

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## Teaching, Worship And Church Life

“Make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”

Matthew 28:20

Some of the most important developments in the teaching, organisation, worship and life of the church came in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century.

## Scripture and Tradition

Faced with false teaching, the church had to have a clear understanding of which writings were trustworthy and which were not. The books that now make up the New Testament were accepted and judged to be authoritative because of their connection with the apostles. If a book had been written by an apostle, or by someone under an apostle's direction, it was regarded as Scripture. Most of the books in our New Testament had been accepted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century but debate over Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John and Revelation went on until the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. This debate was finally settled by a Church Council at Carthage in 397. It is important to emphasise that the contents of the New Testament were not determined by the Council of Carthage. The Council merely recognised what the Holy Spirit had already made plain among the churches.

Together the Old and New Testaments were considered to be the infallible Word of God which contained everything a believer needed to know for his salvation (a view held without being seriously questioned until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century) Unwritten “apostolic tradition” was placed alongside the New Testament. It was highly regarded because it too was considered to have been handed down from the apostles but it was not concerned with doctrine. It dealt with other things the church needed to know for its organisation and worship.

Later — in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century — the church came to consider doctrinal statements issued by Church Councils as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

## Hierarchy

By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century church government began to be more complex and bishops were no longer equal in authority, as they had been in earlier years.

The Council of Nicaea decreed that all the bishops in a province should meet twice a year in synod. The bishop of each provincial capital was appointed president of the synod and called a metropolitan or archbishop. Many churches came into existence that did not have a bishop at all. For example when a church became so large that it had to divide, smaller congregations were set up under the authority of its bishop and cared for by a presbyter who was responsible to him. It soon became the norm for the pastor of a congregation to be a presbyter and for the bishop to be pastor only of the central church in each city.

In time a few bishops — the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem — were given authority over other bishops and archbishops. They were known as patriarchs (fatherly rulers) but affectionately called “papa” or pope. Until the division between the churches of the East and West in 1054 all five patriarchs were, in theory, equals and together ruled the catholic or universal church. In the West the bishop of Rome was the only patriarch.

The other important structure developed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century was the “ecumenical Council”. This was an occasional assembly of bishops from throughout the Empire. The earliest Councils were summoned by the Emperor, who often played a major part in their proceedings, but in

later times it was the patriarch of Rome, the pope, who called the bishops together. From the 5<sup>th</sup> Century on the decisions of Councils about doctrine and discipline were considered to be inspired and authoritative.

## **Liturgies and Festivals**

From the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Latin became the preferred language of worship in the Western churches. There was also more emphasis on liturgy — a fixed written form of worship. Liturgies had been used from very early times, with individual churches devising their own orders of worship. Now there was little room for bishops to stray from the set pattern which was determined largely by the churches in Constantinople (to which the Eastern churches looked for leadership) and Rome (to which the Western churches looked). At the same time the use of ritual and ceremony including the wearing of vestments, use of incense, the carrying of lights and rites of confession and penance became commonplace.

Easter had been celebrated from the earliest times but now the forty days of Lent and Easter week became part of the celebration. The celebration of Christmas on 25<sup>th</sup> December was also established in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. This had been the date of the pagan festival of the sun — the church took that festival over and Christianised it. The old Roman festival of Saturnalia, when candles were lit, parties held and gifts exchanged, also became attached to Christmas.

It was around this time too that the religious honouring of saints and relics expanded. Chapels, shrines and churches were built over the tombs of saints and relics of saints were prized. The idea developed that a dead saint, now in heaven, could assist struggling Christians through his prayers. Christians did not so much pray to the saints as ask the saints to pray for them. In time it did lead to praying to the saints and certain saints came to be considered especially good at meeting particular needs. Many of the great church leaders of the time, like Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine and Jerome, encouraged this cult of the saints.

Again during the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, churches began to be decorated with pictures of Christ and the saints. This may be because it was only in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century that it became the norm to have buildings set aside especially for worship rather than because of any change in thinking but there were those who strongly opposed the practice.

## **Hermits, Monks and Monasteries**

One of the most significant developments in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century was monasticism. Many believers became so disgusted with the state of the Empire and the state of the church that they decided to opt out altogether. They went off to live in remote places and renounced worldly property and pleasure for a life of prayer, fasting and Bible study. Men who did this were called monks.

Some lived alone as hermits or anchorites. A few adopted bizarre practices which they thought would benefit their souls<sup>1</sup>. Many lived in monasteries in community with other monks.

Monks lived according to a “rule” which determined their daily routine and the different orders, which were usually named after their founders, each had their own rule. They were required to obey their abbot — the head of their monastery — and most worked to provide the basic necessities their lifestyle required. Women who followed the monastic life were called nuns.

Monasticism had its origin in Egypt but it followed a general spirit of self-discipline which had become popular in the Roman Empire. Even Christians who did not become monks often lived an ascetic lifestyle. One thing that grew out of this was a belief in the high spiritual worth of celibacy. By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century most Christians accepted that celibacy was better than marriage and congregations began to insist that their bishops should be unmarried.

In the East monks tended to remain cut off from society but many western orders took a different path. Their rule often included cultivation of the mind through study and over time the

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<sup>1</sup> One such hermit was Simon the Stylite who lived for over 30 years on top of a pillar 60 feet high. Simon preached to his many visitors from his pillar and some of them built pillars of their own in the region of Antioch in Syria.

monasteries became recognised as centres of learning. After the collapse of the Western Empire they remained as the guardians of European culture, learning and civilisation. It was also in the monasteries that future bishops and leaders of the church received their training: most started out as monks.

Monks also became a great missionary force from this time and on through the Middle Ages. Free from ties of family and property they carried the faith into pagan lands. England and Germany, for example, received the Christian faith through the influence of missionary monks.

### **But Is It Right?**

John Calvin, in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, although critical of monasticism in his own day, spoke highly of what was accomplished in the early monasteries where, "Godly men prepared themselves by monastic discipline to exercise office in the church."

We must be honest and say that monasticism has contributed a lot both to the spread of the gospel and to the development of our culture but has the monastic movement been a good thing? Is there anything we can learn from it?

God's Word certainly instructs believers to be separate from the world.

"Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you."

2 Corinthians 6:17

But that separation cannot be physical separation from all that is unclean, or even from unbelievers for Jesus prayed for His disciples:

"I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

John 17:15 – 16

And He has commanded us:

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Matthew 5:16

### **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. What do you think were the weaknesses of monasticism?
2. What, practically, does it mean to be separate and to keep oneself unspotted from the world?
3. Are there aspects of monasticism that are good and that we can learn from today?
4. The early monks were certainly successful missionaries. How could the modern missionary movement learn from their methods and experience?
5. In all the developments we have looked at in this study we can see, with the benefit of hindsight, a mixture of good things and bad things. Is it possible to avoid introducing practices into the church that have potential to do long-term harm?

### **For Further Study**

In John 17 Jesus, who is soon to leave His disciples and return to the Father, prays for His disciples. What can you learn from His prayer about the relationship that should exist between a Christian and this world?