

Articles and Sermons :: The Declension Of The Early Christian Church -gillis

The Declension Of The Early Christian Church -gillis - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2007/12/9 14:20

The Declension Of The Early Christian Church

by Clive Gillis

From the fifth to the fifteenth century, the Lamp of Truth burned dimly in the sanctuary of Christendom. Its flame often sank low, and appeared about to expire, yet never did it wholly go out.

Now it was on the cities of Northern Italy that its light was seen to fall; and now its rays illumined the plains of Southern France. Now it shone along the course of the Danube and the Moldau, or tinted the pale shores of England, or shed its glory upon the Scottish Hebrides. Now it was on the summits of the Alps that it was seen to burn, spreading a gracious morning on the mountain-tops, and giving promise of the sure approach of day. And then, anon, it would bury itself in the deep valleys of Piedmont, and seek shelter from the furious tempests of persecution behind the great rocks and the eternal snows of the everlasting hills.

The spread of Christianity during the first three centuries was rapid and extensive with the translation of the Scriptures into the languages of the Roman world, the fidelity and zeal of the preachers of the Gospel, and the heroic deaths of the martyrs. It was the success of Christianity that first set limits to its progress. It had received a terrible blow under Diocletian, the most terrible of all the early persecutions, which, Pagans believed, utterly exterminated the "Christian superstition".

Yet the Gospel gave to the world a mightier proof of its divinity. It rose from the stakes and massacres of Diocletian to triumph over the empire which thought that it had crushed it.

Dignities and wealth now flowed in upon its ministers. The disciples and faith which had maintained Christianity's purity and rigour in the humble sanctuaries and lowly position of the first age, and amid the fires of its pagan persecutors, became corrupt and waxed feeble amid the gorgeous temples and the worldly dignities which imperial favour had lavished upon it.

From the fourth century corruption made rapid progress. The Bible was hidden from the people. As the light, the surest guarantee of liberty, was withdrawn, the clergy usurped authority over the laity. Canons of councils were put in the room of the one infallible Rule of Faith. The foundation stone was laid in "Babylon, that great city, that made all nations to drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication".

The ministers of Christ affected titles of dignity, and extended their authority to temporal matters, forgetful that an office bestowed by God, and serviceable to the highest interests of society, can never fail of respect when filled by men of exemplary character, sincerely devoted to the discharge of its duties.

Seemingly innocent at first, pleas before the secular tribunals were obviated, ministers arbitrated in disputes between members of the Church, and Constantine legalised all such decisions in clergy consistories, abolishing review by the civil judges. Next the external polity of the Church was modelled upon civil government. As four vice-kings or prefects governed the Roman Empire under Constantine, why not introduce this into the Church? Accordingly Christendom was divided into four great dioceses; over each diocese was set a patriarch, who governed the whole clergy of his domain, and thus arose four great thrones or principdoms in the House of God.

Where there had been a brotherhood, there was now a hierarchy; and from the lofty chair of the Patriarch, a gradation of rank, and a subordination of authority and office, ran down to the lowly state and contracted sphere of the Presbyter. It was splendour of rank, rather than the fame of learning and the lustre of virtue, that henceforward conferred distinction on the ministers of the Church.

Such an arrangement did not nourish spirituality, humility or peaceful temperament., The clergy no longer dreaded the enmity of persecutors but the factious spirit now possessing Church dignitaries. This awakened vehement disputes and fierce contentions which disparaged authority and sullied glory in the sacred office. The emperor witnessed such. "I entre at you," we find him pathetically saying to the fathers of the Council of Nice, "beloved ministers of God, and servants of o

ur Saviour Jesus Christ, take away the cause of our dissension and disagreement, establish peace among yourselves."

Neglecting "living oracles" clergy zeal expended itself upon rites and ceremonies borrowed from the pagans. Multiplied they became "less tolerable than the yoke of the Jews under the law", complained Augustine. Bishops of Rome now wore costly attire, gave sumptuous banquets, and were carried in litters. They spoke with authoritative voice demanding obedience from all Churches. For instance Eastern and Western Churches disputed over Easter. The East followed the Jews and kept the feast on the 14th day of the month Nisan - the Jewish Passover. The West, especially Rome, kept Easter on the Sabbath following the 14th day of Nisan. Victor, Bishop of Rome, resolved to end controversy, and becoming sole judge, he commanded all the Churches to observe the feast on the same day with himself. The East unaware that Rome's bishop had such authority in any matter, kept Easter as before. Victor accounted it flagrant contempt of his legitimate authority and excommunicated them. Refusing to obey human ordinance they were excluded from the kingdom of the Gospel. This was the first peal of those thunders later to roll so often and so terribly from the Seven Hills.

Riches, flattery and deference attended Rome's bishop. The emperor hailed him Father; foreign Churches sustained him judge in disputes, heretics fled to him for sanctuary and the favoured affected recognition of his piety and customs. His pride and ambition, fed by continual incense, grew till the vigilant pastor of Rome's single congregation raised his seat above his equals, mounting the patriarch's throne and exercising lordship over the heritage of Christ. Corrupt streams then flowed with ever-deepening volume. Doctrine and worship had already changed the brightness of the Church's morning into twilight. From the fifth century descending Northern nations converted that twilight into night changing countries but not superstitions. Unhappily this age's Christianity had neither the zeal nor vigour to instruct and genuinely convert. With the Bible withdrawn pulpit fable usurped truth. Holy lives that might have won the barbarians, were rarely exemplified. The Church instead of dissipating superstitions now encompassed them like a cloud all but quenching her own light. She received the new peoples as they were, sprinkled them with baptismal water, inscribed their names in her registers and taught them in their invocations to repeat the titles of the Trinity. The doctrines of the Gospel, alone enlightening, heart purifying and virtue imparting, she inculcated little. She absorbed the tribes, but they were scarcely more Christian than before. She was greatly less so. Christianity was a mongrel system from the sixth century. Pagan rites, revived from classic times, superstitions imported from afforested Northern Germany mingled with Christian beliefs and observances from primitive and purer times. Inward power was lost in vain to outward form. Rome nourished piety not at the living fountains of truth, but with the "beggarly elements" of ceremonies and relics, of consecrated lights and holy vestments. Rome herself confesses that in the sixth century few in Italy were skilled in both Greek and Latin. Gregory the Great acknowledged ignorance of Greek The clergy simply had to read well, sing matins, know the Lord's Prayer, Psalter, forms of exorcism, and compute sacred festivals. Nor were they very sufficient for this. Musculus says many never ever saw the Scripture. Incredibly the Archbishop of Mainz on first seeing a Bible said, "Of a truth I do not know what book this is, but I perceive everything in it is against us".

Apostasy like the descent of heavy bodies proceeds with ever-accelerating velocity. First, lamps were lighted at the tombs of the martyrs; next, the Lord's Supper was celebrated at their graves; next, prayers were offered for them and to them; next, paintings and images began to disfigure the walls, and corpses to pollute the floors of the churches. Baptism, which apostles required water only to dispense, could not be celebrated without white robes and chrism, milk, honey, and salt. Then came a crowd of church officers whose names and numbers are in striking contrast to the few and simple orders of men who were employed in the first propagation of Christianity. There were sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers, choristers, and porters; and as work must be found for this motley host of labourers, there came to be fasts and exorcisms; there were lamps to be lighted, altars to be arranged, and churches to be consecrated; there was the Eucharist to be carried to the dying; and there were the dead to be buried, for which a special order of men was set apart. When one looked back to the simplicity of early times, it could not but amaze one to think what a cumbrous array of curious machinery and costly furniture was now needed for the service of Christianity. Not more stinging than true was the remark that "when the Church had golden chalices she had wooden priests."

We cannot fail to see looking back that its deepest originating cause was the inability of the world to receive the Gospel in all its greatness. It was a boon too mighty and too free to be easily understood or credited by man. Worship was transformed into sacrifice - sacrifice in which was the element of expiation and purification and the "teaching ministry" was converted into a "sacrificing priesthood". When this had been done, there was no retreating. A boundary had been reached which could not be re-crossed till centuries had rolled away, and transformations of a more portentous kind than any which had yet taken place had passed upon the Church.