

WEEK #4 “CHRISTIAN IDENTITY” (HANDOUT #1 OF 2)

History of Christianity—By Pastor Daren Erisman—March 25, 2009

KEY IDEA: **Identity** usually emerges from the struggle with a person, an idea or movement and involves both the taking on of certain elements as well as differentiation from them. Christians early on struggled with Jewish identity, Hellenistic forces and Roman reality. What emerged was a diversity of identities of which history would gradually prune and sort. Though one could cynically (and somewhat truthfully) say that it is only through the winners (survivors) of a particular view that it is determined what is “orthodox” and what is “heretical,” it is a little more complicated than that. In reality, orthodoxy seems only to formulate itself amidst its struggle with heresy. There is therefore an interdependency between the two as well as with other voices in the community. In struggling with and learning from what is “other” we discover and hone who we are—but always in the midst of community—and in the midst of God.

STRUGGLE WITH JEWISH IDENTITY

- **After the Jerusalem Council of 48 CE**
 - Allowing uncircumcised followers of Jesus to be part of the early Church was a momentous **change** and **concession**.
 - **For conservatives Jews**, this concession was a slippery slope for Christianity becoming an apostate sect for Jews who did not want to be Jews any more.
 - **James the Just** (brother or cousin of Jesus) asked Peter to change his position on eating with Gentiles.
 - **Peter** agreed, followed by **Barnabas**. Paul was enraged, calling them hypocrites.
 - James the Just tried to compromise with a kind of four-point version of the Law of Moses that would allow Gentile Christians to be clean enough to eat with.
 - **For Paul**, the calling of the Gentiles was God’s direction for the followers of Jesus.
 - Paul spent his days establishing churches all over Asia Minor and Europe.
 - Opponents of Paul toured his churches teaching the benefits of the law provoking Paul to write his letters of encouragement and chastisement to these new churches.
 - These **letters or epistles**, a side-product of his work, became the earliest written documents of what would become the New Testament.
 - **Paul returned to Jerusalem in 57 CE** with large monetary gift collected from his churches to give to James the Just’s church, which was in need at the time.
 - Paul was in Jerusalem for less than a week when he was recognized and a riot broke out. He was arrested, imprisoned in Caesarea for two years. Then claiming his status as a Roman citizen, he appealed to Caesar’s court and was **sent to Rome**.

PERSECUTION AND MOVEMENT TOWARDS CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

- **Not Jews, but Christians—The World takes notice**
 - Until now (c. 61 CE), Christians, as a Jewish sect, **had enjoyed Rome’s toleration towards Jews** (7% of the Roman Empire were Jews).
 - **However, tensions were building** between Jews and these newly identified “Christians” and there was tension with Romans as well.
 - **Tacitus**, the first Roman writer to notice Christianity described it as “a deadly

superstition,” and Christians as “a class hated for their abominations” and “hatred of the human race.”

- **Christians were decried as an affront to Roman family values:**
 - Christians were decried as “atheists” who denied the gods, refused to sacrifice, and shunned the city feasts. They met in private in the hours of darkness (likely planning revolution) and they participated in cannibalistic rituals such as sharing the body and blood of Christ amidst what was thought to be an incestuous orgy that Christians called the “Love Feast.”
- **In 62 CE**, the High Priest in Jerusalem had **James the Just stoned to death** along with other Christians. James’ devotion to the Law of Moses had not satisfied his being Christian.
- **In 64 CE**, Emperor **Nero blamed the Great fire of Rome on the Christians** (Nero had been accused of starting the fire himself in order to build a new palace and park)
 - Christians were rounded up in Rome and killed in unspeakable ways. Among the **victims were Peter and Paul.**
- **The Gospel of Mark is likely written in the 60s CE** during this tumultuous time with the gospels of Matthew and Luke following a decade later.
 - With persecution amidst the deaths of those first-hand witnesses of Jesus’ public ministry, what had been shared orally was now being written down.
 - These gospels would be shared in the churches over the years along with some of Paul’s letters and other texts from early Christian leaders. These writings would become the basis for the canon of the New Testament, but the selection of writings would not be determined until centuries later.
- **The final break with Judaism: The Jewish revolt and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE**
 - The Jewish revolt in **66 CE** against their Roman occupiers had been brewing for decades.
 - **In the spring 70 CE**, Roman legions marched on Jerusalem where 3 million Jewish pilgrims (according to Josephus) had come to celebrate Passover.
 - The entire city, including the Temple was demolished and according to Josephus, 1.1 million people were massacred in unspeakable ways.
 - **A pivotal moment for Judaism and Christianity**
 - The devastated Jews become a people of diaspora, persecution and people of little political power for centuries.
 - **The Jerusalem church is correspondingly wiped out and its emphasis on the Laws of Moses minimized within the larger Church.**
 - Important: As the Church solidifies through the next centuries; it is the influence of the Greek-speaking, Gentile-Christians outside of Jerusalem that will carry the day.
 - **Tensions escalate between Jews and Christians:**
 - The Jews regard Christians with contempt for staying neutral during the **66 - 70 CE revolt** with the Romans. Before the siege of Jerusalem had began, Symeon, Jesus’ cousin, led the Jerusalem Christians across the river Jordan to the town of Pella. Similarly in the **Kokhba Revolt (132 – 135 CE)** Christians refused to follow the popular Simon bar Kokhba who was thought to be the Jewish Messiah. When the revolt was crushed Jews and Christians were barred from Jerusalem.
 - For Christians, the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE was interpreted a number of ways.
 - Christians began to see the destruction as God’s judgment against the Jews for rejecting the true Messiah—which ironically occurred 40 years after Jesus’ crucifixion.

- They also remembered what Jesus had said, “In those days there will be suffering,” and “those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat.” (Mt. 24)

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- **TODAY:** Was Jesus talking about the “rapture” or the destruction of the Temple?
 - The ***Left Behind*** series of books and films is influenced by the Biblical interpretation of John Nelson Darby in the mid-1800’s, which was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible.
 - According to Darby and the *Left Behind* authors, Jesus will return twice: First, to retrieve the remnant of Christians who are considered true believers of the “true church” (popularly called the “rapture”)—an interpretation of Matthew 24:40-41. Second, after 7 years when the world falls into complete chaos and the anti-Christ takes over (popularly called the “tribulation”) Jesus returns, vanquishes the anti-Christ and the Judgment occurs.
 - Note: Mt 24:42—“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”
- **Period of intense Christian martyrdom under the Roman Emperors (64-311, 361-363)**
 - Nero (64-68)—Blames great fire of Rome on Christians; Peter & Paul executed
 - Domitian (81-96)—It is thought that the Book of Revelation written during persecution
 - Trajan (112-117)
 - Marcus Aurelius (161-180)
 - Septimus Severus (202-210)—Conversion to Judaism & Christianity forbidden
 - Maximinus the Thracian (235-38)
 - Decius (250-251)—Had to have a certificate showing sacrifice to Emperor
 - Valerian (257-59)—Clergy and later, aristocracy had to sacrifice to gods
 - Aurelian (270–275)
 - Diocletian and Galerius (303-311)
 - Julian the Apostate (361-363)—The last pagan Emperor; tried to bring back paganism

THE MAKING OF BISHOPS, HERESIES AND ORTHODOXY

- **The Making of Bishops**
 - Missionaries of the first churches chose leaders who usually led as a team.
 - There were a number of job titles including: apostle, bishop (literally “overseer”), deacon (literally “servant”)—also translated as “minister,” pastor, elder, evangelist, teacher and prophet. These titles were at first used almost interchangeably depending on the church, but by the end of the first century, each church had one bishop overseeing a team of elders and deacons.
 - Bishops gradually took on more power depending upon the size and prestige of their church.
 - With the demise of the Jerusalem church, other churches and their Bishops vied for influence. Churches such as in Antioch and Alexandria became important and, of course, Rome.
 - **The Bishop of Rome would become understood as the first among equals** referring to Christ’s words to Peter that he would be the rock upon which the Church would be built. Peter had worked closely with the church in Rome and was martyred in Rome (as well as Paul).
- **The Making of Heresies & Orthodoxy**

- Until the reign of Emperor Constantine (312-327 CE) and his leadership in gathering Bishops worldwide for the great councils such as at Nicaea in 325 CE, there was no definitive way for the Church to decide between a plurality of ideas that were emerging and circulating within the Christian Church.

CHRISTOLOGICAL HERESIES...Is Jesus Christ human, divine or both?

HUMAN — ORTHODOXY — DIVINE

EBIONITISM

Jesus only a human
[Jewish concept of God→Transcendent]

DOCETISM

Jesus only divine (just appeared human)
[Hellenistic concept of God (immutable)]
Marcion popularized Docetism

ADOPTIONISM

“dynamistic monarchism”
Human Jesus ascending to divinity
Spiritually and morally

MODALISM (SABELLIANISM)

“modalistic monarchism”
ONE God appeared as...
“Father” in O.T.
“Son” in Jesus
“Spirit” in the Church

SCHOOL OF ANTIOCH

Stress Historical Jesus in Synoptic Gospels
Historical-exegetical approach to Bible

SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA

Stress Liturgy
More speculative metaphysics

ARIANISM

God created the Logos (Son of God)
The created Logos assists God in creating world
[Influenced by Adoptionism]
Logos NOT EQUAL TO God

ATHANASIUS

The Logos must be God (Against Arianism)
How could the mediator between God humanity be less than fully divine or fully human?

COUNCIL OF NICAEA (325 AD)—Against Arianism

homoousios = “one substance” (the Father & Son together)
“eternally begotten of the Father...true God from true God”

APOLLINARIANISM

Logos truly God but did not become fully human
Logos takes place of human spirit

COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE (381 AD)—Against Apollinarianism

Affirmed the completeness of Christ's human nature
“If therefore the whole man was lost, it was necessary that that which was lost should be saved”

NESTORIANISM

Christ = **Two Natures**, Two Persons (*prosōpa*)
If two natures than must have two persons

MONOPHYSITISM (EUTYCHEANISM)

Christ = **One Nature**, **One Person**
Human nature absorbed into divine nature

CHALCEDON (451 AD)

Christ = **Two Natures**, **One Person** (*prosōpon*)
“truly God and truly Man”
“*homoousios with the Father as to his Godhead,*
and the same homoousios with us as to his manhood;”
“made known in two natures (which exist) without confusion, ...without separation;
the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union,
but rather the properties of each being preserved, and (both) concurring into

one Person (*prosōpon*) and one *hypostasis*—not parted or divided into two persons (*prosōpa*)”