

CHAPTER 21

THE PARADIGM OF THE CROSS IN THE EARLY CHURCH III

PART III: THE “IMPERIAL CHURCH”

Note how the following quotations detail how clearly many Christians in the fourth century accepted the paradigms of the structure and activities of the Roman Empire as their paradigms for church and social life rather than accepting the paradigm of the Cross:

Emperors and bishops worked hand in hand, as the church, benefiting from the patronage of Christian emperors, was increasingly modeled along imperial lines.¹

After Constantine's conversion, Christian worship began to be influenced by imperial protocol . . . Officiating ministers, who until then had worn everyday clothes, began dressing in more luxurious garments. Likewise, a number of gestures indicating respect, which were normally made before the emperor, now became part of Christian worship.²

. . . one of the theological issues that caused some concern for earlier Christians was how it was possible for a rich person to be saved. But now, beginning with Constantine, riches and pomp came to be seen as signs of divine favor . . . the persecuted church became the church of the powerful, But the net result of those buildings [ornate churches], and of the liturgy that evolved to fit them, was the development of a clerical aristocracy, similar to the imperial aristocracy, and often as far from the common people as were the great officers of the Empire.³

In an earlier section, it was related how evangelism took place in the early church; common people spread the gospel by their witness, and the greatest witness was martyrdom. However, after Constantine, multitudes were attracted into the churches by pomp and ceremony and easy acceptance; no longer would they have to prove their willingness to die for Jesus. After emperors became nominal Christians, it was common practice for them to force conversion by the sword in conquered lands. Any attempt to make sure that candidates were truly committed to follow the paradigm of the Cross was often no longer made.

Previously, persecution strongly challenged Christians to be committed personally to following the paradigm of the Cross by facing the real possibility of torture and execution. Those who “lapsed” were not accepted at communion. In a time when it was popular to be a Christian, there was no need to make such a commitment to be like Jesus, and many Christians automatically accepted the paradigms of pagan Romans for their personal lives and for their corporate church life.

What I refer to as the paradigms of the Roman Empire, Alexander Hislop in his book *The Two Babylons* argues to be essentially “Mystery Babylon” (Rev. 17); and thus the system or paradigm that the Roman church largely adopted can be seen to reflect much of the pagan religion of ancient Babylon:

It has been known all along that Popery was baptised Paganism; but God is now making it manifest that the Paganism which Rome has baptised is, in all its essential elements, *the very Paganism* which prevailed in the ancient literal Babylon.⁴

This interpretation of the “Imperial Church” seems extreme; no doubt, there is much evidence that there have been those in the Roman Church from earliest times who have lived out the paradigm of the Cross. All denominations need to reflect on how much of the paradigms that their members

¹Collins and Price, *The Story of Christianity*, 42

²Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 125.

³Gonzalez, 134.

⁴Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons or Papal Worship* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1959), 2.

actually follow are really that of the Cross and need to be willing to have exposed and to repent of other paradigms that originated in pagan cultures or have much in common with the humanism and materialism of modern society. Without the foundational commitment to lay down our lives for Christ, many modern churches place very little emphasis on applying such a standard to aspects of our experiences and relationships.

At the time of the “Imperial Church” under Constantine, the reason for many to choose monasticism was very different than earlier:

Whatever Constantine’s motives for adopting the Christian faith, the result was a decline in Christian commitment. The stalwart believers Diocletian killed were replaced by mixed multitudes of half-converted pagans. Once Christians had laid down their lives for the truth; now they slaughtered each other to secure the prizes of the church.⁵

When the church joins the powers of the world, when luxury and ostentation take hold of Christian altars, when the whole of society is intent on turning the narrow path into a wide avenue, how is one to resist the enormous temptations of the times? How is one to witness to the Crucified Lord, to the One who had nowhere to lay his head, at a time when many leaders of the church live in costly homes, and when the ultimate witness of martyrdom is no longer possible? How to overcome Satan, who is constantly tempting the faithful with the new honors that society offers?⁶

Those that fled into the desert found the ascetic way an acceptable substitute for the spiritual heroism required during the days of persecution. . . . They transformed the spirit of martyrdom into the final full commitment to God and the ascetic imitation of Christ . . . the monks assumed a three-fold vow: poverty, chastity and obedience.⁷

Those that chose monasticism refused the paradigms of the state church and found in monasticism some aspects of the paradigm of the Cross. However, in examining the motives and fruit found in reports of this monasticism, many missed some of the vital aspects of the paradigm of the Cross, as mentioned above.

Bishop Basil the Great was an example of a Christian who stayed within the state church but showed the courage to follow the paradigm of the Cross even in his reply to threats of confiscation of his goods, exile, torture, and even death. He was not asked to deny His faith in Christ; he was asked to remain subdued and not speak out against Arianism during a visit from the Emperor:

All that I have that you can confiscate are these rags and a few books. Nor can you exile me, for wherever you send me, I shall be God’s guest. As to tortures you should know that my body is already dead in Christ. And death would be a great boon to me, leading me sooner to God.

When he was told that no one had ever spoken like thus, Basil answered, “Perhaps that is because you have never met a true bishop.”⁸

Many modern Christians escape from the “world” or established churches by joining or forming a kind of Christian “ghetto” or exclusive group. The challenge for us is to be truly like Jesus, Who lived out the paradigm of the Cross in the middle of a society filled with those dedicated to other paradigms. Each local church needs to first of all accept the vital need to give priority to learn to truly become like Jesus and to be set free from the influence of all other paradigms. Following that, it is necessary to search out all the ways that being conformed to His death can be applied to our individual and corporate lives as Christians in our present society.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

⁵Bruce L. Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 133.

⁶Gonzales, 136-7.

⁷Shelly, *Church History in Plain Language*, 134.

⁸ Gonzales, 185.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)