

“THE PAULICIANS”

(As they were called by their enemies)

“They rejected all externals in religion. Baptism means only the baptism of the Spirit. The communion with the body and blood of Christ is only communion with His word and doctrine.”

(From “The History of The Christian Church” by Schaff, Vol. IV, pg.577)

One of the most gloomy and sad tasks that a true Christian ever set about to do was to read what is called "Church History." The shocking facts of how rapidly apostasy set into the framework of professing Christianity is almost beyond our belief. The specter that comes to haunt every believer in the Christ of the Bible is in the form of the question, "What ever became of that beautiful church that was born on Pentecost?" Rummaging through the endless pages of centuries of secular Church history leaves one totally frustrated to find any traces of vital living Christianity. I should not say that it is not there. Rather, I should say that "Church History" is primarily not the story of the church of Jesus Christ. It becomes the horrible story of man-made, Babylonish, pagan Church-anity. The only traces of true Christianity will be found in the lives of those who were often hunted and hounded by the bloodthirsty clerics of popery.

Edward Gibbon, in his famous work "*The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*" was so struck by the character and integrity of one class of hated and slandered Christians, who were derisively called "Paulicians" by the "Imperial Church," that he devoted a whole chapter in his third Volume to them. He indicated that they actually spanned a period of time from about 600 A.D. until the 14th century, and a few continued even as late as the 18th century (page 301 & 310). Gibbon considered them the "first reformers" and to have literally "scattered over the West the seeds of reformation" (pg. 302). The unusual thing about these reformers, and also what caused so much of their persecution, was the fact that they rejected all forms of ritualism—including water baptism and the Supper.

In doing research about this group of Christians I investigated the older standard "Church Histories" such as Mosheim, Neander and the Roman Catholic history of the Inquisition by Vacanard. From their works, along with Gibbon's, I have pieced together the story of the "Paulicians" who simply called themselves "Christians." Obviously over such a long period of time these Christians were called many different things. They also had divisions into many different groups, yet always maintained a semblance of common disgust with ritualism. They appeared stronger in certain times and seemed to disappear at times, only to reappear in different areas, especially later in the West. One thing all the historians warn about is to not believe everything the official Church said about them. For instance Hurlbut, in his very popular "*The Story Of The Christian Church*" said, "With regard to these sects and so-called heresies, one difficulty in understanding them arises from the fact that their own writings have perished; and we are dependent for our views upon those who wrote against them, and were

undoubtedly prejudiced" (page 52).

I believe, that if you are truly "born again" and disgusted with mere religion, you will find this one of the most interesting and moving stories you will ever read, especially from the realms of "Church History."

Quick Review of The Six Periods of "Church History"

Some popular Church historians divide Church History into six basic periods. Generally speaking these periods of time fall into the following categories:

1) "The Apostolic Church," from 30 A.D. - 70 A.D. This covers the birth, growth and development of the early church primarily under the leadership of the **Apostle Paul**. The destruction of Jerusalem takes place in 70 A.D. There is commonly called a "period of silence" from about 70 A.D. till 120-150A.D. and the historians often say that the church that emerges after this time is different from that of the beginning.

2) "The Persecuted Church," from 70 A.D. - 313 A.D. For well over two hundred years the church underwent spasmodic but severe persecution. The battle with pagan influences took a high toll of lives. This continued until the "Edict of Constantine" in 313 A.D. Sad to say, a form of Christendom emerged that was beginning to look very similar to pagan religion. In fact, it began to build its own form of temples and worship systems in competition with the pagan systems and temples.

3) "The Imperial Church," from 313 A.D. - 476 A.D. This covers the period of time from the edict of Constantine to the fall of Rome under the barbaric hords of Northeastern Europe. In the year 313 A.D. the Emperor Constantine issued an edict of toleration prohibiting any persecution against Christianity. It also made Christianity the favored religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine moved the capital of the Empire to Constantinople and also proclaimed it as the seat of Christianity. A great cathedral was built to mark the coronation of what was to become the Eastern Church. Rome refused to relinquish its place of leadership and both the empire and the Church were divided into its Eastern and Western schisms. During this time the world became "Christian" by the sword and force. The mixture of Church with the State was finalized. The fullest development of the clerical, hierarchical system was adopted. The Bishop of Rome became the prime ruler of "The Church."

4) "The Medieval Church," from 476 A.D. - 1453 A.D. This is the longest span of Church history and the darkest. It is also commonly called "the Dark Ages." The barbaric hords of Northern Europe adopted Christianity as Christianity adopted the pagan customs. During this time Papal power increased to its maximum. The separation of the Eastern Catholic Church was firmly set. There was also the rise of the great Mohammedan power. The Crusades took place to counteract it. It is admitted by all that much corruption came into Christianity. Towards the end of this period of time the Roman Catholic Church began to formulate the systems of its inquisitions of infamy.

5) "The Reformed Church," from 1453 A.D. - 1648 A.D. This encompasses that

period of time known as the "Reformation," or the emergence of the major Protestant groups. It moved through Germany, France, Switzerland, England and Scotland. Its wellknown leaders were Wicliffe, Tyndale, Luther, Zwingly, Calvin, Knox, etc. It was marked primarily by a return of many to the authority of the Bible over religious traditionalism.

6) What is sometimes called "The Modern Church" emerged from about 1648 and has continued until the present. This started out as further revival of Biblical purity but ends in liberal rationalism. The Puritan movement of England spread to America and was followed by a sweeping Wesleyan revival on both continents and left deep influence upon which the future society was to build. However, German rationalism began to emerge after the French revolution and it rapidly overtook, with its liberalism and social gospel, the influence of the earlier Reformation. Last, there was a veritable spasm of cults and divisive sects that appeared in America and in time have spread their influence over the world.

On the backdrop of this history we will explore the emergence of those called "the Paulicians." We shall trace what is known of their history, doctrine and persecution throughout the "Dark Ages." I will be quoting extensively from three of these "Histories."

THE ORIGIN AND DOCTRINE OF THE PAULICIANS,

Gibbon's Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire, Vol. III, Pages 302-305.

"Under the grandson of Heraclius, in the neighborhood of Samosata, more famous for the birth of Lucian than for the title of a Syrian kingdom, a reformer arose, esteemed by the *Paulicians* as the chosen messenger of truth. In his humble dwelling of Mananalis, Constantine entertained a deacon who returned from Syrian captivity, and received the inestimable gift of the New Testament, which was already concealed from the vulgar by the prudence of the Greek, and perhaps of the Gnostic, clergy. These books became the measure of his studies and the rule of his faith; and the Catholics, who dispute his interpretation, acknowledge that his text was genuine and sincere. But he attached himself with peculiar devotion to the writings and character of St. Paul: the name of the Paulicians is derived by their enemies from some unknown and domestic teacher; but I am confident that they gloried in their affinity to the apostle of the Gentiles."

"In the Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul his faithful follower investigated the creed of primitive Christianity; and, whatever might be the success, a Protestant reader will applaud the spirit of inquiry."

"The objects which had been transformed by the magic of superstition appeared to the eyes of the Paulicians in their genuine and naked colors. An image made without hands was the common workmanship of a mortal artist, to whose skill alone the wood and canvas must be indebted for their merit or value. The miraculous relics were a heap

of bones and ashes, destitute of life or virtue, or of relation, perhaps, with the person to whom they were ascribed. The true and vivifying cross was a piece of sound or rotten timber; the body and blood of Christ, a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, the gifts of nature and the symbols of grace. The mother of God was degraded from her celestial honors and immaculate virginity; and the saints and angels were no longer solicited to exercise the laborious office of mediation in heaven and ministry on earth. In practice, or at least in the theory, of the sacraments, the Paulicians were inclined to abolish all visible objects of worship, and the words of the Gospel were, in their judgment, the baptism and communion of the faithful."

"The Paulician teachers were distinguished only by their Scriptural names, by the modest title of Fellow-pilgrims, by the austerity of their lives, their zeal or knowledge, and the credit of some extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. But they were incapable of desiring, or at least of obtaining, the wealth and honors of the Catholic prelacy: such anti-Christian pride they bitterly censured...The new sect was loosely spread over the provinces of Asia Minor to the westward of the Euphrates; six of their principle congregations represented the churches to which Paul had addressed his epistles.

MORE ABOUT THEIR DOCTRINE AND LIFE,
Neander's Church History, Vol. III, Pages 263-287

"They were for restoring the life and manners of the church to apostolic simplicity. They maintained that by the multiplication of the external rites and ceremonies in the dominant church, the true life of religion declined. They combated the inclination to rely on the magical effects of external forms, particularly the sacraments. Indeed, they went so far on this side as wholly to reject the outward celebration of the sacraments. They maintained that it was by no means Christ's intention to institute the baptism by water as a perpetual ordinance, but by baptism he meant only the baptism of the Spirit, for by his teaching he communicated himself, as the living water, for the thorough cleansing of the entire human nature. So too they held, that the eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood of Christ consisted simply in the coming into vital union with him through his doctrines, his word, which were his true flesh and blood. It was not sensible bread and sensible wine, but his words, which were to be the same for the soul that bread and wine are for the body, which he designated as his flesh and blood."

"They undoubtedly considered the confounding together of Christian, Jewish and political elements as the cause of the corruptions of the dominant church; they were desirous of bringing back the simplicity of the Apostolic church; hence they styled themselves the Catholic church, Christians, as contradistinguished from the professors of the Roman state religion. They strove to follow the pattern of apostolic simplicity...and carefully avoided everything that approached to a resemblance of Jewish or pagan rites. Hence they never called their places of assembly temples which suggested the image of Jewish or pagan temples...They recognized it as belonging to

the peculiar essence of Christianity, that it aimed to establish a higher fellowship of the life among men of all ranks and classes, tolerating no such distinctions as the existing ones between clergy or priests and laity. They had among them, it is true, persons who administered ecclesiastical offices, but these like the rest were to be looked upon as members of the communities. They were distinguished from others neither by dress, nor by any other outward mark."

"It is obvious to remark however, that little reliance can be placed on such accusations coming from the mouths of excited adversaries. Such bad reports concerning the religious meetings of sects accounted heretical are to be met with, in every age of the church...Certain it is, that the Paulician doctrine, as a whole, not only required, but were calculated to foster, a spirit of sober and strict morality."

"They gave special weight to the authority of the apostle Paul: and his epistles must have been considered by them as the main sources of the knowledge of Christian doctrines. ...The earlier persecutions of the Paulician sect had promoted its spread; had tended, in particular, to further its extension beyond the limits of the East Roman empire, into the districts where it met with a favorable reception from the most formidable enemies of that empire, the Saracens; and the same was the result, when these persecutions were revived and pushed to a more violent extreme, by the fanatical zeal of the empress Theodora, in propagating the doctrines of the church. Military officers were sent at the districts of Armenia, to extirpate the Paulicians; and multitudes were hung, beheaded, drowned, and their property confiscated. The number of the victims to this outrage is reckoned at not less than a hundred thousand."

FROM THE MOUTH OF THEIR PERSECUTORS

THE INQUISITION, A Critical And Historical Study Of The Coercive Power Of The Church, by E. Vacandard, Translated from the Second Edition by Bertrand L. Conway, C.S.P., First edition, Feb., 1908, The Paulist Press, New York, N.Y., Nihil Obstat: Thomas J. Shahan, S.T.D., Imprimature: John M. Farley, D.D., Archbishop of New York, Pages 50-55.

(Perhaps thinking that anyone would justify persecuting these people if they only knew what these people were propagating against the Church of Rome, the perpetrators of the awful slaughter announced for the world to hear what it was that these Paulicians said and believed directly against "The Church.")

"The Catharan (the "pure" ones – another name for the Paulicians, much like the "Puritans" who came to America) or Albigensian heresy – its anti-Catholic and anti-social character. While Popes Alexander III, Lucius III, and Innocent III, were adopting such vigorous measures, the Catharan heresy by its rapid increase caused widespread alarm throughout Christendom. Let us endeavor to obtain some insight into its character, before we describe the Inquisition, which was designed to destroy it. The dominant heresy of the period was the Albigensian or Catharan heresy; it was related to Oriental Manicheism through the Paulicians...In the tenth century, the Empress Theodora, who detested the Paulicians, had one hundred thousand of them massacred;

the Emperor Alexis Comnenus (about 1118), persecuted the Bogomiles in like manner. Many, therefore, of both sects went to western Europe, where they finally settled, and began to spread.”

“Catharism was chiefly a negative heresy; it denied the doctrines, hierarchy and worship of the Catholic Church, as well as the essential rights of the State.

“These neo-Manicheans denied that the Roman Church represented the Church of Christ. The Popes were not the successors of St. Peter, but rather the successors of Constantine. St. Peter never came to Rome. The relics which were venerated in the Constantinian basilica, were the bones of someone who died in the third century; they were not relics of the Prince of the Apostles. Constantine unfortunately sanctioned this fraud, by conferring upon the Roman pontiff an immense domain, together with the prestige that accompanies temporal authority. How could anyone recognize under the insignia, the purple mantle, and the crown of the successors of St. Sylvester, a disciple of Jesus Christ? Christ had no place where to lay His head, whereas the Popes lived in a palace! Christ rebuked worldly dominion, while the Popes claimed it! What had the Roman curia with its thirst for riches and honors in common with the gospel of Christ? What were these archbishops, primates, cardinals, archdeacons, monks, canons, Dominicans, and Friars Minor but the Pharisees of old! The priests placed heavy burdens upon the faithful people, and they themselves did not touch them with the tips of their fingers; they received tithes from the fields and flocks; they ran after the heritage of widows; all practices which Christ condemned in the Pharisees.

“And yet, withal, they dared persecute humble souls who, by their pure life, tried to realize the perfect idea proposed by Christ! These persecutors were not the true disciples of Jesus. The Roman Church was the woman of the Apocalypse, drunk with the blood of the saints, and the Pope was Antichrist.

“The sacraments of the Church were a mere figment of the imagination...

“Baptism of water was to them an empty ceremony, as valueless as the baptism of John...the Holy Spirit, by Whom alone the soul is purified from sin...

“It was preposterous to imagine that Christ wishes to change bread and wine into His Body in the Eucharist. The Cathari considered transubstantiation as the worst of abominations...They all agreed in denouncing Catholics for daring to claim that they really partook of the Body of Christ, as if Christ could enter a man’s stomach, to say nothing worse; or as if Christ would expose Himself to be devoured by rats and mice.

“The Cathari, denying the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, rejected the sacrifice of the Mass. God, according to them, repudiated all sacrifices. Did He not teach us through His prophet Osee: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’

“They did not worship in an immense building called a church—a word which should be applied exclusively to the assembly of the saints.

“The Cathari, in their hatred of Catholic piety, railed in the most abusive

language against the veneration of images, and especially of the cross. The images and statues of the saints were to them nothing but idols, which ought to be destroyed. The cross on which Jesus died should be hated rather than revered."

(Thus the Inquisitors of Rome thought themselves to be justified in the horrible persecution of these Christians. And I, for one, believe everything that was stated here!)

THEIR CONTINUED PRESENCE IN THE WEST,
Neander's Church History, Vol. III, Pages 556, 589 & 600

"Thus the Paulicians and other kindred sects though occasionally suppressed continually sprung up anew in Armenia till the middle of the eleventh century; and from this point they spread abroad into other regions, particularly the adjacent provinces of the Roman empire, partly from compulsion and to escape the violence of persecution and partly from the desire of multiplying converts to their doctrines.

"As they rejected outward baptism, so they seem also to have rejected altogether the outward celebration of the Lord's supper; probably understanding the Lord's supper spiritually and symbolically of the communion with Christ, as the bread of life that came down from heaven.

"Though by means of those sects which came from the East, many errors were propagated among the laity, yet their influence was in some respects advantageous. They awakened in the ignorant and uninstructed people, who had been misled by incompetent priests to place the essence of religion in a round of ceremonies, a more lively interest in spiritual concerns,--called up in them the idea of a divine life, presented religion to them more as a matter of inward experience, and perhaps too, since this was the peculiar bent of the Paulicians, made them better acquainted with the Scriptures; for there can be little doubt that by means of the Paulicians, translations of particular portions of Scripture were already circulated among the laity. And when the laity thus awoken, spoke from their own religious experience, when in the attitude of polemics, and combating the additions foreign to Bible Christianity in the doctrine of the church, they were able to bring forward their arguments from the teachings of Christ and the apostles, it is easy to see, how superior they would prove in disputation to the ignorant and incompetent clergy. Men could not fail to be struck with admiration, at seeing uneducated, ignorant people after they had received such doctrines able to discourse with great fluency on religious things and even put to silence the regular ecclesiastics."

CONCLUDING HISTORY OF THE PAULICIANS,
Gibbon's Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire, Vol. III, Pages 310 & 312.

"Three different roads might introduce the Paulicians into the heart of Europe... Under the Byzantine standard the Paulicians were often transported to the Greek provinces of Italy and Sicily: in peace and war they freely conversed with strangers and

natives, and their opinions were silently propagated in Rome, Milan, and the kingdoms beyond the Alps. It was soon discovered that many thousand Catholics of every rank, and of either sex, had embraced Manichaeian heresy; and the flames which consumed twelve canons of Orleans was the first act and signal of persecution.

“The visible assemblies of the Paulicians, or Albigeois, were extirpated by fire and sword; and the bleeding remnant escaped by flight, concealment, or Catholic conformity. But the invincible spirit which they had kindled still lived and breathed in the western world. In the state, in the church, and even in the cloister, a latent succession was preserved of the disciples of St. Paul, who protested against the tyranny of Rome, embraced the Bible as the rule of faith, and purified their creed from all the visions of the Gnostic theology.

“A philosopher, who calculates the degree of their merit and the value of their reformation, will prudently ask from what articles of faith, above or against our reason, they have enfranchised the Christians; for such enfranchisement is doubtless a benefit so far as it may be compatible with truth and piety. After a fair discussion we shall rather be surprised by the timidity than scandalized by the freedom of our first reformers.

“The modern Paulicians (at the time Gibbon is writing) have lost all memory of their origin; and their religion is disgraced by the worship of the cross, and practice of bloody sacrifice, which some captives have imported from the wilds of Tartary.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By Jack W. Langford

It is sad that the last generation of the Paulicians did not realize and appreciate the precious truths that their forefathers had died for. This often happens. The modern Quakers have very little appreciation of the struggles and teaching of their early beginnings. The modern Methodists have no idea whatsoever of what John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield really believed and practiced.

One thing is clear, each and every generation of Christians must make the truths of Jesus Christ their very own! The historic evidence that many generations of believers realized the distinctive ministry of Paul, and “followed him as he followed Christ” (I Cor. 11:1), and came to practice true Christianity in their times, is spiritually reinvigorating to my soul. It helps me to realize that in serving Christ, no matter how dark and gloomy the hour, it will be worth it all, when we meet Him face to face.