

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Early Church History

Session 1, Segment A

Introductions: Participants & Course

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. Personal Introductions
 - a. Instructor
 - b. Participants: Name; Home Congregation; Something about you; What you hope to accomplish in a course on early church history, other than stay awake.
- III. Course Outline & Discussion of “Doing History”
 - a. History is crucial -- *“The recording of history is to tell the story of the human family. The historian has the crucial task of helping each generation find its bearings. Just as loss of memory in an individual is a psychiatric defect calling for medical treatment, so too any community which has no social memory is suffering from an illness.”* (IHOC, 14)
 - b. The notion of Bible as “all we need” needs to be addressed. The relationship of scripture and tradition (including history) is just that – a relationship. The first is the foundation of the latter, and the latter and expression of the former. *“The Christian not only claims that all history is God’s history, but that within history the Holy Spirit has not left himself without witness in any generation. This is what is meant by the word ‘catholic’, used in its primary sense: the presence of the living Christ, recognized, adored and obeyed, securing the catholicity of the church in every age, granting it its proper wholeness.”* (IHOC, 17)
 - c. The Critique of History – To think the Faith has truth, one must deny a history littered with victims. *“The Christian Faith does not have to contort itself to embrace the hard facts of history. It admits that the tragedy of history cannot be avoided, but claims that there is a power that redeems tragedy.”* (IHOC, 25)
 - d. The Subjectivity of History – *“..over against criticism, detachment and analysis as ways of knowing, the historian must also use commitment, sympathy and imagination.”* (IHOC, 35) History is as much art as science. It is never free from the cultural and personal perspective of the historian. This does not render history meaningless, it simply means it is always unfinished and cannot have certainty as its goal.
- IV. Break

Session 1, Segment B
Resurrection, Pentecost & Expansion

- I. The Jesus Movement – The community that gathered.
 - a. The beginning point in a discussion of ‘church history’ is rooted in Jesus and his ministry. “Christian thinkers were not in the business of establishing something; their task was to understand and explain something.” (Wilken, 3)
 - b. Jesus announcement of the “reign or kingdom” of God begs a question about the relationship between church and kingdom. Was Jesus about the business of founding a church? Is this the wrong question?
 - c. “Already” and “Not Yet” can be seen as a way of resolving the tension between the reign of God realized and the imperfect Church.
 - d. The character of this community gathered AND the fulfillment of God’s reign takes on the character of Jesus himself. Jesus’ ministry is the ministry of the Church. Jesus’ vision is the vision of the reign of God “breaking in upon us.” Our understanding of Jesus will determine our historical understanding of the church.
 - e. The Disciples of Jesus: The Twelve – who are they and what do they represent? The Seventy & John’s inclusive/dwindling band.
 - f. The Lord’s Supper – Covenant, remembrance and foretaste of the feast to come.
- II. Resurrection
 - a. Resurrection is more than just a raised Jesus, it is a “birthing moment” – the birth of the church.
 - b. More than just a sacrificial atonement – it is the victory of God over evil. Resurrection affirms Jesus’ way as the only way.
 - c. The cross shows the character of the reign of God. Resurrection shows the validity of the reign of God.
- III. Pentecost & the Church in Acts
 - a. Acts 1:8-11
 - Mission of the disciples (apostles) laid out:
 - Empowered by the Spirit – fulfilled in 2:1-13
 - “be my witnesses” in Jerusalem – fulfilled in 2:14-8:3
 - “be my witnesses” in Samaria – fulfilled in 8:4-25
 - “be my witnesses to the ends of the earth” - fulfilled in 8:26-40; 10:1-11:18; 28:14
 - Jesus ascended – relationship of physical absence. Spirit is presence.
 - Don’t fixate on heaven or his return
 - b. Acts 2

- Spirit driven
 - Prepared with prayer
 - Biblical preaching
 - Directed to outsiders
 - Converts in 2:37 ff
 - Devoted to the teaching of the apostles
 - To fellowship & breaking of bread & prayer
 - Hold all in common
 - Filling the needs of one another
- c. Acts 3
- Begin to see the power of Jesus in the followers – healing
- d. Acts 4
- Community of sharing and support attracts attention
- e. Acts 5
- Subversion of community leads to judgment
- f. Acts 6
- Growth leads to demands beyond apostles' ability
 - Deacons formed – different ministry
- g. Acts 10
- Table fellowship is opened to all
- h. Acts 13
1. Paul and Barnabas sent to Gentiles in Antioch (not Jerusalem)

IV. Expansion

- a. Jerusalem
- Pentecost
 - Initial converts – numerous
 - Site of earliest “councils”
 - James, brother of Jesus seems to come to take leadership
- b. Judea, Samaria and surrounding area
- The martyrdom of Stephen is an impetus for expansion to Antioch and “first ring” beyond Jerusalem.
 - The movement begins to transition from more rural to centered in cities.
- c. Peter, Paul and Rome.

Session 1, Segment C
The Earliest Church in Context

I. Judiasm.

- a. The earliest church is first and foremost a movement within Judaism. Rooted in the promises of God and the experience of exile – which (as N.T. Wright points out) is still being experienced.
- b. Though the people had a temple and Jerusalem was home, countless rulers had dominated, the latest being Rome. They were suffering as a result, especially under cruel dictators (as we see in Daniel) in the 100-150 years before Jesus.
- c. Jewish people are oriented to one of two places – temple and synagogue. Many in Jerusalem, but also many still in Babylon and in places like Alexandria in Egypt. The presence of Jews across the Empire made the expansion of the gospel possible.
- d. Judaism is not “monolithic” (WHC Frend). Within are different groups:
 - Herodians – Not averse to adopting outside customs and lifestyle. Hellenistic life is synthesized. They represent the view of the Herods – rulers, who found a way to manage the tension between disparate people.
 - Sadducees – Mostly wealthier Jews with ties to the Hasmonean dynasty that ruled Judea for a short time. They observed only the scriptures of Israel, rejecting the midrashic expansion of the law. They did not believe in resurrection or a cosmic judgment. They administered the temple cult and so were the powers of the Jewish religion.
 - Pharisees – These were the religious leaders of the masses – “the righteous ones” who tried to live the law of God in everyday life. Almsgiving, charity, acts of kindness along with religious purity were their concerns. They are portrayed as among Jesus chief antagonists, though this may be a bit one dimensional.
 - The Scribes – a noble religious class who were teachers and keepers of the tradition.
 - Essenes – The community most notably associated with ascetic lifestyle in a community near the Dead Sea. These Jews expected the immanent end of the age and the coming of God’s salvation.
 - Revolutionary Movements – “Zealots” and others seeking to bring about the full return from exile were part of the Jewish context. In 66 CE and 68 CE messianic revolts were dealt with harshly. The second led to the destruction of the temple. The final led by Siom bar Kokhba in 132-135 CE brought an end to these hopes at the hands of Hadrian
 - The Temple – The third temple is the temple in Jerusalem for the early church. It was the seat of religious life and a place where all Jews were encouraged to journey to in a lifetime. It

was not only a religious center by the time of Jesus, but the seat of Jewish cultural and economic life to some extent.

- The Synagogue – Probably rooted in home gatherings, by about 200 CE there is evidence of buildings built just for the purpose of synagogue. It is a place of prayer, study and meeting. It is a foundational model for the early church.

e. Hellenism

- Though the political power is in Rome, the culture still belongs to Greece. The world of the early church is influenced heavily by Greek language, thought, ideas, religion, and worldview.
- Gentiles were unclean and it is debated just how “ostracized” they would be from the Jewish community.
- Koine Greek was the lingua Franca of the day, providing a means for the message to transcend locality.
- Philosophy – The Greek tradition of philosophy as a means of understanding the *“form and function of daily existence”* (Lyman, 22) was prevalent in the Roman world. Lucian, a second-century pundit noted that one could choose the *“dirty Cynics, dreamy Platonists, Aristotelians interested in cash, skeptics interested in nothing.”* (Lyman, 22) This shaped the culture within in which Christianity grew and the thinking of its earliest leaders.

f. Rome

- The peace of Augustus is a central factor in the ability of the church to spread influence. Roads, well maintained and safe allowed Paul to travel.
- The chief concerns of the empire are social order. *“If the Roman world was knit together by imperial unity and commerce, it was also sharply divided along political, cultural, and economic lines. Roman society was based on a reverence for the past, and resisted change as disruptive to the ways of the ancestors.”* (Lyman, 18) The Christian movement appears to threaten this reverence for the past, calling for change. It is hence, revolutionary.
- There is a growing dissatisfaction with Roman life and a drive to find a “place” in society that was fragmenting – Christian community was among the most effective.
- *“Slavery was an accepted economic fact, but it was not based on race. Highly educated slaves in fact had more power and status through their wealthy households than did poor, free people...”* ((Lyman, 18). Wealth, power, and privilege are concentrated in the hands of a shrinking number. The openness of the Christian Gospel to all people presents a problem.

- Religious life is integrated into the fabric of economic, political, and daily life – not separated. *“The state regulated worship of the gods in order to guarantee their continued protection of the city and state. Individuals or religious movements that challenged these venerable patterns of worship were therefore subject to suspicion and hostility, official persecution and even death in order to protect the stability of society.”* (Lyman, 19)