

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Early Church History

Session 2, Segment B

The Context of Early Christianity - Conclusion

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. Reflections on Last Week
- III. The “Pristination” of the Early Church
 - a. The church has long engaged in an effort to find her roots. There is great value in knowing where we come from; where our identity is rooted.
 - b. This healthy desire, like all endeavors to connect with the past, runs the risk of idealizing the past as what we need to “get back to.”
 - c. From James D.G. Dunn in his book: *The Evidence for Jesus*: “*More prominent today is the desire among many Christians to recapture the drive and zeal of the first Christians. ‘Back to the Bible!’ is still a powerful slogan. ‘Back to New Testament Christianity!’ is the motivation which inspires many a Christian group to try to recreate and relive the church pattern of the apostolic age. In all this is the subtle tendency to treat the period of Christian beginnings as qualitatively different, a time separate and distinct from what followed – a kind of timeless age, not subject to the same forces of change and decay which the forms and forces of this world know all too well.*” (p. 81)
 - d. The church, perhaps as early as the resurrection experience, was diverse. Each of the four gospels have distinctive characteristics and sometimes, competing theological formulae.
 - e. Look at Galatians 1:6-9, as an example. The argument here is about divergent proclamations of the gospel: ⁶ *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--* ⁷ *not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.* ⁸ *But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!* ⁹ *As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!”*
 - f. The church was and is “*never disconnected from the world around it. The first Christians were first-century Jews, and it was as such that they heard and received the message. Then the faith spread, first among other Jews, and eventually among Gentiles both within and beyond the borders the Roman Empire. In order to understand the history of Christianity in its early centuries, we must begin by looking at the world in which it evolved.*” (SOC 7)

IV. Jewish Christianity

- a. "Christians" at first were simply seen as what we might call "Messianic Jews." That is to say – they were just another sect within Judaism who believed that the Messiah had come in Jesus of Nazareth. These followers of Jesus were referred to as "Nazarenes."
- b. The first Christians kept the Sabbath and went to the Temple in the same way they always had done. Communion was added to the life of the "Nazarene" community.
- c. There is evidence that the movement spread quickly to places like Damascus and Antioch (where the term "Christian" was coined by pagans).
- d. The stress in the relationship within Judaism was rooted in 1) the Christian disdain for zealot movements; 2) their threat to Jewish authorities; 3) most of all, the attitude toward Gentiles.
- e. The Gentile question boiled down to controversy over food and circumcision. It is rooted in how the church was growing to see Jesus: an extension of the Abrahamic covenant, fulfillment of prophecy, or something radically more.
- f. The center of early Judaic Christianity is Jerusalem, especially as it is led by James. It is organized as a synagogue (apostles and deacons or elders). The Jewish law is to be kept as part of the discipleship of the community.

V. Gentile Christianity

- a. Once the gospel began to reach places like Antioch, the crowd that responded was increasingly Gentile. To the Gentiles, Jewish customs regarding food, circumcision, and a host of other matters were seen as irrational, even repulsive. They were a stumbling block to the hearing of the Gospel.
- b. Primarily through Paul, but also in the movement of Peter from Jerusalem ultimately to Rome, and John to Ephesus, the Gentile issue was both explored and became an increasing source of tension. The council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) is the first controversy and some accommodation is reached.
- c. Paul's role is central for three reasons: 1) Championed & defended mission to the Gentiles; 2) developed theological framework for expansion to Gentiles; 3) principle of "all things to all people" – apologist for the faith. (IHOC 63)
- d. Paul's role should not eclipse others in the movement. By the time Paul gets to Rome, Christians are already there, for instance. While he founded some communities, others were founded before his contact. His epistles are his primary legacy.
- e. By 50 CE riots between Jews & Christians have broken out. By 85 CE, the liturgy of the synagogue includes formal curse upon the Nazarenes. In 160, Justin speaks still of Jewish Christians, but the Gentile form is clearly the norm.

Session 2, Segment B
Who Shall Lead, Speak & Serve?

I. The Problem of Expansion

- a. As the Gentile population increasingly becomes the norm for early Christianity, problems arise. First, the sheer numbers of people create a leadership and ministry crisis. In Acts 6 we see this in the election of the first deacons.
- b. Second, the expansion beyond Jerusalem, and then beyond the local synagogue, creates a problem of proclamation. How does one make Jesus Christ intelligible to people who don't know the story of Moses, Abraham and company? *"The moment they passed outside the ambit of the synagogues of the Jewish dispersion and their loosely attached Gentile adherents, the missionaries were in the twilight world of pagan syncretism, magic, and astrology."* (Chadwick, p. 33)
- c. The third expansion, one could say, is the expansion of time that the movement is engaged in mission. As the day of resurrection moves further into the historic past, two problems arise: 1) What of the return of Jesus? 2) Who will tell the story when the eyewitnesses are all gone? This second problem grows more urgent as the martyrs begin to die: Stephen in Acts; James in 62 CE; Peter and Paul and many others in 64 CE under Nero.
- d. The fourth expansion that adds to the demands for leadership arises when larger numbers of people and more diversity of thought comes together. You get differing ideas about what the community believes. Leadership became necessary to discern what diversity was allowable and what was not.

II. The Apostles

- a. The history of the apostles as time moved forward became more difficult to trace. Traditions regarding the apostles arose to legitimate the authority of churches in various cities and their bishops at later dates. Having a claim to linkage with one of the early apostles became a means of validating the authority of both leadership and canonical inclusion.
- b. Peter, it is fairly certain, ended up in Rome, martyred during the Neronian persecution. Tradition and the obscure reference in John 21:18-19, suggest crucifixion upside down was his fate. The authority of the church at Rome to this day is drawn upon the connection with Peter.
- c. Paul's end is left up in the air, so to speak. In the Book of Acts, we find him in Rome and then no further mention is made. Two strands of tradition developed. One has him traveling further west. The other, more attested to and likely, is death as a Roman citizen in the same period as Peter.
- d. John's on-going story is more confused. Some tradition places the apostle in Ephesus, living to a ripe old age, exiled on Patmos. Others say the apostle was martyred (boiled in oil) and another John, maybe a disciple of the apostle, ended up being the John of Ephesus and Patmos.

- e. Philip is claimed by Constantinople; Spain claims James (Santiago); Idia claims Thomas. Matthew may have some connection with Antioch. Historical evidence is thin.

III. The Development of Ministry and Order

- a. Earliest mention of offices is in 1 Corinthians. 12:28 – Apostles, Prophets, Teachers
- b. By 95, two-fold order is in place bishops/presbyters and deacons. Deacons are administrative: handle money; social ministry; help with sacraments (see Acts 20:17; Clement and Didache). There is a movement in the duties of each over time. At first deacons assisted the presiding minister. Later they begin to distribute the wine. By 150, they are taking communion to the sick
- c. By 200 bishops and presbyters split – oversight over specific areas begins. Here we begin to see the power to ordain assigned to bishops. To the senior presbyter or bishop also fell the job corresponding with other localities. Finally, these leaders became representatives of their locality to other places.
- d. This three-fold order (bishops, presbyters, deacons) is fairly universal before the third century (IHOC 119).
- e. Bishops develop as theologians in residence against heresy; marks of unity through agreement. This begins to be essential as the Gnostic heresies develop (more in session 4). The “apostolic succession” was first and foremost a means of insuring the faithful witness of the church across time.
- f. This development, while it seems to have been a quite natural progression, had opponents, like Tertulian, who became a Montanist (session 4) rejecting the role of bishops.
- g. The succession of bishops becomes important as Gnostic threats (among others) start to threaten the gospel message. Irenaeus and Tertullian “held that the succession of bishops stemming from the apostles guaranteed the unbroken handing-on of the apostle’s doctrine.” (IHOC 120) Cyprian strengthens this further in the West, lining the bishop to the apostles more closely. The East never went along with this completely.

Session 2, Segment C **The Word Preserved as Holy Scriptures**

I. The Making of Holy Scripture

- a. The first thing to always remember in discussion about the development of the scriptural canon is the relationship between God’s Word and the Bible. The writings are often confused with the Word. We profess that the Living Word addresses humans through mighty deed, through creation, through life in community. Chiefly, it addresses us through

Christ in his cross and resurrection, through the community of the faithful as it gathers around Word and the sacraments.

- b. It is the stories and reflections, songs and prayers about being addressed by the Word of God that are told and shared, giving life and hope to the community. They become oral traditions, passed down from generation to generation. In the early church, the number of generations is quite short compared to the older testament.
- c. Oral tradition becomes written word. Fragments, individual stories, sayings etc. come to be pieced together into a cohesive whole. The gospels are a synthesis of what people said about Jesus.
- d. About 400 BCE the Torah (the first five books of the OT) is regarded as scripture for the whole community of faith.
- e. Between 400 BCE and 100 CE, the prophets and other writings become regarded as scripture.
- f. 300-100 BCE, the Jewish scripture we have today is translated into Greek and compiled as the Septuagint. This name comes from the tradition that 70 scribes worked independently to come up with a translation. All 70 agreed. Our Old Testament is rooted in this work.
- g. In 98 CE a council of scholars gathered at Jamnia to consider what makes scripture sacred. The 7 books of the apocrypha were excluded.
- h. Jesus and the disciples carried much of the Old Testament in their heads.
- i. Between 50 and 125 CE letters of instruction, stories of Jesus' life, death & resurrection, collections of his teachings are written down and circulated among the believers.
- j. Lists of helpful letters and books are circulated among bishops end of first – beginning of second century. Justin knows of at least three synoptic gospels and harmonizes them.
- k. The Muratorian Canon “lists for gospels, thirteen letters of Paul, Acts, two letters of John, Jude and the Revelation of John, together with the Wisdom of Solomon and, with reservations, the Revelation of Peter.” (IHO 108), dated for a long time around 200 CE, now agreed that it was later.
- l. Eusebius, in the third century, reflects a consensus, with debates open about Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Jude.
- m. The current list of 27 books can be dated at 367 CE in the 39th festal letter of Athanasius.