

## ***Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA***

### ***Early Church History***

#### ***Session 3, Segment A Early Church as Worshipping Community***

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. The Jewish Roots of Christian Worship – “The Jewish liturgy is to the Christian liturgy what the flower is to the fruit, the promise to the fulfillment. Just as the ancient Scriptures were, as it were ‘pregnant’ with Christ – that is, carried the Messiah in their womb – so also the Jewish liturgy was the womb from which the Christian liturgy was born.”<sup>1</sup>
  - a. Worship set in time – Jewish worship is deeply connected to the various festivals that arise each year that connect worship to the historic acts of God. By the time of Paul the designated day of worship is Sunday. Easter is originally connected to the Passover, but soon moves to the Sunday after the Passover. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century “the calendar included Ascension Day, and the nativity of Christ which the Greek East celebrated on January 6, the West on December 25.” (Chadwick)
  - b. Baptism - Washing - “They kept the washing of baptism which had been an important constituent in the ceremonies of the admission of Gentile proselyte to the Jewish synagogue.” (Chadwick). Adults only at first. By third century infant baptism is widely practiced. By sixth century – almost exclusively children. Long period of preparation that is actually the backdrop for Lenten season.
  - c. Meal - “The bread and wine of the Jewish Passover and other sacred meals were invested for the Church with an intense significance by their association with the Last Supper and the Crucifixion when, as St. Paul put it, ‘Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us’ (1 Cor. 5:7).” (Chadwick) “Paul used the framework of the Passover meal to interpret the Lord’s Supper.” (IHOC, 23)
  - d. Word – The centrality of the Torah, the prophets, etc. is obvious to this day in Judaism. This is transferred directly into the Christian worship. The teachings of the apostles and developing Christian texts (last week’s lectures) provide a basis for proclamation. The reading of scripture, ‘the memoirs of the apostles’ and preaching are attested by Justin in 150.
  - e. Prayer – Jewish worship is rich in practice of prayer. Blessings before and after meals, times of prayer set aside during the day, prayers of thanks and remembrance, not to mention the scriptural example of the people, provide the forms and discipline for prayer in the early church.
  - f. Singing – Paul uses and refers to singing, which is rooted in the psalmic tradition of Israel. It is prayer, celebration directed to God. It is done by the whole community.

### III. Baptism

- a. Rooted in the tradition of proselyte washing, Christian baptism was at first celebrated on the festival of Easter. Early on, fasting preceded Easter and led to the great Vigil of Easter. By the fourth century the Lenten fast is 40 days in length. Part of the Lenten fast includes an observance of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday by the fourth century, and Palm Sunday by the sixth century.
- b. The form is described by Tertullian in 200 CE. It has 1) a renunciation of the devil; 2) a declaration of faith; water and oil. See LBW p. 121 & the Didache in Chadwick.

### IV. Eucharist

- a. Earliest Christian worship, as early as the second century, “agree that the regular Sunday worship of the Christians was first and foremost ‘thanksgiving,’ eucharista, a term which gradually replaced the more primitive term ‘breaking of bread.’ (Chadwick)
- b. The Didache provides an early model of celebration. The Apostolic Tradition by Hippolytus, 315 CE. Is very early and influential.

### V. Preaching

- a. Preaching is rooted in the rabbinic teaching office and in the ministry of Jesus at its root. Seen in Acts through Peter and Paul.
- b. Great attention to preaching appears in the work of John Chrysostom, Augustine and others.

## **Session 3, Segment B** **Church as Moral Community**

### I. The Moral Code of the Community

- a. In the book of Acts we begin to see how the moral character of the Christian community is part of its mission. (Acts 2:43 ff)
- b. Paul’s letters show us consistent calls to a transformed life, lived as community.
- c. The Didache begins with the “Two Ways” and leads to instructions on worship. The two are linked.
- d. The concern of the teachings is directed toward the converted, those in community.

### II. Mission and Morality

- a. Acts portrays that it is the joy and community of the church in Jerusalem that draws people along with the proclamation.
- b. Justin, by 150 CE, claims that “the constancy, patience and business integrity of Christians persuaded others to change their ways and join them.”<sup>2</sup>
- c. Preparation for baptism centered around the apostolic teaching (the story) and the moral character of community.

- d. The transformed lives of Christians was central to the spread of the gospel. What does that teach us today?

**Session 3, Segment C**  
***The Blood of Martyrs and Lives of Saints***

I. Martyrdom – The roots

- a. It is rooted in the warnings of Jesus (Matt 10:16-23) and in his crucifixion.
- b. The word martyr means witness, and in the earliest periods, just after the resurrection it seems to imply simply telling the truth at risk of persecution or death.
- c. Stephen is the first martyr in the developed sense – death. His stoning is placed as a literary parallel to Christ's own passion. (Compare Luke 23:32 ff with Acts 7:54 ff)

II. The Martyr's Path

- a. Christians were generally taught to obey the rule of those who govern. One exception – idolatry.
- b. Worshipping the local deity or proclaiming the lordship of Caesar was not possible. Making a sacrifice to the gods or emperor were seen as apostasy.
- c. It was relatively easy to avoid martyrdom – a little sacrifice, you were off the hook. This set off debates in the Church about those who had taken the easier path.
- d. What the culture did not understand was that martyrdom quickly became the way that Christians saw the deepest possible union with Christ. Tertullian raises the bar in the second century making martyrdom an expectation.

III. The Lives of the Saints

- a. The earliest honoring of the “saints” was synonymous with martyrs. Later, veneration of those whose faith led to paths other than martyrdom became recognized.
- b. Early in Celtic Christianity, where there were no persecutions to speak of, martyrdom was broadened to include acts of sacrifice and such.

IV. Martyrs in Perspective

- a. There are still credible martyrs for the faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero – all died as faithful witnesses. They did not seek death.
- b. Life is valued in the faith and should never be given away too willingly.
- c. The blood of the martyrs and life of the saints should never be forgotten or cheapened by those who “caved in.” Gandhi said: “If it were not for Christians I would be a Christian.” He was not talking about the martyrs and faithful saints.

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<sup>1</sup> Deiss, Lucien, *Springtime of the Liturgy*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979) p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Stuart, *Doctrine & Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991) p.14