

History of Christian Movements and Theology



4. Consolidation, Schism and Diversity

Overview

Before the 400s, a single Christian church (network) existed. The followers of Jesus had been promoted from a persecuted minority to acceptable members of the mandated religion of the State following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and subsequent edict by Emperor Theodosius. Christianity was now socially and politically “acceptable”.

Throughout the Christian world each ethnic group increasingly expressed faith via its language and liturgy and, at times, its own theological nuances. Gradually, cultural, geographic, political and religious differences led to separate churches in the West and East of the Roman Empire. Beginning in the 400s, Eastern churches began to drift from the authority of Rome.

The collapse of the Western half of the Empire in 476 AD meant that no single power had political control there and barbarians (Arian Christians, who were regarded as “not really Christians”; or non-Christians) ruled. Beginning with “Pope” Gregory the Great (540-604) in 590, the church set out to create a Christian world, led by the Papacy.

At the same time, Christian groups were developing new approaches to community (including living as hermits or in isolated monasteries), worship, witness, evangelism and identity.

Debates about Apostolic Succession

The Importance of Context

The New Testament is clear that Jesus Christ has placed ministries in the church and that they had/have a key role in church planting, leadership and teaching, with appropriate authority:

- “... you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone*. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22)
- “So Christ himself gave the *apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers*, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 4:10-16)
- “Let the *elders that rule* well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” (1 Timothy 5:17)
- “... the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable *people who will also be qualified to teach others*. (2 Timothy 2:2)

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- “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and *appoint elders in every town*, as I directed you.” (Titus 1:5)
- “Remember *your leaders*, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Have confidence in your leaders and *submit to their authority*, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. (Hebrews 13:7, 17; see also Romans 1:1, the Apostle was a servant = “*doulos*”, not a lord; 1 Corinthians 16:15-18; 1 Peter 5:1-4)

Succession Dogma

It is clear from the New Testament that, as the early church grew, it became necessary to set up clearly defined structures, with recognised spiritual authority and accountability. The increasing size of the church and its enormous geographical spread required a network of leaders to head up local churches and relate to one another, with agreed frameworks.

In the New Testament the concepts of “bishop”, “shepherd” and “elder” were often used interchangeably. It is clear that some churches had a multiple eldership.

By the 2nd century, an episcopal (ie governed by bishops) structure was established. By the end of the early Christian period, the church had hundreds of bishops, with varying levels of authority; these were roughly split between “Western” and “Eastern” traditions (based on history, practices and personalities in Rome and Constantinople respectively). The hierarchy of the Western church was asserting itself, moving from local leadership and service to claims to universal (or “Catholic”) authority over the entire Christian community.

Roman Catholics believe that the church has been headed up by a succession of bishops going back to the Apostles, in particular Peter (the “first Bishop of Rome”). The New Testament does not teach this. Not does the election of Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26), which was nowhere repeated in the New Testament. None of the Apostles alluded to personal succession. Peter’s ministry was to Jews (Galatians 2:9, 10). There is no conclusive evidence that Peter ever went to Rome, let alone became Bishop of Rome.

Early church leaders emphasised the roles of bishops:

- Clement - “Through countryside and city [the apostles] preached, and they appointed their earliest converts, testing them by the Spirit, to be the *bishops and deacons* of future believers. Nor was this a novelty, for bishops and deacons had been written about a long time earlier. Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry” (Letter to the Corinthians 42:4-5, 44:1-3 [80 AD]).
- Irenaeus - “It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known to us throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by *the apostles and their successors* down to our own times, men who neither knew nor taught anything like what these heretics rave about”.

"But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here *the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul*—that church which has the tradition and the faith with which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world. And it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the *apostolic tradition*". "The true knowledge is the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient organization of the Church throughout the whole world, and the manifestation of the body of Christ according to the succession of bishops, by which succession the bishops have handed down the Church which is found everywhere" (Against Heresies 3:3:1, 2; 4:33:8)

- Polycarp - "also was not only *instructed by apostles*, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by *apostles* in Asia, *appointed bishop of the church* in Smyrna, whom (Irenaeus) also saw in (his) early youth, for he tarried [on earth] a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the Church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic churches testify, as do also those *men who have succeeded Polycarp* down to the present time" (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3:3:4).
- Tertullian - "[The *apostles*] founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the *offspring of apostolic churches*. Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive Church, [founded] by the apostles, from which they all [spring]. In this way, all are primitive, and all are apostolic, while they are all proved to be one in unity" (Demurrer Against the Heretics 20 [200 AD]).
- Jerome - "Far be it from me to speak adversely of any of these clergy who, in *succession from the apostles*, confect by their sacred word the Body of Christ and through whose efforts also it is that we are Christians" (Letters 14:8 [A.D. 396 AD]).
- Augustine - "[T]here are many other things which most properly can keep me in [the Catholic Church's] bosom. The unanimity of peoples and nations keeps me here. Her authority, inaugurated in miracles, nourished by hope, augmented by love, and confirmed by her age, keeps me here. The *succession of priests, from the very see of the apostle Peter, to whom the Lord, after his resurrection, gave the charge of feeding his sheep* [John 21:15-17], up to the present episcopate, keeps me here. And last, the very name Catholic, which, not without reason, belongs to this Church alone, in the face of so many heretics, so much so that, although all heretics want to be called 'Catholic,' when a stranger inquires where the Catholic Church meets, none of the heretics would dare to point out his own basilica or house." (Against the Letter of Mani Called "The Foundation" 4:5 [397 AD]).

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Church history and tradition are very important; however tradition does not supersede Biblical teaching. The Scriptures are the final authority in any matter relating to the Christian life.

- It would be a thousand years before the underlying structure of the leadership of the church would be seriously challenged.

The Origins of “Sainthood”

“Saint” in the NT refers to Christians (eg Acts 9:32, 26:10; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1, 4:12; 5:3; Philippians 4:21). Over time the term came to be reserved for “special, worthy, exemplary” Christians, eg martyrs, church leaders, who had influence in heaven.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, it was not long before pagan practices of honouring the divine (their gods and emperors) started to be merged with Christianity. The Roman Catholic position that emerged was that, in general terms, “saints are portrayed in statues, icons, paintings, and other media; they are not worshipped as God is.” Non-Catholics and other religions (eg Islam) regard this as idolatry, especially when combined with the adoration of relics (such as the bones of dead saints) and prayers directed to the memories, remains or statues of saints, of to them personally, as intercessors in Heaven.

Early Monastics

Monasticism (literally “dwelling alone”, from Greek *monos*), describes the mode of life of persons living in seclusion from the world, under religious vows . (Christianity is not the only religion that has monasteries.)

Early Christian monastics sought to follow the examples of Elijah and John the Baptist, who lived alone for periods in desert places and often went without basic comforts. Some early Christian leaders also sought to follow in the steps of Jesus, who spent time alone in the desert after his baptism and was tempted by the Devil. Abba (“Father”) Anthony was one of the first so-called “desert fathers” (Greek “heremos” = desert), who renounced positions and possessions (taking as his inspiration Jesus’ command to the rich young ruler in Luke 18:22), left their homes, voluntarily adopted celibacy (or abstinence) and lived as ascetics in the desert, where they prayed, meditated at length on the Bible and faith, worshipped, fasted (often excessively), sought to deepen their communion with God and their dependence on Him (citing Matthew 6:25-34) and trained disciples. Some lived in caves and between walls, others sat on poles for lengthy periods (“stylites”, see below). The first known monastery was established in Egypt in 346. There is an irony in “monasterion” = house of lone ones, filled with people looking for the solitary life, ie living alone together. (Meditation is good, but legalism leads to dead tradition.)

The idea of the “cenobitic life” (*koinos* + *bios* = common life”) came from Pachomius (290-346), also in Egypt; “rules” were established to regulate the common life. Monastics and their writings became popular throughout Egypt and in other parts of the empire. Pilgrims came to sit at the feet of religious masters, returning home to spread what they had learned; some monks were believed to have special access to God and be able to perform miracles.

Monasticism spread through the Eastern part of the Empire through the work of St Basil in Cappadocia (c. 370). Basil taught that self-examination, freedom from possessions and commitments and living a more committed life of separation was the ultimate Christian duty.

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Martin of Tours, who served in the Roman legions and then converted to Christianity, established a hermitage near Milan, then moved on to Poitiers (Gaul) where he gathered a community around himself. In 372 he became Bishop of Tours in 372 and established a monastery at Marmoutiers.

The first monastery in Ireland was established by St Patrick (390-462).

Christian monasteries became much more prominent during the Middle Ages. More about them later in the course.

Christ did not teach a monastic lifestyle. He went about doing good to people (Acts 10:38). Christians are called to be salt and light; to be in the world but not of it (John 17:15, 16), to reach out to all nations with the Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20). Salt only works if it gets out of the shaker. We are not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1, 2). Sinful pleasures are not overcome by escaping from the world or punishing ourselves, but by the grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit and choice.

The Christian lifestyle will often clash with non-Christian values. Throughout history Christians have often found it desirable to go into voluntary exile rather than confront paganism and attract persecution. The type of asceticism demanded by many monastic leaders and orders comes close to the excesses criticised by Paul (Colossians 2:23; 1 Timothy 4:1-3) and others. However, the writings and examples of some in monastic orders can nevertheless inspire us to deepen our personal devotion to Christ.

Stylites

The stylites (from the Greek *stylus*, or pillar) were early Christian mystics in the Eastern part of the empire who lived on top of poles in order to fast, pray and preach. They commonly believed that by punishing and disciplining the flesh they would be spiritually victorious and assured of salvation. Some remained perched on their poles for a number of years.

The most famous stylite was Simeon Stylites the Elder, who climbed a pillar in Syria in 423 AD and remained there until he died (37 years later). Simeon had many disciples and imitators.

Early Christian Worship

Places of Worship

Followers of the one who had nowhere to lay His head (Matthew 8:20) originally met in synagogues, homes, public halls and (as persecution increased) underground (sometimes literally so). The subsequent formal recognition of Christianity brought wealth into the church. Christian communities were now free to construct temples (the absence of which had formerly led to persecution of them as “atheists” by superstitious pagans). The ornateness of places of worship would increase over coming centuries. The concept of “house of God” would move from the people of God (a spiritual temple, not made with bricks and mortar, cf Ephesians 2:19-22) to physical buildings. Far from having to confess “silver and gold have I none”, the church could increasingly command material resources and acquire places of worship, political influence, religious trappings and respect; the downside was that it was no longer to say to the physical and spiritual cripples, “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk” (Acts 3:6.).

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Baptism

Baptism was practiced in pre-Christian times, for example baptism for converts to the Jewish faith. Jesus' cousin John practiced baptism and it is clear the disciples did so as well (John 3:22, 26). From the very beginning of Christianity, when a person made a decision to become a Christian, he or she was usually baptised (by full immersion) without delay (eg Acts 2:38; 16:33).

The concept of baptism literally means immersion, however the practice of baptism quickly shifted from immersion to various forms of sprinkling or anointing.

The Lord's Supper

The early church developed a practice of meeting for worship on the first day of the week (Sunday, aligned with the day of Jesus' resurrection) The Lord's Supper, or Communion, was instituted by Jesus as a memorial, so that His followers would remember Him (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Over time, the symbols and practices of the Lord's Supper came to acquire mystical powers of their own. Bishops began to teach that the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Jesus, sacrificed repeatedly, with priests formally officiating as a prerequisite to being valid. (After 831 the doctrine of transubstantiation was articulated as such; it was formally recognised at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.)

Emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus as the final triumph also shifted back to the cross as a place where Jesus was seen as continuing to suffer at the hands of sinners.

Use of Incense in worship

The practice of burning incense occurred in the Old Testament and some pagan religions and was opposed by church leaders in the fourth century. Over time it came to be accepted in Christian circles, seen as symbolic of prayer, the presence of God, or a cleansing power to remove the guilt of sin. Evangelical churches do not normally use incense.

Confession

The New Testament teaches that we should confess our sins and weaknesses to one another, as part of a process of wholeness (James 5:16). We should pray for one another. A lot of good work has been done over the centuries by Christian leaders and counsellors, but in the final analysis there is only one mediator between us and God, and only one avenue for forgiveness of sin, ie Christ (John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5), so confession should never be to another person in the capacity of an additional mediator and forgiver.

The priesthood

Early Christians believed that every believer was part of a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9.). However, as the church became more structured and the power of the clergy increased, priesthood passed to a select group that was regarded as separate from the "laity" and as recipients of a special measure of divine grace, in a position of relationship with God that merged with that of mediator.

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Copts

Copts (from Kpt, the way Arabs pronounced the Greek word for Egypt, Aigyptos) believe that their founder was John Mark, one of the 72 apostles sent forth by Jesus Christ and author of the Gospel of Mark. Mark ordained one bishop (Anianus) in Egypt and seven deacons and founded the school of Alexandria. According to tradition, he died in Alexandria in 68AD after being dragged by horses through the streets. Copts count him as the first of their chain of 118 patriarchs (popes).

By 180 AD, the school of Alexandria was an established centre of learning. It served as the cornerstone of Coptic teaching for four centuries. One of its leaders was Athanasius (296-373AD) who created the Athanasian Creed. In the third century, a Coptic monk named "Abba" (Father) Antony established a tradition of asceticism, which is still strong in Coptic Christianity. He became the first of the "desert fathers," a succession of hermits who practiced manual labour, fasting, and constant prayer. Abba Pacomius (292-346) is credited as founding the first cenobitic, or community monastery at Tabennesi in Egypt. The Coptic Church was persecuted by fellow-"Christians" during the third and fourth centuries.

At the Council of Chalcedon, in 451 AD, Coptic Christians split from the Roman Catholic Church. Rome and Constantinople accused the Copts of being monophysite, or teaching only one nature of Christ. In fact, Coptic theology is "miaphysite," ie recognizing Christ's human and divine natures "being joined inseparably in the 'One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate'". Coptic churches were targeted by Rome and Constantinople and a number of massacres of Copts occurred between Chalcedon and the rise of Islam.

With Muslim expansion from 645 AD Copts were permitted to practice their religion provided they paid a "jizya" tax for protection. Copts are still persecuted in Egypt.

Eastern Orthodox

The word "Orthodox" means "holding correct opinions; in harmony with what is authoritatively established, approved, and conventional". Orthodox churches comprise those that accepted decisions of first seven church Councils and relate to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. They are separate from the Catholic communion because of schisms between the eastern and western branches of the organized church. Some differences:

1. Roman Catholic liturgy was traditionally in Latin. Orthodox Churches use other languages, including Greek, Russian and Syriac.
2. Orthodox Churches allow married priests. The Roman Catholic Church generally does not.
3. Orthodox and Catholic Churches use different ways to calculate the date of Easter, so that in most years they end up celebrating the feast on different days.
4. The Catholic Church recognises the Pope as having supreme spiritual authority on earth. Orthodox churches do not recognise the Pope.
5. The Catholic Church recognises a number of ecumenical councils that Orthodox Churches do not (eg Trent, Vatican I, Vatican II).

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6. The Catholic Church accepts the 'filioque' clause ("and the Son") in the Nicene Creed. Orthodox churches consider it to be an incorrect addition.
 - And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

The things that unite Catholic and Orthodox churches are greater than those that divide them. Both are in broad agreement on nearly all major matters of doctrine and most differences between them are cultural. Pope John Paul II made several efforts to bridge the gap.

Like Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy claims to be universal, the "only True Church".

Orthodox tradition has splintered along national lines, mainly Greek, Russian, Georgian, Romanian, Serbian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Albanian and Syrian. This multiplicity is reflected in Orthodox communities around the world. Orthodox churches originally used Greek while the Catholic Church in West used Latin. Altogether, there are about 200 million Orthodox adherents.

In Ethiopia (claims links to the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8:26-30) the Orthodox Tewahedo Church is dominant. Part of the Coptic communion for a period.

Syrian Orthodox

Background

Antiochian priests I have met, including the Iraqi-born Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of Antioch and the East, believe their church is a remnant of the original church (Acts 11:19) in the city of that name. The followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Today the city of Antakya is situated inside Turkey and the Patriarchate is based in Damascus and Sidnaiya, Syria, where I first got to know senior members of this old denomination. In some parts of Syria adherents still speak Aramaic. It is fascinating to hear people speak a language they claim has not greatly altered since the days of Jesus. No wonder they feel strongly about other denominations. Over several meetings I got to know the Patriarch and senior members of his staff. I did not understand his rituals, and I questioned their efficacy in terms of revealed Biblical teaching, but I knew he trusted Jesus Christ for his salvation. Instead of getting hung up about rites and sacerdotal outfits, I was glad to be able to pray with these people and talk about our common faith in the Living Christ and the hope He gives us in a world that is often at odds with faith in God.

Additional Reading

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