



Early Church History

The early Church experiences the pain of change

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Intro

- Why do priests (and altar servers) wear robes?
- Why are there so many different denominations?
- Why do churches look the way they do?
- Where do dioceses come from?
- Could things have really happened the way they are described in “The DaVinci Code”? Is it not at least possible?
- What about the hidden gospels described on the History Channel and National Geographic?

In a nutshell...

- Early Church was actually churches - communities with different emphases, some on ecclesiology, others on the personal relationship with Christ
- 4 parallel activities shape the story of the early Church:
 - Persecutions
 - Heresies
 - Schisms
 - Organization

The Early Church in Bible times

The Early Churches described in the Gospels, Acts, and Letters

The Matthean Community

- 10:5 "Go nowhere among the Gentiles" --> 28:19 "Go to all the nations" (notice the development)
- MT is the ecclesiastical gospel - the only one with "Church" in it ("koral" ~ DT "community")
- Notice the different emphases between MT and Paul: MT "down to the last iota of the law"; Paul emphasizes faith apart from works of the law
- The Christianity associated with Peter lies somewhere between James and Paul (might explain its prominence). Peter becomes the spokesperson for determining the will of Jesus. Paul argues with him about imposing circumcision (Gal 2:14) but then yields to one in Acts 16:3!
- Power to bind and loose to Peter, then possibly to all the disciples: (MT 16:19, 18:18); keys to the kingdom; former for law binding, latter for excommunication (?), forgiveness of sins
- With organization comes the question of authority. So why does the kingdom belong to the little children? Not because they're cute and cuddly, but because they're helpless and powerless.

The Johannine Community

- less ecclesiastical; more personal: "My sheep hear my voice, the Father and I will come to them."
- Yet Peter is to tend the sheep; We are to eat the flesh of Christ. i.e., John is the most Catholic AND most Protestant Gospel at the same time!
- Women as important as the men. Martha, not Peter, utters "You are the Christ the son of the living God". We have the Samaritan woman, and Mary at the foot of the cross.
- MT community keeps Sabbath, but the JN community regards it an alien feast of the Jews!
- The Johannine term "Jews" for enemies of Christians does not make sense for Jesus to say when he lived. This is likely the Hellenistic influence in the Johannine mix, who were made of Samaritans (as opposed to the "pure" Jews).

- JN reaction to those Jews trying to kill Jesus: They're the children of the devil!
- Before there was the Church, there were house churches ~20/30 people united to their apostle - "koinonia"
- Jn I, II, III address Gnostic secessionists: Christians breaking koinonia, denying that Jesus is the eternal Logos made flesh. So now... those are the antichrists!
- Gnostics don't mention the crucifixion, just JC teaching of "believe and you're saved; don't and you are condemned".
- As the Father sent me, we will send the Holy Spirit (15:26). (Unfortunately different churches see it as: We have the true Holy Spirit. *You* are the antichrists!)
- No JN emphasis on love of outsiders. Not like the synoptic "love your neighbor". Not even a prayer for someone who blasphemes the HS. JC doesn't pray for the world. Here the emphasis is loving his own. (See the strength *and* the weakness of individual communities witnesses to Christ?)

Acts of the Apostles / Lucan witness

- Pentecost
- Luke/Acts gives simplified picture of Peter taking Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome, and Paul taking it to the known "ends of the earth"
- Lucan community emphasizes the Spirit - could be called "Acts of the Holy Spirit"! The HS leads Paul, participates in the Deacon decision
- struggle between a more Jewish flavor of Christianity and a more Gentile one: contradictory faith/works verses again
- Celibacy "debate": RC takes Paul's personal standard for its priests. One can question the wisdom of it, but not the origins.

Paul's letters (and others, incl. Revelation)

- Col ~60s: the Church is the Body to be loved: more than an earthly body. Speaks of inheritance of the holy ones in the light >> Church Triumphant, Militant, and Suffering.
- Eph: Stainless bride: hypocritical? Compared to? Heaven is still future but partially realized.
- Pastorals trying to get churches organized and describe character traits. Would Paul have passed? (Titus 1:7)! Fortunately he was a missionary, not a pastor!
- Gnostics: 1 Tim 6:20. Paul foresaw the best defense against the heresies was an apostolic pedigree. Episcopal authority to silence wrong teachers (1 Tim 1:3). In 1 Cor 12 dispute about which charism is best. Paul always lists apostles first.
- Paul's dying wish to Timothy: appoint presbyters in each town
- Revelation: Persecution, both by Romans (charges of atheism against cult of the emperor, incest - "brothers/sisters" and cannibalism) and by Jews (for blasphemy); 64: Nero blames fire on Christians; Rev 13: Roman Empire / emperor worship are beastly puppets of Satan (13), Nero's name (666)

The Early Church beyond the Bible

From the Catacombs to Constantine

2nd Century (100s)

- 100: Didache: people vote for bishops; “priests” for presbyters; but by 110 with Ignatius of Antioch: single bishop over the presbyters
- Irenaus "Against the Heresies" 180. "Where are your bishops?" Still the framework, even for 1st Reformers!.
- Persecutions: Martyrdom strengthens faith: Justin Martyr, Perpetua; "Look how they loved one another"; Polycarp - burned alive - smell of bread. Ignatius (Peter's successor in Antioch) - would not recognize Roman imperial authority. Emp Trajan: “To the beasts!” “Let me be chewed like the wheat of God”
- Church proving stronger unity than imperial divinity
- mid 100s: Marcian - oldest proposed list for NT "but rid devilish Jewish references". (Orthodoxy squashed that idea). Other ways to fight the heresies: Councils, canon (4 gospels) and creed
- late 100s: "according to". Tradition to assign authors to originally *anonymous* gospels to reflect the authority behind each one, not the actual writer
- Catacombs in times of persecution (on and off, not constant); even Gnostic martyrs!

3rd Century (200s)

- Rigorists (not heretics, but schismatics):
- *Montanists*: "true spiritual Christians" v "carnal". Wanted to up the fast to "must" (Bishops: "excuse me?"); *Novation* v. Cornelius (successor to Peter): Novation: "No readmission of apostates (non-libeli holders)!" Cornelius: "readmit with penance"; St. *Cyprian* v. Pope Stephen - rebaptize apostates (Pope says no; later reconciled)
- Diocletian splits empire into E / W, each with emperor; subdivided into dioceses, controlled by imperial admins. Christianity assumed the structure.
- Syrian architects: Roman columns on Corinthian arches, emperor at center with 2 little caesars at side, flanked by soldiers, all in a field of paradise filled with putti.
- 295: Diocletian outlaws Maniche gnostic faith and their "abominable" scriptures tampering with what was "laid down by the ancients" (!)
- Diocletian worshipped as Jupiter, had NT books burned, but empire falling apart, dividing into provinces, earthly disgust > Egyptian Christians move into the desert

4th Century (300s)

- *Donatist* in N. Africa - no readmit of apostate clergy (again - yes, with penance)
- With no more martyrdom, asceticism comes in - Desert Fathers: St. Antony, St. Pachomius, St. Basil - cradled in Egypt, later spread to Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor - not a norm for all but a call to some; submitted to hierarchy. Monks loved the church, while others mistakenly thought they WERE the church
- biggest threat to orthodoxy: *Arianism*. Alexandrian priest Arius: Logos not equal to God; there was a time when the Son was not. Bishops divided. East emphasized 3: adoptionism and tritheism, while West emphasized 1: sabellianism / modal monarchianism.
- Constantine - monotheist "Sol Invictus" vision of Chi Rho - under this sign you shall conquer > accepts Christianity, ends persecutions; Edict of Milan 313; Sunday, Christmas, mother landmark sites, cut abuse of slaves, help poor
- 325 - calls Nicean council - "Begotten" clause; sitting and standing at Mass, readmit of apostates, celibacy of priests, 3 persons/1 substance, Dec. 25, calendar.
- Arian bishop Valens sways Constantine after his own council! Bishops like Athanasius - exiled but prevailed against Constantine; forges Rome's role.

The DaVinci code: Hollywood vs History

1. "Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicea...."
2. "At this gathering, many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon - the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of sacraments, and, of course, the *divinity* of Jesus."
3. "My dear, until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nevertheless. A mortal."
4. "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicea... a relatively close vote at that."
5. "Establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base...."
6. Constantine collated an entirely new Bible at the Council of Nicea, containing only books that speak of Jesus as divine. All books that portrayed him as human were burned.

1. Constantine presided over the council to ensure unity in the Church and in the Empire, but there was no "new" Christian tradition, as we'll see.
2. The date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of the sacraments, yes. The divinity of Jesus, not quite! They debated not how he was divine, but how that mixed with his being human at the same time.
3. My dear Dan Brown, until "that moment in history," nearly every Christian believed that Jesus was divine. "Jesus is Lord!" "My Lord and My God!", and from the NT on.
4. Read the gospels lately? The very reason given for his execution was the claim to be the Son of God. And the vote in question (*how* he was divine) was not even close.
5. LOL. There was no Vatican yet. And can you say Pax Romana? Cult of the Emperor? Even Constantine's later Arianism was overruled!
6. Wow. Nicea had nothing whatsoever to do with the Bible. No books were burned. And the "secret" books (ie Gnostic gospels) tend to *de-emphasize* his humanity, leaving out the crucifixion entirely.

The Early Church after Constantine

To infinity... and beyond

Epilogue

- Huge oval piazza mixing pagan and Christian rituals. Priests don same rich robes of late Roman courtiers.
- 337 Constantine buried as if 13th apostle. All monuments later attacked, rebuilt, embellished. Christian Roman Empire
- Eusebius - historian, first synoptic reference, listed the 27 books, clearly states non-auth gospels: Thomas, Matthias, Peter, Acts of John, Andrew and others - written well into 100s and 200s. "Nonapostolic" "obviously unorthodox" "impious, to be thrown out beyond the pale". Like Irenaus, depending on tradition of the Church to define the NT.
- Eusebius also had idea of 1 substance / 3 persons. Died from persecution in 310.
- Hippo 393 St. Augustine - time to shoot the canon: 73, not 66

Last thoughts...

- From Body to Mother Church: less impersonal. Even when a mother overdoes her role, you still love her. Some non-Cats don't understand the language of "giving your life for the church". But that's Pauline. It's what Christ did. If someone disgruntled starts smaller church, if it lasts it will take on its own institutionalism. Comes with the territory. Jesus without a Church? Strange Jesus! *"The great anomaly of Christianity is that only through institution can the message of a non-institutional Jesus be preserved."*
- Biblically speaking there is no single fully formed ecclesiology. Different writings to different communities with different emphases each with inherent strengths and weaknesses. The Pastorals and MT 16:18 come closest to a formed ecclesiology (and in my estimation the Catholic Church is the closest to that).
- John knows of sheep not of the fold, and his JC concern for unity "that they may be one". I doubt JC and Paul would approve of the current division of churches. Most of us (incl yours truly) are where we are because either of our parents or because we find it most closely expresses what we find in the Gospels or both. I saw most of my friends leave for better fellowship in the 70s. We caught on. I saw others leave for better preaching. I was attracted, but it got old. I remain Catholic because I don't consider myself divided from them any more, even if they consider themselves divided from me. I've seen the love of Christ in their eyes to know that, yes, we're one and the same.

We are one body, one body in Christ;
and we do not stand alone.

We are one body, one body in Christ;
and he came that we might have life.

On the rock of Peter, see my Church I build.
Come receive my spirit, with my gifts be filled.
For you are my body, you're my hands and feet.
Speak my word of life to everyone you meet.



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