

The Close of the Imperial Church Age

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the expansion of Christianity during the Imperial Church and the close of the age
2. aim – to cause us to be mindful that God is always expanding his church throughout the world

b. outline

1. The Expansion of Christianity
2. The Fall of the Roman Empire
3. The Importance of the Imperial Church

c. overview

1. our *timeline*
 - a. the Imperial Church begins c. 311 with the conversion of Constantine
 - b. and it continues throughout the waning years of the Roman Empire
 - c. so, tonight we address two things:
 1. the expansion of Christianity *beyond* the Roman empire (see image at end of outline)
 2. specifically, where Christianity went *during* the Roman empire
 3. and, the final days of the W Roman empire and the “end” of the Imperial Church Age

I. The Expansion of Christianity

Content

a. the expansion to the East

1. through the Syriac language – a language closely akin to Aramaic
 - a. in the Roman Empire, Latin was the language of politics, Greek the language of commerce
 1. by the 1st C., most Jews had *stopped* speaking Hebrew, and most couldn't understand it
 2. the translation of the OT into Aramaic (*Targums*) allowed Jews to read it in the synagogue
 3. the LXX allowed Greek-speakers to understand the OT (thus the Greek of the NT)
 - b. early Christians (then) possessed both Aramaic and Greek copies of the OT
 1. in the 2nd C., a Syriac translation of *both* Testaments appeared – *the Peshitta*
 2. Peshitta (like Vulgate) = “simple” – a simple translation of both works into Syriac
 3. an early “harmony” of the Gospels was produced by Tatian (called the *Diatessaron*)
 - a. it remained an important work in some Syriac churches until the 7th C.
2. the spread of Christianity to Edessa
 - a. situated in the eastern reaches of modern Turkey (above Syria and Iraq; below Black Sea)
 - b. considered upper Mesopotamia; the northern-most point of the Fertile Crescent
 1. where Abraham's father died, in Haran
 - c. the city became Christian under Abgarus IX (179-216)
 1. *i.e.* the *earliest* Christian state (long before Constantine)
 2. a legend held that Abgarus V (a leper) wrote to Jesus and asked him to come to him, but Jesus sent Thaddeus to him with a return letter; Abgarus V was healed and the “letter” became a *talisman* (used to save people from injury or disease)
 - a. some of the language of the “letter” comes directly from the *Diatessaron*
 3. however, it is more likely that missionaries from the church came to Edessa during Abgarus IX's reign, converting him and the many in the city as well
3. the spread of Christianity to Armenia
 - a. situated to the NW of Turkey – a buffer state between the Roman Empire and Persia
 - b. Armenians preferred Roman rule because it allowed them to remain independent
 - c. modern Armenians insist that Bartholomew and Thaddeus brought Christianity there c. 50
 - d. however, more likely it was Gregory Lusavorich (the Illuminator) who brought Christianity there
 1. his relative, King Tradt III was in exile, but was returned to the throne by Rome
 2. Lusavorich returned with him and many converts were made in Armenia
 3. Lusavorich eventually converted Tradt and baptized him on *Epiphany* (01/06/303)
 4. the Scriptures were translated into Armenian
 5. Christianity eventually moved from there N into Georgia

6. today 97% of Armenians are part of the Armenian Apostolic Church
 7. it is a very ritualistic, conservative, *non-Chalcedonian* tradition
 - a. **i.e.** Chalcedon (451): Jesus has two *distinct* natures coexisting together in one person
 - b. they embrace a **Monophysite** view of Jesus: his two natures being *united into a single nature without separation* (in contrast to Chalcedon; **see future**)
 4. the spread of Christianity to Persia
 - a. the area of modern Iran, to the E of Mesopotamia
 - b. Christianity was probably taken there in the 2nd C. by Syriac-speaking merchants
 - c. the Parthian dynasty (to 224) was tolerant of Christianity, and it spread throughout Persia
 - d. but the Sassanid dynasty came to power and began persecuting Christians (as a foreign religion)
 1. the embrace by Rome of Christianity heightened persecution
 - e. rejecting both the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), the Persian churches became *Monophysite*, broke from Rome, and were then tolerated
 5. the spread of Christianity to Arabia
 - a. Christianity was present in Arabia by the 2nd C. – noted by contacts from Alexandria
 - b. the various forms of Christianity present around Arabia (from Rome, Persia, and Ethiopia) produced a “mixed” form of Christianity (including the Gnostic Elkesaites)
 - c. it was this confused picture of Christianity that Muhammad knew (rejected) in the 7th C.
 6. the spread of Christianity to India
 - a. there is a tradition that Thomas brought Christianity to India in the 1st C.
 - b. however, India is sometimes a reference to Arabia – Christianity was flourishing there c. 5th C.
- b. the expansion to the South**
1. the spread of Christianity to Ethiopia
 - a. although the Ethiopian Eunuch may have brought Christianity back there in the 1st C.,
 - b. it is more likely that Christianity there originated in Egypt (to its N)
 - c. Frumentius and Edessius were captured there; they were released and returned to Alexandria
 1. Frumentius became a bishop (under Athanasius) and went to Aksum (the center of Ethiopia)
 2. after a century of missionary work, the king was converted and much of the nation
 - d. however, like the Armenians, the Ethiopian church rejected the Council of Chalcedon
 1. the largest Monophysite churches in the world are (still) there
- c. the expansion to the West**
1. the spread of Christianity to Ireland
 - a. typically attributed to Saint Patrick (c. 387-03/17/493)
 - b. Patrick was captured in Wales at 16, he became a slave in Ireland
 - c. he escaped, returned to Wales, was converted and became a bishop
 - d. Patrick had a vision to return to Ireland as a missionary
 1. his early work was unimpressive, but he had much success later
 2. many monasteries were formed and the study of antiquity was all the rage
 - e. because Ireland was bypassed by the wave of barbarian invasions of Europe, its monasteries became the main sources from which the Church of Rome regained much of the classical knowledge and literature that were lost during those periods
- d. the expansion to the North**
1. the spread of Christianity into Europe
 - a. this occurred largely during the Arian support of the empire (during the reign of Constantius)
 - b. a missionary named Ulfila helped bring the faith the Germanic tribes to the N of Constantinople
 1. he developed an alphabet for the language of the Goths, and translated the Bible into it
 - c. because there were many Goths in the Imperial Guard in Constantinople:
 1. many were converted to Christianity and brought it back to the N
 2. thus, many invading Goths were actually Arian Christians who came looking for “sanctuary”
- e. the importance of this expansion**
1. it is often assumed that Christianity started in Europe and traveled into Africa, Persia, and India
 - a. **i.e.** a “westerner’s” view – that Christianity is the “invention” of the W
 2. however (as Jesus himself would say in **Acts 1**), Christianity would spread on its own outward from Judea and Samaria to the whole world
 - a. the missionary journeys of Paul represent only a small fraction of the evangelistic work that would occur between 30AD and c. 410
 3. **IOW**: Christianity (**i.e.** the kingdom of God) advanced throughout the world as the Spirit moved men to copy the Scriptures into new languages and tongues and bring that faith with them

II. The Fall of the Roman Empire

Content

a. the invasion of the Germanic Vandals from the N

1. the Goths reached Constantinople by 378, but turned W to attack the more “pliable” areas
2. the city of Rome fell to Alaric and his Goths in 410
3. the W half of the empire officially fell in 476, when the last emperor was deposed

b. the continuation of the church

1. the church would continue for the next 1000 years in the E, under the Byzantine Empire
2. the church in the W would remain largely independent and scattered until the rise of “the West” (i.e. the European continent states and the Holy Roman Empire)
3. the invaders from the N:
 - a. many of them were (of course) pagans, but the vanquished would convert many of them over time, creating new churches and new leadership
 - b. the invasion resurrected the issue of Arianism (again!), but it would eventually be subsumed to Nicene Christology by those who had been overtaken
 - c. the invasion began the period known as the Middle Ages – the period *between* the Classical Roman era and the Modern Era – a period of 1000 years from the 5th C. to the 15th C.

III. The Importance of the Imperial Church

Content

a. lessons from the Imperial Church

1. the “theological struggles” of this period are endemic to *every* period, including our own
2. the issue of the connection of the church *to the state* is a constant debate in every age
3. the church does not look as all “one size and shape” throughout history (i.e. as though it must look like “us” in order to be the true church)
4. the providence of God is *highly visible* throughout this period, leading it through many “variations”



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