

CHAPTER 7 : THE FOURTH CENTURY CHURCH

We traced in the foregoing chapter the decay of doctrine and manners within the church. Instead of "reaching forth to what was before," the Christian Church permitted herself to be overtaken by the spirit of the ages that lay behind her. There came an after-growth of Jewish ritualism, of Greek philosophy, and of Pagan ceremonialism and idolatry; and, as the consequence of this threefold action, the clergy began to be gradually changed, as already mentioned, from a "teaching ministry" to a "sacrificing priesthood." This made them no longer ministers or servants of their fellow-Christians; they took the position of a caste, claiming to be superior to the laity, invested with mysterious powers, the channels of grace, and the mediators with God. Thus there arose a hierarchy, assuming to mediate between God and men.

The hierarchical polity was the natural concomitant of the hierarchical doctrine. That polity was so consolidated by the time that the empire became Christian, and Constantine ascended the throne (311 AD), that the Church now stood out as a body distinct from the State; and her new organization, subsequently received, in imitation of that of the empire, as stated in the previous chapter, helped still further to define and strengthen her hierarchical government. Still, the primacy of Rome was then a thing unheard of. Manifestly the 300 Fathers who assembled (A.D. 325) at Nicaea knew nothing of it, for in their sixth and seventh canons they expressly recognize the authority of the Churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and others, each within its own boundaries, even as Rome had jurisdiction within its limits; and enact that the jurisdiction and privileges of these churches shall be retained.

Later in the fourth century the Roman empire was again divided into two parts, which were held by two brothers. Valentinian, who had the eastern half, was an Arian; and Valens, who ruled at Rome, was a catholic (even at this time "catholic" simply meant orthodox and anti-Arian). Though all the empire was Christian, still these were sad disputes; for many had fallen away into the Arian heresy.

During Valentinian's reign an especially corrupt man, by the name of Damasus, obtained the office of bishop of Rome. The death of the preceding bishop, Liberius, led to a division in the church there. One faction supported Ursinus, while the other supported Damasus. This dissension climaxed with a riot which led to the deaths of 137 people and the rare intervention of Emperor Valentinian to uphold public order. Damasus prevailed, but only with the support of the city prefect. He was also accused of murder before a later prefect, but his rich friends secured the personal intervention of the emperor to rescue him from this humiliation. The reputations of both Damasus and the Roman church in general suffered greatly due to these two unseemly incidents.

Many in both pagan and Christian society saw in Damasus a man whose worldly ambitions outweighed his pastoral concerns. His entertainments were infamous for their lavishness. A wealthy aristocrat called Praetextatus, who was a priest in the cults of numerous gods, is reputed to have said jokingly to Damasus, "Make me bishop of Rome

and I will become a Christian". Some of his critics used to call him "the ladies' ear-tickler". An accusation of adultery was laid against him in 378 in the imperial court, but he was exonerated by Emperor Gratian himself.

Damasus is notable for his association with Jerome of Dalmatia. He encouraged the highly respected scholar to revise the available Old Latin versions of the Bible into the contemporary Latin (hence *Vulgate*, the "vulgar" language). Jerome also wrote an account of each book of the Bible, setting apart those old writings of the Jews that are called the Apocrypha, and are read as wise instruction and history, though they are not the inspired and infallible Word of God.

Damasus also encouraged the liturgical and aesthetic adornment of the city churches. He employed a calligrapher, one Dionysius Philocalus, to adorn the shrines of martyrs and Roman bishops with epigrams.

These ceremonial embellishments and the emphasis on the Roman legacy of Peter and Paul amounted to a general claim to the Roman upper classes that the real glory of Rome was Christian and not pagan. All this made it more socially acceptable for the upper classes to convert to Christianity. Often the women of the family were the first to abandon pagan ways, while the men tended to hold on to them longer, being generally more conservative in their idealised views on the greatness of the empire. This was often more for aesthetic and antiquarian reasons, rather than strictly religious ones. To these elegant, austere citizens, the pagan zeal of the previous Emperor, Julian was an embarrassment nearly as grating as that of any Christian evangelist.

Damasus was the first bishop of Rome to invoke the "Petrine text" (Matthew 16:18) in terms that sought to establish a serious theological and scriptural foundation on which the primacy of the Roman church could be based. From Damasus onwards, there is a marked increase in the volume and importance of claims of authority and primacy from the Roman bishops.

Damasus spoke of Rome in terms of the "apostolic see", as his predecessor Liberius had also done. This is one of the most noteworthy qualities of his reign, as it allowed him to emphasize his purportedly powerful apostolic inheritance. His reign is also one of the more important landmarks in the progression towards the development of the Papacy proper.

Valentinian was succeeded by Gratian as Roman emperor, while Damasus yet remained bishop at Rome. The reign of Gratian forms an important epoch in ecclesiastical history, since during that period orthodox Christianity for the first time became dominant throughout the empire. Gratian prohibited pagan worship at Rome; refused to wear the insignia of the *pontifex maximus* as unbecoming a Christian; removed the Altar of Victory from the Senate House at Rome, despite protests of the pagan members of the Senate, and confiscated its revenues; forbade legacies of real property to the Vestal Virgins; and abolished other privileges belonging to them and to the pontiffs of the Roman empire. True to form, when the office of *pontifex maximus* was relinquished by the Emperor

Gratian in 382, it was assumed by Damasus. And Damasus' successive bishops of Rome have continued to assume this office.

One notable leader in the church at the time was Ambrose. In 374, Auxentius, bishop of Milan, died, and the orthodox and Arian parties contended for the succession. An address delivered to them at this crisis by Ambrose led to his being acclaimed as the only competent occupant of the see; though hitherto only a catechumen, he was baptized, and a few days saw him duly installed as bishop of Milan.

He immediately betook himself to the necessary studies, and acquitted himself in his new office with ability, boldness and integrity. Having apportioned his money among the poor, and settled his lands upon the church, with the exception of making his sister Marcellina tenant during life, and having committed the care of his family to his brother, he entered upon a regular course of theological study, under the care of Simplician, a presbyter of Rome, and devoted himself to the labors of the church, labors which were temporarily interrupted by an invasion of Goths, which compelled Ambrose and other churchmen to retire to Illyricum.

The eloquence of Ambrose soon found ample scope in the dispute between the Arians and the orthodox or Catholic party, whose cause the new bishop espoused. Emperor Gratian, the son of the elder Valentinian I, took the same side; but the younger Valentinian, who had now become his colleague in the empire, adopted the opinions of the Arians, and all the arguments and eloquence of Ambrose could not reclaim the young prince to the orthodox faith. Theodosius I, the emperor of the East, also professed the orthodox belief; but there were many adherents of Arius scattered throughout his dominions. In this distracted state of religious opinion, two leaders of the Arians, Palladius and Secundianus, confident of numbers, prevailed upon Gratian to call a general council from all parts of the empire. This request appeared so equitable that he complied without hesitation; but Ambrose, foreseeing the consequence, prevailed upon the emperor to have the matter determined by a council of the Western bishops.

A synod, composed of thirty-two bishops, was accordingly held at Aquileia in the year 381. Ambrose was elected president; and Palladius, being called upon to defend his opinions, declined, insisting that the meeting was a partial one, and that, all the bishops of the empire not being present, the sense of the Christian church concerning the question in dispute could not be obtained. A vote was then taken, when Palladius and his associate Secundianus were deposed from the episcopal office.

Ambrose was equally zealous in combating the attempt made by the upholders of the old state religion to resist the enactments of Christian emperors. The pagan party was led by Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, consul in 391, who presented to Valentinian II a forcible but unsuccessful petition praying for the restoration of the altar of Victory to its ancient station in the hall of the senate, the support of seven Vestal Virgins, and the regular observance of the other pagan ceremonies.

To this petition Ambrose replied in a letter to Valentinian, arguing that the devoted worshippers of idols had often been forsaken by their deities; that the native valour of the Roman soldiers had gained their victories, and not the pretended influence of pagan priests; that these idolatrous worshippers requested for themselves what they refused to Christians; that voluntary was more honorable than constrained virginity; that as the Christian ministers declined to receive temporal emoluments, they should also be denied to pagan priests; that it was absurd to suppose that God would inflict a famine upon the empire for neglecting to support a religious system contrary to His will as revealed in the Holy Scriptures; that the whole process of nature encouraged innovations, and that all nations had permitted them even in religion; that heathen sacrifices were offensive to Christians; and that it was the duty of a Christian prince to suppress pagan ceremonies.

The increasing strength of the Arians proved a formidable task for Ambrose. In 384 the young emperor and his mother Justina, along with a considerable number of clergy and laity professing the Arian faith, requested from the bishop the use of two churches, one in the city, the other in the suburbs of Milan. Ambrose refused, and was required to answer for his conduct before the council. He went, attended by a numerous crowd of people, whose impetuous zeal so overawed the ministers of Valentinian that he was permitted to retire without making the surrender of the churches. The day following, when he was performing divine service in the basilica, the prefect of the city came to persuade him to give up at least the Portian church in the suburbs. As he still continued obstinate, the court proceeded to violent measures: the officers of the household were commanded to prepare the Basilica and the Portian churches to celebrate divine service upon the arrival of the emperor and his mother at the ensuing festival of Easter.

Perceiving the growing strength of the prelate's interest, the court deemed it prudent to restrict its demand to the use of one of the churches. But all entreaties proved in vain, and drew forth the following characteristic declaration from the bishop: -- "If you demand my person, I am ready to submit: carry me to prison or to death, I will not resist; but I will never betray the church of Christ. I will not call upon the people to succour me; I will die at the foot of the altar rather than desert it. The tumult of the people I will not encourage: but God alone can appease it."

Many circumstances in the history of Ambrose are strongly characteristic of the general spirit of the times. The chief causes of his victory over his opponents were his great popularity and the superstitious reverence paid to the episcopal character at that period. But it must also be noted that he used several indirect means to obtain and support his authority with the people.

He was liberal to the poor; it was his custom to comment severely in his preaching on the public characters of his times; and he introduced popular reforms in the order and manner of public worship. Although the court was displeased with the religious principles and conduct of Ambrose, it respected his great political talents; and when necessity required, his aid was solicited and generously granted.

Theodosius I, the emperor of the East, regained the kingdom. He was a thorough catholic. Some fresh heretics had risen up, who taught falsehoods respecting the Third Person of the Trinity; and to put them down, Theodosius called another General Council to meet at Constantinople, and there the following addition was made to the Nicene Creed: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified —" and so on to the end. Thus each heresy was made the occasion of giving Christians a watchword, intending to summarize the scriptural doctrine on the issue.

This same Theodosius was sternly rebuked by Ambrose for the massacre of 7000 persons at Thessalonica in 390, and was bidden imitate David in his repentance as he had imitated him in guilt.

In 392, after the assassination of Valentinian II and the usurpation of Eugenius, Ambrose fled from Milan; but when Theodosius was eventually victorious, Ambrose supplicated the emperor for the pardon of those who had supported Eugenius. Soon after acquiring the undisputed possession of the Roman empire, Theodosius died at Milan in 395, and two years later Ambrose also passed away.

Another notable Christian leader at the time was John of Antioch. He was famous for eloquence in public speaking and his denunciation of abuse of authority in the church of the time. After his death he was named John Chrysostom, which comes from the Greek *chrysostomos*, "golden mouthed". He rejected the contemporary trend for allegory in preaching to the people, instead speaking plainly and applying Bible passages and lessons to everyday life.

One incident that happened during his service as bishop in Antioch perhaps illustrates the influence of his sermons best. Around the time he arrived in Antioch, the bishop had to intervene with the Emperor Theodosius I on behalf of citizens who had gone on a riotous rampage in which statues of the Emperor and his family were mutilated. During the weeks of Lent in 397, John preached twenty one sermons in which he entreated the people to see the error of their ways. These apparently had a lasting impression on the people: many pagans reportedly converted to Christianity as a result of them. In the event, Theodosius' vengeance was not as severe as it might have been.

In 398 he was called (somewhat against his will) to be the bishop in Constantinople. He deplored the fact that Imperial court protocol would now assign to him access privileges greater than the highest state officials. During his time as bishop he bullishly refused to host lavish entertainments. This meant he was popular with the common people, but unpopular with the wealthy and the clergy. In a sermon soon after his arrival he said "people praise the predecessor to disparage the successor". His reforms of the clergy were also unpopular with these groups. He told visiting regional preachers to return to the churches they were meant to be serving - without any pay out.

His time there was to be far less at ease than in Antioch. Theophilus, the bishop of Alexandria, wanted to bring Constantinople under his sway and opposed John's

appointment to Constantinople. Being an opponent of Origen's teachings, he accused John of being too partial to the teachings of that Christian teacher who had lived two centuries earlier. Theophilus had disciplined four Egyptian monks (known as "the tall brothers") over their support of Origen's teachings. They fled to and were welcomed by John. He made another enemy in Eudoxia, the wife of the eastern Emperor Arcadius, who assumed (perhaps with justification) that his denunciations of extravagance in feminine dress were aimed at herself.

Depending on one's outlook, John was either tactless or fearless when denouncing offences in high places. An alliance was soon formed against him by Eudoxia, Theophilus and others of his enemies. They held a synod in 403 to charge John, in which the Origen factor was used against him. It resulted in his deposition and banishment. He was called back by Arcadius almost immediately, however. The people were very angry about his departure. There was also an earth tremour which was seen as a sign of God's anger. Peace was shortlived. A silver statue of Eudoxia was erected near his cathedral. John denounced the dedication ceremonies. He spoke against her in harsh terms: "Again Herodias rages; again she is confounded; again she demands the head of John on a charger" (an allusion to the events surrounding the death of John the Baptist). Once again he was banished, this time to Armenia.

The bishop of Rome (Innocent I at this time) protested at this banishment, but to no avail. In the west, Rome's primacy had been unquestioned from the fourth century onwards. But an interesting point to note in the wider development of the papacy, is the fact that Innocent's protests availed nothing: demonstrating the lack of influence the bishops of Rome held in the east at this time.

John wrote letters which still held great influence in Constantinople. As a result of this, he was further banished to Pityus (on the eastern edge of the Black Sea). However, he never reached this destination as he died during the journey.

John's banishments demonstrated that secular powers dominated the eastern church at this period in history. It also demonstrated the rivalry between Constantinople and Alexandria, both wanting to be recognized as the preminent eastern see. This mutual hostility would eventually lead to much suffering for the church and the Eastern Empire.

So in both East and West Christ's church was too often used as a tool for power and wealth, rather than an instrument to bring glory to God. And at the same time true Biblical religion became increasingly obscured.

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.

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