

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

Wrong Directions

“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies.”

2 Peter 2:1

Persecution was not the only problem faced by the church in its first two hundred years. Right from the beginning there was wrong teaching and, as we shall see, directions taken in response to it have influenced the practices of the church right down to the present day.

What's New?

It should come as no surprise that it happened. Just as He warned them about persecution, Jesus warned His church that there would be those who would mislead many with false doctrine

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing

Matthew 7:15

"Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

Matthew 24:11

Neither should it come as any surprise that it happened so early in the history of the church, for there is evidence in their Epistles that it was already beginning in the days of the apostles.

Inevitably wrong teaching led to division — it always does — for there were those who went along with it and there were those who did not. Even while the persecution of which we learned last week was going on the church was splitting into groups that were in disagreement with one another.

Montanism

Montanus was a young convert from Asia Minor. He began to prophesy in AD 170 claiming that the Holy Spirit was speaking to the church in a new way directly through him.

The movement he began — he called it “the New Prophecy” — promoted rigid moral standards and encouraged his followers to embrace martyrdom eagerly. Visions, speaking in tongues, prophesy and other extraordinary experiences were common among them.

The evidence we have suggests that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit (prophecy, tongues, miraculous healing) continued in the church after the 1st Century but they became increasingly less common. Montanism came on the scene as a fresh outburst of the supernatural.

Ordinary Christians were suspicious. To them the Montanists seemed like spiritual drunkards. Their claim to bring fresh revelation from God was at odds with the view that the writings of the apostles were the final rule for Christian belief and practice. What is more, many of their prophecies, particularly those about the time of the second coming of Christ, did not come true. They condemned other Christians as unspiritual “prophet killers” and so, at a time when the church was struggling to maintain unity they were condemned and forced out, first by the churches in Asia Minor and then in Rome. They developed their own church life and Montanist churches continued to exist until the 6th Century when they were finally persecuted out of existence, not by pagan but by Catholic emperors after Christianity became the state religion of the Empire.

Gnosticism

A greater threat to the church was the heresy that came to be known as Gnosticism. It arose around AD 130 – 160 though some of its ideas were already circulating in the days of the apostles Paul and John who condemned them strongly (in Colossians 2 and 1 John).

The Gnostics claimed that they possessed special, secret knowledge which was not available to ordinary Christians. They said that knowledge had been passed down to them by the apostles who had been taught it by Jesus and that it was impossible to understand the gospel without it. They even had their own scriptures which contained this knowledge or “gnosis”.

They taught that the world was created by an inferior god — the god of the Old Testament which they regarded as evil. They believed that everything in the material world was evil, including the human body which holds us prisoner. They believed that Jesus never possessed a true human body and indeed believed that He was not truly God but merely an exalted spiritual being who brought us the true knowledge of our condition.

Their most outstanding leader was Marcion, who died in AD 160. By the time of his death the sect he founded had spread throughout the Roman world and existed as an alternative church with its own bishops. It died out only in the 6th Century.

Many were led astray by Gnosticism but its lasting legacy came as a result of the way the church responded to it.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp who in turn had been a disciple of the apostle John. He became bishop of the church in Lyons in AD 177 after the previous bishop died in the fierce persecution of that year.

Irenaeus wrote a lengthy book against the Gnostics, which is still in existence. It tells us not only about Gnosticism, it also tells us a lot about church practice in the 2nd Century and about how the church responded to the Gnostic heresy.

Apostolic Tradition

The main thrust of the church’s response to Gnosticism was to emphasise apostolic tradition — the teaching of the apostles handed down by those churches where the apostles themselves had been active. Each church summarised that teaching in a rule of faith and each had its own version but they all taught more or less the same thing. The version used by the church in Rome became what we know today as the Apostles Creed.

Bishops in Charge

In New Testament teaching elders are responsible for spiritual oversight in each church. Two different words are used to describe them but they both refer to the same role.

By the time of Irenaeus those two words had come to be used to describe two different roles. In each church the senior elder was known as the bishop. He was the leader of the church and each church had only one bishop. Presbyters were also elders but they were secondary leaders who assisted the bishop and served under his authority.

The bishop was the congregation’s official teacher and preacher. He conducted the services of worship, oversaw church discipline, and had the sole power to ordain, baptise and preside at the Lord’s Supper, though he could delegate these roles to his presbyters.

The rule that only a bishop could ordain other bishops maintained the idea of apostolic succession. Because each bishop could say he had been ordained by a bishop, he could trace his authority right back to the apostles who had ordained the first bishops. Apostolic succession also implied that the bishop was obliged to hold to the faith the apostles had taught and to be the guardian of that faith.

A Catholic Church

It was at this time too that people began to speak about the Catholic Church. The word Catholic comes from a Greek word that means universal. By calling itself Catholic the church set itself apart from Gnostics and other heretical groups as the true church founded on the teaching of the apostles.

Higher Structures

At first, each church had its own bishop and no bishop had authority over any other church but with increased emphasis on apostolic tradition the churches the apostles themselves had founded or with which they had been connected came to the fore. These churches, it was argued, were the special guardians of the true apostolic faith and so they came to be looked to for guidance.

Because the church in Rome was the only church in the Western part of the Roman Empire that could claim such a connection with the apostles it increasingly became the church the others looked to. In the days of Irenaeus the bishop of Rome was already being given prominence as a "first among equals."

A Common Identity

So in its response to Gnosticism, by emphasising apostolic tradition the church developed a number of new features. It developed a new emphasis on orthodoxy, unity, tightly controlled organisation and discipline and it was these things gave the Catholic Church throughout the world a common identity.

Some Questions for Discussion

1. The leaders of the church in the 1st and 2nd Centuries believed that these emphases were necessary to protect the church against heresy. Do you think they were right?
2. In what ways do you see the steps taken to defend the church against Gnosticism in the 1st Century influencing the church today?
3. If you had been the bishop of Ephesus in AD 130 what steps would you have taken to defend your church against Gnosticism?
4. How should the church respond to wrong teaching today?

For Further Study

Peter deals extensively with the problem of false teachers peddling damaging doctrine in his second epistle. Read 2 Peter. How does it help you to answer questions 3 and 4?