

# The Controversies of the Imperial Church

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – a discussion of some of the controversial issues of the Imperial Church
2. aim – to cause us to consider what happens when the church becomes complacent in easy times

### b. outline

1. The Monastic Movement
2. The Donatist Schism
3. The Arian Controversy

### c. overview

1. **note:** this series is casting a *wide net* – many specific issues and details will be passed over
  - a. the goal is to give you a “feel” for the church as it passes through time
  - b. **e.g.** there are a number of individuals worth discussing re: monasticism, but they will not be
2. our *timeline*
  - a. the conversion of Constantine has done away (mostly!) with persecution, and Christianity has become the *de facto* standard of religion in the Roman empire
  - b. many have “embraced” Christianity in order to be a “part” of the life of the empire, and the church has enjoyed a newfound period of prosperity and peace
  - c. however, it is this very reality that has introduced *significant* issues, and we will look at some ...

## I. The Monastic Movement

### Content

#### a. the definition of the movement

1. monk (*monachos*) = solitary; to escape from ordinary life to a place of meditation and discipline
2. monasticism = a fourth-century movement of people away from the church into the Egyptian desert
  - a. to escape the excesses of the now-culturally embraced church
  - b. to pursue intellectual pursuit away from the low-church standards of the imperial church
  - c. to avoid the temptations that permeated normal life amongst other people (even Christians)
  - d. to escape the demands of the state into daily living (**i.e.** taxation)
  - e. to provide a *communal* life of sharing possessions and worldly goods (**i.e.** as in **Acts 2**)
  - f. to chart of life of discipline and *ascetism*; finding holiness in a world where holiness is lost
    1. including **celibacy** and **nunnery**

#### b. the forms of the movement

1. included three (3) forms: solitary, communal (cenobitic), hierarchal
  - a. solitary = individuals who moved away from the population centers to pursue a solitary life of discipline and ascetism – having little contact with others as a way to foment holiness
  - b. communal (cenobitic) = communes of “solitary” individuals that worked together in an ascetic life
    1. breaking away from the population centers and the “popular” church to seek discipline together
  - c. hierarchal = the “effects” of the monastic life being embraced by members of the hierarchy itself
    1. bishops adopting the ideals of celibacy, asceticism, and discipline within the clergy itself

#### c. the importance of the movement

1. the various forms of monasticism shared a common thread: the ideal Christian life was one of personal poverty and sharing of goods
  - a. over against the general church, which no longer needed to *think* in that way, being well-accepted in society and enjoying the fruits of a prosperity alongside everyone else
  - b. **application:** in some ways, the modern American Church is like the Imperial Church – the relative “peace” surrounding the church has made her adherents *much* less drawn to *holiness*
    1. **IOW:** how do *we* respond *now* to a church where the primary appeal is to personal *happiness*?
    2. **e.g.** the *Benedict Option* and *Live Not by Lies* by Rod Dreher

## II. The Donatist Schism

### Content

#### a. the basis of the schism

1. instead of *withdrawing* from the imperial church, some declared it *corrupt*, and splintered off
2. the question of “the lapsed” reared its head again: what do we do with those who *lapse* in their faith during a time of persecution and want to return to the church now that persecution has stopped?
  - a. in N Africa, persecution had been particularly strong, and the issue once again appeared
  - b. this included *bishops* who had handed over *Scripture* to the Romans to avert persecution
  - c. a new *rigor* seemed to be needed by the *confessors* in readmitting the *lapsed*
  - d. particularly, bishops who had lapsed (sometimes referred to as *traditores* [traitors])

#### b. the history of the schism

1. the movement derived its name from a *rival* bishop elected in Carthage (N Africa) – *Donatus*
  - a. the bishopric was originally given to Caecilian (but he was not popular amongst the *rigorists*)
  - b. so, a rival bishop was appointed (Majorinus), but he died and Donatus replaced him
  - c. Constantine eventually named Caecilian as the true bishop
    1. and, only those who were in communion with Caecilian could receive the “gifts” of the emperor (*i.e.* freedom from taxation, etc.)
  - d. so, the Donatists “split away” over a number of specific issues with the church under Caecilian:
    1. they considered the consecration of a bishop by a *traditor* (*i.e.* Caecilian) to be invalid (*i.e.* one of Caecilian’s appointers had been a *traditor* himself)
    2. they considered the church to be *pure* and *holy*; the holiness of individual members determining the holiness of the church itself (an early form of *perfectionism*)

#### c. the results of the schism

1. the Donatists were labeled as *heretics* by the church-at-large because:
  - a. since no person is *sinless*, no act performed by an elder or bishop could ever be perfect
    1. the authority of a person is derived from the *office*, not his own personal holiness
  - b. since the church *will* have both saved and unsaved in it (*i.e.* the wheat and the tares), the judgment of the church regarding its own holiness must be left up to God
2. ultimately, the Donatists became the *catalyst* for Augustine’s treatises on the doctrine of the church, the centrality and importance of the sacraments, and Just War Theory
3. **application:** when will it be necessary to “split” away from a “movement” that has lost her way and has abandoned the fundamentals of the faith (*i.e.* see **Jude**)?

## III. The Arian Controversy

### Content

#### a. the beginnings of the controversy

1. the controversy began in Alexandria (even before Constantine became the single emperor)
2. the beginnings of the controversy were over the concept of the *Logos*:
  - a. largely an issue in the E (Greek-speaking church); in the W, the issue was largely moot
  - b. particularly as expressed by Jerome and Origen:
    1. that the Supreme Being was *immutable* (unchangeable) and *impassable* (unchanging)
    2. but, the creation was constantly changing and being changed
    3. however, the *Logos* (or Reason of God) was personal and capable of relationship
    4. so, the *Logos* was that aspect of God which could communicate and relate with humans
  - c. but, what *was* this *Logos*, and how did it “come into being” in Jesus Christ?
    1. although *Trinitarian* Christianity had existed from the foundations of the church, this was the first *real* attack upon it from *inside* the church
    2. strangely, it was an attempt to *defend* orthodoxy against outside interpretations of Christian thinking (*i.e.* polytheism), but it swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction

#### b. the substance of the controversy

- a. Alexander (the bishop) insisted that the *Logos* was *coeternal* with God
- b. Arius (a presbyter) insisted that the *Logos* was *not* eternal, but *created* (the first-born)
  1. **his motto:** “there was when He was not” (*i.e.* there was a “time” when the Son was not)
- c. both agreed that Jesus *pre-existed* his own Incarnation, but Arius insisted he was *created* by the Father in eternity past (Arius attacked the position as *polytheistic*; *i.e.* of embracing “two” Gods)

- d. both agreed that Jesus had secured a salvation by entering into human history, but Arius insisted that Jesus' obedience was *meaningless* if he was divine

**c. the resolution of the controversy (the Council of Nicea, 325)**

- 1. it all came to a head when Alexander deposed Arius, who began appealing to other bishops
  - a. ultimately, Constantine intervened and called the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea (325; Iznik)
- 2. the Council first dealt with a number of issues relating to the new Imperial Church
  - a. standard procedures for the readmission of the lapsed
  - b. standard procedures for the election and ordination of presbyters and bishops
  - c. the establishment of the "order of precedence" of the various episcopal sees
  - d. regulations regarding the transfer of leaders from one city to another
- 3. the Council then dealt with the Arian controversy from Alexandria
  - a. Arius (not a bishop) and his small group was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia
  - b. Alexander represented the small group opposed to Arius' position
    - 1. his deacon, Athanasius, could not attend (but became the champion of Nicene orthodoxy)
  - c. ironically, it was the *exposition* of the Arian position by Eusebius that fueled their response
    - 1. most of the bishops considered it a "localized" squabble and were looking for a compromise
    - 2. but, Eusebius' claim that Christ was but a "mere creature" provoked cries of heresy
  - d. at first, they tried to build a case against Arianism from Scripture, but soon realized the difficulty
    - 1. the Arians had "answers" to all of their proof-texts
  - e. so, the council decided to develop a *creed*, which would clearly state the nature of Jesus  
"and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, through whom all things were made."
  - f. most of the bishops signed the new creed (with the Arians excepting)
    - 1. those who refused were declared heretics and deposed
    - 2. Constantine added a *civil sentence* and banished the deposed bishops from their cities

**d. the results of the controversy**

- 1. Arianism did not go away after Nicea, but *grew*, and this spread was largely *political* in nature
  - a. Eusebius was distantly related to Constantine, and eventually convinced Constantine to change his position regarding the Arians (he also baptized him on his deathbed)
  - b. after Constantine's death, a series of "political intrigues" and civil wars eventually led to a place where the whole world "woke to discover it was Arian"
  - c. **note:** a future lesson will deal with Athanasius and the recovery of biblical Trinitarianism
- 2. **application:** Arianism is alive and well today (in the Jehovah's Witnesses and amongst the Mormons)
  - a. there will *always* be heretical teachings – Christians must be on-guard against them
  - b. there will *not always* be clear and easy solutions for dealing with such matters
  - c. there will *always* be a need for Christians to *understand* what others believe
  - d. there will *always* be a need for Christians to *defend* the truth both biblically and systematically