

The Pilgrim Church - Part 2

by E.H. Broadbent

The sermon explores the early Christian church's separation from the world, its persecution by the Roman Empire, and the significance of the Council of Nicaea and the Canon of Scripture.

Scripture: Matthew 5:44, Romans 5:8, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 10:36, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 2:11, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Early Christianity", "Persecution And Faith"

Description

E.H. Broadbent preaches about the early Christians' distinct way of life, living as citizens of heaven while obeying earthly laws, enduring suffering and persecution for their faith in God. The Epistle to Diognetus highlights the Christians' unwavering devotion to Jesus as the Son of God, sent as a Saviour to bear the burden of their sins, showcasing the profound love and sacrifice of Christ. Despite severe Roman persecution, the Christians' steadfastness and refusal to compromise their faith eventually led to the unexpected end of persecution through Constantine's edict, demonstrating the power of faith and endurance in the face of adversity.

Transcript

[Epistle to Diognetus]

Amidst the confusion of conflicting parties there were true teachers, able and eloquent in directing souls in the way of salvation. One, whose name is unknown, writing in the second century to an inquirer named Diognetus,[14] sets himself to answer the questions asked as to the mode of worshipping God among the Christians, the reason of their faith and devotion towards God and love to one another, why they neither worshipped the gods of the Greeks nor followed the Jewish religion, and why this new practice of piety had only so late entered into the world.

He writes:

"Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language", living in such places "as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.... They pass their days on earth, but they are

citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives ... they are reviled and bless".

Then, speaking of God, he says:

[He] "who is almighty, the Creator of all things, ... has sent from heaven, and placed among men, Him who is the truth, and the holy and incomprehensible Word, and has firmly established Him in their hearts. He did not, as one might have imagined, send to men any ... angel, or ruler, ... but the very Creator and Fashioner of all things--by whom He made the heavens--by whom He enclosed the sea within its proper bounds"--whom the stars obey. "This messenger He sent to them.... As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Saviour He sent Him." Not as judging us He sent Him, though "He will yet send Him to judge us, and who shall endure His appearing?" As to the delay in sending the Saviour, God has always been the same, but waited in His long-suffering. He had "formed in His mind a great and unspeakable conception, which He communicated to His Son alone." As long as He concealed His own wise counsel He appeared to neglect us, but this was to make it manifest that of ourselves we cannot enter into the kingdom of God. But when the appointed time had come, "He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the Holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!"

When the Church came into contact with the Roman Empire,[15] a conflict ensued in which all the resources of that mighty power were exhausted in a vain endeavour to vanquish those who never resisted or retaliated, but bore all for love of the Lord in whose footsteps they were following. However much the churches were divided in view and practice, they were united in suffering and victory. Although the Christians were admittedly good subjects, their faith forbade their offering incense or giving divine honours to the Emperor or to the idols. Thus they were looked upon as being disloyal to the Empire, and, as idol worship entered into the daily life of the people, into it's religion and business and amusements, the Christians were hated for their separation from the world around them.

[Severe Roman Persecution]

Severe measures were directed against them, at first spasmodic and local, but by the end of the first century it had been made illegal to be a Christian; persecution became systematic, and extended over the whole Empire. There were considerable intervals of respite, but with each recurrence the attack became more violent; all the possessions of the confessors of Christ were confiscated, they were imprisoned, and not only were they put to death in countless numbers, but every imaginable torture was added to their punishment. Informers were rewarded; those who sheltered the believers shared their fate; and every portion of the Scriptures that could be found was destroyed. By the beginning of the fourth century this extraordinary warfare, between the mighty world-empire of Rome and these unresisting churches that were yet invincible because "they loved not their lives unto the death", seemed as though it could only end in the complete extinction of the Church.

[Constantine 288-337]

Then an event happened which brought this long and dreadful conflict to an unexpected close. In the struggles that were going on in the Roman Empire, Constantine was victorious and, in 312, gained his decisive victory, entered Rome and immediately issued an edict bringing the persecution of Christians to an end. This was followed, a year later, by the Edict of Milan, by which all men were given freedom to follow whatever religion they chose.

Thus the Roman Empire was overcome by the devotion to the Lord Jesus of those who knew Him. Their patient, unresisting endurance had changed the bitter hostility and hatred of the Roman world, first into pity, and then into admiration.

Pagan religions were not at first persecuted, but, being deprived of State support, steadily declined. The profession of Christianity was favoured. Laws abolishing abuses and protecting the weak brought in a measure of prosperity not known before. The churches, freed from oppression from without, entered upon a new experience. Many had preserved their primitive simplicity, but many had been affected by the profound inward changes in their constitution which have been noted, and were very different from the New Testament churches of Apostolic days. Their entry on a larger sphere will exhibit the effects of these changes.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]"Mission and Ausbreitung des Christentums" A. v. Harnack.

[2]"Das Judentum in der vorchristlichen griechischen Welt" M. Friedländer.

[3]"The church in Rome in the First Century" George Edmundson M.A.

[4]"The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers" Vol.1 of the Ante Nicene Christian Library.

[5]"The writings of the Apostolic Fathers" Vol. 1 of the Ante-Nicene Christian Library.

[6]The Greek Testament, etc. Henry Alford D.D., Dean of Canterbury. Note on Acts 20. 17.

[7]"Die Taufe. Gedanken über die Urchristliche Taufe ihre Geschichte und ihre Bedeutung für die Gegenwart" Joh. Warns.

[8]"Early church History" J. venn Bartlett, M.A., D.D., Lecturer on Church History at Mansfield College, H.T.S., 1925.

[9]Ante-Nicene Christian Library. Writings of Origen

[10]Ante-Nicene Christian Library. Writings of Cyprian

[11]"Encyclopedia Britannica" Article, Montanus

[12]"Marcion das Evangelium vom Fremden Gott" Ad. v. Harnack.

[13]"The Later Roman Empire" Professor J. B. Bury. Vol. I, c. 9.

[14]The Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol. I, "Epistle to Diognetus". The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

[15]"East and West Through Fifteen centuries" Br-Genl. G. F. Young C.B. Vol. I.

Chapter II

Christianity in Christendom

313-476, 300-850, 350-385

Church and State associated--Churches refusing union with the State--Donatists condemned--Council of Nicaea--Arianism restored--Athanasius--Creeds--Canon of Scripture--The Roman world and the Church--Break up of the Western Roman Empire--Augustine--Pelaginus--Change in the position of the Church--False doctrines; Manichaeism, Arianism, Pelagianism, Sacerdotalism--Monasticism--The Scriptures remain for guidance--Missions--Departure from New Testament Missionary principle--Irish and Scottish Missions on the Continent--Conflict between British and Roman Missions--Priscillian.

313-476

The prominence of the Bishops and especially of the Metropolitans in the Catholic churches made for ease in communication between the Church and the civil authorities. Constantine himself, while retaining the old imperial dignity of chief priest of Pagan religion, assumed that of arbitrator of the Christian churches. The Church and the State quickly became closely associated, and it was not long before the power of the State was at the disposal of those who had the lead in the Church, to enforce their decisions. Thus the persecuted soon became persecutors.

In later times those churches which, faithful to the Word of God, were persecuted by the dominant Church as heretics and sects, frequently refer in their writings to their entire dissent from the union of Church and State in the time of Constantine and of Sylvester, then bishop in Rome. They trace their continuance from primitive Scriptural churches in unbroken succession from Apostolic times, passing unscathed through the period when so many churches associated themselves with the worldly power, right down to their own day. For all such, persecution was soon renewed, but instead of coming from the Pagan Roman Empire it came from what claimed to be the Church wielding the power of the Christianised State.

The Donatists being very numerous in North Africa and having retained, or restored, much of the Catholic type of organisation among themselves, were in a position to appeal to the Emperor in their strife with the Catholic party, and this they soon did. Constantine called together many bishops of both parties and gave his decision against the Donatists, who were then persecuted and punished; but this did not allay the strife, which continued until all together were blotted out by the Mohammedan invasion in the seventh century.

[Council of Nicaea--325]

The first general council of the Catholic churches was summoned by Constantine and met at Nicaea in Bithynia (325). The principal question before it was that of the doctrine taught by Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, who maintained that the Son of God was a created Being, the first and greatest, but yet, consequently, not on an equality with the Father. Over 300 bishops were present, with their numerous attendants, from all parts of the Empire, to examine this matter, and the Council was opened in great state by Constantine. A number of the bishops present bore in their bodies marks of the tortures which they had endured in the time of persecution. With two dissentients, the Council decided that the teaching of Arius was false, that it had not been the teaching of the Church from the beginning, and the Nicene Creed was framed to express the truth of the real Divine Nature of the Son and His equality with the Father.

Although the decision reached was right, the way of reaching it, by the combined efforts of the Emperor and the bishops, and of enforcing it, by the power of the State, manifested the departure of the Catholic church from the Scripture. Two years after the Council of Nicaea Constantine, altering his view, received Arius back from exile, and in the reign of his son Constantius all the bishoprics were filled by Arian bishops; the Government, now become Arian, persecuted the Catholics as formerly it had done the Arians.

[Athanasius 296-372]

One of those in high places, moved neither by popular clamour nor by the threats or flatteries of the authorities was Athanasius. As a young man he had taken part in the Council of Nicaea and afterwards became Bishop of Alexandria. For nearly fifty years, though repeatedly exiled, he maintained a valiant witness to the true divinity of the Saviour. Slandered, brought up before tribunals, taking refuge in the desert, returning to the city, nothing shook his advocacy of the truth he believed.

Arianism lasted nearly three centuries as the state religion in a number of countries, especially in the later established Northern kingdoms. The Lombards in Italy were the last to abandon it as the national religion.

Not only the first, but the first six General Councils, of which the last was held in 680, were occupied to a large extent with questions as to the Divine Nature, the relations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the course of endless discussions, creeds were hammered out and dogmas enunciated in the hope that the truth would by them be fixed and could then be handed down to succeeding generations. It is noticeable that in the Scriptures this method is not used. From them we see that the mere letter cannot convey the truth, which is spiritually apprehended, neither can it be handed from one to another, but each one must receive and appropriate it for himself in his inward dealings with God, and be established in it by confessing and maintaining it in the conflict of daily life.

[Canon of Scripture]

It is sometimes supposed that Scripture is not sufficient for the guidance of the churches without the addition of, at least, early tradition, on the ground that it was by the early Church councils that the canon of Scripture was fixed. This of course could only refer to the New Testament. The peculiar characteristics and unique history of the people of Israel fitted them to receive the Divine revelation, to recognise the inspired writings, and to preserve them with an invincible pertinacity and accuracy. And with regard to the New Testament, the canon of inspired books was not fixed by the Church councils, it was acknowledged by the councils because it had already been clearly indicated by the Holy Spirit, and accepted by the churches generally, and this indication and acceptance has ever since been confirmed by every comparison of the canonical with the apocryphal and non-canonical books, the difference in value and power being evident.

[Union of Church and State]

This second period of the history of some of the churches, beginning with Constantine's edict of toleration in 313, is of lasting importance because it exhibits the experiment on a large scale, of the union of Church and State. Could the Church, by union with the world, save it?

The Roman world[16] had reached its greatest power and glory. Civilization had attained to the utmost of which it was capable apart from the knowledge of God. Yet the misery of the world was extreme. The

luxury and vice of the rich were boundless; a vast proportion of the people were slaves. The public exhibitions, where the sight of every kind of wickedness and cruelty amused the populace, deepened the degradation. There was still vigour at the extremities of the Empire, in conflict with surrounding enemies, but disease at the heart threatened the life of the whole body, and Rome was helplessly corrupt and vicious.

As long as the Church had remained separate it had been a powerful witness for Christ in the world, and was constantly drawing converts into its holy fellowship. When, however, already weakened by the adoption of human rule in place of the guidance of the Spirit, it was suddenly brought into partnership with the State, it became itself defiled and debased. Very soon the clergy were competing for lucrative positions and for power as shamelessly as the court officials, while, in congregations where a godless element predominated, the material advantages of a profession of Christianity changed the purity of the persecuted churches into worldliness. The Church was thus powerless to stem the downward course of the civilised world into corruption.

Ominous clouds, threatening judgment, were gathering. In distant China movements of the population, setting westward, led to a great migration of the Huns, who crossed the Volga, and, pressing upon the Goths in what is now Russia, forced them on to the frontiers of the Empire, which was by this time divided; the Eastern part, or Byzantine Empire, having Constantinople as its capital, and the Western, Rome. The Germanic or Teutonic nations came out of their forests. Pressed by the Mongol hordes from the East, and attracted by the wealth and weakness of the Empire, Goths (divided into Eastern and Western under the names of Ostrogoths and Visigoths) and Germanic peoples such as the Franks, Vandals, Burgundians, Suevi, Heruli, and others, broke like the waves of some resistless flood over the doomed civilization of Rome.

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