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5. Jerusalem: The Development of a Polity


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5. Jerusalem: The Development of a Polity

Abstract

We know very little about the organization of what has been called the primitive Church. The belief in the imminent second coming did not put to rest the need for some arrangement to keep the faithful together and to spread the gospel. No one polity prevailed, but the general pattern was for each group of believers to organize a church and choose those who taught or preached, those who took care of external matters, and those who administered the assistance rendered to unfortunate members. Each church was an independent unit but almost all of them maintained connections with each other through correspondence or other devices. During the second century the clergy, in the person of the priest, became differentiated from the other members. The priest was set apart -- ordained -- for his work, devoted himself entirely to his religious duties, and began wearing distinctive garb. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, gospels, Jesus, New Testament, Christians, bishop

Disciplines

Classics | History of Christianity | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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5. The Development of a Polity

We know very little about the organization of what has been called the primitive Church. The belief in the imminent second coming did not put to rest the need for some arrangement to keep the faithful together and to spread the gospel. No one polity prevailed, but the general pattern was for each group of believers to organize a church and choose those who taught or preached, those who took care of external matters, and those who administered the assistance rendered to unfortunate members. Each church was an independent unit but almost all of them maintained connections with each other through correspondence or other devices. During the second century the clergy, in the person of the priest, became differentiated from the other members. The priest was set apart -- ordained -- for his work, devoted himself entirely to his religious duties, and began wearing distinctive garb.

Early in the second century the bishop began to appear in important cities where there were Christians. Eventually, he extended his authority over all churches within the urban and rural areas of an imperial city, which came to be called a diocese. This authority was made possible by (1) the gradual acceptance in the Church of the doctrine of apostolic succession, stated as early as the end of the second century, which doctrine held that the power to ordain is maintained in a direct line of succession of bishops beginning with the original apostles, and that the bishops have the authority to determine the truth in religious matters whenever disputes arise; and (2) the temporal powers which the state began giving the bishops, primarily over the clergy but even at times over the laity. For centuries the most powerful single figure in the hierarchy of the Church was to be the bishop.

[As the need for further organization arose, it is only natural that the Roman Empire would suggest itself as a model to be followed. During the fourth and fifth centuries bishops in large cities (who were later called metropolitans and still later archbishops) acquired certain powers in an area corresponding to a Roman province. Bishops in several of the oldest Christian centers (who were later called patriarchs) had some authority in an area corresponding to a group of provinces.]

It was perhaps inevitable that this line of development would lead to a single head for the Church, just as there was a single head for the whole empire; and also that he would come from one of the largest Christian centers. The contest for leadership narrowed to Constantinople and Rome. As we have seen, Constantinople was made one of the two imperial capitals in 330. It had strong ecclesiastical power and prestige and quickly surpassed Rome in political power.

However, Rome had its advantages, too. There was no strong civil power in the city to oppose or dominate its bishop after about 400, when the emperor's court moved to Ravenna. Rome had a line of able and orthodox bishops who presided over a large body of Christians. Rome also had prestige -- the prestige of having been founded as a bishopric by the apostle Peter and of having been visited by Paul. Thus far at least, it is impossible for us to know whether or not Peter was the first bishop of Rome. However, the tradition that he was, appeared as early as the second century and persisted thereafter. The bishops of Rome displayed great energy and ability in handling matters referred to them for advice or decision, a role which was accorded them from the second century on, when there were many such matters to be resolved.

Petrine - St. Peter founded the bishopric of Rome

[One tactful and satisfactory performance led to the opportunity for another and eventually the idea became fixed, at least in the West, that the bishop of Rome was and should be the ultimate court of last resort on religious matters. In the year 455 Emperor Valentinian III declared that the authority of the pope (as the bishop of Rome came to be called) should be "law for all" and ordered all bishops to fall into line. It is instructive to note that this edict came during the tenure of one of the two popes in history known as "the Great." However, it is also important to remember that this recognition of the primacy of Rome did not mean that Leo the Great (440-461) and all his successors exercised effective control over the life of the entire Church. As we shall see, the eastern half in time drifted away and conditions in the western half during the period after the fall of Rome were such as to make papal authority little more than a shadow, except in matters of doctrine.]

[Another development in the early Church that must be considered briefly here is monasticism. There is much circumstantial evidence to explain its appearance: it satisfied the strong ascetic tendency present in some people; it offered a substitute for martyrdom after that ceased; it represented a way in which

Polity - church government

one could protest against the increasing wealth and worldliness of the Church; and it offered an escape from what seemed to some to be a rapidly declining world. Monasticism appeared in the warm climate of third century Egypt and spread in the East. Typical was the hermit who went into the desert and lived a solitary life. During the fourth century the monastery appeared, the monk was put to work, and the hermits slowly disappeared. The monastic rule drawn up by St. Basil (c. 330-379) is still in effect. In the West, the hermit was always exceptional. There were some monasteries, but they drew criticism from the Church because each went its own way. The great period of monasticism in the West was in the future and will be noted in a later chapter.