Book Review of “The Early Church”

Subject: History of the Christian Church
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1. Summary

Chadwick’s Early Church covers, as the book cover suggests, “the story of emergent Christianity from the apostolic age to the dividing of the ways between the Greek East and the Latin West.” The story unfolds with the Jewish and Roman background within which the beginning church was nourished. It then goes on to show how important it is for the church to establish order and unity amidst threats of persecution and heresy. The emergence of apologists helps not only the expansion of the church but also the construction of Christian doctrine. At the same time, controversies abound as the church encountered many different cultural and sociological challenges while trying out in reaction a variety of ideas. With chapter seven, the relation between church and state changes, resulting in a stronger influence of the state upon the church while accelerating the split between the Latin West and the Greek East. The Arian controversy shows a period of instability between state and church, and also deepens the split of East and West. But within the turmoil, ascetic practice, papacy, liturgy, and art are established, helping to transmit a common European culture while the Roman Empire begins to degenerate. With the intellectual status culminating in Jerome and Augustine, history turns to another exiting page.
2. Evaluation

It is indeed a massive task to go through countless documents in order to write a history as complicated as that of the early church as a whole. Given such an impossible task, Chadwick is almost the scholar who is able to accomplish it. Although this cannot be labeled a *magnum opus*, it surely is a masterpiece in representing so many original documents in a mere 282 pages. It is also invaluable for beginners in Church history to have a book of such scholarly objectivity and reduced notes at the same time.

The book has a rather excellent strand running through almost all the chapters—the dividing of the church into the Latin West and the Greek East. The author does not just leave the division with some kind of abstract ideological arguments on the use of icon. Rather, it traces the cultural and political background of the split to such details about language and geography, and as early as the controversy about the dating of Easter. It then goes deep into the Arian controversy and the political and Episcopal power struggles to spell out the seeds of division already planted in the two sides.

Another feature of the book is its thematical presentation not of doctrines but of events. Very often history of Christian thought replaces and stands for the history of the whole of Christianity. But with Chadwick’s book, doctrines are mentioned only
when necessary, and they are always treated in their respective cultural and sociological contexts.

One drawback lies in the fact that although this book is already as easy as it could be, it stills demands a person not born in the western culture a lot of backgrounds presupposed. But it is doable with a dictionary of the church at the side to supplement factual gaps.

3. Reflection

As a modern reader, I read the book with several expectations and aims in mind. I believe that the early church has a lot to say about many of the hot issues for Taiwan today like the identity of Christians, the plurality of ways in the Way, the similarity of the Taiwanese context and that of the early church, and the interrelatedness of Christ and culture, etc. Many of the questions that emerge in our discussion about faith—the authority of the Bible, the value of tradition, etc.—can be solved by knowing the history of the early church too. Reading this book has not let me down. I am only disappointed to find that many of my puzzles pursue me to study further the original documents first-hand or to continue to build up my reading on relevant topics in the early church like those books recommended in the “suggestions for further reading” at the end of the book.
Given the limited scope of this paper, I will only discuss the idea of the plurality of the early churches. In Chadwick’s work, we see indeed a plurality of different original sources, and of the divergent manifestation of the beginning churches. But as the title of the book already suggests, it is written with the perspective that “the early church” can be demonstrated as a whole. Throughout the story, we also notice how important it is that the church is somehow maintained in one voice. Many of the heresies come about because of the need of the empire as a uniting power. Unity seems to be a necessary premise of the growth of the church. However, we see another aspect in the growth in unity. There accompanies also an unstoppable corruption as the church is getting involved in the will and wishes of the emperor. Therefore, the early church becomes our invaluable resource for reflection today. We can try to avoid corruption with the freedom given under the Reformed tradition while tapping into the ways tried out in the early church, avoiding their mistakes and giving them a new and just voice in the writing our story today.

(Word count: 874 English words, which approximate 1457 words in Chinese; with the ratio 0.6:1)