

The Early Christian Church (II) - The Development of Christology

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Photo date and location unknown

After Jesus ascended into heaven and the disciples started preaching by the power of the Holy Spirit, they had to face problems of persecution from established authorities and disputes on doctrines and application of Jesus' teaching.

Persecutions were mostly local until 249 when the Roman emperor Decius banned and persecuted Christians throughout the empire.

In 303 Diocletian initiated the last and most serious persecution. But he resigned when he saw that his policies were not succeeding.

Shortly after, Emperor Galerius issued the first edict of toleration of the Christians in 311, and persecution gradually subsided.

But questions of the faith, especially on the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God plagued the church. Gnosticism, in its widespread forms, was probably the first serious threat. Its prime opponent was the theologian Irenaeus.

He sought to steer a middle course between those who thought of Christ as too divine to be man (such as the Gnostics) and those who thought that Jesus was simply a prophet (such as the Ebionites, a group of Jewish Christians).

Irenaeus emphasized the atonement of Christ. He taught that Jesus repeated the course of Adam in order to purify mankind. His obedience, along with Mary's, precisely balanced the disobedience of Adam and Eve. The result was a new beginning for mankind. In redemption, man becomes divine, in the sense that God, through Christ, gave man certain divine powers.

The Marcionite movement was similar to the Gnostics in their belief of a dualism of flesh (bad) and spirit (good). They made no claim to secret *gnosis* (knowledge), however. Marcion taught that this world is the creation of an evil God, the Demiurge of the Old Testament.

The second God remained hidden until He revealed Himself in Christ, who only seemed to be a man. The death of Christ was the price paid by the good God to the Demiurge for the deliverance of man from the latter's dominion. Chastity and celibacy was enjoined on the Marcionites.

Marcion believed that the Catholic Church had obscured the Gospel, so he created his own canon of scripture out of the letters of Saint Paul and part of the Gospel of Luke. This stimulated the church to

formulate its own New Testament canon.

Some scholars believe that the early form of the Apostles' Creed was intended to be a repudiation of some of the tenets of the Marcionites.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth..." counters the idea that the world was created by a Demiurge.

"And in Jesus Christ His only son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried..." shows that Christ was fully human.

Purifying trends

Early in the second half of the second century, a Christian in Phrygia named Montanus began to receive prophecies of the imminent return of Christ.

He prophesied that the Heavenly Jerusalem would be established in Phrygia, and in his enthusiasm he attracted a wide following among those who were easily persuaded by his apocalypticism.

Some historians have interpreted the surging popularity of Montanism as a protest against the growing material ease of the church. The Montanists preached asceticism, fasting, celibacy, and vegetarianism.

So they thought they had a superior form of Christianity. This seemed appropriate to them, for they believed in the approaching end of the world. They spread from Asia Minor to North Africa, and gained among their following the noted Christian apologist Tertullian.

Not unexpectedly, Montanism was hardly welcomed with open arms by church authorities. They feared the excitement his enthusiastic prophesying could arouse in a congregation. But actually, the schismatic effect of Montanus' teaching lay in his refusal to re-admit Christians who had renounced Christ in times of severe persecution. The Roman Catholic tradition had adopted the notion that a Christian could be forgiven one major sin after he had been baptized. (Major sins were considered to be adultery, idolatry, and murder.) Montanists denied this possibility.

The church condemned the Montanists as heretics and schismatics in third-century synods, but the movement persisted, especially in Africa, until the fifth century. Novatian, a Roman presbyter, and Donatus, a North African bishop, led similar movements.

As a result of the Montanist dispute, the church rejected the possibility of any new revelation which could supplant or expand the traditional revelation. Tradition was elevated to the authority of a complete and final revelation. But on the other hand, the church gained a new respect for ascetic discipline, which was to have a powerful influence in the development of monasticism in succeeding centuries.

Relationship of Jesus to God

The most puzzling intellectual question that faced Christians at the end of the second century was how Jesus should be related to God. Christians believed in two seemingly contradictory ideas: One God, and Jesus Christ as Lord. If Jesus is Lord and the Son of God the Father, then God's unity seemed to be threatened by ditheism. Three solutions to this dilemma were proposed: *Dynamic monarchism*. Jesus was a man born of the virgin Mary, and in him dwelt an impersonal power which came from God. This view emphasized Jesus' humanity, and therefore he could be emulated by Christians. But it could not explain how a mere man could become Christ, the savior.

Modalistic monarchism. Jesus was completely one with God. This view held that God manifests Himself in several modes: "Lawgiver," "Jesus," and "Spirit." Although it nicely avoided the Gnostic beliefs, it lost any sense of the value of Jesus' real life as a man.

Logos Christology. When Callistus succeeded to the chair as Bishop of Rome in 217, he had to resolve this heated controversy in the church. He offered another uneasy compromise formula: "The Logos Himself is Son, and that Himself is Father, and that though denominated by a different title, yet that in reality He is one invisible spirit."

Early view of the Trinity

Tertullian (c. 155-c. 222) and Novatian were the two theologians responsible for the formulation of a rudimentary trinitarian theology, although both were schismatics- Tertullian a Montanist, and Novatian a puritanical reformer. Tertullian, a former lawyer, developed a theology of salvation based on a concept of God as the Lawgiver. Adam's sin gave all men a criminal record, for which men deserved to die. Jesus paid the debt for human sin, thereby annulling the death sentence.

To explain the relationship between Jesus and God, Tertullian taught that Jesus is the Logos of God; He translated the Greek word Logos into Ratio (reason) and Sermo (discourse). We as men think before we talk, so also God.

God, therefore is Reason, and Christ, Discourse. Tertullian argued that the three, Father, Son, and Spirit, were one substance, not one person, but he could not resolve how the three were interrelated.

These men represented trends in Western theology. Until Augustine in the fifth century, Roman Catholic theology generally believed that 1) God is the creator of a good world gone bad through sin; 2) salvation is from the power of sin; 3) the incarnation was a real event in human history; 4) the divine monarchy is maintained by the distinctions of Logos Christology; 5) the theology was strongly biblical; and 6) the authority for church life comes from the "rule of faith" founded on the apostles.

The prime concerns in the West became morals and standards of church conduct, not philosophical speculations.

Trends in Eastern theology

Eastern theology developed without some of the Roman limitations. By the time of Imperial Rome, Alexandria had succeeded Athens as the intellectual and cultural center of the Mediterranean. So it was small wonder that Alexandria also became a center for Christian teachings.

The Alexandrian theologians Clement and Origen had much to do with the conversion of the pagan empire to Christianity, for their creation of the first systematic Christian theology made Christianity intellectually respectable. Previous Christian thinkers had directed their attention to isolated problems facing the church.

Clement argued that the Word was the creator of life itself. The revelation of the word is possessed by the church and consists of the knowledge (gnosis) of God. In this way, Clement brought together into one system the concept of a holy tradition and the idea of an esoteric gnosis.

Clement's Logos is all things to all men. It is the Teacher who instructs the philosopher with mysteries, educates the believer with hope, and corrects the hardhearted by discipline. Clement claimed that all knowledge is one, the gnosis of God. For Clement, Christianity frees man from ignorance and slavery and makes possible the fulfillment of all that it means to be a man.

The great mind of early Christianity

Origen (c. 185 - c. 254) stands alone as the great mind of Christianity before the fourth century. However, while the church has acknowledged his greatness, it has not always been so enthusiastic about his ideas. Three councils of bishops condemned Origenism as heresy. Origen considered himself to be a man of the church, but his vision of the church and of truth was broader and freer than most.

His passion for the faith and great enthusiasm began early in life. When his father was martyred for the faith, Origen, even though he was only 17, tried to follow him. At age 18 he became head of the catechetical school in Alexandria, succeeding Clement, and gained a wide reputation as a brilliant teacher and devout ascetic.

Origen's chief permanent contribution to the development of Christology was his assertion that there never was a time when the Logos of God did not exist. His Logos is made of the same essence or "stuff" as the Father. He saw that God had to be eternally the same, therefore always at rest (as the Father) and also in motion (as the Son). He held that the self-knowledge, which the ancients called wisdom, was the primary form of the gnosis of God.

He believed that the fall of man was the result of not thinking properly. Origen's Christ is the great teacher who brought enlightenment of man by reawakening in the soul the vision of heaven. He also called Christ the great Physician who "cured" man of the pain of ignorance.

An enduring optimist, Origen believed that progress in this life would continue in the next. He thought progress would ultimately will all creation to union with God. Even Satan will be finally converted to paradise, Origen taught. All the rest of Christianity, however, tended to remain dualistic, separating good from evil and spirit from matter. But for Origen everything must return to its origin in God's being.

A daring and comprehensive thinker, Origen came to conclusions which seemed too heretical to the church. He considered the basic distinctions between men to be knowledge and ignorance. The church found that it could not live with such a distinction, and so emphasized ecclesiastical dogma, and created another order of distinction -- clergy and laity.