

Chronology of the Falling Away

1st Century to the Council of Nicaea – Louis Garbi

"For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

"Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." (Acts 20:29-30)

A.D.

49-100

The falling away from Christ can be identified with these characteristics: Religious systems associated with Jesus Christ mingling with Judaism, Gnosticism, philosophies of men, and false apostles. A love of power over others prevailed.

100-117

Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch, made a distinction between bishops and presbytery (elders). He upheld the idea that the bishop was the only one who had the right to baptize. He reminds one of Diotrophese (III John) when he wrote; "Do follow your bishop, as Jesus followed the Father."¹ Historically he would be described as a monarchical bishop (one who solely rules as an overseer). This marks a rejection of the scriptural example and command of multiple overseers being appointed in a given congregation. Also, its high handed tone does not exemplify the Spirit of Christ.

135-160

Gnosticism was at its height of influence among the churches, though it lingered long afterward. By the latter half of the first century, a concept of Christ was being taught which denied His fleshly existence, saying He came in an "appearance" of flesh. It is thought one reason for its acceptance was the difficulty some had in reconciling a member of the godhead possessing our earthly form. (This probably stems from a concept that the flesh is tainted with original sin.) Also because of Gnosticism's wide and varied background, it was able to be insinuated among the unwary throughout the wide range of locations in which the gospel was received. "It took unto itself many elements from many sources, and assumed many forms. It is therefore, impossible to speak of a single type of Gnosticism."² The word comes from the same word translated as 'knowledge' in II Peter 1:5. However, the Gnostics understood this word to mean a type of knowledge mystically transferred to a believer, thus enlightening him without the need for a written testimony. It was experiential in nature. It stood opposed to receiving knowledge through the scriptures.

Gnosticism had its roots in Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia.

1. It taught that matter is evil and spirit is good. (Dualism)
2. Its reception was mystical, based on the adherent's "experience".

Gnosticism distinguished between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament.

1. The God of the O.T. created matter, therefore was called inferior.
2. The God of the N.T. is the God of light.

Gnosticism rejected that Christ had our flesh and blood. Rather they believed He had flesh of a different nature, or a phantom representation. (An idea that persists to this day.)

Gnosticism taught a limited candidacy for salvation.

1. Some were 'spiritual' and could attain 'knowledge.'
2. Some were less 'spiritual' but could attain a degree of faith.
3. Some were strictly material in their existence, therefore hopeless.

Maricon, a wealthy ship-owner, became a member of the church at Rome. He apparently considered the system's growing rigidity as a result of regarding the God of the OT the

1 Walker: A History of the Christian Church 1:9 p.47

2 Ibid. 2:1 p.54

same as the God of the NT. He considered the God of the NT a God of mercy, and the OT God an inferior being. He was excommunicated in the year 144. “Maricon's movement was probably the most dangerous of those associated with Gnosticism. He sundered Christianity from its historic background as completely as had the more speculative Gnostic theories. He denied a real incarnation, and condemned the OT and its God. All this was the more plausible because done in the name of a growing legalism. For such a protest there was much justification. His churches spread extensively, in the orient especially, and survived into the fifth century.”³

- 150-175 An early form of the so-called Apostles Creed was developed. It was deemed necessary to recite it in order to be baptized.
- 154 The prestige of the Roman bishop began to emerge. Partially due to its great wealth and size, as well as being located in Rome (the focal point in much of the world's mind), the Roman church had a domineering influence among other churches. In 154, its influence included the fact that it chose its first monarchical bishop, Anicetus.
- 154-155 The observance of the Passover (later called Easter) is noted because of a controversy over the date of the occasion. This controversy was between Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, and Anicetus, bishop of Rome.
Note: The word 'Easter' was coined later. It comes from Eastre, “a Teutonic goddess to whom sacrifice was offered in April.”⁴ Apparently the custom of some Jewish Christians to observe the Passover gradually came to be followed by many other churches to the point it became an unquestioned practice. This is contrary to Gal.4:10-11.
- 156 The Beginning of Montanism.
About this time there was a growing expectancy for the 2nd coming of Christ. The miracles of the early church were fading out. There were those who wondered if there would be a renewed flourishing of this type of power. The setting was intensified by a growing burden of human authority in the churches. Montanus, a former priest of the idol Cybele, came on the scene as a self-proclaimed instrument of the Holy Spirit, with prophetic utterances, and heralding the imminent return of Christ. There were two women associated with him, Priscilla and Maximilla. There were many attracted to this doctrine which was salted with rigorous asceticism; fasting, abstinence from meat, communal living, and celibacy. They gathered their disciples to an area in Phrygia, where they expected the New Jerusalem to be established. Though their prophecies were unfulfilled, there were many who were not discouraged and embraced this teaching. The movement continued for some time.
- 160 Monarchical Bishops were practically universal by this time. (Monarchical Bishop – a single overseer of many congregations in one city.)

3 Ibid 2:2 p.57

4 The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, “Easter” p.889

- 160-169 The “Catholic” orthodoxy began to appear.
The word 'catholic' had been a loose description to the many assemblies professing Christ. Catholic means universal. However, around this period, it began to be used to denote a particular group of churches who battled the Gnostic and Montanist movements. They shared some notable features: Strengthened authority of the monarchical bishop, metropolitan churches⁵, the use of councils to initiate homogeneous policy, a common creed, a set body of scriptures.
- 185 A 'Christian' school of theology started at Alexandria.
Alexandria had long been an important city in the Empire. It was a center of trade. It had a library of the highest reputation. It was also the crossroads for Eastern and Western thought. It had long mingled Judaism with Greek philosophy, so it was no surprise that the same was done with the message of Christ. At this time a philosopher, Pantaenus, did this very thing. It is not certain whether he originated the school of Christian thought, but Pantaenus is the one of note. The school was a private endeavor at this time and not yet officially incorporated into the churches.
- 186 Further advancement of the Roman church was indicated.
Irenaeus, a bishop of Lyons, wrote; “Every church should agree with this church.”⁶ This in reference to the Roman church. He also upheld the idea of church councils; the only way of preventing Christianity from disintegrating into a thousand sects is for all Christians to accept humbly one doctrinal authority – the decrees of the episcopal councils of the church.”⁷
- 190 The continued controversy over scheduling the date of Passover resulted in more councils held to resolve the matter.
- 189-198 Victor, bishop of Rome, excommunicated congregations who refused to conform to the council.
- 200-260 Characteristics of church hierarchy were enhanced. “. . . between 200-260, the church as an organization took on most of the constitutional features that were to characterize it throughout the period of the dominance of the Graeco-Roman culture.”⁸ Here are some features of that institutionalization:
1. By this time the clergy – laity distinction was drawn and fixed. The word 'clergy' – kleros – is translated variously in the NT as: inheritance, lot, part, or heritage. Its literal meaning is a piece broken off or bits. It came to mean a portion or an acquisition. In I Pet.5:3, there is a warning for the elders not to consider the church as an acquisition. They were not to be lords. However, in the process of time the opposite attitude and practice became accepted. The warning in Acts 20:29 went unheeded by many.
 2. Just as monarchical bishops presided over the local congregations in a city, the bishops in city churches extended authority over rural churches in the region of

⁵ (City churches which dominated other churches. The metropolitan churches visited by the apostles of Christ had special regard as keepers of the faith. In our time, this term has an entirely different connotation.)

⁶ Walker: . . . History. . . 2:5 p.63

⁷ Durant: Caesar and Christ 28:4 p.612-613

⁸ Walker: . . . History. . . 2:77 p.87

the city. Likewise, this pattern was carried even further as the bishops in major cities (Rome, Antioch, Ephesus, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Carthage) exerted influence over bishops in smaller cities. The bishops of the major cities were called Metropolitans or Archbishops. (By the 4th century the development was more complete with Metropolitans taking the title of Patriarch.) During this period (200-260) there were four layers in the church's structure: laity, country bishops, city bishops, and Archbishops. There was also a substrata of clergy: presbyters, deacons, sub-deacons, acolytes (altar boys) exorcists, readers and janitors (from Janus, the doorkeeper god, they made sure that only the faithful could be included into certain parts of the assembly). This description was given given by Eusebius of the Roman church in 251.⁹ The appointment of the "lower clergy" was in the hands of the bishop. The appointment of the bishop was by the presbytery with the approval of a bishop from another city. By 325, it was decreed at the council of Nicaea that a bishop could only be approved by an Archbishop.

3. Other items hierarchical power are to be found in this time period.
 - (a) Kalistos, bishop of Rome (217-222), issued a statement to the effect that he would personally absolve sins upon due repentance.
 - (b) Cyprian, (200-258) a bishop of Carthage, made such declarations as these;
 - i. "Ye ought to know that the bishop is in the church and the church is in the bishop, and if anyone be not with the bishop, that he is not in the church."¹⁰
 - ii. Rome, ". . .the chief church whence priestly unity takes its source."¹¹

200-260

Mystery religions and their influence.

In the latter part of the 2nd century and in the 3rd century much of the Roman Empire was given over to mystery religions. These were ancient pagan beliefs such as the worship of Demeter & Persephone, Cybele, Isis, Dionysus, and Mithras. The word 'mystery' used in association with these religions meant something hidden or kept secret, rather than something unfathomable. It was a secret kept within the circle of the initiated. Their celebrations and rituals were kept hidden from outsiders. They placed a great deal of emphasis on symbolic ceremonies. It stimulated fervor through impressing the senses, teaching a communion with their gods. "The mysteries. . .appear to have been originally an autumn festival of plowing and sowing. . .The . . .initiates broke their fast by participating in a holy communion in memory of Demeter. . .What mystic ritual was then performed we do not know; the secret well kept through antiquity, under the penalty of death. . . Very probably the theme was the rape of Persephone by Pluto, the sorrowful wandering of Demeter, the return of the maiden to earth, and the revelation of agriculture to Attica. . .The summary of the ceremony was a mystic marriage of a priest representing Zeus, with a priestess impersonating Demeter. . .The worshipers were then led by dim torch light into dark subterranean caverns symbolizing Hades, and again to an upper chamber brilliant with light, representing, it appears, the abode of the blessed. . .they were now shown, in solemn exaltation, the holy objects, relics, or icons that till that moment

⁹ Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History book 6, section 43

¹⁰ Walker: . . . History. . .2:7 p.70

¹¹ Ibid. 2:7 p.71

had been concealed. . .”¹²

The mystery trend made its way into the catholic system. It was absorbed because of the mindset of the general population. There were numerous converts who retained their backgrounds enough that the system reflected it. It was also used to attract new converts. “And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”(Rev.17:5)

Noted Developments:

1. The church was regarded as the keeper of life giving mysteries superintended by the clergy.
2. There was a systematic initiation for those entering in through baptism:
 - (a) a formal renunciation of one's past life
 - (b) a recitation of the creed
 - (c) immersion three times (one per each of the godhead)
 - (d) a taste of milk and honey to express the new life
 - (e) anointing with oil
 - (f) laying on of hands
 - (g) godparents (from the cult of Isis)
3. The Lord's Supper was seen as a sacrifice requiring a “priest” to officiate
4. All were barred from being present at a baptism or the Lord's Supper except the converted or candidates for conversion.
5. The creed and Lord's Prayer were kept secret.
6. Ritual fasting was practiced on Wednesdays and Fridays, and 40 hours before the Easter (a prelude to Lent).
7. Martyrs were commemorated in the Lord's Supper on the anniversary of their deaths.
8. The relics of the martyrs were held in reverence.

During the bracket of time covered so far (49-260), persecutions beset those wearing the name of Christ. The pagan world largely viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism. When Nero persecuted Christians in 64 AD, the distinction became more apparent. From about 68 it was a general policy to consider Christianity as criminal activity. There were fluctuating degrees of antagonism and easement. The Emperor Domitian was officially addressed “our Lord and God.” He required his image to be worshiped. John was exiled to Patmos during Domitian's reign. Emperors Trajan (98-117) and Hadrian (117-138), while not condoning Christianity, made concessions to ease the terror. Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher Emperor, persecuted Christians in his belief that The Empire needed to return to the old gods and principles. Disease brought in from previous conquests in the East, in addition to the pressures from the Germanic people (trying to recover territory taken by the Empire) was blamed on Christianity. Treason (a failure to worship the Emperor) and a failure to worship the old gods were the charges leveled at Christians. There were ugly rumors of cannibalism (a distortion of the Lord's Supper) and orgies in their underground meetings. (Ironically, the antichrist rising out of these times would bring accusations such as these against the Jews and against Christians who refused to follow the Orthodoxy, such as not allowing their babies to be baptized, saying that they needed *to believe* and be baptized.)¹³

¹² Durant: The Life of Greece 8:3 p.189

¹³ Guibert: Self & Society in Medieval France 3:17 p.212-214

Some persecutions of note:

1. 202 – Severus persecuted harshly in Carthage & Egypt.
2. 211-217 – Caracalla persecuted in North Africa
3. 235-238 – Maximinus put forth an edict against Christianity. It was most severe in Asia Minor and Palestine.
4. 248 – The 1000th anniversary of Rome. The Empire's troubles were blamed on Christianity.
5. Decius instigated the “. . . first universal and systematic persecution of Christianity.”¹⁴
6. 251-253 – Gallus persecuted, but was somewhat milder.
7. 257-259 – Valerian was harsher than Decius in his persecutions.

260-303 At the beginning of this period, Gallienus (260-268) dropped the efforts of his father, Valerian. Property was restored and Christianity was tolerated. This was not by any decree. The pagan Empire just backed away for awhile. This lasted forty three years, during which time Christianity enjoyed extensive growth.

303-312 This marks the last time a major effort was raised by the Empire to destroy Christianity. It was perceived as a political threat.

In 284, Diocletian became Emperor. In 285, he appointed Maximian to rule jointly with him. They had the title of Augustus. In 293, he chose two more rulers: Constantius, Chlorus, and Galerius. They bore the title of Caesar. Thus Diocletian partitioned the Empire into fourths for more efficient administration. Diocletian was considered a very capable ruler. He evidently recognized the highly organized hierarchy of the orthodoxy as a power that had considerable influence, thus a threat to the existing government. It had an infrastructure widespread and beyond his control. “Two courses lay open for a vigorous ruler, either to force it into submission and break its power, or enter into alliance. . .”¹⁵

In February, 303, he set forth three edicts wherein church buildings were ordered to be destroyed, books burned and clergy imprisoned and forced to abdicate by torture. A fourth edict in 304 required all Christians to sacrifice to the Roman gods. The attack was fierce. Christians were tortured to coerce them. It was so terrible that many pagans sought to protect them. Constantius Chlorus, whose sector was that of Gaul, Spain, and Britain, was mild in carrying out the edicts. Upon the resignation of Diocletian and Maximian, Chlorus and Galerius ascended to the Augustii while Severus and Maximinus Daia became Caesars. Constantius Chlorus died in 306 and his army hailed his son, Constantine, as Emperor. Which he accepted. Soon afterward the son of Maximian, Maxentius overthrew Severus. Licinius, in the favor of Galerius, also took a portion of rule over the former territories of Severus. Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius issued **an edict of toleration (April 311)**. However this did not end the persecution as Daia renewed it in Asia and Egypt. Maxentius was also in league with Daia, though he limited his efforts to encouraging paganism rather than persecuting. A power struggle arose with Maxentius and Daia upholding paganism vs. Constantine and Licinius holding favor with the Orthodoxy. (Galerius died in May, 311.) In the ensuing conflict, Constantine met “. . . face to face with Maxentius at Saxa Rubra, a little to the north of Rome, with the Mulvian bridge across the river between his foes

14 Walker: . . . History. . . 2:10 p. 86

15 Ibid. 2:19 p.108

and the city. There on October 28, 312, occurred one of the decisive struggles in history in which Maxentius lost the battle and his life. The West was Constantine's. The Christian God, he believed, had given him the victory. . . ”¹⁶

312-313 **The edict of Milan** was produced by Constantine and Licinius. (The date is approximate, some sources say one thing and some say another.) This edict was not of toleration, rather it was a grant for Christianity to be on par with every other sanctioned worship throughout the Empire. In fact it was given a marked favor that that eventually led to the suppression of other religions.

“ . . . we had given orders, that each one, and the Christians among the rest, have the liberty to observe the religion of his choice, and his particular mode of worship. . . We have resolved among the first things to ordain, those matters by which reverence and worship to the Deity might be exhibited. This is how we may grant to the Christians and to all, the free choice to follow that mode of worship which they may wish. . . And this we further decree, with respect to the Christians, that the places in which they were formerly accustomed to assemble, concerning which we also write to your fidelity, in a different form, that if any persons have purchased these, either from our treasury, or from any other one, these shall restore them to the Christians, without money and without demanding any price, without any super-added value, or augmentation, without delay or hesitancy.”¹⁷

To this another ordinance was added that clarified who the Christians were “among the rest.”

“Whence it is our will, that when one shall receive this epistle, if any of those belonging to the catholic church of the Christians in the several cities or other places, are now possessed either by the Decurions (senate officials on a local level), or any others, these thou shalt cause immediately to be restored to their churches.”¹⁸

313 Licinius defeated Maximinus Daia, leaving himself and Constantine as Emperors. A new power struggle began with Licinius renewed the persecutions in the East. He was defeated by Constantine in 323.

319 The clergy was made exempt from taxes.

319 Private sacrifices by pagans were prohibited.

321 The church was granted the right to receive legacies. This marked the beginning of the great acquisitions of land that soon brought the system into ownership of one fourth to one third the land in Italy. And nearly as great elsewhere in Europe during the centuries that followed. In later times a device was implemented to receive the legacies. . . A property owner might use and enjoy as his own certain church lands on the condition that when he died, his personal property would pass on the church.)

321 Sunday work was forbidden to the people of the cities.

16 Ibid 2:19 p.110

17 Eusebius' . . . book 10, sec. 5, p.426

18 Ibid, p.248-249

From the previous information it can be seen that Constantine did much to facilitate the empowerment of the Orthodoxy. It is a consensus among historians that Constantine did not do this as a matter of devotion to God, rather it was to strengthen his power base. (He went through the conversion process near his death.) He favored the catholic system, because it was the widest and most unified among divergent approaches to the gospel. With this religion as his power base, it was to his interest to insure its unification. By his power the Orthodoxy gained in prestige and was further consolidated. Here is an illustration of his efforts to unify:

After the persecutions of Diocletian, controversy arose in N. Africa. The issue was whether Caecilian, the newly appointed bishop of Carthage, had a valid ordination. The bishop who ordained him was stigmatized because he had surrendered some copies of the scriptures during the persecution. An alternate bishop was appointed, Majorinus, and his successor was Donatus. Donatus and his group lost out on some funds from Constantine's administration; other catholic clergy received them. An issue was made leading to a synod which was to decide the matter. (It was held at public expense.) Though the church was to make the decision, Constantine presided. The Donatists lost, appealed and lost again. They refused to yield to the synod. In 316, the Emperor had their church buildings closed and their bishops banished.

- 320-325 The teachings of Arius caused problems with the unity of Constantine's power base. The Orthodox belief was that the Father and the Son were co-eternal, unified in the godhead. There were other viewpoints which held Christ to be a created being, adopted into the godhead, or created into the godhead, therefore a lesser degree of God. Arius, a presbyter of a church called Baucalis, taught the Monarchian concept of God (as opposed to the Trinitarian concept) and that Christ was a created being. Arius came into conflict with his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria (320). It became so bitter that Alexander called a synod (320-321) which condemned Arius and those with him. This backlashed as Arius drew a growing number of sympathizers. This backlash caused the catholic church's unity (the Orthodoxy) to be shaken.
- 323 Constantine defeated Licinius. He was then sole ruler of the entire Empire. His reign lasted until his death in 337. This is important because through these fourteen years his influence in the affairs of Christianity were able to extend through the entire Empire. This period of inculcating his favor would never be undone, and have ramifications far into the future.
- 325 Because the controversy between Arius and Alexander was so severe, Constantine called for a council to be held at Nicaea. This was a landmark event as it was the first general council for the entire Orthodoxy. There were 318 bishops in attendance, plus a large number of "minor clergy." Constantine himself attended and urged a solution for the unity of the church. It seems that the majority were out of touch with the issue, with Alexander and Arius having a minority of well versed supporters. This indicates that while the issue was hot, not too many understood it except for the most striking points. Athanasius was a supporter of Alexander, was heavily involved in the debate. Eusebius, a bishop of Caesarea (the historian), offered a rendition of the orthodox creed. It was orthodox in that it was based on generally accepted principles. We call it a rendition because creeds were still varied according to locale. The creed was amended according to the council's rejection of Arius' teaching, as statements were inserted to give no doubt of their Trinity theology:

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, that is of the substance of the Father; God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, both in heaven and in earth; who for us men and for our salvation, descended, was incarnate, and was made man, and suffered and rose again the third day; he ascended into heaven, and shall come to judge the living and the dead: And in the Holy Spirit. But the holy catholic and apostolic Church of God anathematizes those who affirm there was a time when the Son was not, or that he was not before he was begotten. Or that he was made of things not existing: or who say, that the Son of God was of any other substance or essence, or created, or liable to change or conversion.”¹⁹

In the end, this formula was accepted by all except three, who were exiled. In conjunction with this, all of Arius' books were to be burned, and those guilty of retaining them were to be put to death. This was the Emperor's decree in support of the council. Oddly enough, it wasn't long after the council that one of the supporters of Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, won the support of the Emperor. From this time forward the issue was up in the air, vacillating from party to party. The contenders with the highest profile were Athanasius and Arius. It was settled in 381 by a second general council held at Constantinople. The Arian party lost, and the original creed was further refined and enforced. It became a crime not to follow the orthodoxy.

Before closing on this subject, it might be well to note a few other articles (canons) that were set forth at Nicaea:

A bishop could only be constituted as such by the agreement of the other bishops in his province.

A bishop's appointment was only valid upon approval of the Metropolitan Bishop. There could only be one bishop to a city.

The deacons could not administer communion to the presbyters and bishops.

The deacons could not sit among the presbyters.²⁰

In conclusion, the council of Nicaea was a culmination of developments arising from such kernels of the heart described in the NT; many warnings dealing with the falling away, the antichrist. The shoots of such wove their way to this outcome. It makes one wonder. . . There seems to be no hint from available resources of any dissent. Perhaps it is because the very meekness of Jesus and His followers help them to avoid the pride and pomp of notoriety. The notion of actively seeking material support from civil government would have been akin to Jesus asking Peter to defend Him in Gethsemane. The matter of acquiring power is a two way street. In this case it is very evident. Constantine enjoyed the strengthened support of the Christian community, and they enjoyed the protection and augmentation of their position by the Emperor. When this happened the field became open for ambitious souls to play games with power on a vast scale; this, in the name of the meek and lowly Jesus.

“And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.” (II Pet.2:2)

19 Eusebius' . . . (Appendix – Boyle: A Historical of the Council of Nice) Sec. E, p.44

20 Ibid. Sec. E, p.55/58-59