

Theology of the Church Fathers

Church Structure part 1

We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the early church was peaceful and everyone shared what they had with each other and the poor. The wealthy gave to the Apostles so that they could distribute the goods among those in need. Yet, this was not quite the truth. For parts of the Christian world and for individual local communities, this type of peaceful existence was their experience of Christianity. Yet, this peaceful coexistence was not the norm. We read only a few passages later that a dispute arose amongst the disciples requiring a verdict from the Apostles. The Apostles gathered as well as St. Paul. After some rather heated discussions, St. Peter stood up and gave a verdict. These two examples show some of the challenges and joys present in the early Church. This session focuses on the structure and understanding of the church by the Church Fathers.

The Christian Message and Freedom

One of the greatest challenges faced by the early church was the implications of the Christian message. Jesus taught that he came to bring them freedom and an abundance of freedom. To many of the first disciples and converts, this meant freedom from everything. Freedom from Jewish law, civil authority, Church law, morality, and the demands of life. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St. Paul, we read of both stories and the rebuke given to these people. In St. Paul's 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians, he rebukes those who think that they can get by on the charity of others without working. Again, the same basic idea. Jesus came to make us free and that means free from work. St. Paul rebukes them by saying that those who do not work should not eat.

Throughout the writings of the early church and the Book of Revelation we see another type of freedom that challenged the early Christians: freedom from Roman rule and morality. Many thought that the Christian message, which strongly deviated from the strict moral code of Judaism, meant that regardless of what we did, we were forgiven. Therefore we were free to do as we please. Some of these practices included women not wearing head coverings, using fortune tellers and mediums, not paying taxes, and many more. All of the practices painted a picture to the local society of the nature of Christianity. Women who didn't wear head coverings were seen as prostitutes since only prostitutes didn't cover their heads. Those who sought fortune tellers and mediums were seen as pagans who didn't trust God like they preached. Those who didn't pay taxes, attend the temple sacrifices, or participate in Roman society were seen as atheists and destroyers of the peace of Rome.

The implications of the freedom Jesus gave to his followers was a critical aspect of the early Church. What did Jesus mean by giving us freedom? How were we to live out this new type of life in Christ? The Church spent much time and energy explaining to the people their boundaries and expectations of this freedom. Freedom in Christ didn't mean freedom to do whatever you wanted. Freedom in Christ meant the freedom to do what was right and to live the commands of

Jesus even more strictly. The Church Fathers were adamant about the necessity and importance of following the moral law of the new law. They emphasized that belief in Jesus necessitated a good and holy life. Major sins like apostasy, murder, adultery, and schism resulted in a complete removal from the Christian community, excommunication. The Church Fathers taught that the freedom that comes through Christ meant a stronger adherence to the moral laws so that the nations around them would see the truths of the Christian message and the graces that comes from these laws and this lifestyle.

Challenges to authority

Clearly this message was not well received. But another aspect of this strong sense of freedom led to more challenges than simply following moral norms. Most of those who converted to Christianity came from rather domineering religions. Judaism was a highly patriarchal religion with the men, and especially the Jewish leaders, controlling every aspect of society and home life. The Roman society was very similar to the Jewish faith with a highly patriarchal structure and many demands placed upon the people. Roman society required constant animal and grain sacrifices to the gods, many festivals and ceremonies through the year, and a strong adherence to the cultic worship of the emperor. Although Roman cultic religion had some local communities which were led exclusively by women, the cult of Demeter, Athena, and Hera to name a few, their scope of control and power existed only in those small communities and didn't factor into the larger society.

How did the people respond to the freedom from oppressive religions and society? With great vigor. The women propelled the message of freedom far more than the men. For the women, this message of freedom meant freedom from the rule of men, the ability to live on their own, to participate more fully in society and the church, and the ability to control their own lives. For some of the women, they lived this new freedom with an astute religious observance and a deep dedication to Christ. Some of the earliest martyrs of the Church were these type of women. They dedicated their lives to Christ, shunned marriage, and died for the faith they professed. The people of the church saw these early women witnesses with great awe. For a society that promoted the idea that women were weak and prone to their emotions, these early martyrs stood out as strong witnesses to the incredible power and strength of women. Another group, however, were quite the opposite. Many women saw this new freedom in Christ as a way to challenge authority and remake things in their own image. Some tried to become the leaders of churches, others tried to lead factions of Christians on their own, and some fully challenged the church authority.

What did the church do in response to such challenges? Oddly, these moments show the incredible weakness of the early church. We may like to think that the leaders of the church complied with them and created avenues for leadership, or maybe that they were able to quell the ire of these women and dissenters, or maybe that the church came back strongly against them and asserted her power. None of these is the case. Instead, the church waited out these problems. The bishops would write letters, they would encourage the faithful to practice true virtue, they would explain the truths of the faith, and they would try the best they could to encourage proper order in the church. But this is the best they could do. Most of the time, the bishops pleaded with

the people and strongly encouraged them to be the people who witnesses to the truth of Jesus by their actions. In almost all situations, the people eventually relented to the authority of the bishops and they were able to work together again as one people. The challenges to the church authority in the early church were strong and sometimes violent. It was not easy for the bishops of the church to keep control of the people or even to effectively lead them.

Development of Church Structure

The church began with only the 11 Apostles. These eleven men formed the top authority and only authority of the church. With the conversion of St. Paul and the need to elect a successor for Judas, the leadership of the church grew. Now, the people understood that the Apostles could have replacements and that the church was going to continue following their deaths. So, what should the church look like? Who was in command? Who spoke on behalf of God and represented authority in the Church?

Before the death of the Apostles, as the church grew, the need for more help emerged. The Apostles convened to decide how to choose men to help in the administration of the church. They decided to nominate and ordain men to a new role in the church called deacons. The term “deacon” means servant. These men were called to service in the church. Since the Apostles felt that their primary role was to preach the Word, study the Scriptures, and celebrate the Sacraments, these deacons were sent to take care of practical matters. These charges included bringing Communion to the sick, caring for widows and orphans, helping those who are sick, and assisting at the Sunday celebrations. This first new administrative role showed that the church was growing and needed more services than the Apostles could supply.

What happens after the Apostles die? What did the structure of the Church need to look like? One image the Apostles and early Christians wanted to avoid was to look Jewish. Therefore, they avoided calling the leadership “priests,” “rabbis,” “teachers,” or “high priests.” They had one high priest who is Jesus. They are all a form of priest in connection with Jesus through baptism. All were teachers of the word and therefore didn’t need an official designation. They had but one teacher who is the Christ. Yet, the issue of leadership was still a pressing matter especially after St. Andrew, the first Apostles to be martyred, died.

The decision was clear. The Apostles would ordain other men to carry on the same service of the Apostles including preaching the Word, celebrating the Sacraments, and exercising leadership in the Church. This new role was called an episcopos, or overseer. The word “bishop,” as we translate it today, means overseer. Their role is to oversee or administer the Church. These bishops would continue the ministry, leadership, and role of the Apostles following their ordination to the episcopate. Notice the change in terms. The new generation of leaders were not called Apostles as though they had witnessed to the death and Resurrection of Jesus. They have a new name. They are the overseers, the successors, the next in line from the witnesses. These bishops were meant to have full control over their local church with each bishop presiding over a single church. The authority of the bishop was limited to his one church but understood to be exercised everywhere.

As the church continued to grow, the structure expanded. Recognizing the importance of specific churches within the Christian world, the patriarchs emerged. The beginning of the patriarchate was caused by the expansion of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world and the recognition of the importance of the churches of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. A new level of leadership has emerged. Now we have five men who hold places of authority over regions of the church. They were understood to be equal in power and have complete control in their region. In matters of church doctrine or practice, they would collectively make the decision.

What about priests? So far we have three levels of authority in the church. The patriarchs oversee regions of the church and work to maintain consistent teachings throughout the church. The bishops oversee individual churches and preside over them through preaching, teaching, and the Sacraments. Deacons help with the practical functions of the church and assist the bishops in their role of caring for the people. The first iteration of priests were called presbyters, which means elders. They were men from the community who would be ordained for the aid of the bishop. They would assist at Masses, preach the word, and administer the Sacraments. The original name of “presbyter” was to make a distinction between the Jewish “priest” who offers a bloody animal sacrifice in the temple and the Christian “priest” which offers the unbloodied sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Jesus. For the first three centuries, these presbyters worked alongside their bishops in the administration and care of the churches. With the legalization of Christianity in 313 and the explosion in people wanting to enter the church, the bishops sent their priests to churches within their domain to celebrate the Sacraments on their behalf. With the stigma of the Jewish priests far behind the minds and sentiments of the people, the name presbyter changed to priest giving them a new spiritual role amongst the people.

These priests exercised a level of leadership among the people. They were the agents of the bishop and therefore had authority over the people. We can tell from the writings of the early church that the bishops were still more important, more sought after for their teachings, and held higher importance than the priests. Yet, some priests like St. Hippolytus was well-known enough that his Mass setting and his writings continued to be used to the present day. The authority of a priest was as a spiritual leader in his church. He was between the bishop and the people. Sometimes the people liked their priests, sometimes they didn't. The same with the bishop.

The oddest part of the early church for modern people is the election and transition of a bishop. Bishops were not elected by Rome until the 11th century. Until this time, the people voted, nominated, and chose their bishop. You can imagine that some people who got outvoted were not pleased with the decision and some outright rebelled. When a new bishop came to claim his church, a great ceremony was held in which he would knock on the doors of the church and ask for admittance. He needed the support and permission of the people. Then he would become their bishop until death or retirement. Most often until death.

Another aspect of church authority which is often overlooked is the monastic communities. Starting in the 3rd century, men and women would leave society and become religious, usually out in the desert. These monastic communities had their own structure and authority, semi-independent of the rest of the church. An abbot, who led a community of monks, had complete

and total authority over his monks. He could tell them to do whatever he wished. It didn't quite work that way but this was the ideal. In the situation of St. Benedict, the monks disliked him to the point that they tried to poison him. An abbess, who led a community of nuns, had complete authority over the sisters under her care. She acted in the role of a bishop to those women and had complete control over them. With the desert fathers and mothers, they had no central leadership. Instead they operated in an elder style of authority. Those who were older exercised some level of care and support to the younger hermits.

The structure of the authority in the early church was complicated and continually under development. The people reacted in various ways, like they do today, to these people having authority over them while also proclaiming freedom in Christ. Yet, the Church persisted and the structure formed. This structure gave a great weight to the truths of the church, helped promote consistency, and gave the people a sense of obedience to God and the Church.

St. Ignatius of Antioch

We know very little about the early life of St. Ignatius. The first instance we have of his life comes around 69 AD when the Apostle Peter consecrated Ignatius as a bishop of Antioch in Syria. Imagine being consecrated a bishop by the Apostles. Ignatius was known to be a very orthodox man and preached and wrote eloquently about the church, especially on church structure. He was the first person in church history to use the term "catholic" when referring to the church. In 107, during the reign of Emperor Trajan, Bishop Ignatius was wrongfully sentenced to death because he refused to renounce the Christian faith. He was taken by guard to Rome where he was brutally devoured by wild beasts in a public spectacle. On the way to his martyrdom he wrote seven letters to churches he encountered along the way.

The Letters of St. Ignatius

These seven letters are all that remains of the life of St. Ignatius. Having served as bishop in the church of Antioch for several years, all that we know of this first bishop of Antioch is what he wrote in these letters as he was carted off to Rome for his martyrdom. Yet, in these letters contains remarkable examples and issues related to the early church. St. Ignatius has three principle concerns that he writes about in his letters. His first concern is the false teachers of the church. Many people are wandering around the Christian world spreading false information about the teachings of Jesus. Following in the footsteps of St. Paul, these "false teachers" are teaching a Jewish form of Christianity contrary to the message taught by the Apostles. As such, they are discouraging the people and making them rebel against their official leaders, the bishops. In this mystical style, St. Ignatius doesn't simply lay down the law but instead expands their view to see these issues of false teaching in light of the greater truth about Jesus. He uses the same tactic with his second concern on church leadership. As the people rebel against authority, he makes the point that obedience to the bishop is obedience to Christ. These issues are not simply a matter of church structure but are spiritual in nature. We want obedience to Christ,

then we must be obedient to the people he set in authority over us. Although the majority of his letters do not focus on authority, they are some of the earliest accounts of the structure and challenges with authority of any church writing. The final major theme in his writing is his impending death. Ignatius knows that he is going to be martyred. He sees this moment as a defining moment that brings together the final end of things and the purpose of the Christian life. Through his writings about his impending death, he encourages the people to press forward in faith knowing that this is the goal of our lives.