

Internal Pressure # 2

A.D. 100-325

Introduction

- Internal threats against the Church did not only come from heresies like Gnosticism, or opposing philosophies like Neo-Platonism.
- Three large threats also emerged from legitimate places.
 1. Successful evangelism led to many converts, but in the midst of persecution, not all converts were properly taught. Within Christianity, “sanctified” practices and beliefs that are Christianized equivalents of certain pagan practices and beliefs grew in popularity.
 2. Seeking to understand how God is both One and Three will lead some church leaders to promote homegrown theological and Christological heresies.
 3. Disagreements over how to keep the church morally pure will lead to multiple schismatic movements.
- Therefore, this lesson will present internal pressure against the church in three categories: 1) Internal sub-Christian beliefs; 2) False teaching about the Oneness of God; and 3) Schisms over doctrine and practice.
- And remember, all this was happening at the same time as intense persecution and Gnostic heresy. It was a tough time to be the Church.

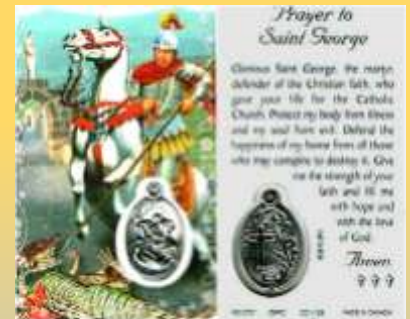
Cult of Relics or Fetishism

- It reaches its full force by the 4th century after Christianity was legal and protected.
 - But this means it was developing prior to this. Indeed, there is evidence for its development starting very early.
- Saints and relics were increasingly honored. Importance was attached to the corpses and possessions (e.g., bones, shroud, staff, etc.) of those considered holy in their lifetime (especially martyrs).
 - Chapels and shrines were built over tombs of saints.
 - Relics—things that belonged to the saint while alive—became increasingly prized.
 - The idea was the dead saint could pray on your behalf since the prayer of the righteous avails much (James 5:16).
 - Now that they are dead, it was assumed their prayers would be even more effective since they are in heaven.



Relics and Fetishism

- Praying to the Saints (cont).
 - At first, it wasn't praying to saints, but invoking them to pray for living believers.
 - But in popular use, it quickly turned into prayers to the saints.
 - Eventually, it was indistinguishable from how pagans prayed to their gods. Particular saints were thought to have skill at taking care of particular needs.
 - Thus, one saint for childlessness, another for illness, another for traveling protections, another for revealing the future, etc.
- Pillars like Basil of Caesarea, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome encouraged the cult of saints and relics.
 - A minority opposed them (e.g., Vigilantius pointed out how it was just like paganism).



Relics and Fetishism

- Related to this, icons were being added to Christian artifacts (cups, seals, etc.) and places of worship.
 - Early on, art depicted events from the Bible and its heroes.
 - Eventually, post-biblical saints were included.
 - Some popular early symbols were the fish, dove, anchor, and loaf.
- Catacombs—subterranean tunnels of connected graves—developed in the first century.
 - During severe times of persecution, these were safe places to meet for worship. Worship was literally taken “underground.”
 - When saints died, the church would create a small cut in the walls and place their bones there.
 - Overtime, there would be more bones than cave wall and later generations thought the place became holy.
- Even certain actions were thought to help (e.g., crossing yourself).



Female Deity

- Most pagans came from religions with female deities.
 - Hera, wife of Zeus, and Aphrodite (or Venus).
 - Mystery Cults had Cybele as the mother earth goddess. Fertility goddesses were highly important to pagans.
 - Gnosticism had Sophia.
- Religious veneration of an important female would be at home in the mind of a new convert.
 - The OT and NT present a God that is Spirit, but He identifies Himself as Father. He sends His Son. And even the Holy Spirit has masculine pronouns.
 - There is no female deity.
- The pagan desire, however, eventually fed a developing Mariolatry (idolatry in the worship of Mary).
 - She was a great woman, but not a god. She called God her savior in Luke 1:47. Only someone who needs saving has a savior. She never claimed any status for herself, and Christ never offered it.



Professionalism

- Undoubtedly, Scripture does teach that God appoints some as leaders in the church.
- Professionalism goes beyond this and creates a hierarchy.
 - Bishops are above elders, and elders are above deacons, and deacons are above the laity.
 - This develops a professional clergy class that is closer to God.
 - Christians did not take this idea from pagans (remember Ignatius and also the need for apostolic connection to refute Gnosticism).
- However, paganism is wrought with professionalism as their priests were closer to their gods because of their professional position.
 - Those converting to Christianity from paganism would naturally support the developing professionalism since they were used to it. The professionalism will only get stronger as time goes on.



Sacramentalism

- Two notions will develop adjacent to professionalism: sacramentalism and sacerdotalism.
- The two ordinances eventually were renamed as sacraments and then many other rituals were added among them.
 - This theme will develop throughout the rest of this course and reach its peak with Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. There will be a lot more than two.
- A sacrament comes from the word sacred. It is the idea that a sacred act can bestow God's holiness and grace upon a person.
 - Pagan religions had sacred rites and converts would naturally see Baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacred rites.
- This is one key reason people began baptizing infants. There was a high infant mortality rate, and parents wanted sin washed off their babies in order to guarantee heaven.
 - This only makes sense to those who believe the act of baptism actually bestows grace.



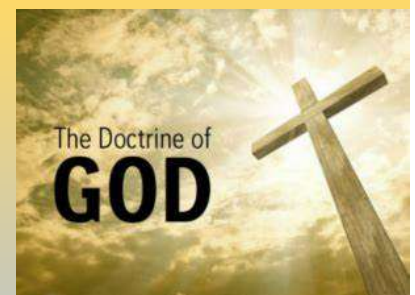
Sacerdotalism

- Sacerdotalism is necessary if there is sacramentalism.
 - If certain acts actually bestow grace, then you can't just have anyone perform them. You need a priest to do it.
 - Almost every church that practices sacramentalism has a priesthood.
- Sacerdotalism is a hyper form of professionalism.
 - It makes the priests more than just a higher class of people, but instead it makes them mediators. The laity does not have direct access to God.
- The NT teaches that we are all a kingdom of priests. Jesus is the High Priest, and He is the only Mediator between God and men. See 1 Tim 2:5.
 - Sacerdotalism, however, would make sense to pagan converts to Christianity since the professional priests of their former religion were the only ones that could perform the sacred rites.
- Again, the Church did not borrow these ideas from paganism directly. They developed out of apostolic succession as it grew.
- These ideas were not in full force prior to AD 325, but they were developing and growing.



False Teaching about the Oneness of God

- Trinitarian and Christological Difficulties
- The Bible is clearly monotheistic (e.g., the Shema).
 - Yet, Christ is presented as God, yet distinct from the Father (e.g., John 10:30).
 - The Holy Spirit is also presented as God, yet distinct from the Father and the Son (Acts 5:3-4).
 - This was a difficulty that the early church had to work out—the oneness of God and yet the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- It did not help that some of the second and third century church leaders and apologists were philosophers beholden to some form of Platonism.



False Teaching about the Oneness of God

- Justin Martyr unwittingly advanced a form of subordinationism (the Father is greater than the Son).
 - Middle Platonism assumed the unoriginate creator cannot interact with matter or creation.
 - Justin described Christ as the Logos, which is what the Greek philosophers understood as the eternal principle of reason that gives meaning to the universe.
 - It served as the Platonic middleman between God and the creation.
 - Justin identified the Logos as Christ while using this Greek philosophical conception.
 - **PROBLEM:** If it would be a deficiency in the Father to interact with creation, then it must mean there is something inferior in the Logos, or Son, since He can interact with creation. Thus, the Son by nature is somehow less than the Father. This is subordinationism.



False Teaching about the Oneness of God

- In the early third century, a presbyter in Smyrna named Noetus tried to describe Christ in a way that avoids the Platonic middleman of Justin, but his option represented the opposite extreme.
 - He conflated the Son with the Father, and simply saw them as different modes of the one God rather than different persons.
 - They were so identified with each other that his position was patripassianism (the Father suffered on the cross since there is no real distinction between the Father and Son). Tertullian claims a man name Praxeas taught the same thing.
 - This was rightly declared heretical.
- Sabellius tries to improve this in an attempt to preserve the oneness of God, but avoid patripassianism.
 - He opts for what is called Modal Monarchianism. This claims God is only one person.
 - The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three persons, but three modes of the single person, God.
 - That one person acts as the Father in creating the universe, the Son in redeeming sinners, and the Holy Spirit in sanctifying believers.
 - The church as a whole recognized this misses the biblical mark.

False Teaching about the Oneness of God

- Others respond to the riddle of One and Three by a more radical subordination.
- A leader of the Second Century, Paul of Samosata, denied Christ's divinity altogether, and saw him as a mere man.
 - One way to destroy an opponent was to convince others that they agree with Paul of Samosata.
- Others will go back to the idea of the preexistence of Christ as the Logos, but will opt for him being the first creation of the Father, by which He created everything else.
- Origen will push back by introducing the idea of eternal generation.
 - In this way, the Son comes from the Father, but eternally so. Thus, He is not less than God. He is eternal and shares the divine essence with the Father.



False Teaching about the Oneness of God

- These matters will be debated until it reaches a crisis soon after the persecution ends.
 - The Council of Nicaea will provide a creed that presents a biblical and robust Trinitarianism.
 - Prior to that time, the church was genuinely trying to figure this out (monotheism and the divinity of Christ).
 - They were doing this while trying to survive the external threat of persecution and the internal threat of Gnosticism and heresy. It makes sense a consensus was hard to reach until after the persecution was over.
- The next set of slides will present some of the false views of God that were debated prior to the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. These certainly presented an internal threat to the Church.