

The Church and The Roman Empire

As one surveys the history of the ancient Church, up and until the beginning of the medieval age, a striking feature of that period is the transformation of the Church's relationship with Imperial Rome. The Church began in a remote quadrant of the ancient Roman Empire where its leader was crucified and from which its followers were eventually scattered. Indifference and tolerance were the Empire's first reaction to this sect, but not long thereafter, followers of The Way would be subjected to growing persecution. How did this unlikely movement of true believers succeed in surviving and outliving the imperial Roman Empire? Insights from this formative time may have transcultural application for today.

This essay will explore the nature of the transformation of the relationship between Rome and the Church, discuss how that transformation came about, and note what were the various positives and negatives of this change for the Church. I will argue that the Church went through four stages in its relationship to the Empire which deeply influenced the thinking of the Church leadership as they formulated their responses to these changes. Further, I will argue that the results of these transformations are mixed in that they obtained both good and bad consequences.

Nature of the Transformation

The Church went through four stages of transformation in its relationship with the Roman Empire. The first brief stage was characterized by missionary expansion under the leadership of the Apostles. During this stage the Empire's policy (if it had one) was indifference, but the Church from the beginning lived in tension with the culture. The Church's big struggle was with the influence of Hellenistic ideas in the form of gnosticism and neo-Platonism which had deep influence on the young converts to Christianity in and around Asia Minor. Paul's missionary advances during the infancy stage of the Church found more physical confrontation with people

of Jewish traditions and culture than with the Empire. However, soon that would begin to change. When much of the Apostolic leadership began to die off toward the end of the century, the new leadership began to face a more difficult task of discerning the balance between "being in the world, but not of the world."

What marked the second stage in the transformation was the introduction of sporadic and limited persecution followed by Empire-wide and severe persecution of the Church by Rome in the third and fourth centuries. The result of this persecution was that it drove Christians to think through in a new and urgent way what should be the Church's relationship to the contemporary culture. Three important figures in this new development in the Church were Tertulian, Clement and Origen. I'll briefly describe the input of these three men in helping to formulate the Church's response to persecution.

Tertulian (145-220 A.D.) was an important spokesman who arose from the Church and began to express his conclusions about how the Church should relate to its culture. In his Apologies he demanded tolerance and justice from the Empire for Christians. He advised Christians to live out their faith, avoid war, music, and women! He saw Christ as being against the culture and that Christians must make a break from the world.

Clement of Alexandria (155-215 A.D.) had a different opinion. Being from Alexandria, one of the key intellectual and cultural cities of North Africa, he wanted to connect Jesus' commands with the culture. He wanted an intellectually respectable faith that could relate to the philosophical disposition of his society. In his The Exhorter he related that he thought pagan culture at its best was only pointing to Christianity; only Christianity could help people reach their full potential. He affirmed his culture but saw Christ as "over it." Christ would help individuals to be more "complete." Ironically, during the persecution of 202 A.D., the culture he

affirmed drove him from his teaching post and Origen took over.

Origen of Alexandria (184-254 A.D.), a child prodigy and adherent to a strict religious mode of life, became the greatest teacher of his era. Though later condemned as a heretic, he established a great tradition in apologetic writings. Origen, who placed great stress on the freedom of man, wanted to "offer" Christianity to the pagan world. His apologetic works were meant to reach the pagan man in a modern relevant fashion.

The Edict of Milan (313 A.D.) began the third stage, what I shall call the "recognition" stage, of transformation of the relationship between the Church with Rome. In this phase the Church was no longer subject to martyrdom but instead was granted political sanction by the Emperor. The rise of the papacy and new-found freedom under Constantine sparked a reassessment of the Church's relationship to Rome. Augustine, who marks the transition from the ancient church and classical world of the Roman Empire to the medieval church, is perhaps the key figure in the transition. Augustine's early view during this time was that Christ was to "transform the culture" and, using Luke 14:23 as a proof-text, he was willing to use force to accomplish that. This phase was marked by increasing freedom and power and an ongoing struggle with the state (Constantine) for more power.

Following the sack of Rome in 410 A.D., the Church began a fourth stage in its relationship with the Empire. The most notable thing that changed was that the political Empire was no longer viable. Augustine in his important book, City of God, began to express his new-found pessimism about the City of Man (Rome). Perennially, the City of God and the City of Man would be in conflict. History was God's story and it would be climaxed by the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the City of God. Therefore, culture was under God's judgment--happiness and peace were to be found in Christ.

In summary, the nature of the transformation was marked by four stages: missionary expansion to martyrdom, martyrdom to a recognition phase under Constantine, and complete conquest as the Empire crumbled at the beginning of the Dark Ages. The nature of the process was dictated by external events within the Empire and the leadership of the Church's thoughtful but often situationally conditioned response.

How the Transformation Came About

In this section I will fill in more details as to how the transformation of the relationship between the Church and the Empire came about. Rome's general attitude toward other religions during the infancy of the Church was both tolerant and practical. If one didn't cause problems one could believe what one wanted in one's heart. The Church's first believers were Hebrews that accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah--not a Messiah that would bring immediate political justice but rather, one who would come again and set up his Kingdom. The Empire's indifference was resounding. Pontius Pilate arguably participated in Jesus' crucifixion only in that he held the reigns of political power--of life and death. His complicity, at least as recorded in the Biblical text, was more of an appeasement to the local religious authorities and the mob; they held the view that Jesus was breaking their religious laws. It was something a tolerant Roman citizen found uninteresting. Perhaps, cooperating with the hard-to-manage Hebrew religious leaders on this one thing could buy some peace and maintain order.

As the church expanded along the lines of the Empire (mainly due to the missionary activities of the Apostle Paul and his converts), the sheer numbers of converts were beginning to add up. The message of the gospel had an appeal to the disenfranchised of the Empire: women, children, slaves, and the underclass. Sometimes allegiance to Jesus was more an expression of

hostility to the values of Rome--a way of thumbing their noses at their oppressors--than true conversion.

As it grew and expanded, the Church's relationship to the Empire began to change. Now Christians were beginning to be seen as arrogant and socially uninvolved. Their lack of participation in the pagan feasts was viewed with suspicion. Rumors began to spread--Christians were atheists; they denied the Roman gods. More seriously, could they be trusted to be loyal to Caesar? After all, Jesus was Lord of All.

There was some truth in those concerns. Christians of that period did view the state with ambivalence. On the one hand they were responding to the Romans Chapter 13 perspective of subjection to the governing authorities, but they also knew that rendering unto Caesar the things of Caesar also implied rendering unto God the things of God. The result is that many Christians had a tentative view of the state.

The early persecutions of the first and second century took advantage of the rumors. Christians were seen to be committing incest with their "brothers" and "sisters" and attending "secret love feasts." This kind of behavior was raising more and more Roman eyebrows. Soon these rumors paved the way for Christians to become handy scapegoats. Nero accused the Christians of arson in the burning of Rome (63 or 64 A.D), which was the start of many local persecutions of the church. Most likely Paul and Peter died in Rome at the hands of the Empire at this time.

The third and the early fourth century A.D. saw severe Empire-wide persecutions. True, the Church was enjoying public sympathy for its character in the face of this, but now one could be killed for merely being a Christian convert. The Empire wasn't just out for blood--it preferred apostates to martyrs and there were certainly plenty of those, but now the Empire itself was in

the throes of a decline. By the end of the third century Rome began to spiral out of control. The Empire was being ravaged by chaos caused by plagues, natural disasters, and economic problems. It began a search for stability.

The year 313 A.D. was pivotal in the Church's relationship with the Empire. Constantine the Great was a complex man; he was brilliant and visionary, but also ruthless and conniving. Being savvy he saw in the Church the possibility of solving the Empire's problem of stability. The Church's infrastructure and leadership could help cement the Empire in a way the old gods could no longer do. He issued the Edict of Milan. Christianity should now be tolerated and assured of legal rights which included the right to organize churches and the return to them of confiscated land. It was an edict of toleration that had teeth.

The Church began to experience a dramatic change of fortune. Outsiders had now become insiders. The powerless were gaining more and more power. The Empire continued to experience difficulties which had the effect of cementing the new relationship even more; but a new challenge was arising for the church. Could the Church withstand the inevitable injection of Hellenistic thought and worldly values? Would the world intrude into the Church and weaken it? Who would dominate--the church or the state? Monastic movements began to spring up--a grass roots reaction to the transition.

The Empire didn't survive, however, as Constantine had hoped. Invasions of the barbarians took their toll until the year 410 A.D. when Rome was sacked and Europe began to sink into a dark age. The Church, even though it no longer had access to the same power as before, stepped in and filled the gap.

In summary, the transformation from ignored to martyrs and martyrdom to conquerors came about as the Church expanded into and infiltrated the Empire. As the Empire declined and

became unstable it sought refuge in the infrastructure of the Church. The Church's power increased and yet the Empire collapsed. As it entered the Dark Age that followed the Church was a beacon of light amid the chaos.

Positives and Negatives of the Transformation

The first four centuries of the first millennium A.D. witnessed the astonishing changes and fortunes of the Christian Church. As the Church's relationship to the Roman Empire changed, so did the Church's identity. Its prominent leadership, epitomized by people like the Apostle Paul and later by Augustine, influenced and to some degree shaped this transformation. In this section I will discuss some of the positive consequences and negative consequences of this change.

I will begin by listing some of the positive outcomes. In its initial stance of ignoring the Church, the Roman Empire afforded the early Church several advantages. The Romans had developed a highly efficient highway system that made travel more practical, thus facilitating the spread of the gospel by early missionaries. The Empire also furnished a lingua franca--Greek--which enabled rapid expansion of the Christian message throughout many countries. The persecution of the first and second century provided an "advertisement" for Christianity in that it gave the movement publicity (but certainly not welcomed). Romans, known for their hedonism, were still the recipients of general revelation about God's moral law. It must have pricked their consciences to see such commitment by the Christians in the face of abuse. In between the persecutions the Church tended to prosper; it saw numerical growth, built churches, and in essence began to permeate the society. The stresses of expansion, persecution and heresy forged character into the leadership of the Church. Important issues such as the authority in the Church, the relationship between the Church and culture, and the closing of the canon were raised and

became subjects with which the Church wrestled. Following the Edict of Milan, the Church enjoyed the blessings of security from persecution. Crucifixion was outlawed, gladiatorial games as punishment were abolished, Sunday was made a public holiday. The Church even responded to the influx of worldliness at this time by starting monastic communities. Ironically, these communities became a haven for Classic culture and knowledge when civilization began to crumble in the fifth century.

On the negative side, the influence of gnosticism and neo-Platonism from the Empire with their negative view of matter and the body led the Church into serious problems. Ascetic elements of this philosophy crept into Christianity which, on occasion, led a destructive misemphasis. Instead of being considered a blessing, marital sex was looked upon by important thinkers like Augustine as unspiritual. The effects of that syncretism lasted for millennia. The later persecutions understandably created a "siege mentality" in the Church. In these situations Christians began to develop an "other worldliness" view of life--again understandable but not a full-orbed biblical view of life. When the Church came to power after Constantine it struggled with a watered-down version of Christianity. The reaction to this worldliness provided impetus for the monastic movement; however, there was a downside to monasticism for the church retreated from engagement with the culture and often the monasteries were characterized by legalism. These negatives raise an important question: did the Church prostitute itself to the state under Constantine? Considering what the Church had gone through under persecution, I think not. However, the Church was seriously compromised at times when positions of leadership and influence were up for sale. My own conclusion is that the Church in any circumstance will face positive and negative outcomes as it responds to culture. Great leadership helps to mitigate, not eliminate, the deleterious effects.

Summary and Conclusion

The Church's relationship to the Roman Empire experienced remarkable change from the beginnings with the Apostle Paul up to the time of Augustine. The nature of the relationship was influenced by the Empire's attitude toward the Church--first indifference, followed by sporadic and limited persecution, and then by more serious, Empire-wide persecution. The Edict of Milan changed that external influence and the state and Church embraced each other for good and for bad. In those circumstances leaders in the Church arose who, while influenced by those circumstances, provided enormous intellectual and spiritual authority to the process. With great sympathy for their situations and perspectives we can draw the conclusion that the Church ever needs men and women of great character and vision, and that the Church will struggle until the return of its Savior with the challenge of "being in the world, but not of the world."