

The Imperial Church Fathers

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the biographies of the Cappadocians and Augustine, standing for orthodoxy
2. aim – to cause us to always be mindful of the times and the immediate effects of heresy

b. outline

1. The Cappadocians
2. Augustine of Hippo

c. overview

1. our *timeline*
 - a. and, a number of *significant theological* issues arise during this time (**e.g.** Arianism)
 - b. the church convenes an **Ecumenical Council at Nicea** to formalize the nature of the Trinity
 - c. but, the church was unable to stop the advance of Arianism after Nicea
 - d. so, by the providence of God, Athanasius stands against the world to defend orthodoxy
 - e. **and**, a number of others *extend* that fight into the Fifth Century of the Church Age *even as new theological issues will arise to be dealt with ...*

I. The Cappadocians

Content

a. Basil the Great (d. 379)

1. from the area of Cappadocia (Eastern Anatolia [Turkey]; N of Syria)
2. studied the monastic life in Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere
3. returned to Cappadocia and founded a monastic community for men
 - a. he believed that Christianity was communal (not an individualistic pursuit)
4. was ordained a presbyter of the church against his will, but returned to his monastery
 - a. he was tempestuous, inflexible, and arrogant, and had difficulties with the bishop of Caesarea
 - b. when Valens became emperor (364), the bishop called on him for help against Arianism
 - c. arriving at a time of difficult conditions (rampant poverty, hoarding), Basil set up a “new city”
 1. sort of a “mission” for the poor – Basil used his influence with the rich to gain resources
 2. he told the wealthy that they were laying up for themselves “treasures in heaven”
5. when the bishop died, Basil was elected to the bishopric of Caesarea
6. the emperor (Valens) visited Caesarea to support Arianism
 - a. officers were dispatched to “persuade” Basil to submit to the emperor’s theological views
 - b. one prefect lost his patience with Basil and threatened to exile and torture him

Basil replied, “all that I have that you can confiscate are these rags and few books. Nor can you exile me, for wherever you send me, I shall be God’s guest. As to torture, you should know that my body is already dead in Christ. And death would be a great boon to me, leading me sooner to God.”
 - c. the prefect was taken aback that anyone would dare to speak to him in such a way
 - d. Basil replied, “perhaps that is because you have never met a true bishop”
7. when the emperor brought a bountiful offering to the altar, no one went forth to take it
 - a. Basil finally rose to accept it, making it clear who was favoring whom
8. Basil’s writings and correspondence reaffirm Trinitarian theology and a rejection of Arianism
 - a. he died only a few months before the Council of Constantinople

b. Basil’s younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (d. c. 395)

1. trained originally as a lawyer and rhetorician, but did not care for those pursuits
2. originally spurned the monastic life, marrying a young woman (and seemed happy)
 - a. when she died, he wrote a treatise (*On Virginity*) on the value of the monastic life as a way of avoiding the pain of losing a loved one or seeing a loved-one suffer (**e.g.** childbirth)
3. Basil forced Gregory to become bishop of Nyssa
 - a. however, the controversy of Arianism forced this quiet man into hiding
 - b. but, after the deaths of Valens and Basil, Gregory became one of the leading advocates of orthodoxy, eventually explicating Nicene theology at Constantinople
4. he returned to monastic life after Constantinople, and lived in obscurity until he died

c. Basil's friend, Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390)

1. a fellow student with Basil, the son of the Bishop of Nazianzus
 - a. he met Basil in Athens, and eventually joined Basil in his monastery in Cappadocia
2. was ordained a presbyter against his will in Nazianzus
 - a. at first, hid from his responsibilities with Basil, but eventually realized the importance of pastoral duty (particularly having preached on the subject)
 - b. Basil made him the bishop of a small hamlet against his will, and it strained their friendship
 - c. but, upon the news of Basil's death, Gregory stood up and resumed his duties
3. he appeared in Constantinople in 379
 - a. there was not even a single orthodox church in the city, so he celebrated orthodox services in the home of a relative – he was mobbed by Arians, and Arian monks often broke in on his services
 - b. but, he remained steadfast, strengthening his congregation with hymns he composed
 1. many of which remain in use in the Eastern Orthodox tradition to modern times
4. in 380, the orthodox soon-to-become-emperor Theodosius entered Constantinople
 - a. he expelled the Arians from their high positions in government
 - b. he asked Gregory to visit the *Hagia Sophia* with him (**show photo**)
 1. it was a cloudy day, but a single ray of sunshine fell only upon Gregory
 2. some of those present thought it to be a sign from God
 3. Gregory was approved as bishop of Constantinople
 4. he resigned this position (which he didn't want) when his opposition pointed out that he was already the bishop of Nazianzus
 - c. he briefly led the Council of Constantinople
5. he left all civil and ecclesiastical pomp for the rest of his life, content to serve as a pastor

d. the results of the Great Cappadocians

1. they are largely credited with overthrowing Arianism by their work
 - a. **remember:** Constantinople also extended the discussion of the nature of Christ to the nature of the Spirit (**i.e.** as fully divine and equal to the Father and Son; true *Trinitarianism*)
2. their main contribution was in clarifying the difference between *ousia* ("essence") and *hypostasis* ("substance" or *persona* in Latin)
 - a. or the Trinitarian formula: one essence (or *ousia*) in three Persons (or *hypostasis*)
3. they helped resolve the *cultural* issue (of the Imperial Church): can God truly be present in a carpenter executed by the empire as a criminal (**i.e.** the view of the orthodox), or is God more like the emperor on his throne (**i.e.** the Arian connection to the emperors)?
 - a. another "compromise": that the carpenter *was* truly divine, but was now represented much more often as the exalted *Pantokrator* – the exalted emperor sitting on a throne
 - b. much of the early Byzantine art depicts Christ in this way (**show photo**)
 - c. the Western civilizations (empires and democracies) often struggled along these lines

II. Augustine of Hippo

Content

a. the biography of Augustine (354-430)

1. born in the North African town of Tagaste; his father was a minor Roman official (and a pagan)
 - a. his mother, Monica, was a fervent Christian and a deep influence on his life
 - b. he was gifted, and sent for an exceptional education (until their money ran out)
 - c. he returned to Tagaste, and set out on a life of "wandering with my companions through the public squares of Babylon and wallowed in their mud" (his *Confessions*)
 - d. eventually, he received a scholarship from a certain Romanianus
 1. he went to Carthage to pursue his studies (at the age of 17)
 2. he studied, but also enjoyed the many pleasures the city offered
 3. he took a concubine, and had a son (named Adeodatus = "given by [a] God")
 4. as a student of *rhetoric*, Augustine was introduced to Cicero (the philosopher)
 5. from Cicero, Augustine became aware of the need for *truth* above proper speech and style

- e. he flirted for a while with Manichaeism
 - 1. a far-eastern religion which focuses on the separation of *light* (spiritual) and *darkness* (material)
 - 2. it seemed to meet Augustine's difficulties with Christianity
 - a. **e.g.** that the Bible was *inelegant* as rhetoric (which Manichaeism rejected as Scripture)
 - 3. but, Manichaeism never answered all of his doubts (many planted there earlier by Monica)
 - a. never able to answer his most serious questions (**i.e.** the origins of evil, *in himself*)
 - f. he flirted for a while with Neoplatonism
 - 1. a philosophical system which taught that, through study, discipline, and mystical contemplation, one would reach the ineffable One, the source of all being
 - 2. realities that are closer to the One are superior (**e.g.** a pebble producing ripples in a pond)
 - a. evil was just an *outer* reality, far away from the *central* reality of a perfect Being
 - g. it was under the preaching of Ambrose in Milan that Augustine "overcame" many of his doubts about Christianity
 - 1. Ambrose's fidelity to Scripture and his ability to preach convinced Augustine that the Bible was not just a crude book, but the very Word of God
 - 2. Ambrose's ability to *interpret* Scripture into everyday life convinced Augustine that Christianity held answers to his deepest questions regarding God and evil
 - h. he realized that to profess himself a believer and become a Christian, he would have to abandon the physical pleasures of this world (which he had reveled in for so long)
 - 1. it was into this reality that he was truly converted
 - 2. he had learned that three great rhetoricians had been converted in Rome, and he could no longer *stand* his own personal evil, nor his friends (which drove him to solitude in his garden)
 - 3. **"take up and read, ... "** was shouted by a child over the fence into his garden as he sat and contemplated his own evil nature, and *inability* to be anything but evil
 - 4. as a result, he read from **Romans 13:13-14**: "*let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*"
 - i. he became one of the most influential theologians of the church (of any age!)
 - 1. in Hippo, he became bishop (after just stopping by for a visit)
 - 2. he wrote extensively *against* the philosophies he had embraced earlier
 - a. against Manichaeism: his treatises on the *freedom of the will* (over against fatalism)
 - 1. that the will is *free* to do as it desires; it is not "bound" by anything outside of itself
 - 2. a position that Augustine will *modify* when dealing with Pelagius
 - b. against the Donatists: his treatise on Just War Theory
 - 1. that a war may be considered just only if a) its *purpose* is just and not purely selfish, and b) it is instituted by the proper authorities
 - c. against Pelagius: his treatise on the *effect of sin on the will*
 - 1. Pelagius argued that human beings still retain a perfectly free will, to the point where they can overcome their own sin (**i.e.** Pelagianism)
 - 2. Augustine argued that sin *overcomes* our will (as fallen beings), and that *God* must initiate a work of conversion within us that grants us a new state capable of believing and accepting (by our own will) what God has given to us by grace
 - 3. he wrote several "stand alone" works
 - a. his autobiography, *Confessions*, outlines the struggle of his life to Christianity
 - b. his classic, *The City of God*, outlines the dichotomy between the temporal cities of this world (which were in constant state of decay; **i.e.** Rome overthrown in 410) and the city that God is building which is in a constant state of expansion
- b. the importance of Augustine**
- 1. the magisterial Reformers of the 16-17th Centuries will attempt to "recapture" Augustinian theology within the W church – specifically, the *fundamental belief* that human beings are totally depraved
 - 2. some have even suggested that "aside from the Apostle Paul, Augustine is probably the greatest theologian the church has ever known"
 - 3. **principle: Christianity will always have its detractors, men who will attempt to "pervert" the gospel (Jude 4) – but, God will raise up men to defend it, as a part of his decree in history**