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A Very, Very Brief History of the Pre-Reformation Christian Church

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WEEK 1: A Very, Very, Brief History of the Pre-Reformation Christian Church

BY DR. MARK ELLINGSEN (PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY, INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER)

TOPIC SUMMARY

The church grew like wildfire in the 1500 years after Jesus' death. It quickly changed from being a small Jewish sect into *the* religion of Europe. Although Christianity had originally been a movement of Jews, immediately after gaining a Gentile majority of the membership sometime in the 2nd century, it was still a religion with its heaviest concentration in Israel, the Near East, and North Africa. It was not until the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century that Christianity began to be associated with Europe and Western culture. (We must never forget how Jewish, Asian, and African our faith is.)

Most of the first Christians, much like Jesus, came from lower-class backgrounds. However, their commitment, willingness to suffer for their faith, and care for the poor attracted more and more powerful people within the Roman Empire. This accounted for much of the church's phenomenal growth. This in turn led the church to gain educated leaders who in the 4th and 5th centuries developed some of our great doctrines: the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus, original sin, and the prioritizing of grace over works. (Liturgical styles of worship, teaching about the sacraments, and the determination of what books would and would not be in the Bible had been addressed in previous centuries.) The increasing numbers of Christians among the educated elite meant that Christian theology developed in conversation with the cutting-edge intellectual developments of the day.

Christians often perceived the Roman Empire as meddling in the Church, so the Church developed powerful leadership positions (bishops, and eventually the papacy) in order to counter Roman influence. Monasticism developed during this time period, in part, as a resistance movement to the blending of power and faith. Despite numerous controversies, the church remained one church until the Great Schism in 1054, which divided East and West – the West being those Christians loyal to the leadership of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope), today's Roman Catholic Church, and the East being those Christians more inclined to take leadership from the rival Bishop of Constantinople (today's Eastern Orthodox Churches).

In order to understand the Reformation itself, we must pay special attention to the church in Europe prior to the time of the Reformation. The conquest of Rome in 455 by Germans ended the Roman Empire's dominance in Europe and led to a millennium of poverty and political instability throughout Europe. European Christians endured much suffering in these years, and the European standard of living drastically diminished. But, the church continued to gain both power and influence, including influence over both the military and royalty in various parts of the Continent. The church was also largely responsible for the emerging educational system. It was the one institution that could provide the masses with hope in the midst of their struggles. Of course, with power comes temptation and corruption. Not surprisingly, then, by the 15th century the Church in Europe was falling prey to both political and theological corruption.

KEY WORDS

Augustine (354-430): An African Bishop and important theologian of the early church; he is most famous for developing the doctrine of Original Sin and for affirming the priority of grace in God's Work of saving us. His writings influenced both Luther and John Calvin, as well as the Roman Catholic Church.

Episcopal Polity: A way of organizing denominations by having bishops as foremost authorities.

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

1 Corinthians 12:27 | Romans 12:4-5 | Ephesians 2:19-22

WHERE DOES LUTHER STAND?

In *Here I Stand*, famed professor and Luther biographer Roland Bainton framed Luther the Reformer with this theses: "Very naturally he is a controversial figure. The multitudinous portrayals fall into certain broad types already delineated in his own generation. His followers hailed him as the prophet of the Lord and the deliverer of Germany. His opponents on the Catholic side called him the son of perdition and the demolisher of Christendom. The agrarian agitators branded him as the sycophant of the princes, and the radical sectaries compared him to Moses, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt and left them to perish in the wilderness. But such judgments belong to an epilogue rather than a prologue. The first endeavor must be to understand the man."

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- + In the first few centuries, the Church grew at a remarkable rate, both numerically but also ethnically. Is the church today ethnically diverse? What about your local congregation? Why or why not?
- + One reason the early Church grew so quickly was its reputation as a community that cared for the least of these (esp. the poor). Are we known for our care of the least of these today? Why or why not? Do you think this impacts the Church's growth?
- + There is little question that the connection Christianity made with the Roman Empire and its leaders helped the Church to grow. But was it good for the Christian faith? Should the Church align itself with the state? Or does the Church act most faithfully when it is perceived as counter-cultural, advocating values that challenge society?
- + From the 2nd century until the Reformation the Church had an episcopal polity (Bishops and priests as its leaders, along with deacons). The ELCA, along with many other denominations, continues this form of leadership today. What is the role of the bishop? The pastor? Lay people?