

Fall 2016 History & Heritage — #5

(A Seasonal Catechism for the Study of Western and American Civilization)

Bishops Take the Lead — (Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; pp. 75-83)

This assertion observes the emergence of benevolent rule by bishops nearly everywhere in the churches by the second century (AD 100's)? Particularly influential were a series of epistles written by Ignatius of Antioch (Syria) affirming God's approval of the episkopos (overseer) supported by elders and deacons. Apparently, nearly everywhere one official among the ruling council became chief in order to direct relations with other churches, address heresies, preside over the Lord's Supper, etc.

School for Sinners — (Shelley; Church History; pp. 75-83)

This identity highlighting a tutorial role for the restoration of even heinous offenders was eventually embraced by the churches priding themselves on their catholicity? Such a stance was not without controversy as some in the 3rd century (200's), including Tertullian (N. Africa) and Novatian (Rome), protested leniency for murderers, adulterers, and apostates. Nonetheless, provided the offender was penitent, the more merciful approach of Cyprian (Carthage) and both Callistus and Cornelius (Rome) prevailed.

Marcion and Montanus — (Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; pp. 64-74)

These two heretics moved the early Church both to compile and to close up the New Testament canon in order to preserve the purity of Christianity's written sources? One of them went to Rome in the 2nd century, fell under the world-negating Gnostic spell, and repudiated the sacred Old Testament and its purported god of unrelieved wrath. Not long after, the other, hailing from Asia Minor and allying with prophetesses, proclaimed an ascetic holiness based upon supposed new revelations of the Paraclete.

Seduced by Philosophy — (Shelley; Church History; pp. 84-93)

This subtle deception, by the third century (AD 200's), troubled many Christians both lay and clerical, none more so than Tertullian? "What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?" asked the N. African church father, who warned of dire consequences for the integrity of Christianity if reconciliation with Hellenic thought were pursued. However, in cities like Alexandria academies arose in which respected theologians made use of pagan writings (Reason) to guide students to biblical teaching (Revelation).

Christians Suffer Persecution (Shelley; Church History in Plain Language; 75-83)

This observation indicates what "disloyal" Christians had to endure when Roman General-Emperor Decius decreed that all citizens had to sacrifice to the gods (250-51)? How many at the time were either imprisoned or martyred (bearing "witness" with one's life) is uncertain, but among them were the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem. However, those who "lapsed" under pressure and committed apostasy, no small number, became the subject of controversy when they sought reentry to the Church.