

# **MBC Equipping Hour 2019**

## **Church History**

### **Week 2: New Era for the Church**

#### **Introduction**

This section starts around 300 AD and we will discuss the major turning points in the church regarding theology, church leadership, how the church interacts with society and the culture around her and how this era has impacted even us today. We will end around the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

In my opinion, there is no other time in church history which has impacted us today more than this era. The church will move from its heaviest and bloodiest persecution to finding herself as the apple of the government's eye. The same Roman government which murdered Peter, Paul and Christ Himself would now not only be at peace with Christianity but also its loudest advocate. This is also the time when the church had the opportunity (although forced upon her) to work out their doctrinal and theological positions publicly.

The Roman Empire was split into four factions, each ruled by a single man with their own army. One of the rulers, Constantine, decided that he was going to march on Rome and successfully took her over in October of 312. The night before this battle he reportedly had a vision/dream where the Christian God told him "in this sing, conquer." Because of this, he took the Roman eagle off their shields and replaced it with the Christian cross. In January of 313 he issued the Edict of Milan, declaring all religions legal in the Empire. This was a major turning point in Christianity which we still feel today.

#### **Constantinian Christianity**

With the signing of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, Roman wide persecution of Christians came to a standstill. In fact, much of the old Roman immoral and depraved activities started to slow down as well. Favoring the church and the Bible's high morals, Constantine began passing laws which had never been in place before. Women now had rights over their children and could own land. Adultery was punished and infanticide was forbidden. The gladiators who once fought in the colosseums had been halted and now the poor, the elderly and the sick were cared for by the government.

As the church seemed to influence the culture, so the culture now influenced the church. "Under Diocletian, there were no nominal believers, no one who joined the church except out of the deepest conviction, since confessing Christ was punishable by death. But once Christianity became politically-correct and culturally-fashionable—indeed, a means of advancing in the Emperor's favor—joining the church lost its edge. People embraced

Christianity without necessarily understanding its teachings or having true faith in Christ, bringing with them into the church their pagan worldviews.”<sup>1</sup> Though Constantine was never born again nor put himself under the teachings of Christians, he was allowed to dictate to the church what they were supposed to do.

The Christians in Rome took two very different outlooks on their new freedom and their new leader. Many Christians, because of their favor from the government, sought to show that Constantine was chosen by God to unite the church and the Empire. In fact, while the official teaching of amillennialism did not take shape until Augustine in the fifth century, the belief that the Christian era had begun started to surface<sup>2</sup>. This belief came about because there was now peace and support from the government. The persecution had stopped, and the church was now calling the shots. Up until this point, Christians were expecting the imminent return of Christ and many early writings (including the Apostle Paul’s) pointed to a premillennial belief.<sup>3</sup>

With the support of the government, those who did not want to partake in this unholy marriage either withdrew into the desert or decided to break away to continue “real church.” The rich were now dominating the churches, the bishop positions were going to the highest bidder and the pagan government was dictating to the church. This was just too much for those who had endured persecution for decades to handle. Up until this point, for some three hundred years, the true test of a Christian was the ability to handle persecution and ultimately face martyrdom with the joy and strength of the Lord. Without that being possible anymore, many saw all the new faces flocking into the churches as tares and goats just following the new fad.

Those who withdrew into the desert were the pioneers of the monastic movement. The word for these men were monks, meaning “solitary” in the Greek. As they went into the Egyptian desert, they sought to be inaccessible to society and not to be disturbed by all that was happening in the culture. It is important to understand that this lifestyle was not the invention or creation of one person but a movement which occurred so thousands over a period of time could seek to become closer to Christ.

## **Persecution Ends and Heresies Begin**

Those who separated from the church and remained in the world were called Donatists. They followed a man who was the bishop of Carthage, North Africa, who sought to have a pure church, pure bishops and only those who persevered under persecution were to be in the church. This was essentially a cult as they baptized believers who had been baptized in other churches. It would be about two hundred years of fighting them off before they finally went away through the various counsels and the writings of Augustine.

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<sup>1</sup> Table Talk Magazine Aug. 2004

<sup>2</sup> This view also gained popularity because allegory was the preferred method of teaching and would be for centuries to come.

<sup>3</sup> Papias (60-130 AD) Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) Melito of Sardis (2<sup>nd</sup> Century) to name a few.

While the Donatists sought to be separate from the church, another heresy arose from within the church. A priest in Alexandria, Egypt, North Africa named Arius would bring about a monumental move in the history of the church, without even knowing it. Arius believed and taught that “there was a time when Jesus was not.” That means that he taught that Jesus was created, although he believed that Jesus was the highest of all created beings, he was not the same essence of God.

Unlike the Donatists, Arius sought to attack the very foundation of the doctrine of God and thus the foundation of Christianity. Arius was not an uneducated man, on the contrary, he was a brilliant man, skilled in Hebrew and Greek. He was a master orator and never turned away from debating and defending his position.

## **Constantine and Councils**

With the rise of theological threats to the church, especially from Arius, something needed to be done. The unsaved, polytheistic Emperor Constantine called a gathering of bishops in 325 AD in Nicaea. This was a landmark moment as it was the Emperor, not the bishops who called them together. There were about 320 bishops from around the Roman Empire that gathered to discuss the issues at hand, mainly Arius calling the deity of Christ into question.

**Councils are (were) a good thing!** It is very important to remember that councils are not there to speak for God. They are not put on by perfect men and women who add revelation to the Word. But they are good for the church to work out differences, warn the body of false teachings and attempt to be unified. No Biblical doctrine that exists today has gone without argument over the past 2000 years. Many today disdain the idea of a corporate council or even arguing within the church. But it is a good thing and a good way to work out theological issues.

**Council of Nicaea (325)** This is historic because the Emperor called the church together, issues of theology were being discussed and Scriptures were being used to determine the answers. At the council, “The debate was heated and often bitter. But the creed that Nicaea produced forthrightly condemned Arius as a heretic. Arguing that Jesus was of the same essence as the Father, the Nicene Creed declared Jesus to be “true God from true God” (Leith, 30). And denying one of the central tenets of Arianism, the council proclaimed Jesus as “begotten, not created” (Leith, 31).”<sup>4</sup>

***So, what was the product of the council of Nicaea?*** “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance (homoousios) with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heave and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation descended and became

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<sup>4</sup> James Eckman, *Exploring Church History*, p. 30

incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance (hypostasis) or essence (ousia), or that He is created, or mutable, these the catholic (universal) church anathematizes.”

### **Athanasius (295-373)**

“Arius’s arch opponent was Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, whose personal secretary was Athanasius. Athanasius played a small but important role at Nicea. **But for the next forty-five years, he defended the Nicene formula.** He taught that the members of the Trinity are coequal, coessential, and coeternal. He powerfully linked the doctrines of the Trinity and salvation. From Scripture he argued that God created humanity in His image, but through sin, humanity abandoned Him and His image. Thus a new creation was necessary, and only God could be the Savior of fallen humanity. No man could possibly provide this needed redemption. **For Athanasius, then, the deity of Jesus Christ and the salvation of fallen humanity were inextricably linked.** This Apologist was willing to suffer any punishment or persecution to defend that crucial bond, for to deny the deity of Jesus was to emasculate the Gospel.”<sup>5</sup>

Athanasius was constantly under threat of persecution as many believers followed Arius. In his 45 years of defending the deity of Christ, he was exiled 5 times by four different Emperors and even disobeyed an order from Emperor Constantine to restore Arius back to the church for the sake of fellowship. How many of us would stand alone, against those more powerful, to make sure this (or any) vital doctrine would not be done away with?

In 367 AD, Athanasius inadvertently set the foundation for what we know as the canon of Scripture. The New Testament that you hold in your hand was *fully referenced* by him in a letter on Easter and he used the word canonized to refer to the list.<sup>6</sup> Roughly 100 years before, in Origen’s *Homilies of Joshua*, he also states that the 27 books are in the New Testament and speaks as if the canon is closed.

### **Council of Carthage (397)**

This was an important turning point in the church as the Bible that we have today was officially recognized and complete and finished. This will always raise the question...did the church make up the Bible or did the Bible make up the church? The answer to that question carries the heaviest weight.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 30

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Kruger <https://www.michaeljkruger.com/10-misconceptions-about-the-nt-canon-10-athanasius-festal-letter-367-a-d-is-the-first-complete-list-of-new-testament-books/>

If one believes that the church put the Bible together, then the authority lies within the church and the church can change the Bible and God is still speaking today through the church. This would be the official position of the Roman Catholic Church and why the Pope can continually make “changes” to what Scripture teaches. This would hold true to any movement or church that believes God still “speaks” today. They are not under the authority of the Word but put themselves over the Bible.

On the other hand, if one holds that the church came out of the Bible, then the church is subjected to what Scriptures teach. This is the Orthodox or Reformed or Protestant position. This is why Luther stood up to the RCC and simply said to show him in Scriptures, not in man’s ways or customs. He understood what it meant to be under the authority of Scriptures.

Why so late? One of the most common objections to the Bible being authoritative for the church is that it took over 350 years for it to be canonized. The church never had to officially recognize the canon because it was commonly in use for over 350 years. The only reason they did it when they did was because they were forced to so they could officially stand against heresy and false teachers claiming to have apostolic authority.

### **Council of Chalcedon (451)**

Just as the council of Nicaea was to define the deity of Christ, the council of Chalcedon was to define His humanity. One of the greatest questions then, and still today, is how do the two natures of Christ come together in one person? Once again a Roman Emperor, this time Marcian, called together about 520 bishops to figure out this issue and put it to rest for all time. There were many theories as to how the two natures co-existed in one person, from a mix of the two into one to no humanity or no deity existing at all.

What the council finally came to, after many days of arguing was “Jesus to be both God and man in one person. It declared that both natures are joined in a miraculous way so neither nature is damaged, diminished, or impaired. His two natures are joined “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably” (Leith, 36). Salvation is thus secured for those who profess faith in Jesus because His sacrifice was as both saving God and identifying man.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Augustine (354-430)**

We know more about Augustine than any other person in this time because of his writings, especially *Confessions*, his autobiography concerning his conversion. His mother was a devout believer, but his father was a pagan. Through his mother’s prayers, the Lord saw fit to convert him at the age of 32. His life changed and he became a stalwart of the early church and is often referenced by Luther (who was an Augustinian monk), Calvin and countless others.

Augustine’s biggest issue was how can God allow evil in the world. If God was good, why is there pain, suffering and death all around. In his work on the Trinity, Augustine also solved his

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<sup>7</sup> James Eckman *Exploring Church History* pp. 34-35

personal struggle with the problem of evil. For him, the Bible taught that God created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and created humans and angels with a free will. Free will explained how evil entered into a good universe—Satan, some angels, and humans chose to rebel against God. Grace was the only explanation of why God chose to redeem humanity through His Son.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine is known for many, many contributions to the church, both then and today. He taught that salvation was totally caused by God; man does not have a part to play. He also taught on the Trinity in *Treatise on the Holy Spirit*, and single handedly put a stop to any more debate on the Trinity in the future. He brought the amillennialism teaching into the mainstream thought of the church and from that point on, it was the only teaching for centuries.

Notably, a man named **Pelagius (350-425)** lived at the same time as Augustine. He started what would be an assault on God-centered salvation by denying original sin and putting the power for man to be born again in man's hands. He taught that man was born neutral, with the power to either sin or not sin. Though his teachings (referred to as Pelagianism) were continually condemned by various councils throughout the years, his teachings still live on today. Arminians are generally referred to as Semi-Pelagianism in their belief that though man was born in sin, he is not so tainted that he cannot pull himself out. As we will see in the future, Charles Finney was also an ardent supporter of Pelagius.

In response, Augustine formulated detailed responses by explaining original sin, the doctrine of predestination and also election. His responses will be detailed later as they influenced Luther and Calvin as they stood in the Protestant Reformation.

## The Spread of the Church<sup>9</sup>

### External Factors

Looking at the Council of Nicaea and Chalcedon, one has to ask how the church had spread from a simple band of disciples in 34 AD to having hundreds of churches spread throughout Africa, Europe, Asia and the middle east only 400 years later. One of the factors was the Roman road system. Everywhere the Romans went, they made amazing roads so people would be able to travel with ease. They thought that if people could travel, commerce would improve and a stable economy would ensue. The roads also made it possible for Roman armies to be dispatched and quickly get to any trouble spots.

Another reason for the safety of travel was the *Pax Romana*. The Romans brought and enforced peace in the Mediterranean world. Their legions and proconsuls ensured the stability of the region. The Roman navy cleared the sea of pirates so that sea travel was less risky. All in all, the period under study was congenial to missionary travel.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> It is important to keep in mind that it was primarily God's blessing that the church survive and thrive but our privilege to be used by Him to accomplish His will.

The use of the Greek language as the “common” language was also a leading factor in the spread of the gospel. The common people spoke Greek so everywhere one travelled, they would easily share the gospel.

### **Women**

For the first three hundred years of the church, women silently played a key role in spreading the church through very natural means. It is important to remember that before Christ, women were nothing more than property to be bought, sold or killed at the whim of husband or father. Divorce was rampant, and any excuse for a man to be “free” of his wife would do. Any woman who had been divorced was looked at as no good anymore. Women could not own land, speak in crowds, have any rights over their children and were generally just looked down upon as part of society.

Christ ended all that as he brought women in the church by means of salvation. To the believer, we are all (men and women) desperately wicked, all falling short of God’s amazing standard and all need grace. To be a man or a woman did not matter. Imagine the astonishment a woman would have to hear of this “new” religion where all were looked at as equal in God’s eyes. As the men went off to work, a woman would have her neighbors and friends over and they would hear the gospel and see the transformation. Women were incredibly instrumental in the early church’s spread throughout the world.

### **Internal Factors**

“Christianity prospered because of the ethical standards of the early church. This is not to say that the churches or believers were perfect, but their lives were so much different from their pagan neighbors that they attracted notice. Their morality and works of charity commended the faith to many.”<sup>10</sup> Here is the secret to the church spreading and maintaining its strength, it was a bulwark of holiness in the middle of a storm of debased living.

### **Some of the First Intentional Missionaries<sup>11</sup>**

After Constantine declared peace for Christians in the Empire, he also set in motion many missionary efforts. Even though his goal was to have peace throughout the region by a unified religion, many took advantage this and spread the gospel.

Martin of Tours (316–397) was an evangelistic and saintly bishop whose life was an example to many. As a bishop, Martin traveled widely throughout Gaul<sup>12</sup> and won thousands of converts by his preaching. He destroyed pagan shrines and replaced them with churches or monasteries. Hundreds of churches were named after him. Historians remember Martin for his success in evangelizing the rural areas of Gaul and for introducing monasticism to that land.

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<sup>10</sup> JM Terry *The History of Missions in the Early Church*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Western Europe (France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, Germany)

Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397) is remembered for his outstanding preaching and influence on Augustine of Hippo (Ambrose baptized Augustine). He won many pagans through his preaching in his own diocese, but he also encouraged missionary work in the Tyrol<sup>13</sup>.

John Chrysostom (347-407), bishop of Constantinople, an outstanding preacher of that era, demonstrated a continuing concern about missions. He wrote an apologetic with the aim of winning pagans and Jews. Chrysostom sent missionaries into pagan areas, particularly the land of the Goths. While he was in exile in the Caucasus, he encouraged missionary work in Cilicia and Phoenicia.

Patrick of Ireland (389-461) When he was sixteen, he was captured by a band of marauders and taken to Ireland. Living as a slave, he tended cattle for six years. Patrick ministered in Ireland for over thirty years. In his *Confession* he speaks of baptizing thousands and ordaining presbyters to lead the new congregations. He faced a great opposition from pagan priests and antagonistic rulers. He tried to win the local rulers and through them the masses, but this was not always successful. He was faithful to teach Roman Christianity, though he was a man of little education.

### **What happened in 300 years?**

- Intense persecution stopped
- Christianity became in vogue and under the hand of the Emperor
- Councils sought to end arguments and keep Biblical doctrine pure
- The Bible was “officially” recognized
- The deity and humanity of Christ was solidified
- The Trinity was defined and solidified
- Arianism and Pelagianism sought to undermine the gospel
- The church spread rapidly through normal Christian activity by the power of the gospel
- Latin Vulgate was penned by Jerome (400 AD)

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<sup>13</sup> Western Austria