



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 11 – The Church Historian Eusebius of Caesarea

Much of what we know about the early history of Christianity after the days of the apostles has come to us through the diligent efforts of Eusebius of Caesarea (260-265 AD – 340 AD). He and his mentor Pamphilus gathered up documents from many different congregations and thus preserved the knowledge of this history for future generations. In the persecution under Diocletian and his successors Pamphilus was arrested and killed. Eusebius escaped and put together the historical records in his book, *The Church History*.

After Eusebius became the bishop of Caesarea and surrounding areas, he had less time for historical research. Eusebius lived through the last great persecution and the changes brought about by Emperor Constantine. He believed fervently that the rise of Constantine was the answer to the prayers of persecuted Christians everywhere, and that the church was on its way to greater power and influence than ever before. He did not seem to understand the dangers that threatened the church through its sudden popularity.

When Constantine went to Jerusalem for the dedication of the newly built Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Eusebius delivered a speech praising the emperor. After Constantine died in 337 AD, Eusebius wrote words of high praise for the emperor. He and most Christians with him were so thankful to God for the end of persecution that they failed to see that prosperity can be as detrimental to Christian teachings as persecution – perhaps even more so. Before Constantine's rule it was understood that the Gospel of Christ was for the poor and the rich generally rejected the Gospel. But after Constantine's rule riches and outward success were seen as proofs of God's favor.

In many respects the church started to pattern itself after the empire. The leaders of the church began to dress and act like the leaders in the empire. The liturgy of the church became more elaborate, just like the rituals of the empire. These changes seemed like improvements at the time, but pomp and ceremony and luxury are not really the signs of a healthy church. The world was influencing the church instead of the church influencing the world. During the previous time of persecution, the church had been having a more beneficial influence on the world.

Eusebius was also involved in the major doctrinal controversy of that age: the controversy as to whether the Son of God was a creation of God or not. It seems that Eusebius was not fully aware of what was at stake in this controversy. To him what was most important was the unity of the church, which was also what was most important to Emperor Constantine. Eusebius was first on one side, then on the other, and then reversed himself once more.

Since he, himself, was confused on the matter, he was unable to provide solid leadership to the church, and his confusion contributed to the confusion of others.

Questions:

1. What is the source of much of our information concerning early Christians?
2. Why did Eusebius rejoice at the triumphs of Constantine?
3. What did Eusebius fail to realize about the sudden changes in the church?
4. How did the church become more like the world in many ways?
5. Which is more dangerous for the church: poverty or prosperity?
6. In what way did Eusebius fail to provide leadership in a doctrinal controversy?
7. Is Christianity popular or persecuted in your part of the world?
8. What are the dangers when the church is persecuted?
9. What are the dangers when the church is popular?