

## Chapter 3 :

### The Imperial Church

*From the edict of Constantine, 313 A. D.,  
to the fall of Rome, 476 A. D.*

- A. Things done by Constantine: We have seen that Constantine helped the Christians by ending Roman persecution, and that he himself later became a Christian. We will summarize some of his actions:
- 1) Things which helped the church: Constantine forbade anyone, whether private citizen or government agent, to persecute a person for being a Christian. Church buildings, which had been confiscated, were returned to Christians. Christians could openly meet for worship without fear. Constantine ordered that a number of Bibles be hand-copied on the finest vellum (there was no printing at that time). The Roman Government ceased the practice of sacrifices offered to Caesar and the idols. Some idol temples were cleansed and turned into churches. Church leaders were excused from military service. The first day of the week (Sunday), which had always been kept by Christians, was now recognized as a public holiday. (The Christian day of worship was not changed to Sunday by Constantine's law, as some maintain; Constantine merely recognized by law the day Christians had kept from the beginning as the day of Christ's resurrection). The Roman government discontinued the practice of execution by crucifixion and forbade the exposure of infants. The government made laws to insure the right treatment of slaves and urged people to free their slaves. It also abolished the gladiatorial games in which gladiators had been made to fight to the death.
  - 2) Things which hindered the church: Now that persecution had ceased and the emperor had recognized the church, many outsiders wanted to become members. It became popular to be a Christian. (Christianity was established as the state religion of the Empire in 380). Earlier,

during the persecutions, only the sincerest believers had enough courage to be in the church. But now the insincere, the profiteers, the ambitious, the impure and the half-hearted also came in. Some looked for political advantage by being in the church, or for some other worldly benefit. Constantine began to give a white robe and other gifts to whomever was baptized, and some were baptized just for this honor. The emperor and his officials built large ornate church buildings for the Christians and furnished them expensively. Christians began to be proud of all of this. Constantine gave church leaders expensive and beautiful vestments and high-sounding titles which fostered pride and vanity. The government gave the church much money; thus Christians were no longer required to show their love by sacrificial giving. Even while the church seemed to be triumphing outwardly, it was being weakened spiritually.

When many pagan outsiders began to enter the church without sincere conversion, they brought with them the customs and ideas of paganism and idolatry. Their pagan feasts were given different names and set in the church as Christian memorials. Beginning in 405, statues of special "saints" and martyrs began to appear in the church buildings (in the early church, all Christians were called saints). People bowed to these statues as they had to pagan idols before. Because the pagans had been accustomed to worshiping female goddesses such as Artemis and Aphrodite, they began to elevate Mary the mother of Jesus and call her "Mother of God." The Lord's Supper began to be thought of as a sacrifice, parallel to sacrifices in idol temples.

In this period the church stopped changing the world and began to be changed by the world. Many church leaders stopped being servants and began to be like proud rulers. There remained many godly Christians and leaders, but the church was entering a time of pride and corruption, forgetting the humble example of the Lord Jesus. If political influence had not entered the church, the church might have escaped much of this evil. *When people try to strengthen the church by worldly means, the church is always weakened spiritually.*

- B. Developments in the Roman Empire after 313 A. D.: A new capital for the Empire was set up at Constantinople (named after Constantine) in the province of Asia. (Constantinople is now Istanbul, Turkey.) Rome remained the center of government for the West. The emperor ruled from Constantinople, but had an assistant ruler in Rome. The empire was divided into the Greek Empire in the East and the Latin Empire in the West, in line with the prevailing cultures and languages. Fierce tribes from Northern Europe attacked the Western Empire repeatedly and Rome eventually fell in 476 A. D. The Eastern Empire remained for almost another thousand years, but this was the end of the overall, glorious Roman Empire which had ruled for over 600 years, and began before the birth of Christ. The invaders from the North were gradually converted to Christianity. There was no longer a strong political center in the West.
- C. Great doctrinal controversies in the church: When the church was occupied with

persecution, its eyes were on Jesus and it had little time for controversy. But after persecution ended, controversies multiplied.

- 1) Arianism. Arius taught that there is only one person in the Divinity, and that Jesus was not God. He said Jesus was an ordinary created person, but was chosen by God to be the Savior. This was an evil doctrine because it denied the divinity of Christ and debased him. Athanasius and other church leaders opposed the teachings of Arius, but when the conflict could not be settled, Emperor Constantine called an ecumenical council (a council of representatives from the church everywhere). There had been regional councils before, but this was the first ecumenical council in the history of the church. It was held at Nicea in 325 and was attended by 318 bishops. There the teaching of Arius was condemned and the council affirmed that Jesus is God, possessing the same divinity as the Father. They wrote the Nicene Creed expressing this belief, and in future, everyone disagreeing with this creed was considered heretical. Nevertheless, Arius continued to trouble the church with his teaching, and the controversy continued for many years before Arianism finally died out. Some parts of Arian belief are still expressed in some modern religious groups, such as the Unitarians, who deny the Trinity; the Jehovah's Witnesses, who teach that Christ was a created being (an angel) rather than God; and some Pentecostal groups who deny the divine Trinity and emphasize "baptism in the name of Jesus only."
- 2) Apollinarianism. Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea, in trying to oppose Arianism and to stress Christ's divinity, taught that the Lord Jesus was God but not man. Macdonius, bishop of Constantinople, taught that the Holy Spirit is not divine, but is less than God just as the angels are. The Emperor Theodosius called the Council of Constantinople in 381, and the council condemned the teachings of Apollinaris and Macdonius.
- 3) Nestorianism. Others, in an effort to correct the error of Arius, began to say that Mary, in bearing Jesus, was not just the mother of man, but also the "mother of God." (This kind of statement began as an effort to emphasize the divinity of Jesus, but it easily lent itself to the exaltation of Mary in the future.) Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, objected to these statements about Mary and said that Mary only gave birth to the body of Jesus, not his divinity. Nestorius believed that Jesus was divine, but he said that Jesus' divinity was joined to his human nature by God, and did not come through Mary. Nestorius seemed to say that Jesus' humanity and divinity were separate. The Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Nestorius and stated that humanity and divinity were in perfect union in Jesus.
- 4) Monophysitism. In reaction against Nestorianism, Eutyches maintained that the human and divine natures were perfectly fused into one, the divine. This teaching, called "monophysitism" (one nature), seemed to deny the humanity of Jesus, and the Council of Chalcedon was called in 451 by the Emperor Marsian to discuss this problem. Eutyches was

condemned. The council affirmed that Jesus was at the same time completely God and completely man. The teaching of Eutyches continued to trouble the church in the East, and the Council of Constantinople was called in 553 to condemn it again.

- 5) Monothelism. Similar to monophysitism, this doctrine said that Christ had only one will, the divine will. The Council of Constantinople was called in 680 by the emperor to consider this. It condemned the doctrine of monothelism and affirmed that Jesus had two wills, the human and the divine.
- 6) The Controversy Over Images. Some people had begun to bring images of the saints and martyrs into the churches as early as 405. Others opposed this and said it would lead to pagan idolatry, since people were beginning to caress the images, kiss them and fall down before them. Even the Muhammadans taunted the Christians for using idols. The Eastern emperor opposed the use of images, but the pope in Rome favored them, saying that people could learn from the righteous examples of saints of the past by seeing their images. The controversy became very heated and the Council of Nicea was called in 787 to judge the matter. It allowed images to be set up in churches and allowed Christians to adore or venerate or give honor to the images, but not to worship them. But people could not make the distinction between honor and worship, and soon they were worshiping the images as before.

D. The Development of Monasticism: Partly because of the influence of Gnostic teaching which said the body is evil, and partly from a desire to escape temptation and seek life in the spirit, some Christians began to leave society and live to themselves in caves, in the mountains, or in houses apart. They ate lowly food, fasted often, wore little or poor clothing, slept on the ground and generally practiced asceticism (severity to the body). They gave themselves continually to prayer, study, and meditation on the things of God. This way of life is called "monasticism." Some lived alone; some formed monastic groups with rules for conduct and worked for the support of the whole group, along with their devotional life. The men who followed the monastic life kept themselves from women. There were also women who followed monasticism and some formed female communities. The men were called "monks," and their community houses were called "monasteries." One of the earliest monastics was Anthony, who in about 320 began with many followers to live in caves in Egypt. In Syria some monks spent all their time atop pillars and became known as "pillar saints." Benedict was a noted monastic leader in Europe. In 529 he wrote a famous rule governing the monastic life. Under medieval Catholicism many monastic communities developed. Some Protestants, such as the Lutherans and Anglicans, also have those among them who practice monasticism.

E. Outstanding church leaders in this period:

- 1) Hilary of Potiers (295-368) wrote many things and opposed the teachings of Arius.

- 2) Ambrose of Milan (340-397) was a strong opponent of Arianism. He was so courageous that he even condemned the sins of emperors. He played a central part in the conversion of Augustine.
- 3) The Three Cappadocians were close friends and helped each other in God's work. They were Basil the Great (329-379), bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia; his brother Gregory of Nyssa (332-394); and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390). They were good men, who used their wealth in the service of Christ. They opposed Arianism.
- 4) John Chrysostom (347-407) was first the bishop of Antioch and later bishop of Constantinople. He was a powerful preacher and very eloquent. His name means "John of the Golden Mouth." His preaching offended Empress Eudoxia, who exiled him. He died from ill-treatment.
- 5) Jerome (340-420) was the most learned of the Latin fathers. He became a monk in Bethlehem and lived in a cave there for many years. He translated the Bible into Latin. This translation is called the "Vulgate Version." It became later the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church.
- 6) Aurelius Augustine (354-430) was born in North Africa. His father was a pagan but his mother was a devout Christian. As a young man, Augustine lived a very immoral life, but he also studied many things in search of God. He used to pray, "O God, give me chastity, but not yet!" Later he met Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and learned the word of God. After a period of struggle, his heart was broken and he went through a deep conversion experience and was baptized. In 395 he became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He wrote many books of teaching which later had a great impact on Roman Catholicism as well as Protestantism.

In 412 Augustine condemned the teachings of a monk named Pelagius, who taught that a person is born good and can choose and do good without the help of God. Pelagius also taught that children are not born with "original sin" (sin inherited from Adam through their parents), and that we do not die because of the sin of Adam. He also taught that a person can save himself by his own good works without any need for the death of Christ. Pelagius' corrective on original sin was partially needed in the church, but most of his teachings, especially in relation to salvation and the atonement, were grossly in error.

Augustine taught some things that were to lead the church astray from the scriptures for a long time to come. He said a person cannot be saved unless he or she is joined to the "visible catholic church." This made a person's salvation dependent on a specific earthly group rather than on his relationship to Christ. (We should note here that in the first centuries after the apostles, the term "catholic" did not refer to the Roman Catholic Church as we now know it. "Catholic" simply means "universal," and was used to describe the church which is the one body of Christ all over the

world. But in future, as the changes developed which produced the Roman Catholic Church, the term came to be applied to the church everywhere which obeys the pope in Rome. And the Roman church interpreted the words of Augustine to mean that without membership in the Roman Catholic Church, there is no hope of salvation.

Augustine also taught that the souls of sinners can be cleansed in the fire of purgatory and then they can be saved in heaven. Roman Catholicism later majored on this doctrine. Another erroneous teaching of Augustine was that a child is born guilty before God, inheriting the sin of Adam. It followed from this that if an infant or child died unbaptized, it would be lost. It is true that since the fall of Adam we are a fallen race, and that we run to evil. But the scriptures nowhere teach that a child is born with the guilt of his parents' or Adam's sin. "The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father..." - Ezekiel 18:20. People of responsible age were baptized during Jesus' ministry, but when he received little children, he did not baptize them at all. He simply blessed them as they were, saying, "to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" - Matthew 19:13-15. Augustine taught that a child receives sin from his parents when he is conceived in the womb, because of the lust involved in the sexual relationship. (There seem to be echoes here of the Gnostic view of the body and of marriage). The scriptures teach that God created them male and female, with sexual desire a part of his good creation, and commanded them to come together - Genesis 1:27-31. God also says that there is no defilement in holy marriage, but only in immorality and adultery - Hebrews 13:4. Even a child born of an immoral union is not condemned because of its parents' sin. It is possible that Augustine's ideas on sin and the flesh were colored greatly by guilt from his own sinful past.

- 7) Leo I, or Leo the Great (390-461). He was Bishop of Rome. Some call him the first pope. The Council of Chalcedon (451) ruled that Leo alone should wear the title of "pope" (from the Latin, "papa" or "father"). Previously the bishops of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome had all shared this title. But the council denied to Leo the universal authority which he was seeking. It judged that there are two great authorities over the whole church, the Bishop of Rome over the church in the West, and the Bishop of Constantinople over the church in the East. These two were given equal authority. Therefore Leo was no universal pope as the pope became later, though he thought himself worthy to be.

In making his argument before the council, Leo used three main passages of scripture. Citing Matthew 16:18, he claimed that Peter is the "rock" on which the church is built. Before this, most of the church fathers had regarded Peter's confession of faith as the rock intended by Christ (that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God). ("Peter" does mean "rock," but Matthew used two different words when writing in Greek here. He wrote, "you are Peter [Greek: petros, masculine, a rock such as one can

pick up], and on this rock [Greek: *petra*, feminine, a great shelf of rock, such as could support a house] I will build my church." Jesus seems to be using a play on words, and the name of Peter may have reminded him of the other rock of faith on which the church was to be built). The one foundation of the church is Jesus Christ - 1 Corinthians 3:11. The apostles and prophets are said to be associated with Christ in the foundation - Ephesians 2:19, 20. Even if it could be shown that in spite of Matthew's linguistic distinction, Christ was saying that the church would particularly depend on Peter as the strongest among the 12 apostles, this would be a long way from giving Peter the papal office as Leo claimed.

The other apostles and New Testament writers showed no consciousness that Jesus had made Peter the earthly head of the church (later they were still asking, "Who is the greatest?" and vying for that position - Matthew 18:1; 20:20,21). If Peter had in fact been made head of the church, there is no way that his contemporaries could have been unaware as they were. But this was Leo's claim. He also argued that since Peter founded the church at Rome (a doubtful tradition), and was its first bishop, the bishops of Rome have succeeded Peter in the same seat of authority and are over the whole church.

Leo also used Luke 22:32, where Jesus said to Peter, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." He also referred to John 21:15-17, where Jesus commanded Peter, "Feed my sheep." Leo said that Jesus gave Peter the office of strengthening all the other apostles as their leader, and of shepherding God's sheep (apostles and leaders) and lambs (common Christians). But there is no evidence here that Jesus was giving Peter the office of pope, ruler over the whole church. Nowhere in the scriptures is there evidence that Jesus instituted such an office or that Peter was the first pope (see the appendices for evidence that there was no pope in the early church). In Luke 22, Jesus is just speaking to Peter in keeping with Peter's nature or personality. Jesus knew that Peter was impulsive and apt to be out ahead of others, whether in falling or in repenting. Indeed Peter outdistanced all the apostles in denying Christ. But Jesus also knew that there was a strength in Peter's makeup that would make him a great help to the other apostles once he had repented. Therefore Jesus asked Peter to do this. In every group there is a natural leader, and Peter was the natural leader among the apostles. But this certainly is not the same as receiving a higher office than the other apostles. In John 21, Jesus was restoring Peter to his ministry, not making him pope. As Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus now required him to confess his love for Christ three times. As for feeding the sheep and lambs, Jesus was restoring to Peter the work from which he had fallen, the same work which all of the apostles had. He was restoring Peter's apostleship, not making him pope. One who is not actively looking for a pope in the scriptures would never find one. The papacy did not originate with Christ, and Leo was simply reading back into the scriptures the idea of the papacy which developed much later, in an effort to justify it.

There is also nothing in the New Testament which indicates that the apostles were to have successors after they died. The apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus - Acts 1:21-25; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:3-8. The work of the apostles was to lay the foundations of faith and teaching in the church - Acts 1:8; Ephesians 2:19, 20; 1 Corinthians 3:10, 11; Galatians 1:8, 9; Jude 3. Once the foundation was laid, the work of the apostles was finished. There was no need for them to have successors. The teachings of the original apostles are preserved for us in the New Testament scriptures. Through the scriptures those same apostles are still doing their work of foundation and guidance.