HISTORY of CHRISTIANITY

Part I – History of Christianity: Early Church (A.D. 65 - 430)

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The history of Christianity is inextricably woven with the person and work of Jesus Christ. In one of the earliest documents of the New Testament, St. Paul wrote the following words to the Christians at Galatia: "But, when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law" (Gal. 4:4).

In the fullness of time. There are two separate words for time in the New Testament. There is *chronos,* from which we get our English words "chronic" and "chronology." Chronos is time that can be measured, counted, divided into minutes, hours, months, years, centuries, and so on. *Chronos* is the tick-tick-tick time of an alarm clock in the morning or a stopwatch in a race. It is time as you and I live it and experience it, day in and day out.

But there is another word for time: *kairos. Kairos* means the opportune time, the right time, time that is laden with meaning and significance. The Christian faith is based on the fact that the event of Jesus Christ — His life, His death, His resurrection — has forever changed the meaning of time and history itself. As St. John put it: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). In Jesus, *chronos* became *kairos.* So significant was that event, for the whole history of the world, that we have subsequently divided time itself into A.D. (*Anno Domini*, Latin for "in the year of the Lord") and B.C.

The study of Christian history is rooted in the most basic presupposition of our faith, namely, that God Himself, has entered the warp and woof of our human existence as a baby in a manger, as a man on a cross. And so the study of Christian history is not a luxury but a necessity. For Christianity is not primarily a philosophy of life or a code of behavior or even a set of rituals. It is the story of what God Himself has said and done, in space and time, in the person of His Son on earth, and in the work of His Spirit through the ages.

The word "church" occurs only twice in the Gospels, both times in Matthew. One text has been especially well-remembered through the centuries. In response to Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Jesus said, "Upon this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18).

The history of Christianity is, to some extent, the story of the fulfillment of that prophecy. Christianity began as a small sect within Palestinian Judaism. By the end of the first century, it had already become a significant force within the Roman Empire. When Jesus died, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, required that the words, "This is Jesus, King of the Jews," be written on His cross in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. These three languages represented the three worlds into which the early Christians carried their message of a crucified and risen Redeemer.

THE WORLD OF HEBREW RELIGION

Jesus was a Jew, as was His greatest interpreter, the Apostle Paul. When Paul reminded his young disciple, Timothy, how, from his early childhood, he had known the Holy Scriptures through which he had learned the way of salvation, he was referring, of course, to the Hebrew Scriptures, which the Christians regarded as the inspired Word of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. One of the most momentous decisions of the early church was the retention of the Old Testament as Christian scripture. Above all else, this meant that the God of creation, the God of the covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was none other than the God and Father of the Messiah, Jesus.

THE WORLD OF GREEK CULTURE

Since the time of Alexander the Great, some 300 years before Christ, the Mediterranean world had been drawn together into a common intellectual and cultural unity which we call Hellenism. A new form of the Greek language, the *koine,* or common tongue, came into general use. The New Testament writers used *koine* Greek to spread the message of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. Christianity also had to come to grips with the Greek philosophical tradition, the intellectual heritage of Plato and Aristotle, of Stoicism and Epicurianism. Tertullian, an important church father from Carthage, asked a famous question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Had not St. Paul himself said that the preaching of the cross was foolishness to the Greeks, just as it had been a stumbling block to the Jews? (1 Cor. 1:18). But if Christianity was to gain a hearing in the marketplace of ideas, then certain Greek words and ideas had to be "baptized" with Christian meaning. Certain apologists, such as Justin Martyr in the second century and Origen in the third, went so far as to claim that Greek philosophy, with its concepts of order, justice, and beauty, had, in fact, prepared the way for Christ among the Greeks just as Moses and the prophets had done among the Jews. Yet how far could one go in this direction without losing the essence of the Gospel itself? This tension would mark the history of Christian thought through Augustine and well beyond.

THE WORLD OF ROMAN ORDER

For more than 200 years, the world had known a period of relative peace and stability, known as the *pax Romana.* During this time, the Christian church was born. The story of Jesus was carried along the major highways and well developed sea routes of the Roman Empire into all the known world. The Apostle Paul was a citizen of the Roman Empire, and urged obedience to the civil authority. But he also knew that the Christian's prior political allegiance was to that heavenly commonwealth, "the Jerusalem that is above," as he called it (Gal. 4:26). From the beginning, Christianity was a missionary movement with a worldwide vision and a universal message. It was inevitable that Christianity should come to be seen as a threat to the prevailing world system, at whose head stood a man who was believed to be a God: Caesar. Had Christians been willing to worship Jesus and Caesar, to say their prayers to Christ and also place a pinch of incense on the altar of the imperial deity, then conflict could have been avoided, for religious pluralism was much in vogue in the Roman Empire. But when the Emperor Domitian arrogated to himself the title, *Dominus et Deus* ("Lord and God"), the Christians would not acquiesce. "Jesus is Lord," they said, "not Caesar." Thus the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.

Some Christians, like Ignatius of Antioch, faced martyrdom with great eagerness. To a group of believers, he wrote:

> I hope to obtain by your prayers, the privilege of fighting with the beasts at Rome. Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb, and leave no trace of my body. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world shall not even see my body.

The equanimity, and even joy, with which the martyrs faced persecution and death, was a great witness to the sustaining power of the Christian faith. Indeed, the arena became one of the most fruitful places for evangelism in the early church. Many of those who had witnessed the martyrs' deaths with such constancy, became themselves followers of Jesus. In time, the stories of the martyrs' deaths developed into a new genre of devotional literature. Martyr stories, like those of Bishop Polycarp of Smyma, and the Cathaginian noblewoman, Perpetua, and her servant girl, Felicitas, were read aloud to encourage young Christians to steadfastness and hope.

A major turning in the fortunes of Christianity took place in the early fourth century with the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Under two previous Emperors, Decius and Diocletian, the Christians had been savagely suppressed, their churches destroyed, their Bibles burned, and many put to death because of their refusal to sacrifice to the pagan gods. But rather than quenching Christianity, these persecutions were a stimulus to its growth and expansion. Christianity had permeated all levels of Roman society, including the nobility and the army, some of whose members faced death rather than deny their Lord.

As a soldier with political ambitions, Constantine was alive to the religious questions within the Empire. He had linked his personal destiny to the sun god, *Sol Invictus,* a deity claiming universal dominion in all parts of the empire. However, as he prepared for a battle at the Milvian Bridge near Rome, on October 28, 312, Constantine had a dream in which he was told to place the sign of Christ, the "Chi Rho," on the shields of his soldiers. According to another version of this story, he also saw the following words written in the sky: *In hoc signo, vinces*, "In this sign, you will conquer". Constantine won the battle of Milvian Bridge. He went on to become Emperor, and he switched his allegiance from the sun god to the Son of God.

Constantine's conversion has been endlessly debated by historians. Was it the result of divine intervention or merely an act of political expediency? However we interpret this event, it had enormous consequences for the history of the church. In 313, the Edict of Milan recognized Christianity as a *religio licita* ("a legal religion"), to be tolerated along with other religions within the empire. In time, however, accommodation gave way to assimilation, as Christianity became the official established religion of the empire. In 321, Sunday was declared an official holy day. December 25th, the festival day of Sol Invictus, became the day for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. The Christianization of the Roman Empire brought many great benefits to the Christian church, but there was a downside as well. Eventually Christianity became not merely tolerated but required. The Emperor Theodosius II permitted only Christians to serve in his army. Unbelievers, and even Christian dissenters, such as the Donatists in North Africa, were suppressed by the force of arms. Within less than two generations, the Christian church had moved from being an illegal minority to becoming the dominant religion. Christians, who were once persecuted, now became the persecutors.

The fourth century was a watershed in many other ways as well. I want us to look briefly at three of them:

- A New Sense of History
- A New Form of Spirituality
- The Classic Development of Christian Theology

A NEW SENSE OF HISTORY

The first generations of Christian believers looked forward to the end of the age and the return of Jesus Christ in power and glory. In the second and third centuries, for example, a group of charismatic Christians, known as Montanists, put forth prophecies concerning the date and place of Christ's return. They urged Christians to withdraw from the world and into an ascetic lifestyle, in anticipation of the apocalyptic denouement of history. As time went on, this apocalyptic fervor began to wane. Although Christians still professed belief in the second coming of Christ, instead of looking forward to the future, they now began to look backward on the past.

It is no accident that the first real history of the Christian church was written in the fourth century by Eusebius, a bishop in Palestine. Eusebius also wrote the official biography of Constantine in which he referred to him as the "thirteenth apostle," the visible head of the New Israel. Christians now began to erect houses of worship on a large scale. Church architecture was born as Christians moved from worshiping in the caves and catacombs into beautiful basilicas and stately houses of worship. The mother of Constantine, Helena, was a great advocate of this development. She supervised the building of churches over the presumed sites of Christ's birth in Bethlehem and His death in Jerusalem. By 333, we read of pilgrims from Bordeaux visiting the Holy Land as an act of religious devotion. "Guided tours of the Holy Land" became a thriving business and has remained so to this very day!

As we have seen, the cult of martyrdom had a powerful effect on Christian devotion in the early church. With the cessation of persecution, however, the possibility of martyrdom (as the highest achievement of the Christian life) was removed. At this precise moment, a new and distinctive form of Christian spirituality emerged and established itself as an alternative to the growing lax mentality of official Christianity. The "white martyrdom" of monasticism would leave an indelible mark on the history of Christianity.

The father of monasticism was Saint Antony, who, at the age of 18, entered a church at the very moment when the words of Jesus were being read: "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you possess, give it to the poor, and come follow me" (Luke 18:22). Immediately, he went out, literally obeying the words he had heard. He secluded himself in the desert of Egypt, where he lived in tombs, doing hand-to-hand combat with the devil and his demons of the dark. Eventually, thousands of others followed Anthony into his monastic retreat.

The monks were the successors to the martyrs, a new form of the *militia Christi,* front-line fighters in the ongoing struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. In Syria, a unique form of monastic life developed around the pillar saints, the most famous of whom was Simeon Stylites, who died in 459. He built a stone pillar, some 70 feet high, where he lived an ascetic life of prayer for more than 30 years. His daily food was hoisted up by a band of loyal disciples, who camped at the foot of his stone edifice.

A more routine form of monasticism was developed by Pachomius and Basil the Great. This was "cenobitic" monasticism, from the Greek words, *koinos bios* ("common life"). They emphasized life in community, life together, with a definite form of prayer, a routine of manual labor, and obedience to the abbot, or leader, of the community. "Basil's Rule" became the standard manual for cenobitic monasticism in the East as monasticism became integrated into the wider life of the church. It exerted a powerful influence on Christian devotion. It is no accident that St. Augustine, the greatest of all the church fathers, was profoundly moved toward the monastic life by reading the biography of St. Anthony.

Along with a new history and a new form of Christian community and spirituality, the fourth and fifth centuries also witnessed the formation of classic Christian orthodoxy in the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and Christology. From the beginning, Christian theology had been reoccupied with the question of Jesus during His earthly ministry: "Whom do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15). The Christian community answered with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Early debates over the nature of God and the person of Christ were often prompted by heretical groups within the church, such as the Gnostics, who tried to separate the God of creation from the God of redemption. How could the Eternal God have become human flesh, they asked. Or how could the Son of God have possessed a material body of flesh and blood? At best, they argued, Jesus only *appeared* to be a real human being. When he had walked along the shores of Galilee, His foot had only appeared to leave a print in the sand. Over against such views, the church set forth a rule of faith, basic principles of Christian belief, questions asked of every new Christian at the time of baptism. What we know today as the Apostles' Creed developed out of this kind of baptismal confession of faith.

"Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"
(To which the new Christian would answer), "*Pisteuo*, I believe."
"Do you believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate?"
"*Pisteuo.*"
"And do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting?"
"*Pisteuo.*"

Still unresolved, however, was the fundamental question of how Jesus of Nazareth was related to the Eternal God whom He called Father. In its most basic form, the doctrine of the Trinity is the effort of the Christian church to reconcile the Old Testament affirmation, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one" (Deut. 6:4), with the New Testament confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:5 - 11). This was not merely a problem of semantics or philosophical word games. It went to the very root of Christian piety, in the fact that Jesus was an object of prayer and worship. As the Roman philosopher and Christian antagonist, Celsus, put it: "These Christians, in fact, worship to an extravagant degree this man, who appeared only recently, and think it not inconsistent with monotheism that they also worship God's servant."

The issue came to a head, in the early fourth century, in a fierce conflict between Arius and Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria. Arius emphasized the uniqueness and transcendence of God. The essence of God is indivisible, he declared, and therefore it cannot be shared with anyone else, not even with His Son. Therefore, the Logos, the Son, must be a creature. He must have had a beginning or, as Arius put it, "There was when He was not." (In the twentieth century, Dorothy Sayers has summarized Arian theology in a memorable couplet: "If you want the Logos doctrine, I can serve it cool or hot; God begot Him, and before He was begot, He was not.")

Over against this idea of Christ as creature, Athanasius proclaimed that the Logos was *homoousios* ("of the same essence as") the Father. A mere creature, Athanasius said, however exalted, could never atone for our sins. Only God Himself could rescue us from sin and death. In 325, the church set forth this view of Christ at the Council of Nicea:

> We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For us men, and for our salvation, He came down from heaven.

The Council of Nicea did not stop the controversy over the Trinity, which continued to be debated along with the divinity and humanity of Christ. The Council of Constantinople in 381, the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 all contributed to the settlement of ecumenical orthodoxy: the doctrine that God is one in essence or being, three in Person; Jesus Christ is one Person in two natures. Near the end of the Patristic period, St. Augustine wrote a massive treatise, *De Trinitate, (On the Trinity),* in which he summed up the whole orthodox tradition of thinking about God, emphasizing the unity and equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well as the personal dynamic of relationship with the divine Godhead. In this realm, as in so much else, the theology of St. Augustine would leave an indelible imprint on Christian thinking for the next millennium.

TRADITIONS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Augustine himself had come to the Christian faith through a tortuous intellectual and spiritual quest. He was born in 354 in Tasgate, in what is today the modern North African country of Algeria. His father, Patricius, was not a Christian, but his mother, Monica, was a devout believer who had a dominant influence on Augustine's life and development.

For seven years, Augustine followed the way of the Manachians, a radically dualistic religion with roots in ancient Persia. Then he became a skeptic, doubting whether genuine truth and meaning could be discovered at all. At last he turned to neo-platonism, which offered him a model of transcendence, pointing him beyond the visible world of flow and flux, from the temporal toward the eternal. The sermons of Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, brought him closer to the Christian faith. But still he resisted, until one day, when he was sitting alone in the garden, he heard a group of children singing a song at play: *Tolle lege, tolle lege,* "Take and read, take and read." He immediately picked up a copy of the Scriptures and opened them to a text in Romans 13 (Rom. 13:11-14). This event was a turning point in his quest for God. He was baptized by Ambrose on Easter Sunday in 387. He later described his spiritual pilgrimage in a work which has become a classic paradigm for Christian autobiography: *The Confessions.* He opens this book, which is really a prayer, by declaring to God: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

Adolf Von Harnack once characterized Augustine as "the first modern man." But we might also call him the first medieval man, for his life and his theology would exert a profoundly shaping influence on the one thousand years of Christian history between his death, in 430, and the birth of Martin Luther, another Augustinian monk, in 1483. Augustine was not only a great theologian, but also an active bishop and shepherd of souls. His voluminous writings deal with all kinds of problems faced by ordinary Christians in his day: the nature of the sacraments, discipline and penance, worship and prayer, how to venerate the martyrs and saints, how to study and teach and preach the Bible. In his debates with the British monk, Pelagius, Augustine set forth a theology of God's grace and salvation, which emphasized the impotence of human beings apart from grace, and stressed God's sovereign love and election. The church would later honor St. Augustine as the preeminent *Doctor Gratiae,* "The Teacher of Grace."

With the death of St. Augustine in 430, the world of classical antiquity drew to a close, giving way to a millennium of turbulence and realignment in western Christendom. In his fulsome life as a religious seeker, bishop, spiritual ascetic, and theologian, St. Augustine summed up the major themes of the early Christian era. His vision of God and his description of the Christian life would form the basis for numerous streams of medieval spirituality.

When he was born, the blood of the martyrs was still warm and wet in Christian memory. When he died, the organized church had become sufficiently strong in the world to assume the place of the fallen Roman Empire in the formation of a new civilization. One thousand years later, both Protestants and Catholics claim St. Augustine as the forerunner of their own efforts to advance the cause of Christ. For Christians today, both Catholics and Protestants, St. Augustine is above all the master teacher of the introspective conscience. His opening words from *The Confessions* still speak to us today:

> Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. Whoever does not want to fear, let him probe his inmost self. Do not just touch the surface; go down into yourselves; reach into the farthest corner of your heart.