
CHURCH HISTORY

“Now these things took place as examples for us...”

Lesson 10

The Roman Catholic Inquisition

The Inquisition was a powerful office set up within the Catholic Church to root out and punish heresy throughout Europe and the Americas. Beginning in the 12th century and continuing for hundreds of years, the Inquisition is infamous for the severity of its tortures and its persecution of Jews and Muslims. Its worst manifestation was in Spain, where the Spanish Inquisition was a dominant force for more than 200 years, resulting in some 32,000 executions.

The Inquisition has its origins in the early organized persecution of non-Catholic Christian religions in Europe. In 1184 Pope Lucius III sent bishops to southern France to track down heretics called Catharists. These efforts continued into the 14th Century. During the same period, the church also pursued the Waldensians in Germany and Northern Italy. In 1231, Pope Gregory charged the Dominican and Franciscan Orders to take over the job of tracking down heretics.

New Testament Christians in the Middle Ages

The Continued Practice of Biblical Christianity

Corruption and change in religious institutions often lead to attempts at reform. Throughout religious history such movements almost always come as a response, or even revolt, against corruption in the mainline church/churches. Some movements lead people to return to morally upright lives and attempts to remove corruption from the church. Early movements of asceticism and monasticism were such efforts. But they were not necessarily returning to apostolic authority. The basis of New Testament Christianity has always been Apostolic authority. Whenever there are true reform movements you find the desire to return to this foundation principle - to lay aside church authority and give authority to the scriptures alone. Such movements can be found in the Middle Ages as well as those who co-existed with the Roman church. Those large enough to be seen as a threat to the Roman church are found in the history books. Their existence implies there were others, smaller in number, who would not draw the attention of the Roman church.

J.W. Kennedy observes: “Much too little importance is usually given to the part played by ordinary men and women in the advance of the Gospel. So often the history of the church is portrayed as simply the organized advance of organized religion... It is unfortunate that much of the information we have concerning groups of Christians down through history who deviated from the institutional Church, comes from their enemies and must, therefore, be suspected of bias. When Rome persecuted separate movements of Christian believers, she sought also to destroy any records which might make them appear in a favorable light to subsequent generations, so it is very probable that, in the centuries of Rome’s religious dominance, there were many more gatherings of spiritual folk living out their lives of testimony in simple dependence upon Christ than those of which we have present knowledge.”

Godwin Grimm writes, “No wonder that all true followers of Christ began to sever their ties with the degenerated state churches of Rome and Constantinople. Persecuted by the Roman

The Job of the Inquisitors

Inquisitors would arrive in a town and announce their presence, giving citizens a chance to admit to heresy. Those who confessed received a punishment ranging from a pilgrimage to a whipping. Those accused of heresy were forced to testify. If the heretic did not confess, torture and execution were inescapable. Heretics weren't allowed to face accusers, received no counsel, and were often victims of false accusations. There were countless abuses of power. Count Raymond VII of Toulouse was known for burning heretics at the stake even though they had confessed. His successor, Count Alphonse, confiscated the lands of the accused to increase his riches.

and Oriental Catholics as they had been persecuted by the heathen emperors, they continued to try to serve God in simplicity and truth in the deep of the woods of Armenia, in the deserts of North Africa, and in the valleys of the Alps and Pyrenees. From these countries some heroic missionaries of New Testament Christianity penetrated into Central Europe, eager to restore the great fundamental truths in the churches.” (Grimm, an early 20th century Christian and scholar from Germany, did extensive research on churches of Christ in Central Europe. Though his research was twice destroyed by the German government, and after time spent in German concentration camps, he managed to still write a brief history based on his extensive research.) Let's examine some of these movements.

Priscillian - A Pre-Middle Ages Example

Priscillian was born around 340 AD. His dedication caused him to lead an ascetic movement. He taught the exclusive study of the Bible as well as apocryphal literature (most which he recognized as spurious). He had enemies among some powerful bishops who successfully had him tried. They charged him as a Manicheist (a semi-Gnostic doctrine, which he did not believe) and was eventually executed. His appeal to scriptures alone led him to reject many church doctrines including Mariology. That he taught the Word of God as the sole rule in matters of doctrine was diametrically opposed to what the Roman church was already teaching. It is no wonder that they sought to stop him. Though he was far off on many doctrines, he is an early example of one who was already making an appeal to return to the scriptures alone.

Christianity in the British Isles

Many historians teach that Christianity came to the British Isles as late as 597 AD and that it was Catholic in origin. Yet there is overwhelming evidence that New Testament Christianity was brought to Britain not long after Pentecost. Keith Sisman in his book, *Traces of the Kingdom*, cites multiple ancient sources including church fathers, indicating the presence of Christianity in the British Isles in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Sisman says the gospel came as early as 37 AD, though other historians say 58-63 AD. When Romans finally took control of southern Britain by the late 70's, they faced fierce resistance from ancient Caledonia (now Scotland) and made their northern border at the famous Hadrian's Wall, constructed to stop any invasions from the north. This allowed Christianity to continue in Scotland and Ireland relatively free from Catholic influence. Sisman mentions other groups committed to non-catholic, biblical practices very early in Scotland and Britain.

The commitment of many of these early groups to apostolic authority would wane over time, many eventually being assimilated into Catholicism. But J.W. Kennedy writes, "...there

The “Heretic” Pelagius

In the fourth century the Roman church would have to deal with Pelagianism. Much of Pelagius’ teaching was diametrically opposed to Augustine’s ideas of original sin, foreordination, infant baptism, irresistible grace, etc. Pelagius taught free will, baptism of adult believers for remission of sins, the right of marriage for the clergy, and good works play a role in one’s eternal salvation. Pelagius would have grown up in the church in Britain where the early church was found, another indication of the doctrines of churches not traced to the Roman Catholic church.

remained those in the mountains of Caledonia and elsewhere, separated from what the world at large recognized as the Church, but maintaining their witness and refusing to accept the mediation of any human institution between them selves and God. These faithful people, and those who came after them, were to incorporate their faith in the spiritual movements of a later day.” (Kennedy; The Torch of the Testimony)

Paulicians

In the mid 7th century a group by this name began in Armenia. It developed into a sizable group bringing about the opposition of both the emperor and the Eastern church. Though also charged as being Manicheans, it is hard to believe, when one sees their dedicated commitment to the New Testament. The Catholics used the charge of Manicheanism against so many groups they wish to discredit and eliminate. We have some pretty good records of these people as they became a sizable group. Some of their beliefs are eminently biblical. They valued the Bible as their authority and believed they were in succession of those who still held to the teaching of the apostles, and denied the right of corrupt ecclesiastical authorities ruling over them. They were known for living lives of purity and simplicity. They believed in the independence of the local church with no creed for all the churches to follow. Each church answered directly to God for its practices. Elders, who met the scriptural qualifications, ruled over their local church. They repudiated infant baptism, but believed grace was received before baptism. They are just one other example of an independent group who sought a return to apostolic authority and, thus, discovering so many practices contrary to the teaching of the Catholic church. Later groups that trace their heritage to the Paulicians are the Bogomils (Dear to God) of the 10th century, and the Cathars (Puritan) of the 12th century. But these were later influenced by the old Gnostic idea of complete separation between material and spiritual, believing all material things were created by Satan. Yet they clung to many of the biblical practices of the early Paulicians.

Waldensians

The Waldensians were Christians whose appear in the records in the 12th century in the southern Alps of France. They claimed to trace their beginnings to apostolic times. Even their enemies attested to their antiquity. Though not its founder, the movement is apparently named for Peter Waldo, its most influential preacher in those days. He had procured a translation of the New Testament and became dedicated to its teaching. The result is he became associated with these churches. Having lived isolated lives in the valleys of the Alps, their practices had been unaffected by the developments of the Roman and Orthodox churches. They did not believe the church had the authority to determine one’s salvation. They practiced adult baptism but as a

Early Bible Translations

Though rarely discussed, there were translations of scripture long before Tyndale and the Reformation.

Several translated parts of the Bible into Old English.

Aldhelm (639-709), the first bishop of Sherborne, is usually regarded as the first English translator of the Psalms into Old English.

The Venerable Bede (673-735) translated portions of the Latin New Testament into Old English.

Aelfric (c. 955-1020) is the most important figure in the history of the Bible during Anglo Saxon times. Like the poet Caedmon, Aelfric took great liberties when translating the Gospels by omitting parts as he saw fit. For example, in Genesis, he omits lists of names and difficult passages.

"An Old High German version of the gospel of Matthew dates to 748. Deanesly thought that Bible translations were easier to produce in Germany, where the decentralized nature of the Empire allowed for greater religious freedom. However, these translations were seized and burned by inquisitors whenever they were found. Altogether there are 13 medieval German translations before the Luther Bible." (Bible translations in the Middle Ages; Wikipedia)

These are only a few examples of translations available to Christians besides the Latin Vulgate used by the Catholic church.

witness to their salvation by faith. Elders ruled local churches and itinerant ministers traveled among the them. Their influence would continue into the Reformation. It was the widespread influence of these people that caused the Catholic church to declare no one was to possess a copy of the scriptures (Council of Toulouse of 1229. Later made official by the Council of Trent 1545-63). And the Catholic Inquisition will begin with this group as one of its early targets.

Other Examples

Godwin Grimm writes of early churches in the late Middle Ages: "In 1052, a network of churches of Christ in Central Germany was in existence. Some of the most ardent preachers of the Gospel were burnt at the stake in this year (by order and in presence of the German emperor at Goslar) singing the praise of the Lord amidst the flames. These missionaries were distinguished from their fellow believers only by the austerity of their lives, their zeal and knowledge, and by the modest title of Elder Brethren. As an example Grimm discusses the church in Alsatia which included the martyred Gregorius Grimm at Ensheim (died 1118). He writes: "From this remarkable year of 1118 we can trace the story of the little church in Alsatia to our days. In the records of the Roman Catholic inquisition they appear as "Ortlibarii," "Runcarii" or "Beghardi," whereas the people called them "Christ's poor disciples" ("Arme Junger Christi") or "Good People" ("Gutleute"). But they themselves never used another name for their congregations but "Christengemeine" ("church of Christ") and for the members of these churches as "Christen" ("Christians") or Brethren and Sisters in Christ. And these little flocks had not only to defend against the heretic-hunting Roman Catholic church, but also against the many errors of sectarian denominations, which, though also persecuted by the ecclesiastical and secular authorities tried to merge with the true followers of Christ."

Conclusion

I do not suggest that most of these churches were following exactly what we follow today, But they do evidence commitment of untold numbers of Christians through the Middle Ages not a part of the Catholic church. They were committed to following the Bible alone. No doubt there were many more churches throughout the world seeking to do the same. I do not think the Lord's church has ever ceased to exist since it was established on the Day of Pentecost. People have always sought to follow the apostolic teaching alone, seeking to draw closer to its truth every day. We owe them a great debt, for through them continued an attitude of following the Bible as our only guide.