high places – it is difficult to assess whether evidence from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century indicates the presence of Christians in senatorial families or only in their households, but by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century there is no doubt some Christians held positions of influence with the government.**
- 7. Only apostolic church in the west – controversy had given prominence to contacts with the apostles, and Rome was the only church in the western part of the empire with confirmed direct contact with apostles.**
- 8. Martyrdom of Peter and Paul – these apostolic contacts with Rome were not of the ordinary kind, for the two chief apostles had not only been there but had honored the city with their martyrdom and thus the site of their bones.<sup>1</sup>**
  - After Peter and Paul, a host of prominent Christian teachers found their way to Rome. Not only martyrs like Ignatius, but also teachers as diverse as Justin, Marcion, and Valentinus. Therefore, it is no surprise that some of the important controversies affecting the church at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century set off sparks in Rome.

### **Problems Facing the Early Church Fathers**

- The Paschal controversy is significant for indicating the increasing importance of the church of Rome. The point at issue was the date for commemorating the events of salvation connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

- Some churches, especially in the province of Asia were called – by those who disagreed with them – Quartodeciman’s, meaning those who observed the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month.
- Most of the churches had abandoned the Jewish calendar and remembered the death and resurrection of Jesus on the Sunday after the first full moon of spring.
- An observable consequence of this difference in the calendar was that Christians in different traditions broke their penitential fast on different days, some on the day on which the Jewish Passover fell and others on Sunday.
- Such an annual observance, although not attested to in the New Testament, is not unexpected in view of the annual observations that characterized Jewish and pagan religious activities.
- The sign of fellowship among the various house churches in Rome was receiving the communion bread from the bishop’s table. Victor provoked a conflict by not sending the communion to congregations that followed the Quartodeciman practice.
- Councils of bishops were held in many different places and the Asian churches were isolated on this issue. The great majority declared that the Lord’s resurrection should be celebrated on no day other than Sunday and that paschal fast should be on that day.
- The Quartodeciman practice did not end, but it was increasingly marginalized.

**The Paschal controversy demonstrates several points of importance.**

- 1. The dependence of the church on Jewish customs was evident but their influence was waning, especially in those regions where the Jewish presence was less felt or where the church wanted to distance itself from that presence.**
- 2. The lack of uniform apostolic tradition indicates there was no apostolic authority on the custom. The controversy illustrates the problem of following what was old but lacked explicit, written apostolic authorization. An annual remembrance of the resurrection likely goes back to apostolic times, but the attempt to establish a uniform practice revealed the absence of a verifiable apostolic sanction.**
- 3. The strong feeling for the importance of the resurrection and for Sunday witnessed to the centrality of the event and its unbreakable connection with a certain day. The weekly Sunday observance had been so established in Christian practice that this superseded any other calendrical considerations.**
- 4. The transfer of leadership from Ephesus to Rome was symbolized by the outcome of the controversy.<sup>2</sup>**
  - Another issue that arose in the early church was Patripassianism.
  - The Logos Christology advanced by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century apologists was not the only interpretation of Jesus put forward in the early centuries of the church.
  - The Gnostics presented Jesus as an emanation from the spiritual realm.
  - Traces of angel Christology were also being expressed.
  - According to Tertullian though the greatest threat to proper Christology was Modalism, also known as Patripassianism.
  - Modalism is the more commonly known term and is a Trinitarian and Christological heresy that is quite popular today and it is an easy error to stumble into when trying to make analogies for the Trinity.

**The early church fathers, countering Gnostic speculation, stressed that the supreme Father is the same as the Creator. Irenaeus used the terminology of the Logos, but differed from the Apologists in allowing only one stage (the generated Word existed from eternity,) instead of two stages in the pre-existent Logos. Instead of using Word and Wisdom as two terms for the pre-existent Christ, Irenaeus distinguished them, applying Wisdom to the Holy Spirit and speaking of them as the “two hands of God.”<sup>3</sup>**

- Other approaches to the relation of Jesus to God place more emphasis on the oneness of God than on the threeness.
- The problem for the early church was not how can three be one, but rather how one can be three.
- Early Christianity came out of a strong affirmation of the oneness of God in Judaism – although Judaism included speculation about other divine entities.
- Also found in Jewish heritage was the Old Testament picture of God suffering with and for His people.
- All the early church fathers accepted the idea that God is impassable and found in a distinction between the Father and His Word or the Son a solution to the problem of salvation by redemptive suffering without God Himself directly suffering.

**Monarchianism meaning one rule was a common word for monotheism, and two principal forms of a strict and literal monotheism were put forth in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Modern scholars have distinguished these by the terms Dynamic Monarchianism and Modalist Monarchianism. To the second of these two terms Patripassianism is applied.<sup>4</sup>**

- Dynamic Monarchianism was a development of adoptionism, where Jesus was so worthy that God adopted Him as a Son, either at the resurrection, at His baptism or in foreknowledge of His virtues at birth.

**In the later 2<sup>nd</sup> century, exponents combined the view with a rationalist concern for the moral, human development of Jesus and an effort to give the precision of mathematics to Christian theology. This intellectual approach, opposed to the philosophical formulation of the Logos, communicated a different motivation from the earlier expressions of adoptionism.<sup>5</sup>**

- Paul of Samosata gave the most sophisticated and most plausible presentation in this line of development. He was willing to use the term Logos, but in an impersonal sense as equivalent to God’s use of Wisdom in the Old Testament. Jesus was born of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit; the Wisdom that had dwelt in the others resided supremely in Jesus.
- Since this impersonal Logos was united with Jesus, Paul of Samosata was not strictly speaking as an adoptionist.
- Paul was an important Roman official in Antioch and became bishop of the city.
- Synods in Antioch, climaxing in 268, secured Paul’s condemnation, however he was able to maintain control of the church building.

- His opponents made an appeal to the emperor Aurelian and the emperor made a judgment that the property should belong to those in communion with the bishops in Italy and Rome.
- This is the first occasion on record of an appeal to civil authorities to decide a dispute among Christian factions over ownership of church property.
- According to Tertullian, Modalism offered a greater threat than Dynamic Monarchianism, because large numbers of believers were naïve Modalists.
- Modalism is the name for the view that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were successive modes of activity and revelation of the one God. Another term for Modalism is Patripassianism.
- The term Patripassianism was used because one implication of Modalistic identification of the Father and the Son was that the Father suffered on the cross.
- The most important representative of Modalism was Sabellius, who became so influential that he gave his name, Sabellianism, to the doctrine in the east.
- The crucial difference between Sabellius and the Logos Christology was that Sabellius the one God revealed Himself successively as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whereas the Logos theologians believed these distinctions in the Godhead were simultaneous distinctions.
- Tertullian represented the Western emphasis on the unity of God by identifying God with the Father and by identifying the Son and Holy Spirit with the same substance of God, but like the Greek fathers he found the source of deity in the Father. His differentiations between the persons in the one divine substance were associated with God's saving plan. Hence the designation, "economic Trinity" is sometimes used.
- Origen represented the Eastern tendency to emphasize the distinctions between the three by emphasizing their functional differences. That is, from the one Father were derived the Son and Spirit, who were in relative subordination to the Father but were one in nature with Him.
- Little was said about the Holy Spirit, for the doctrine of Christ bore the brunt of the controversy. Early thinkers may have been Trinitarian in thought but they were binitarian in passion.
- Although it is generally low profile compared to Arianism which we will cover soon, Modalism has gained some momentum. It is common today in the oneness Pentecostalism movement, which denies the Trinity.
- Trinitarian theology is much more than a mere human philosophy. It takes seriously the idea that God has revealed Himself in Scripture and wants to be known and that He has revealed Himself a certain way.
- The question of whether God is one or three is unavoidable when reading the Bible, and the consequence of leaving the question unanswered is to let it be answered badly.
- Modalism was one of those bad answers. In Modalism, God is no longer love because He no longer has anyone whom He has loved eternally.
- The intimate relationship between God the Father and Jesus in John 17 becomes a weird sort of schizophrenic relationship.

- Since God takes on several roles as He pleases it is questionable whether we have ever encountered God as He really is rather than what He does.
- Modalism also undercuts the atoning work of Jesus Christ. If there is only one God who merely appears differently in history, one must question if Jesus was truly man or if He only appeared to be, as in the heresy of Docetism.
- If Jesus is not fully God and fully man, then He cannot be the one mediator between God and man.
- By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the procedure for public confession and repentance was generally established.
- When a person who had fallen away returned to the church, a public confession of sin was made; repentance was expressed by wearing mourning clothes, weeping and fasting; request for the prayers of the church was made while kneeling or prostrating oneself before the church; prayer was offered and restoration to fellowship was shown by the laying on of the hands of the clergy and admission to communion.
- It was often stated that only one such formal second repentance was available.

**Four stages of development in thinking about the nature of the church may be discerned:**

- 1. All members of the church are saints – reflected in the New Testament. Montanism involved an effort to reclaim this view.**
  - 2. The clergy must be saints. The Novationists and then more explicitly the Donatists’ represented this position.**
  - 3. The church embraced saints and sinners. This view was taking shape in the mainstream 3<sup>rd</sup> century church, and in the 4<sup>th</sup> century found expression in the distinction of monks from ordinary church members.**
  - 4. The sanctity of the church belongs not to individuals, but to the sacraments of the church. Augustine articulated this later stage in the development.<sup>6</sup>**
- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the bishop had presided at worship and the presbyters had largely been responsible for church discipline.
  - By the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, however, the bishops secured control of discipline and with the growth of the city churches presbyters were delegated liturgical functions in the separate assemblies.
  - Priestly language became increasingly common during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century for the bishop and his functions. With the transfer of the bishop’s role in worship to presbyters in parish churches, the priestly interpretation began to be extended to them as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 138

<sup>2</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, pages 140-141

<sup>3</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 141

<sup>4</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 142

<sup>5</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 142

<sup>6</sup> Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 146