CHURCH HISTORY (4): Nicene (1)

The Nicene Era (4th century) was filled with important events and people: the conversion of Constantine, rise of monasticism, rise of Arianism, the Nicene Creed (325 and 381), Athanasius, Augustine, and the Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa). Jonathan Hill described the fourth century as "possibly the most extraordinary hundred years that the church would ever experience,"[1] and Sinclair Ferguson said, "the fourth century was one of the most significant periods in the first fifteen hundred years of the church's existence."[2]

I. The Conversion of Constantine and Rise of Monasticism

1. *The conversion of Constantine* (272-337). The fourth century opened with strong persecution against the church. "As we come to the beginning of the fourth century the Roman Empire was in some chaos. At one time there were six emperors all competing with one another to see who would be the supreme emperor in the Roman Empire" (Calhoun).[3] "As Constantine fought for control of the Roman Empire, he has a remarkable dream just before the Battle of Milvian Bridge. As a result, he fought under the sign of the cross, which became the famous *chi-rho* monogram (from the first two letters in the tittle *Christ*). Whatever the truth may be, Constantine won the battle, and he attributed his victory to the power of Christ" (Ferguson).[4]

> That meant Constantine was now the primary emperor in the West. The next year, 313, he met with Licinius the primary emperor in the East. These two emperors, agreed to end the persecution of Christians in 313 in the Edict of Milan. It is hard to think of a more important date in church history than that. The Edict of Milan was when the two Roman emperors said, 'Christians and all others should have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favor.' It was an amazing statement because it meant that now Christians were free to practice their faith in the Roman Empire, and everyone else could follow whatever faith they preferred.[5]

(1) The question of his conversion. There was evidence to believe he was truly converted. "In addition to his public changes, there were also private changes. Making no secret of his Christian convictions, he had his sons and daughters brought up as Christians and led a Christian family life. Bishop Eusebius baptized him shortly before he died in 337. After his baptism Constantine refused to wear again the imperial purple and thus left this life dressed in his white baptismal robes" (Shelley).[6] Yet, there was other evidence that questioned his conversion. "He showed afterwards in various ways that the old superstitions yet lingered to some extent in his mind. He was never fully weaned from the worship of Apollo. Finally, there were occasions on which he ordered the pagan soothsayers to be consulted" (Fisher).[7] "He has left no evidence that he placed any high value on Christianity's doctrine of sin and grace, divine forgiveness, pardon and renewal, or love and mercy" (Verduin).[8]

(2) The positive benefits of his conversion. Outside of ending persecution, the conversion of Constantine brought many benefits. "From the year 312, he favored Christianity openly. He allowed Christian ministers to enjoy the same exemption from taxes as the pagan priests; he abolished executions by

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[1] Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 72
[2] Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 41
[3] David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 9
[4] Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 43
[5] David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 9
[6] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 101
[7] George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 87
[8] Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, 99

crucifixions; he called a halt to the battles of gladiators as a punishment for crimes" (Shelley).[9] "In 321 he passed a law making Sunday, the Christian day of worship, into an official day of rest. He constructed church buildings at his own expense, and gave gifts of money to individual congregations. He also built the beautiful Church of Saint John Lateran, which is still Rome's cathedral church today" (Needham).[10] In 330, Constantine moved the Roman capital to the east. "The site Constantine chose could hardly have been more perfect for a city that would grow rich through trade. He called the city Constantinople (renamed Istanbul in 1930), the capital of the Byzantine (or eastern Roman) Empire" (Shelley).[11]

> Under Constantine's sons, the Empire's drift away from Paganism towards Christianity became stronger. The emperor *Constantius* (he ruled the East from 337 to 353, and the West too from 353 to 361) took a much more aggressive attitude to Paganism than his father Constantine had done. In 356 he forbade all animal sacrifices and ordered all Pagan temples to be closed down. Many people began to join the Church because it had become fashionable to be a Christian. This drift towards the public profession of Christianity was quicker in the East than in the West. The old Roman aristocratic families in the West remained deeply attached to their ancestral Paganism; they saw it as part of the ancient Roman tradition which it would be unpatriotic for them to surrender.[12]

(3) The negative consequences of his conversion. (a) Imperialism (i.e., the policy of extending a country's rule or reign). This refers to the emperor's control over bishops in the church. "Constantine reserved the right to determine his own religious practices, and even to intervene in the life of the church, for he considered himself 'bishop of bishops'" (Gonzalez).[13] (b) Materialism. "Wealth, power, and prestige became very important in the church, whereas before, that was not the case. One historian has said, 'The Roman Catholic Church is the ghost of the Roman Empire.' So much of what was in the Roman Empire was brought into the Roman Catholic Church" (Calhoun).[14] "When Christianity was made the religion of the empire, it became also the fashion of a luxurious and decaying society" (Fisher).[15] (c) Nominalism. "Before Constantine it was costly to be a Christian; it could mean persecution or death. Therefore people did not convert quickly or without much thought. But after Constantine, when Christianity was not only legal but more and more favored in the courts and in the Empire, then it was easy for people to decide to become Christians because of the advantages they would receive by being Christians" (Calhoun).[16] "The official acceptance of Christianity brought with it significant dangers. At this time, hordes of unregenerate Roman citizens came into the church and were baptized as believers. The sacred thus merged with the secular, and the immediate result was doctrinal compromise, all for the sake of political convenience" (Lawson).[17] "What the Church gained in quantity it lost in quality" (Kuiper).[18]

> The conversion of Constantine brought good and bad news. It was good news in the sense that Christians were now free to worship Christ without physical hindrance. But it was bad news in the sense that for the first time, Christianity became the state religion.

[9] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 100

[10] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:179-180

[11] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 101-102

[12] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:183

[13] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:112

[14] David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 9

[15] George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 87

[16] David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 9

[17] Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 123-124

[18] B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 71

Citizens of the Roman Empire would now view themselves as de facto Christians. The basic biblical distinction between natural birth and spiritual birth was lost. Constantine did much to help the church. But this fatal mistake hindered the church in the long term by minimizing the difference between a citizen of this world and a citizen of the world to come. The church in the West has never been quite the same since then.[19]

In Constantine's change the spirits of the Maccabees and the ghosts of the Zealots rode again. The kingdom of Christ, which the Savior in His hour of trial had declared to be 'not of this world,' was now as much a kingdom of the world as any that had ever existed. The sword that Jesus had told Peter to put away was again drawn from its sheath – by men who wanted to be known as vicars of this Peter. The kingdom of Christ now pitted army against army, sword power against sword power, and from this point on warfare was under the water of baptism, a very 'Christian' enterprise. By the year 416 the army was declared closed to all but Christians. Calling down fire from heaven to destroy those who stood in the way (behavior which Jesus had rebuked in unmistakable terms) was now under the benediction of that same Christ.[20]

2. *The rise of Monasticism*. Monasticism (from Greek word meaning *alone*), refers to exclusion from society for religious purposes. In many ways monasticism was a reaction to the nominalism that resulted from merger of church and state. "The causes of the development of monasticism in this period are not far to seek. The state of the times stimulated a desire for ascetic retirement. The world was falling to pieces morally as well as politically. The purity of the Church was endangered by the influx of nominal Christianity" (Fisher).[21] "Many ordinary Christian men became so disgusted with the sinful state of the Empire that they decided to 'drop out' of society completely. Like John the Baptist (lk.1:80; Mk.1:4-6), they would go off into remote unpopulated regions, such as deserts, and live simple ascetic lives there, away from the corrupting influences of the world. Men who did this were called *monks* (from the Greek *monachos*, a person who lives alone)" (Needham).[22]

When the church joins the powers of the world, when luxury and flashiness take hold of Christian altars, when the whole of society is intent on turning the narrow path into a wide avenue, how is one to resist the enormous temptations of the times? Many found an answer in the monastic life: to flee from human society, to leave everything behind, to dominate the body and its passions, which give way to temptations. Thus, at the very time when churches in large cities were flooded by thousands demanding baptism, there was a veritable exodus of other thousands who sought beatitude in solitude.[23]

As Christianity became the government's preferred religion during Constantine's 31 years in power and then increasingly the only religious option during the reigns of his Christian successors, many were tempted to join the church simply because it provided a way to get ahead in society. In other words, during the fourth and fifth centuries nominal believers entered the church in significantly large numbers to bring about an identity crisis within the church. In essence that crises can be boiled down to this question: What does it mean to be a Christian in a 'Christian society?' The answer to this crisis was the renewal movement that we call monasticism. In the long run this movement created as many problems as it set out to solve, but in the fourth century, in the hands of such

[19] Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of our Lord*, 43
[20] Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, 100
[21] George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 111
[22] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:204
[23] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:112

capable exponents as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea, it did indeed function as a vehicle of renewal. In fact, it played an essential role in the survival of Christianity after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, for it was in the monastic fraternities formed by this renewal movement, for instance, that the Christian Scriptures were preserved and handed on.[24]

(1) Its nature. "Monasticism began to develop in the latter half of the 3rd century, but it became widespread only in the 4th. Its origins were in the less civilized areas of Syria and Egypt, where Hellenistic culture had not made much impact. As their name suggests, the early monks lived solitary lives" (Needham).[25] "The first form of monasticism was located in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, and consisted in a life lived largely in solitude and marked by prayer, asceticism, and combat with demonic powers" (Haykin).[26] Thus, there were four primary aspects to Monasticism: piety, privacy, poverty, and celibacy. "All monks would renounce all worldly property and pleasures, be celibate, and consecrate themselves to prayers, fasting and Bible study" (Needham).[27]

(a) Piety. By "piety" is meant a reverence for God that results in devotion and dedication to God. This is the fundamental purpose behind monastic behavior (at least in theory): to promote religious piety and devotion. "Voluntary poverty, voluntary celibacy, and absolute obedience places man beyond the reach of the temptations connected with earthly possessions, married life, and independent will, and facilitates his progress toward heaven. But this threefold self-denial is only the negative side of the matter, and a means to an end. The positive aspect of monasticism is unreserved surrender of the whole man, with all his time and strength, to God; though not within, but without the sphere of society and the order of nature. This devoted life is employed in continual prayer, mediations, fasting, and castigation of the body" (Schaff).[28]

(b) Privacy. "One of the driving motivations for the early monks was the search for solitude. Society, with its noise and its many activities, was seen as a temptation and a distraction from the monastic goal" (Gonzalez).[29] "What is more blessed than to imitate on earth the choice of angels, at break of day to rise to prayer, and praise the Creator with anthems and songs; then to go to labor in the clear radiance of the sun, accompanied everywhere by prayer, seasoning work with praise, as if with salt? Silent solitude is the beginning of purification of the soul. For the mind, if it be not disturbed from without, and do not lose itself through the senses in the world, withdraws into itself, and rises to thoughts of God" (Basil).[30]

(c) Poverty. "Monasticism demanded entire renunciation, not only of sin, but also of property and of marriage. The poverty of the individual, however, does not exclude the possession of common property" (Schaff).[31] This eventually led to many monasteries becoming rich with land. "While the individual monk took the vow of poverty, the monasteries often grew immensely rich through gifts, especially land." (Shelley).[32]

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[24] Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 108

[25] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:204

[26] Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 108-109

[27] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:205

[28] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:153

[29] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:112

[30] Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 8:200

[31] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:159

[32] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 132

(d) Celibacy. Many church fathers elevated celibacy over marriage. For example, Tertullian said, "Nor do we prescribe sanctity as the rule, but only recommend it, observing it as a good, yea, even the better state, if each man uses it carefully according to his ability."[33] "By the end of the 4th century, most Christians had come to accept that celibacy was better than marriage. And as Christians more and more saw the monasteries as the best training-grounds for spiritual life, churches increasingly drew their bishops from among monks who were already committed to celibacy" (Needham).[34] "The monastic movement was not restricted to men. Christian women also established communities devoted to cultivating the spiritual life; these women were called *nuns* and their communities *nunneries* (taken from the Latin word *nonna*, which is the feminine form of the Latin word for a monk, *nonnus*) (Needham).[35]

> In this whole matter we must carefully distinguish two forms of asceticism, antagonistic and irreconcilable in spirit and principle, though similar in form: the *Gnostic* dualistic, and the *Catholic*. The former of these did certainly come from heathenism; but the latter sprang independently from the Christian spirit of self-denial and longing for moral perfection, and, in spite of all its blots, has fulfilled an important mission in the history of the church.[36]

(2) Its spread. "Beginning in Egypt, it spread in an irresistible tide over the East and the West, continued to be the chief repository of the Christian life down to the times of the Reformation, and still remains in the Greek and Roman churches an indispensable institution and the most productive seminary of saints, priests, and missionaries" (Schaff).[37] "As monasticism largely had its beginning in Egypt, devout people from different regions went to Egypt, some to remain there and others to return to their countries with the ideals and practices they had learned in the desert. From Syria, Asia Minor, Italy, and even Mesopotamia, pilgrims went to the land of the Nile and on their return spread the stories and practices of monastic living to others" (Gonzalez).[38]

Eventually, monastic living took two basic forms: *Hermit* and *Communal* Monasticism. (a) Hermit Monasticism. "Some monks lived alone as *hermits* (from the Greek *eremia*, the desert) or *anchorites* (from the Greek *chorizo*, to separate). The supreme example of the hermit was an Egyptian desert monk called Antony (251-356). Born into a rich Christian family, Antony withdrew from society as a young man, giving away all his money and property to the poor. He then spent some twenty years alone in the Egyptian desert" (Needham).[39] (b) Communal Monasticism. "The growing number of people withdrawing to the desert, and the desire of most of them to learn from an experienced teacher, gave rise to a new form of monastic life. Increasingly, solitary monasticism gave way to a communal form of the monastic life. Those who lived in such communities still called themselves 'monks'—that is, solitary— but by this they meant, not that they lived completely alone, but that they lived in solitude from the world" (Gonzalez).[40] "The place where the monks lived was called a monastery – the word originally meant a hermit's cave. Monks lived a common life, working and praying and eating together, and sharing all property. Monks normally called the head of a monastery an *abbot* (from the Aramaic *abba*, father). From *abbot* came the word *abbey* as a description for a monastery" (Needham).[41] While known for his Trinitarian theology, Basil of Caesarea (330-379), was very influential in the formation of

[33] Anti-Nicene Fathers, 3:294

[34] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:206

[35] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:205

[36] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:153

[37] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:149

[38] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:146

[39] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:203

[40] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:112

[41] Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:204-205

communal monasteries. "Basil was a pioneer of communal monasticism—a monasticism centered on living the Christian life together with others who were like-minded" (Haykin).[42] In the 360s Basil founded or reformed a number of monasteries. His *Longer Rules* and *Shorter Rules* were written for the regulation of life in these communities. "Since all the legislation in the Greek church regarding monastic life is based on the teachings of Basil, he is usually regarded as the father of Eastern monasticism" (Gonzalez).[43]

Among his *Shorter Rules*, Basil has 25 rules that are expounded upon in 25 chapters (totally 95 rules in all). Among them are: that monks are to live together for the sake of mutual help. comfort, instruction, exercise of virtue, efficacy of prayer. and security from danger; that none without trial, should be admitted into their fraternity; that they should dispose of their wealth to the poor and needy; that stinted measure be appointed for eating and drinking; that they should possess all things in common; that those who by their own fault do not come to dinner at the fixed time, ought not to eat till the next day, at the same hour; that they must apply themselves to handy crafts, that so they may be helpful to others; that as a token of humility, they wear sackcloth, and speak with moderation; that no man do his own will in the monastery, or the least thing, without the superior's leave; that the monks are not to discourse alone with women.

(3) Its dangers. (a) Individualism. Especially in its early form, those who practiced monasticism retreated from the world. "The hermit often fled, then, not so much from the world as from the world in the church. His protest of a corrupt institution led him into the dangers of a pronounced individualism" (Shelley).[44] "Above all, the monastic conception of the Christian life was essentially unnatural. To enter a monastery was to separate from the world, to abandon the ordinary relationships of social life, to shun marriage and all that the Christian home signifies. And supporting the whole endeavor was an erroneous view of man. The soul, said the monk is chained to the flesh as a prisoner to a corpse. That is not the biblical view of human life, and it created a fundamental flaw in monasticism" (Shelley).[45] (b) Works-righteousness. Many monastics fell prey to extreme practices of self-denial and mutilation. They bound themselves to many extra-biblical or man-made rules. "Temptations of the outer world were replaced by temptations of the inner world: pride, rivalry, and oddness. Many of the monks in Egypt and in Syria went to extremes in enduring hardships. Some ate nothing but grass, while others lived in trees. Still others refused to wash" (Shelley).[46] (a) Two-level Christianity. Oftentimes, monks were thought of as extra-spiritual. Singleness and poverty were viewed as virtues that exceeded marriage and wealth.

> Monasticism makes a distinction between two grades of morality: a common and lower grade, which moves in the natural ordinances of God; and a higher, extraordinary grade, which lies beyond them and is attended with special merit. It places the great problem of Christianity not in the transformation, but in the abandonment, of the world. It is an extreme unworldliness, over against the worldliness of the mass of the visible church in union with the state. It demands entire renunciation, not only of sin, but also of property and of marriage, which are lawful in themselves, ordained by God Himself, and indispensable to the continuance and welfare of the human race.[47]

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[42] Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 108
[43] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:112
[44] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 127
[45] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 132
[46] Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 127
[47] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:159