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THE RELATION OF INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS
TO THE SPIRITUAL ADVANCEMENT
OF THE EARLY CHURCH

By

John Henry Schlosser
A.B., Greenville College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION	2
A. The Subject	2
1. Stated	2
2. Justified	4
3. Delimited	7
B. The Sources	9
C. The Method of Procedure	10
 CHAPTER II - THE DEVELOPMENT OF SACRAMENTAL INSTITU- TIONS AND THEIR PLACE IN THE EARLY CHURCH	12
A. Baptism	12
1. Origin and Primitive Significance	12
2. The Development of the Roman View	17
B. The Lord's Supper	20
1. Origin and Primitive Significance	20
2. The Development of the Roman View	23
C. Summary and Conclusion	26
 CHAPTER III - THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOGMATIC FORMULATIONS AND THEIR PLACE IN THE EARLY CHURCH ..	29
A. Light from the New Testament	29
B. The Rule of Faith	32
C. The Roman Form and the Apostles' Creed	35
D. The Nicene Creed	36
E. Summary and Conclusion	40
 CHAPTER IV - THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL DISCIPLINE AND ITS PLACE IN THE EARLY CHURCH	45
A. The Moral Authority of Jesus	45
B. Discipline in the New Testament Church	48
C. Moral Discipline in the Patristic and Ante- Nicene Age	50
D. Morality in the Nicene Age	57
E. Summary and Conclusion	59
 CHAPTER V - GENERAL CONCLUSION	63
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	74

22732

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A. The Subject

1. Stated

When in the year 50 A.D. the leaders of the rapidly growing Christian church met together in Jerusalem for the first ecumenical council, they found themselves confronted by issues testing the very basis of their faith and the organic solidarity of the new community. From dynamic Antioch the Gospel had spread out into the Roman Empire, and at once the question arose: Must Gentile believers be required to conform to Jewish ceremonial and legal regulations in order to be recognized as Christian brethren? The question, referred to Jerusalem, was settled at least temporarily by a compromise which, though it still retained a few of those requirements which seemed most vital to the Judaizing party, marked a great victory for the cause of Christian freedom. A new era had begun, for in this dramatic episode the church came to know that its parish was the

world, and that its Gospel was for all mankind.¹

This bit of early church history is particularly interesting because it represents the opening round of that constantly recurring conflict which Christianity has had to face in the relation between the exercise of institutional authority and the liberty of the Christian man. This thesis proposes a study of the development of institutional authority in the early church and the relation of the exercise of that authority to the advancement of her spiritual life. Christian churches everywhere establish certain standards in their worship, their doctrine, their ethics, etc., to which they require their members to conform. How much does external conformity to these standards by any person contribute to his spiritual growth? and, from the corporate aspect, to what extent does such insitutional regulation advance the spiritual life of the church? Specifically, what light may be thrown upon this problem by the history of the early church? These are the questions which have

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1. There had been, of course, events which prepared the way for this decision, notably the conversion of Cornelius and his household under the ministry of Peter. When Peter explained his fellowship with the Gentiles on that occasion and the gift of the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised men, the Jewish Christians "held their peace and glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life". Acts 11:18.

occasioned the present thesis.

2. Justified

The justification of this study lies in the fact that today, perhaps more than ever before, the church as an organization is being called upon to justify her very existence. The needs of the hour plus the critical spirit of inquiry among men demand of the church that she have clearly in mind what her goals are and by what means they may be attained. Every doctrine and practice in life and worship is faced with the constant challenge: Is this basic or superficial, primary or secondary? These questions are being asked not only by the unfriendly who criticize the church from without, but also by those who are the church's most loyal supporters but who at the same time long to see her accomplishing more effectively her God-appointed task.

The last two centuries have witnessed a growing revolt against constituted authority of every kind. Is this movement as it appears in the declining authority of the church to be regarded as a sign of progress or retrogression? Has it contributed to or detracted from the best interests of the Body of Christ? The answer of the Roman Catholic to such a question would be dogmatic. Regarding, as he does, the authority of the Pope and the Roman Church as infallible, he would

doubtless consider any lessening of regard for that authority as fatal to the spiritual lives of the persons concerned. The solution of the problem is for the Protestant far less simple since he cannot equate the Body of Christ with any single visible institution. For him the secret of spiritual advancement lies, not necessarily in the strengthening of the authority of the institution, but in the binding of the heart of the believer to his Master. Accordingly, his question will be: To what extent do human institutions serve this end?

The problem of this thesis takes on added significance in the light of the current ecumenical movement, as that movement represents among the agencies of Protestant Christianity a growing consciousness of common objectives and a search for the most effective means of implementing the faith through united action. The great world conferences of this century have shown that the points of division between Protestant denominations are largely those of institutional traditions and authority. This writer does not regard the uniform levelling of all denominational differences as either desirable or likely; far less does this thesis propose to offer a ready-made plan for the union of Protestantism. Yet a historical study of the chief features of institutional requirements in their relation to the spiritual advancement of the early church should prove to be of

value for the understanding of the ecumenical problem.

The evaluation of institutional standards is a subject more vital to no one than to the foreign missionary, for in the extension of the faith to new localities and among peoples hitherto unreached by the Gospel, traditional standards and practices are seen in a new perspective. Those features of denominational doctrine and practice which reflect strongly the controversies of Western church history or the reaction against abuses of the Western past lose a great deal of their importance in an Eastern setting. As an ambassador for Christ, how much Western institutional impedimenta must the missionary feel obliged to carry with him if he would establish the faith upon a firm basis in the virgin field? Are there any irreducible minima to be found for the regulation of life, doctrine, and worship? Would not a study of the development and contribution of institutional standards in the early church be of value in suggesting principles for the building of standards indigenous to the missionary countries involved?

These considerations would seem to be ample justification for the present study. Indeed, the question would appear to be not so much one of whether the subject is worthy of a thesis as whether a thesis can hope to be worthy of the subject.

3. Delimited

In its broader aspects the exercise of institutional authority by the church might be taken to include every form of tradition or regulation to which a person must conform if he is to be recognized as a legitimate member sharing in the life of the communion concerned. For the purposes of this study, however, the subject of the exercise of authority has been limited in two respects: topically, and in the time span covered. First, three chief types of institutional standards through which the church has characteristically exercised its authority have been selected for consideration: namely, sacramental institutions, dogmatic formulations, and moral discipline. In the second respect, these forms of authority will be considered in their historical development from the time of Christ to the fourth century A.D. More than one reason has led to the limitation of the present study to this historical period. First of all, this period is important because it covers the rise of Christianity. All branches of Christendom trace their ancestry to the church of these early centuries. No movement can be fully understood without regard for its origin. This is especially true of Christianity, which glories in its Founder and professes to be true to the initiating impulses of the primitive church. If the institutional standards of the Christian church are to be

understood and evaluated, they must be seen first of all in their original setting and exercise. Then, too, the church of this age is particularly noteworthy for its achievements. From the most humble beginning among a handful of poor folk in a remote and insignificant portion of the Roman Empire the church grew until within three hundred years it was the most powerful organized religious force in the world, so influential that Constantine could see in it the strongest hope for the unification of his realm and grant it official patronage for that reason.¹ The rapid extension of the church in both numbers and influence appears the more remarkable when it is remembered that this was achieved in spite of the bitterest attacks by Judaism, pagan philosophy, and heresy, as well as under the cruel persecutions of a ruthless state. Its survival and growth under these conditions attest the remarkable spiritual vitality of the early church and, hence, the importance of this particular period for consideration in this thesis.

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1. The exact proportion of Christians to pagans in the empire is a matter of considerable historical uncertainty. Gibbon's traditional estimate that one person out of twenty at the beginning of the fourth century was a Christian is much too low. Somewhere between ten and twenty percent would be nearer the correct proportion. See James Orr: *Neglected Factors in the Study of the Early Progress of Christianity*, pp. 13-91.

"No merely human religion could have stood such an ordeal of fire for three hundred years. The final victory of Christianity over Judaism and heathenism and the mightiest empire of the ancient world, a victory gained without physical force, but by the moral power of patience and perseverance, of faith and love, is one of the sublimest spectacles in history, and one of the strongest evidences of the divinity and indestructible life of our religion.... The early church of this period appears poor in earthly possessions and honors, but rich in heavenly grace, in world-conquering faith, love, and hope; unpopular, even outlawed, hated, and persecuted, yet far more vigorous and expansive than the philosophies of Greece or the empire of Rome; composed chiefly of persons of the lower social ranks, yet attracting the noblest and deepest minds of the age, and bearing in her bosom the hope of the world; as unknown, yet well-known, as dying, and behold it lives; conquering by apparent defeat, and growing on the blood of her martyrs; great in deeds, greater in sufferings, greatest in death for the honor of Christ and the benefit of generations to come."¹

Such a period of history as this gives promise of holding important lessons for the church of all ages as to the means for promoting spiritual advancement.

B. The Sources

Primary sources for the period to which this study has been limited include the New Testament, certain apocryphal and pseudepigraphic works, and the writings of the apostolic and ante-Nicene fathers. The latter include early forms of the creed.

This period has given rise to a large body of

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1. Phillip Schaff: History of the Christian Church, Volume II, pp. 8-9.

modern literature. The secondary sources which have been consulted in the preparation of this thesis will be found listed in the bibliography.

C. The Method of Procedure

The problem of this thesis calls for a historical study of each of the three afore-mentioned institutional standards, the occasion of its origin and the chief features of its development, tracing especially any observable connection between the exercise of authority and the spiritual condition of the contemporary church. This procedure should lead to an evaluation of these standards and to certain recommendations regarding the exercise of authority by the church of today.

CHAPTER II
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A study of the early church having been justified by reason of the basic importance of that era to all subsequent Christian history and by reason of the high degree of spiritual vitality manifested in those years, the forms of institutional regulation employed by the church in that period may now be considered. The controlling questions will be, To what standards or practices was a person required to conform in order to be admitted to and retained in the fellowship of the church, the "ecclesia"? And, what part did this exercise of authority play in the church's spiritual advancement?

A. Baptism

1. Origin and Primitive Significance

The first institutional requirement of the church to appear in the New Testament is that of baptism. It need hardly be argued that baptism was practiced from the earliest days of the church. The Bible and Christian tradition are unanimous on this point. Upon the great day of Pentecost, those who were convicted under the preaching of Peter inquired, "Brethren, what shall we do?". Peter replied, "Repent ye, and be baptized every

one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of sins; and ye shall receive the Holy Spirit."¹ Even earlier evidence, from the point of view of the date of the literary sources, is to be found in the epistles of Paul to the churches in Galatia, Corinth and Rome. In these passages² written scarcely a quarter of a century after Pentecost, baptism is taken for granted as an experience common to all Christians, uniting them to Christ and to one another. From a somewhat later date we have the record of the great commission of Jesus: "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."³

The form of baptism in the early church is a matter of controversy. Baptists commonly hold that the only permissible rendering of the Greek "baptizo" is "immerse". Others, while granting that immersion was probably the most generally used method, deny that aspersion or affusion are to be excluded either from the word employed or the practice of the early church. Acts 2:38; 19:5; and Galatians 3:27 refer to baptism "into

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1. Acts 2:37-38.
2. Galatians 3:27; I Corinthians 1:13-17; Romans 6:3-4.
3. Matthew 28:19; cf. Mark 16:16. Even if the authenticity of these passages be called in question, they in any case reflect a very early tradition in the church.

the name of Jesus Christ". Whether or not these suggest that the trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19 was not used from the beginning is perhaps impossible to determine. Certainly the latter came into common use at a very early date. The rise of infant baptism is also obscure. Converts from Judaism and paganism would, of course, be adults. Hence, adult baptism would be the normal procedure in the early expansion of the church.

There is considerable evidence that baptism was not entirely new either to Jews or to Gentiles at the beginning of the Christian era. Proselytes entering the Jewish faith submitted to baptism and circumcision; while various forms of water ceremonies were employed in the rites of initiation into the mystery cults of the Roman Empire. Baptism as practiced by John the Baptist, however, carried with it far more than a bare ceremonial significance. His was a "baptism of repentance unto remission of sins".¹ Persons who submitted to his baptism confessed their sins, renounced their past life, and entered upon a new one in preparation for the coming Messiah and his Kingdom. John himself regarded his baptism as merely preparatory for the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. This indeed is the chief distinction of Christian baptism; namely, that it is intimately

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1. Mark 1:4.

associated with the impartation of the Divine Life to man. Water is the Jewish symbol not only of cleansing but of the Spirit. Jesus himself draws the same association.¹ This certainly does not imply that there is any saving efficacy in the bare ceremonial, nor would it warrant a practice such as that reported of Francis Xavier who is said to have sprinkled with holy water as many heathen as came within his reach. Even in the Acts baptism is not inseparably connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the case of the Samaritan believers some days passed after their baptism before they received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the apostles' hands. Conversely, Cornelius and his household were admitted to Christian baptism only when it was evident that God had already honored their faith by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Besides specific instances such as these there is the entire teaching of the New Testament, particularly of Paul's letters to Rome and Galatia, on the subject of the conditions of salvation and fellowship with God. The arguments which Paul advances against the necessity of the Jewish ceremonial law are certainly applicable against any confidence in baptism "ex opere operato". It is the spiritual experience which exalts the rite, rather than

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1. John 3:5; 4:13-14; 7:37-39.

the mere performance of the rite which insures or causes the spiritual experience.¹

The significance of baptism in the apostolic church may be summarized in the following points:

1. It marked the termination of one life -- confession, repentance, renunciation of the past.

2. It marked the beginning of a new life of faith in and loyalty to Christ.

3. It marked the entrance of the power and Person of the Spirit into the believer.

4. It marked the entrance of the individual into the fellowship and communion of the Christian body.

Thus a symbol and a rite familiar to the society of that day were enriched with Christian meaning and became instruments in the propagation of the faith. The New Testament, so far from attaching any saving efficacy "ex opere operato" to the ceremony, continually spiritualizes the whole experience. Yet baptism is everywhere assumed as required. Baptismal regeneration need not be assumed in order to see the necessity of the rite. It is difficult to imagine that a person could have adequately met the spiritual conditions of repentance and

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1. Even those Protestant denominations which believe in baptismal regeneration would be quick to deny any magical potency in the bare rite of baptism.

faith who was at the same time unwilling to submit to the external rite of baptism. When the Christian church was a small and despised, often persecuted, sect, it was all the more necessary that attachment to it and profession of faith be clearly marked by baptism. At the same time the vivid dramatization provided by baptism would not only be likely to serve as an aid to the faith of the subject but would also be of great teaching value, emphasizing the essential spiritual facts connected with Christian regeneration.

2. The Development of the Roman View

The second century A.D. is one of the most obscure of all church history, yet from the available sources the following facts may be gathered as to the practice of baptism.¹ Baptism continued to be administered in most cases by immersion, yet, according to the "Didache"² pouring was admissable as an alternative, if less desirable, method. The trinitarian formula was in general use at this time. Baptism presupposed a certain amount of catechetical instruction in advance. Gradually the ceremony itself was elaborated from the simple

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1. Primary sources for this period are the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers.
2. A. T. Robertson: Baptism, International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, p. 387.

apostolic rite as imaginative and allegorical material was included. Rainy, describing baptism in the period 180-313 A.D., says that sometimes the rite included the following elaborate steps:

1. Preparatory catechetical instruction
2. Preparatory imposition of hands
3. Preparatory anointing
4. The communication to the subject of the form of the creed and the Lord's Prayer
5. Exorcism or renunciation, in which the candidate faced west and with a thrusting motion of his arms renounced Satan thrice.
6. Turning to the east, the candidate with outstretched hands invoked and acknowledged Christ or the trinity.
7. Baptism by immersion, pouring, or both
8. The kiss by the bishop and representatives of the faithful
9. The tasting of milk and honey by the baptized person
10. Anointing with oil
11. The imposition of hands with prayer for the Holy Spirit
12. Participation in the communion for

the first time at the great Easter celebration¹
The laying on of hands and anointing with oil were regarded as the special function of bishops. Baptism itself was commonly administered by the clergy of any rank but in emergencies might be performed even by a layman. Baptism was usually reserved for adults, yet infant baptism began to be recognized as early as the second century.

Together with the ceremonial elaboration of baptism a growing spiritual efficacy was attached to the rite itself. In the late second and third centuries according to Rainy baptism was generally regarded as

"the sacramental donation of forgiveness; therefore it is the visible epoch of forgiveness for church purposes, and the sacramental seal of it to the believer himself. No doubt actual forgiveness could not be assumed without reference to the state of mind of the candidate for baptism; for in him faith and repentance are required, and they might not be really present. Still, forgiveness of all past sins is a blessing held out to faith in baptism."²

Two opposing movements have been traced to this belief in the intrinsic efficacy of the rite of baptism. Baptist authorities say that this growth of a superstitious view of the sacrament is responsible for the rise of infant baptism. Since salvation was regarded as impossible without baptism, persons were baptized at the earliest possible

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1. Cf. Robert Rainy: The Ancient Catholic Church, pp. 233-234.
2. Ibid., p. 79.

age in order to assure their eternal safety. Desiring maximum coverage for their children, the parents took out their heavenly insurance policy at an early age. On the other hand, since baptism was thought to grant full forgiveness for all past sins, and since sins after baptism were regarded as difficult if not in some cases impossible of forgiveness, some of the church fathers urged that baptism be postponed as long as possible. So, at this opposite extreme, there appears the development of death-bed baptism. A noteworthy example of this latter practice is the emperor Constantine. Although it was he who many years before this had granted official recognition to Christianity, closing the long period of persecution, yet he deferred his own baptism until shortly before his death. Both of these movements illustrate a growing confidence in the external rite as such which tended to divorce baptism from the personal spiritual experience, the conscious crisis of repentance, faith, forgiveness, and attachment to the body of believers with which the sacrament was originally associated.

B. The Lord's Supper

1. Origin and Primitive Significance

Christians are universally familiar with the institution of the Lord's Supper as recorded in I. Cor.

11:23-25 and narrated in each of the synoptic gospels. From these passages may be gathered the following data as to that first celebration of the eucharist: At the conclusion of their meal together (either the Passover supper or the meal on the preceding evening) Jesus

1. "took the bread and cup, respectively, for use in His new rite;

2. He 'gave thanks' over them, constituting them a thank offering to God;

3. He 'blessed' them to their new and higher potency;

4. He 'gave' them to the apostles (the breaking being a requisite preliminary to distribution of the bread);

5. He bade them 'Take, eat', and 'Drink ye all of it', respectively;

6. He declared, of the bread, 'This is my body given for you', of the cup, 'This is my blood of the covenant', or, 'This is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you' 'unto remission of sins';

7. He adds the reiterated command, 'This do for my memorial'.¹

In the practice of the early church the eucharist was celebrated frequently, perhaps at every meeting

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1. H. R. Gummey: "Lord's Supper", International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume III, p. 1923.

for worship. It was commonly connected with the agape, or love-feast, a meal of social Christian fellowship as well as of the satisfaction of physical hunger. At its conclusion the eucharist was observed, the elements being provided by those who took part. Portions remaining over were sent to the poor or to members of the Christian fellowship unable to be present. Abuses of the agape appeared very early (I Corinthians 11); hence, the Lord's Supper was soon separated from that meal and made the crowning act of Christian worship on the First Day.

The significance of the Lord's Supper for the apostolic and second century church is suggested first of all in its connection with the Jewish Passover,¹ which it superseded in Christian circles. The blood of the new covenant, shed in Christ's death upon the cross, was the solemn confirmation of a new relation entered into by God with His people. Their observance of the paschal rites not only memorialized but implied their acceptance of and thanksgiving for the divine provisions for deliverance. But more than this is to be found in the early significance of the eucharist. Both in the New Testament² and in the apostolic fathers³ there appears an emphasis upon union with Christ and fellow-Christians in the observance.

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1. See I Corinthians 5:7.
2. e.g. I Corinthians 10:16-21; 11:23-31.
3. e.g. Ignatius and Justin.

In the second century "the participation of the worshippers in the body and blood of Christ ... both on their part and on God's" may be said to be the common teaching,

"but what the nature of this participation is, according to Ignatius and Justin...is a question upon which authorities will differ....A lively sense of a wonderful union to Christ, specially brought home to us in the eucharist, dominates all the language used."¹

All theological speculation aside, it is not difficult to see the great psychological value of the eucharist to the early church. It was the faith which they shared in a common Lord which gave them unity. This faith was continually reinforced by their participation in the dramatic memorial of the divine deliverance from death and the provision of life and nourishment in the mystical union of the believer with Christ.

2. The Development of the Roman View

The third and fourth centuries witness a number of changes in the observance of the eucharist. Perhaps in imitation of the mystery cults, a certain "fashion of secrecy about the specialties of the Christian faith and worship grew up which was not very rational nor very edifying".² The chief worship service, which was held on Sunday morning, was divided into two parts: the first included Scripture reading, exhortation, prayers, and

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1. Rainy, op. cit., pp. 77, 79.
2. Ibid., p. 230.

singing; the second was a closed service to which only the baptized were admitted.¹ It consisted of prayer and the Lord's Supper, which was celebrated in increasingly elaborate liturgical forms. Whereas in the primitive practice there is no indication that the validity of the sacrament depended upon the rank of the person officiating, because of the danger of schisms arising through private or unauthorized celebration, the church found it necessary by this time to restrict that privilege to those in official orders. The interpretation of the value of the sacramental elements varied widely among different individuals.

"Those who expound the ordinance sometimes explain the sacrament allegorically,-- it is a wonderful figure through which the realities are presented and brought home to Christians; sometimes dynamically,-- a special virtue to carry the blessings is imparted to the elements by the Holy Ghost; sometimes the thought is that Christ or the Logos appropriates the elements so that they are related to Him as His body is, and carry His presence and virtue in a special manner with them."²

It has been noted above that the elements were originally provided from the freewill-offerings of the worshippers. These were called "prosphorai", oblations, or "thusiai", sacrifices. By the association of the word the idea of

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1. From the words of dismissal of the unbaptized, "Congregatio missa est", the Catholic term "mass" (missa) is derived.
2. Rainy, op. cit., p. 231.

a sacrificial character in the eucharist grew up, -- this at least would seem to be a partial explanation of the origin of the "sacrifice of the mass". By the time of Chrysostom (325 A.D.) the conception of a sacrifice was well established. The officiating bishop was in all consistency designated a "priest". The development of the view of the eucharist is well expressed by the great church historian, Philip Schaff, in the following quotations.

From the close of the apostolic age until the time of Constantine (100-313 A.D.)

"the Lord's Supper was universally regarded not only as a sacrament, but also as a sacrifice, the true and eternal sacrifice of the new covenant, superseding all the provisional and typical sacrifices of the old; taking the place particularly of the Passover, or the feast of the typical redemption from Egypt. This eucharistic sacrifice, however, the ante-Nicene fathers conceived not as an unbloody repetition of the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but simply as a commemoration and renewed appropriation of that atonement, and, above all, a thank-offering of the whole church for all the favors of God in creation and redemption. Hence the current name itself -- "eucharist" -- which denoted in the first place the prayer of thanksgiving, but afterwards the whole rite."¹

In the next century, however, Schaff notes this difference:

"The tendency here as in other church relations, was to realize the spiritual through the outward and material, so as to find in the latter a definite and secure guarantee of the former. Therefore sacramental modes of speech were used with a growing tendency to assume that the outward rite carried inevitably the spiritual

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1. Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, p. 245.

benefit.....The development of the sacrificial view is the change which is more important.....The tendency to enrich and multiply the ritual with a view to impressiveness operated powerfully."¹

C. Summary and Conclusion

From the foregoing survey of the place and significance of the sacraments in the early church the following points may be drawn in conclusion:

1. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are characteristic and primitive Christian institutions, to be identified with the life and growth of the church from its earliest days.

2. That these sacraments have held a place of supreme importance in the regard of the early church is indicated by the emphasis placed upon them: baptism as the means of entrance into the church; the Lord's Supper as the supreme act of worship and Christian fellowship. Both sacraments served as powerful bonds of union in the church.

3. Though at first very simple and informal observances, the sacraments were increasingly enriched with elaborate ritual and ceremony as the years passed.

4. With the growth of heresy on the one hand and the monarchical episcopate on the other the

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1. Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 516-517.

celebration of the sacraments was increasingly restricted to fully ordained clergy.

5. The sacraments served to keep vividly before the mind of the church the central facts of Christian redemption. The pedagogical and psychological values of the sacraments can hardly be overestimated.

6. The exact spiritual value of the sacraments was often left without clear definition, especially in the early years. Yet a strong trend is noticeable in the direction of the identification of the external rite with the desired spiritual work. Towards the end of the period there appear signs of those abuses of the sacraments which have characterized the Roman Church more or less ever since; namely, the superstitious regard for the elements and the ceremonies themselves, the externalizing of religion, the neglect of the primary Biblical requirement of faith, and the attributing of saving efficacy to the sacraments "ex opere operato".

CHAPTER III

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOGMATIC FORMULATIONS
AND THEIR PLACE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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The previous chapter traced the development of the rites of baptism and the eucharist, the sacramental requirements made by the early church upon its membership. Now the rise of dogmatic standards must be considered. It will be the endeavor of this chapter to learn from the history of this ancient period what relation can be traced between requirements of credal conformity and the spiritual advancement of the church.

A. Light from the New Testament

As in the previous chapter, the New Testament is the first field of inquiry. When the Jews asked Jesus what they must do to work the works of God, Jesus replied, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom He hath sent".¹ Similarly, when the Philippian jailer inquired of the apostles, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?", they answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house".² These simple

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1. John 6:29.
2. Acts 16:31.

statements and others like them¹, although they bear little resemblance to a formal creedal requirement, indicate that some profession of faith in Jesus Christ was required of candidates for baptism. In Acts 8:37 it is recorded that Philip required of the Ethiopian eunuch a confession of faith, which he gave in these words, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God".² Perhaps this may have been the primitive baptismal confession.³

Elsewhere in the New Testament, however, there are indications of the use of an expanded creedal summary in apostolic teaching and baptismal confession. Paul speaks of obedience "from the heart to that form (pattern, example) of teaching whereunto ye were delivered".⁴ In I Corinthians 15:1-8 we read, "Now I make known unto you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you, which

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1. e.g. Romans 10:9-10 "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved; for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." I John 4:15 "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God." 5:1 "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God."
2. This verse probably did not occur in the original manuscript, yet it reflects an early tradition of great interest.
3. James Orr: The Apostles' Creed, International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume I, p. 205.
4. Romans 6:17.

also ye received, wherein also ye stand, by which also ye are saved if ye hold fast the word which I preached unto you, except ye believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to.....". In his second epistle to the same church he urges liberality in their contribution to the mother church at Jerusalem "seeing that through the proving of you by this ministration they glorify God for the obedience of your confession unto the gospel of Christ".¹ And, writing to Timothy, Paul exhorts him to "fight the good fight of the faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto thou wast called, and didst confess the good confession in the sight of many witnesses".²

These passages would seem to indicate the early oral transmission of some rudimentary form of the creed as a basis for teaching and as a requirement for public confession. The precise content of that first creed will never be known. Here and there in the New Testament³ there appear clauses which bear a strange resemblance to

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1. II Corinthians 9:13.
2. I Timothy 6:12.
3. See I Timothy 6:13; II Timothy 2:8; 4:1.

the familiar articles of the Apostles' Creed; it may, of course, be assumed that the apostles would not teach by mouth anything contrary to their written doctrines.

Rainy sums up well the origin of the creed in these words:

"Any religion existing in a cultured age -- especially one that does not stand in ancestral customs pleasing to the gods but presents itself as a doctrine of light -- must be able to say roundly what it means. When anyone came to be baptized, the question came clearly up, What does the neophyte accept?.....Some profession of faith in Christ, -- or of faith in the great name into which a man was baptized, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost -- must naturally be supposed. So far we may feel sure. If a longer or more fixed creed existed (in the first century) it must be inferred by reasoning back from later authorities."¹

B. The Rule of Faith

In the second and third centuries the church began to confront more serious problems than she had faced in her earlier years. Intellectual attacks were launched by paganism from without, while heretical sects grew up within. The various types of gnostic heresy were chief among these threats to the purity of the faith. Appeal to standards of the scriptures was not a sufficient defense for two reasons:

1. The canon of the New Testament was not yet finally agreed upon. Heretics were able to produce

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1. Rainy, op. cit., p. 73.

writings of their own for which they claimed equal authority with those which the church eventually pronounced canonical.

2. The gnostics claimed a special insight into the hidden meaning of the apostolic writings, a meaning which invariably supported their doctrines. In these emergencies the church appealed to the "Rule of Faith" or "Rule of Truth" for the substantiation of orthodoxy. This "Rule" consisted of an expansion of the baptismal confession on a trinitarian scheme, a primitive form of the creed as it was received by churches of the chief cities of the empire.¹ The apologists and church fathers -- Irenaeus, Tertullian, Novatian, Origen, and others -- make references to such a "Rule" which indicate that the leading churches were in substantial agreement as to the content of their creed, while they yet retained a freedom as to the particular form of its expression.

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1. Rainy distinguishes between the "Rule of Faith" and early forms of the creed. He says, "What ancient writers call the "Regula" may be described as a somewhat more free conception of the way in which the church regarded its faith, and of the way in which she was prepared to expound and apply it." Rainy, *op. cit.*, p. 511. "It was the common belief relating itself to the mental movement of the time, and taking ground in characteristic assertions." *Ibid.*, p. 74. This is a freer use of the term than most authorities recognize. For Irenaeus the 'Rule of Faith' is the anti-gnostic interpretation of the baptismal confession. See Adolph Harnack: *History of Dogma*, Volume II, p. 27.

The "Rule of Faith", then, served a double purpose:

1. Positively: As a summary of Christian fundamentals this early creed was used as the basis of catechetical instruction and as the baptismal confession.

"When a man asserted these articles he took Christian ground. The recognition implied or imposed upon him the state of mind called Faith. These things, being real, claimed his trust and allegiance and he acknowledged so much in his creed."¹

2. Negatively: As a defense against heresy the "Rule of Faith" was

"employed to check the license of interpretation of Scripture of....fantastic heretical speculators. The creed had originated independently of Scripture -- in the early oral teaching and preaching of the apostles; hence its value as a witness to the common faith. But it was not used to supersede Scripture; it was held to corroborate Scripture, where men by their allegorical and other perversions sought to wrest Scripture from its real sense. It was employed as a check on those who sought to allegorize away the Christian faith."²

Schaff, speaking of the growth of Catholic orthodoxy, one step in which was the development of the "Rule of Faith", says,

"To the subjective, baseless, and ever-changing speculations, dreams, and fictions of the heretics she (the church) opposed the substantial, solid realities of the divine revelation. Christian theology grew, indeed, as by inward necessity, from the demand of faith for knowledge. But heresy, gnosticism in particular, gave it a powerful impulse from without, and

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1. Rainy, op. cit., p. 74.
2. Orr: Apostles' Creed, op. cit., p. 205.

came as a fertilizing thunder-storm upon the field."¹

C. The Roman Form and the Apostles' Creed

One of the oldest forms of the creed is that of the church in Rome. Orr says that this was "certainly in use by the middle of the second century in Rome, probably a considerable time before".² As in the case of other forms, this creed was originally transmitted orally. The text below is derived from the Greek of Marcellus of Ancyra, 341 A.D.:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ His only (begotten) Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; (the life everlasting)."

That this creed is the immediate forerunner of our Apostles' Creed in its received form is self-evident. The history of the latter falls outside the scope of this study, yet for purposes of comparison the text is included at this point:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of Heaven and Earth; and in Jesus Christ His only (begotten) Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate,

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1. Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, p. 509.
2. Orr: Apostles' Creed, op. cit., p. 205.

was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen."

The creed in both these forms may be described as "a simple enumeration, in order, of the great verities which the Church was known to have held and to have handed down from the beginning -- which Scripture also taught".¹ It is not metaphysical in character, for it originated in and served the purposes of the practical necessities of Christian faith.

D. The Nicene Creed

Both in its history and its service the Nicene Creed differs notably from the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene Creed was the first dogmatic standard arrived at by a large and representative council of bishops. Christians, hitherto an oppressed and persecuted people, had now been granted legal privileges and protection by Constantine. In fact, the Council of Nicea was called by his express imperial edict, for he was concerned lest this, the most vital and aggressive religion in his empire, should itself

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1. Orr: Apostles' Creed, op. cit., p. 205.

be divided and, hence, threaten the solidarity of his realm.

The age of Nicea was one of great interest in metaphysical and theological speculation. Men were no longer content to receive the simple gospel narratives as they stand or the brief statements of the creed. They desired a satisfactory interpretation of those facts in the philosophical terms of the day. The nature of the Godhead and of the incarnation were especial fields of theological inquiry. Christianity was trying to find its intellectual ground between the polytheism of the pagan world and the unitarianism of Judaism and of Aristotelian logic.

In the middle of the third century Paul of Samosata had been deposed from his bishopric in Antioch and excommunicated for denying the essential deity of Jesus. Hereafter,

"the divinity of Christ was a universal assumption of theological thought. But God is one God. So some (the Monarchians) inferred that God the Father was incarnate in Christ, and suffered on the cross; that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost were only different and transitory revelations of the same one God: here the distinction of the Son from the Father was given up. Others (the subordinationists) held the divine Being which appeared in Christ to be a spiritual being, created indeed before the world, but yet created, and therefore subordinate to the Godhead: here the essential identity of the Son and the Father was denied. But neither solution held good as orthodox, however intelligible to the understanding. The prevailing conviction which

became even more decisively victorious was this:-- that not only the essential identity, but the distinction of the Son and the Father was reconcilable with the unity of God.^{#1}

The Arian controversy, which was the immediate occasion of the Council of Nicea, broke out in Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century. It might be called a final spasm of the theological struggles of the third century. Arius, a presbyter of the Alexandrian church, taught subordinationist views, declaring that Christ was a secondary being, higher than man yet created by God in time. Athanasius, a deacon from the same city, later a bishop for many years, upheld the trinitarian unity of the Godhead, the full deity of Christ, and the reality of the incarnation. At the Council of Nicea the Athanasian party secured the adoption of a creed which clearly condemned the monarchians and the Arians as heretical. This was, however, not enough to settle the matter finally. When the bishops returned home from Nicea the controversy was reopened and the tide of opinion and power swept back and forth with numerous political complications. Finally, in 381 A.D., the Council of Constantinople reaffirmed the trinitarian creed and the question was closed.

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1. Rudolf Sohm: Outlines of Church History, pp. 50-51.

"But for the interposition of the civil power the result would have been earlier reached: even with that interposition, and in spite of all efforts to avert the consummation, Nicene Christianity wore its opponents out by intellectual and moral strength and constancy."¹

"Arianism became extinct of itself. It had not that strength of resistance which the storms of history demand. It was the first attempt (naturally a failure) to replace the faith of Christianity by a dialectic rationalism. The Nicene doctrine of the distinction and yet identity of essence of the Father and the Son, which was then formally expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity, of the divine unity in three Persons, conquered, because it leaves the incomprehensible still incomprehensible, and reveals, while it reverently hides, the wonderful mystery of Christ's person. The divinity of Christ was of old the creed and hope of the Church. It had now merely become clearer what a marvellous riddle had been given to man to read. The mystery was shown, and confessed to be a mystery; and in mystery religion has alike its essence and its power."²

One of the most subtle dangers which the church had to meet in these early centuries was the principle of salvation through knowledge, knowledge of God, the universe, and of self. This was the soul not only of gnosticism but of ancient philosophy generally. Even such theologians as Clement of Alexandria and Origen show dangerous tendencies in this humanistic direction. The Nicene Creed rendered great service to the spiritual advancement of the church, not only by clarifying the nature of the Godhead, but by proclaiming unequivocally the doctrine of salvation by God through Christ. Sohm summarizes

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1. Rainy, op. cit., p. 354.
2. Sohm, op. cit., p. 53.

the contribution of the Nicene Creed in these significant sentences:

"The Hellenization of Christianity was successfully combated by Athanasius and the Nicene Council. A great danger lay in the fact that Christian theology at the first had begun, and was obliged to begin, by following the intellectual methods of traditional pagan philosophy. This danger was now happily overcome. While salvation through Christ was made the central point of theological thought without turning Christianity into philosophy, the subject-matter of Christianity -- that true and eternal content which brings comfort and deliverance, and which belongs to Christianity as a religion -- was comprehended as matter of science, and at the same time was set in full light as the revelation of the acts of grace wrought by God for sinful humanity. In this sense the Nicene confession was the regeneration of the Gospel, and thereby the firm foundation of the whole future development of the Church."¹

E. Summary and Conclusion

What, then, may be said by way of summary and conclusion as to the value of the exercise of creedal authority for the spiritual advancement of the church?

The first three centuries of the church's history witnessed the development of creeds from the simple baptismal confessions to the philosophical articles decreed at Nicea. This development was a natural one, occasioned by the demands of faith and knowledge on the one hand and the dangers of paganism and heresy on the other. The church of the apostolic age grew and developed by

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1. Sohm, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

virtue of the power of the Spirit. Eyewitness believers required no formal creed. But when the eyewitnesses had died and the time gap began to widen between the church and her Master's life on earth, it was to be expected that evil men and doctrines would challenge the content of Christian faith. Against this danger the church wielded the weapon of an apostolic tradition in a two-fold form, written and oral. The latter developed over a period of several centuries into our present Apostles' Creed. Simple, concise, objective, the creed was an invaluable tool for instruction, it was the common baptismal confession unifying Christians, and it served as a mighty bulwark against heresy.

The distinct service of the Nicene Creed was that in keeping with the requirements of its age it furnished the church with a statement of historic Christian orthodoxy in terms of current philosophical thought, while at the same time it carefully avoided reducing the faith to a system of dialectic rationalism. It guarded specifically against certain serious theological errors, yet it did not profess to exhaust the truth of God's infinite nature. Its value for the spiritual guidance of the church is attested by the fact of its general acceptance even today as one of the best formulations of the Christian faith.

Christianity, it must be remembered, rests upon certain objective historical facts and characteristic intellectual concepts. In preserving these, dogmatic formulations can render their greatest service. Yet, besides orthodox intellectual beliefs, there must, as well, be a contemporary faith on the part of the individual himself if his Christianity is to be either genuine or effective. A common acceptance of certain facts and their implications is essential to Christian unity, yet this is not enough, for equally essential are the vital, positive facts of Christian experience, -- not only the consciousness of sins forgiven but daily fellowship with God through the presence of the Holy Spirit -- and Christian experience is impossible of realization through mere creedal orthodoxy. The danger in the exercise of creedal authority, then, lies in its abuse, the abuse, above all, of taking the short and easy way, that of considering faith a static thing, a legal obligation the fulfillment of which is an end sufficient in itself.¹ On the contrary,

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1. That the post-Nicene church in its treatment of heretics did not escape this error is indicated by Schaff: "The punishment of heresy in the ante-Nicene church was purely ecclesiastical, and consisted in reproof, deposition, and excommunication. It had no effect on the civil status. But as soon as church and state began to be united, temporal punishments, such as confiscation of property, exile, and death, were added by the civil magistrate with the approval of the church, in imitation of the Mosaic code, but in violation of the spirit and example of Christ and the apostles." Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, p. 515.

Christian faith must be something ethical, organic, and dynamic, else it will fast become a dead letter.

CHAPTER IV
THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL DISCIPLINE
AND ITS PLACE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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The preceding two chapters have dealt with the exercise of authority in two important phases of the life of the early church, sacramental institutions and dogmatic formulations. The inquiry of the present chapter is directed to the area of moral discipline. As in the previous instances the attempt will be made to discover what relation there may be between the erection and enforcement of authoritative standards (of morality in this case) and the spiritual advancement of the church.

A. The Moral Authority of Jesus

"Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill."¹ With these now familiar words Jesus began an exposition of his teaching, comparing and contrasting his moral standards with the commandments of the Mosaic law. The effect of that great "Sermon on the Mount" upon multitudes of hearers and readers down through the history of the church has been one of marvel and astonishment, for Jesus taught -- yes, and he teaches -- "as one having

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1. Matthew 5:17.

authority and not as their scribes".¹

Doubtless the Pharisees, who were jealous for traditional Judaism, sighed with relief when they heard Jesus' affirmation of loyalty to the law. But if they expected him to justify the current ceremonial legalism they must have been very much disappointed, for, brushing aside all the minutiae of observance and prohibition, Jesus came to the heart of all morality, the impelling thought and motive behind the act. The authority which his words carried then, as they do today, was that of an appeal to something which the honest, seeking human heart instinctively recognizes as supremely important. He was not satisfied to endorse the Mosaic system as it was currently understood and practiced, nor, on the other hand, did he propose new and comprehensive categories whereby every deed might be judged good or evil. Instead, he called men to obedience to positive spiritual principles which are the absolute test of every action. Instead of merely forbidding murder and adultery he taught love and purity of heart; instead of falsehood he urged simplicity and sincerity of speech; instead of retaliation, active goodwill. The truly religious person, he taught, lives by humble trust and dependence upon God and makes the interests of the heavenly kingdom his own. Life is

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1. Matthew 7:28,29.

beautified and freed from anxiety by the knowledge of the Father's love and care; it is solemnized by the certainty of judgment. Pretence, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness are the curse of religious exercises. When the Samaritan woman asked Jesus to designate the correct place for worship, He answered by stating the more important requisite -- "in spirit and in truth". From the rich young ruler He demanded not only the outward observance of the legal code but the crucifixion of selfishness and commitment to Himself. The greatest commandments of all, He said to the inquiring lawyer, are those of perfect love for God and man. -- These are some of the high points of Jesus' moral teaching. In every case He made some great spiritual principle the test of duty. Here is no formal science of ethics. Indeed, as a rational system these standards have much against them, for they are beyond human self-achievement as well as impossible of institutional enforcement. In fact, Jesus' ethics can only be understood in the light of such words as His parable of the vine and the branches: "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; so neither can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches, He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for apart from me ye can do nothing."¹ It

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1. John 15:4-5.

is the person and moral power of Jesus Himself which has not only lent universal authority to His ethics, but has made them attainable in human life. Those who would separate His teaching from His person inevitably destroy the authority of both.

B. Discipline in the New Testament Church

In the Acts and the Epistles are found the first efforts of the new-born church to exercise disciplinary authority over its membership, to require conformity to certain standards of conduct. The first serious disciplinary issue to face the church was a question which to us may seem almost trivial: Should Gentile believers be required to submit to circumcision and the whole code of Jewish ceremonialism in order to be admitted to the Christian fellowship? This question, so easily answered in the negative today, involved a real moral issue for the persons concerned. Paul and Barnabas, just returned from a successful missionary campaign in Gentile Galatia, rehearsed to the Christian council in Jerusalem the victories of the faith and the demonstration of the power of the Spirit outside the bounds of Jewish legalism. Their testimony, supported by the advice of Peter and James, carried the day for Christian freedom. It was decided to reduce the formal requirements for

admission to a minimum of those things deemed most vital by the Jews; namely, the abstinence from blood, things strangled, fornication, and things sacrificed to idols. Thus was the absolutism of legal conformity declared officially to be a dead letter, while salvation by faith was given new wings. Christianity had broken the bonds of Jewish sectarianism; it had now recognized itself as a world religion.

In Paul's epistles to the Corinthians we read of the specific exercise of discipline by a local congregation. The case¹ was one of gross immorality. Paul commanded the church to expel the offender in order to maintain its own purity. Yet the apostle did not assume that the excommunication of sinners would in itself be sufficient to guarantee the positive spiritual advancement of the church. For the achievement of this end he relied, as did his Lord, upon spiritual principles -- yes, rather, upon the Spirit of God Himself -- to bear the fruits of the Spirit. First Corinthians 13 exalts the supreme Christian virtue, love. Other passages (for example, 10:24: "Let no man seek his own, but each his neighbor's good"; 10:31: "Whether, therefore, ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God") illustrate the same sort of appeal to underlying spiritual principles

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1. I Corinthians 5.

of conduct which we noted in the teaching of Jesus.

Thus the New Testament, while it does not present any formal science of ethics, undergirds morality by continual reference to the great spiritual truths revealed in the person and teachings of Jesus. Formal exclusion from Christian fellowship was enjoined in certain serious cases for the protection of the church, yet it was realized that this would not be sufficient to guarantee positive virtue. The New Testament everywhere reveals that genuine morality is too lofty and too spiritual to be bound within the limits of any legal system.

"The presence of a life-giving Personality, the source and norm of Christian teaching, is dominant. His teaching is not limited to His spoken words; it is an ever-present, continuous work. This is taken for granted by the New Testament writers....The history of Christian morality is....a record of how the Spirit of Christ has been endeavoring to redeem all life to its own service and the record is still unfinished."¹

C. Moral Discipline in the Patristic and Ante-Nicene Age

Historians seem to be in general agreement that the level of Christian morals at the beginning of this period (ca. 100 A.D.) was remarkably high. Harnack says,

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1. Donald Mackenzie: Ethics and Morality (Christian), Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Volume V, p. 468.

"The first century of the existence of Gentile Christian communities is particularly characterized by... the rigorous endeavor to fulfill the moral precepts of Christ and truly represent the holy and heavenly community of God in abstinence from everything unclean, and in love to God and the brethren here on earth in these last days."¹

Pliny, governor of Bithinia and Pontus, reported to the emperor that even persons who had renounced Christianity testified without exception to the moral purity of Christian life. He could discover nothing different even by cross-examination and torture. Rainy notes that it was not merely obedience to a lofty code but a positive enthusiasm for holiness which marked the early Christians. In his own words:

"Perhaps nothing strikes one more than the singular moral heat -- the enthusiasm for goodness -- which we meet in the Christian writings. To be good is no longer a doctrine of philosophy or a matter of taste; it is a calling, a career; a summons, as imperative as it is wonderful, has awakened man to it It has become for Christians their inheritance to be realized, their proper destiny to be achieved, the field on which they are to make good the reality -- the glory -- of the religion which has taken them captive."²

If these evaluations be true, it is little wonder that the early apologists could advance as one of their most powerful arguments for the superiority of Christianity over paganism the fact of the distinctive purity of Christian life and conduct.

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1. Adolph Harnack: History of Dogma, Volume I, p. 141.
2. Rainy, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

The authority for the enforcement of moral standards rested to begin with in the local congregation of believers, though just how the people exercised this responsibility is historically obscure. The dynamic of such enforcement of morality lay in "the vivid Christian consciousness of being face to face with the decisions of eternity".¹

By the middle of the second century, however, we see the dogmatic interest of the church gradually submerging the ethical. Legalism and externalism begin to be manifest in such Christian literature as "The Teaching of the Apostles", "The Epistle of Barnabas", and "The Pastor of Hermas".² Against the sensuous and self-indulgent paganism of the age the church rightfully protested, yet sometimes (in the case of Clement and Tertullian, for instance) that protest took the form of too negative a conception of Christian excellence -- too great a disposition to multiply rules and prohibitions and to urge them in a legal way. Self-denial for its own sake was regarded and commended as eminent Christian virtue -- especially celibacy -- the latter idea developing in protest against the terrible debauching of marriage common in pagan society.

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1. Rainy, op. cit., p. 69.
2. Cf. Mackenzie, op. cit., p. 468.

"The young church made here (in the case of ascetic legalism) an experiment which young Christians often repeat: the experiment of seeking the victory over evil in rules and in severities of their own devising."¹

The third century witnessed a marked hastening of a process of secularization which had been under way ever since the church began to win large numbers of converts. As the Christian community came to form a substantial proportion of the populace in many cities and provinces the ancient idea of the church as a communion of saints deteriorated. Instead, the church came to be thought of as an educational institution that trains its members for salvation. The belief grew that for the laity all that was necessary for salvation was, first, submission to the sacraments of the church; then, the avoidance of gross sins; and, finally, for atonement for post-baptismal sins, the payment of penance and the exercise of such ecclesiastical virtues as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The strict discipline which in the early years had excluded permanently from the church such persons as lapsed into idolatry, adultery, whoredom, and murder, now was relaxed, first in the case of sins of the flesh, and then even for idolaters. Public confession and prolonged penitential exercises were indeed required of these sinners, the object of such

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1. Rainy, op. cit., p. 225.

penance being the securing of forgiveness, which power it was believed Christ had vested in His church through the succession of bishops. The result was a growing legalistic attitude toward sin and forgiveness and a general lowering of the moral life of the church.

It is not to be supposed that this change took place imperceptibly or without protest. The exercise of discipline was the occasion of much controversy and several schisms. The most significant of these was probably that of Novatian, which occurred in the middle of the third century.¹ During the Decian persecution large numbers of Christians had apostasized. In some cases whole congregations had fallen away. But once the trial was past, hundreds of them clamored for readmission to the church. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, adopted towards these offenders a policy of moderate severity involving an extended penitential course as the condition of restoration. He was bitterly attacked by Novatus, on the one hand, who criticized him for his severity, and by Novatian, on the other, who denied the right of readmission to any of the fallen. Cyprian was a strong advocate

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1. A century earlier another movement had lodged a protest against the decline of popular Christian morals. This was Montanism, yet the history of the sect is so complicated by its emphasis upon charismatic and eschatological elements that it falls largely outside the limits of this study.

of the doctrine of the necessity of the church to salvation. If he refused absolution to the penitent, there were "confessors",¹ who would give them what they desired. Christian groups would thus arise who did not recognize the authority of the bishop and the church. Consequently, in order to protect the authority and unity of the church, Cyprian relaxed the discipline of offenders.

For Novatian, however, the church has no right to absolve idolaters. God alone

"has the power of pardoning sins against Himself.... As the assembly of the baptized, who have received God's forgiveness, the church must be a real communion of salvation and saints; hence, she cannot endure unholy persons in her midst without losing her essence. Each gross sinner that is tolerated within her calls her legitimacy in question."²

Novatian inaugurated a separatist movement which lasted for three centuries, yet the history of his church does not reveal a moral character higher in any essential way than that of the Catholic Church.

The pronouncing of the separatists as apostate by Cyprian and the other bishops who rallied to him was an act of ecclesiastical casuistry.

"In learning to look upon the church as a training school for salvation, provided with penalties and gifts of grace, and in giving up its religious

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1. "Confessors" were persons who had confessed their faith in the face of persecution but had survived. They were regarded as possessing special powers for absolving sinners.
2. Harnack, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 118-119.

independence in deference to her authority, Christendom as it existed in the latter half of the third century, submitted to an arrangement that was really best adapted to its own interests.....the breaking up of communities...was a danger incurred in all cases where the attempt was made to exercise unsparring severity.....A casuistic proceeding was necessary as well as a firm union of the bishops as pillars of the church.....In order to be a Christian a man was no longer required in any sense to be a saint. 'What made a Christian a Christian was no longer the possession of charisms but obedience to ecclesiastical authority', share in the gifts of the church, and the performance of penance and good works. The church by her edicts legitimized average morality after average morality had created the authority of the church.....In giving up the last remnant of her exclusiveness the church became Catholic in quite a special sense; in other words, she became a community where everyone could find his place provided he submitted to certain regulations and rules."¹

Rainy emphasizes the utility of the decision but notes its attendant evils as well:

"The point on which there can be no question is the ecclesiastical efficiency of the principle laid down. Also it is simple and saves a world of discussion. Possess men's minds with the conviction that separation from the official framework of the church is equivalent to renunciation of Christ and of His benefits, and you erect the strongest possible defense against schism. Unfortunately, while Cyprian and his followers are eloquent about the lack of love on the part of the separatists, they have not seen that the passion of scorn and hate are the effective forces in the system by which they themselves propose to fortify the unity."²

Schismatic movements were not the only outcome of the general decline of the standards of morality in the church. A further development was the recognition

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1. Harnack, op. cit., Volume II, pp. 122-125.
2. Rainy, op. cit., p. 194.

by the church of a double standard of life and conduct, one for the general laity and one for professionally religious persons. "Alongside of a code of morals to which anyone in case of need could adapt himself the church began to legitimise a morality of self-chosen, refined sanctity which really required no Redeemer."¹ The second standard developed particularly along ascetic lines. It became the source of monasticism, as Schaff points out in the following summary paragraph:

"The Pauline doctrine of faith and justification by grace alone steadily retreated, or rather, it was never yet rightly enthroned in the general thought and life of the church. The qualitative view of morality yielded more and more to a quantitative calculation by the number of outward meritorious and even supererogatory works, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, voluntary poverty, and celibacy. This necessarily brought with it Judaizing self-righteousness and over-estimate of the ascetic life, which developed by an irresistible impulse into the hermit life and monasticism of the Nicene age. All the germs of this asceticism appear in the second half of the third century and even earlier."²

D. Morality in the Nicene Age

In 313 A.D. Christianity was granted legal toleration by the Edict of Milan. With the persecutions a thing of the past, the "tide of easy-going converts swelled the churches". This influx of the world hastened

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1. Harnack, op. cit., Volume II, p. 125.
2. Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, p. 388.

the two chief trends of the preceding period; namely, the decline of morality in the church at large, and the rise of monasticism.

"A man's Christianity passed unchallenged if, having once been baptized, perhaps in infancy, he maintained a negative goodness, joined with some attention to ordinances....The decisive something had taken place at baptism, and after that it seemed the only question that could be raised was the question of a little more or a little less of Christian observance. Meanwhile this 'Christianity', which was less and less distinguishable from indifference, lived on easy terms with the manners and spirit of the decadent empire. Against it the spirit of Christianity itself revolted. Men who were awakened, even if they did not judge others, still refused to be content for themselves with so dubious a religion. And, in the spirit of their time, they demanded that the genuine Christianity should have a definite outward form, so that one could make sure of it. Asceticism was the answer to that demand."¹

"It (monasticism) was a methodism,-- ruled off way of being good, so plain and distinctive that one might rest in it, dismissing questions and doubts. How dear this is to human hearts a thousand instances have proved!"²

The history of the post-Nicene development of morality and discipline is outside the limits of this study. Suffice it to say that although the decline continued it would be unfair to attribute to the imperial establishment of Christianity the entire responsibility for the far departure from the moral standards of Jesus and the primitive church which occurred from the fourth century on. This decline was well under way, as has already been

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1. Rainy, op. cit., p. 300.
2. Ibid., p. 303.

noted, in the century and a half preceding the Edict of Toleration.

E. Summary and Conclusion

The history of these early centuries has revealed several important features of the development and exercise of moral discipline in the church.

First of all, the primitive conception of the church as a communion of saints is noteworthy. Discipline was exercised by the local church for the purpose of maintaining the purity of that communion. The later growth of the doctrine of the church as a saving institution resulted in the rise of the penitential system and a legalistic concept of morality. Practical questions of enforcement were permitted to govern the standards recognized and applied by the church. Hence, the creation of a double standard of morality and, also, the delegation of the exercise of discipline to the bishop.

The general decline in the moral character of the church brought about schismatic movements on the one hand and monasticism on the other. Both represent protests on behalf of the purity of the church.

What then may be said as to the effect upon the spiritual advancement of the church of the exercise of authority in moral discipline? Judgments of cause

and effect are extremely precarious here. Was the decline in morality due to the lowering of disciplinary standards or vice versa? Probably both were true. The process, once under way, operated in a vicious circle. When once the church had endorsed a legalistic concept of morality, decline was rapid. In this sense the exercise of authority was most hurtful to the spiritual life of the church, for when obedience to ecclesiastical authority is made the supreme test of character, the spiritual principles of Jesus are correspondingly slighted. The moral standards of Jesus do not depend for their authority upon human institutions; indeed, they are forever beyond the reach of external enforcement.

This period reveals the opening rounds of a conflict which has recurred every so often down through the history of the church, a conflict between two emphases, that upon the external solidarity and power of the church, and that upon her moral purity. The Catholic Church ever since her victory over the Montanists and the Novatianists has laid stress upon the former. But separatist movements -- as well as movements within the Catholic Church itself -- have arisen again and again to proclaim the unconquerable principle of puritanism which lies so near the heart of the Christian religion.¹

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1. For example: the Montanists, Catharists, Albigenses, German mystics, the Protestant Reformation, Pietism, Methodism, etc. Cf. Paul Warren: The Principle of Puritanism and the Significance of its Recurring Manifestations.

These movements have not maintained an organizational continuity, nor have they been free from extremes and perversions of the faith, yet in spite of the errors of which they have been guilty, they have demonstrated the vitality of the principle of puritanism, and they have forever challenged that travesty of Christianity which seeks moral security by conformity to an externalized institutional standard.

Our final conclusion must be that no institutional authority as such can guarantee moral advancement. For true morality comes from within and can only be produced by the activating agency of the Holy Spirit. The primary duty of the church must be to keep its people in constant touch with that absolute standard and compelling discipline which are to be found in the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ.

"The firm foundation of God standeth, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His: and, Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness."¹

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1. II Timothy 2:19.

CHAPTER V
GENERAL CONCLUSION

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It is now time to bring this study to a point of conclusion, to summarize its historical findings, and to make any desired recommendations or warnings regarding the exercise of these forms of institutional authority by the church of today.

The development of each type of requirement -- sacramental, doctrinal, and disciplinary -- has been traced from its origin in New Testament times to the fourth century A.D. This period was one of notable triumphs. The church showed an aggressive vitality which has been a challenge to all succeeding generations. In the face of cruel persecution and seemingly insuperable obstacles Christianity, under God, not only kept itself alive but achieved the conquest of the Roman Empire. And this it did not by the might of the sword but by the power of the Spirit working through Word and life.

"Christianity once established was its own best missionary. It grew naturally from within. It attracted people by its very presence. It was a light shining in darkness and illuminating the darkness. And while there were no professional missionaries devoting their whole life to this specific work, every congregation was a missionary society, and every Christian believer a missionary, inflamed by the love of Christ to convert his fellow-men."¹

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1. Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, p. 20.

In this extension of the faith throughout the Mediterranean world Christians characteristically cherished those standards and practices which served to distinguish them from Judaism, paganism, and heresy. It could be no casual matter for a person to take upon himself the name of Christ in the apostolic age or during the persecutions of the second and third centuries. The either-or loyalty to Christ was a line clear-cut when life or death might depend upon it.

"The humble and painful condition of the church under civil oppression made hypocrisy more rare than in times of peace, and favored the development of the heroic virtues. The Christians delighted to regard themselves as soldiers of Christ, enlisted under the victorious standard of the cross against sin, the world, and the devil. The baptismal vow was their oath of perpetual allegiance, the Apostles' Creed their parole; the sign of the cross upon the forehead, their mark of service; temperance, courage, and faithfulness unto death, their cardinal virtues; the blessedness of heaven, their promised reward."¹

Thus the Christian by his obedience to the requirements of the church was different from the non-Christian. The standards of the church in its sacraments, its creed, and its discipline helped to make him so. But the requirements of the church would have rendered small service to the spiritual advancement of her people had they not, besides differentiating Christians from the heathen, united Christians themselves together in a

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1. Schaff, op. cit., Volume II, p. 337.

corporate fellowship. The basic bond of union was, of course, a spiritual one, the common Christian experience of salvation through and devotion to Jesus Christ, yet it would be a great mistake to overlook the value for unity of a common participation in the sacraments, a common acknowledgment of the historical facts and theological interpretations contained in the creed, and a common obedience to high moral standards. Paul emphasizes this value in the familiar verses:

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all."¹

The apostle's exhortation in this passage "to keep the unity of the Spirit" is supported by a direct appeal to the common possessions of Christians, including the sacraments and the faith. If by its institutional requirements the church could preserve these things, it seems reasonable to conclude that external standards can be of great value in advancing the spiritual life of the church.

In addition to serving as marks distinguishing Christians from all others while binding them together in

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1. Ephesians 4:1-6.

corporate fellowship, the standards and requirements of the church possessed yet a further value. They served as a continual reminder to the church and to the world of the objective, supernatural basis of her faith. In opposition to the uncertain reasonings of philosophy and the fantastic imaginations of heathenism and heresy the church could point to its sacraments and its creed as evidence that Christianity was firmly grounded upon One who broke into history to accomplish man's eternal salvation. As sacramental and creedal requirements witnessed to past facts underlying redemption, so the moral discipline of the church testified to the present fruits which every Christian was expected to demonstrate.

But while the service rendered to the spiritual advancement of the early church by these institutional standards and requirements deserves full recognition, it would be a mistake to suppose that this exercise of authority was free from abuse. In the development of the sacraments there was observed a strong trend on the part of the church to regard the desired spiritual benefits as attached inherently to the performance of the external rites themselves. This writer has no particular objection to the elaboration of the sacramental ritual which occurred, except wherein this externalizing of the sacraments became an obstacle rather than an aid to the faith of the participants. To trace spiritual causes

and effects in matters of this kind is admittedly precarious. Yet it can hardly be denied that in this period there are discernible the seeds of all the abuses of the sacraments which aroused the mighty protest of the Reformers in the sixteenth century and of Protestantism ever since.

In the case of dogmatic standards the danger which appeared was the tendency to regard faith in terms of intellectual submission rather than as a living relation of man's soul with God. Orthodoxy became a legal obligation, and, in the years following the state establishment of Christianity, the church made the grave mistake of assuming that it could enforce religious truth by employing harsh physical penalties for heresy. In so doing the church not only violated the spirit and example of Christ and the apostles but it set up as the object of faith and obedience the authoritative institution of the church rather than God Himself. "No creedal or ecclesiastical forms of religious authority are legitimate which thwart the vital interaction of man and God. The function of religious truth is to lead men to God."¹

The history of disciplinary standards in the early church reveals a similar drift away from the inward, spiritual principles which are clearly laid down

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1. E. Y. Mullins: Freedom and Authority in Religion, p. 402.

in the New Testament as the basis of all holiness. Instead, the church legitimized a mediocre morality on the part of its members which could less and less be distinguished from the standards of the world. As long as the church member avoided gross sins, partook of the sacraments, and paid penance he was regarded as having fulfilled his duty. More was expected of the clergy, while monks and hermits voluntarily adopted stricter standards, yet even in these cases blighting asceticism was frequently made the criterion of holiness. The fault lay in the church's attempt to short cut morality. Only externals can be enforced, so the church took the obvious easy way, but in so doing it forgot the law of Christ and reduced morality to mechanism.

The church of the present generation cannot afford to overlook the lessons to be found in this record of the first four centuries. In a world of uncertainty and doubt people have a right to expect the church to know what she believes and why -- not as a matter of blind credulity, but because her faith involves fundamental historical as well as theological truths. The era of self-sufficient subjectivism in religion is rapidly passing away. Christianity requires the wholesome objective norms furnished by creedal affirmations, not to paralyze further thought upon the boundless subjects of the faith, but to preserve the fundamental deposit

which past generations have agreed most nearly represents the core of Christian truth.

Similarly, the church of today requires that continual setting forth of heavenly redemption and man's participation therein which is the peculiar service of the Christian sacraments.¹ In addition, the church today is coming to realize anew its need of cultivating corporate Christian fellowship. Extreme individualism is being progressively discredited. Christian liberty finds its highest fulfillment in the voluntary association of the group in corporate life and worship. Here, too, in that they assist the creation of a corporate Christian consciousness, can the sacraments contribute to the spiritual advancement of the church. An illustration of this truth may be found in a scene which occurred at the Madras Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1938. At the great communion service on Christmas morning a Chinese bishop and a bishop from Japan came down the aisle side by side bearing to the assembled worshippers the sacred elements which memorialize our Lord's atonement. Representing as they did nations

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1. Some persons would say that the church requires the sacraments for the benefit of the special gifts of grace attached thereto. The question of the spiritual efficacy of the sacraments is, however, one for theological rather than historical verification.

engaged in bitter war, these men nevertheless met as Christian brothers in the worship of the Prince of Peace. Such values as these the church must cherish for the sake of her own spiritual advancement.

The case of the exercise of disciplinary authority is somewhat more difficult. Local circumstances must of course determine the specific application of the ethical principles of Jesus. However, it is the writer's opinion that although the Protestant insistence upon the liberty of the Christian conscience is an indispensable one, yet that principle has too often been carried to the extreme of antinomianism. The Bible should of course furnish the needed corrective here. Christianity should make a difference. The church should be distinguishable from the world. To this end the Christian conscience needs the educative value of standards set up and enforced by the church. Some of the more serious dangers which afflicted the early church occurred in the enforcement of discipline. This problem is somewhat eased now since membership in any Christian church is voluntary and secular penalties are no longer employed. Disciplinary enforcement today simply involves a control over the conditions of membership.

The church of course will always have to guard against the abuses which crept into the exercise of authority in the past. Although external rites, forms,

and standards are necessary and desirable, they must be regarded as means to the attainment of the Christian goal, not as ends in themselves. That goal is to be understood as a living, organic unity and fellowship between Christ and His followers and, also, mutually among believers themselves. Paul describes this unity by analogy with the human body, each organ of which contributes to and derives from the total organism under the control of the head. Man's soul cries out for the establishment of a harmonious relationship with God. This can be realized only through Jesus Christ who is in His own person both the end and the means of the Christian life. The church in apostolic times was keenly conscious of this relationship and gloried in it. When in later years the external authority of the institution had supplanted the inward authority of the Spirit, decline was the inevitable result.

Shillito, speaking of the marked decline between the church which could receive and understand an epistle such as Paul's to the Ephesians and the church at Ephesus described in the Revelation, says:

"Already in the New Testament the warning is given that there is no security for any community of followers of Christ except through a faith constantly renewed. No one generation can pass on its inheritance except on conditions. A living church in one generation cannot be sure that in the next it will be living."¹

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1. Edward Shillito: The Way of the Witnesses, p. 92.

Thus the final safeguard against the dangers attending the exercise of authority by the institution, and the only assurance that standards will really protect the inheritance of the church is to be found in the wholesome Reformation doctrine of justification by faith in the grace of God alone. Here is the principle which will serve as a continual corrective of any tendency toward false confidence in human standards and institutions. Yet this is no easy principle, for "to have faith -- really have it, means to be a man on the watch".¹ And this is as truly said of the Christian church as it is of the Christian individual.

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1. Emil Brunner: The Philosophy of Religion, p. 191.

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