

The Family Tree of Christianity

Session 1: Unity & Diversity in the Early Church (30 – 300 AD)

Overview of this Series

- 1) Unity & Diversity in the Early Church (30 – 300)
- 2) Councils, Creeds, and Schisms (300-700)
- 3) Roman Catholicism & Eastern Orthodoxy (700-1300)
- 4) The Protestant Reformation (1300-1700)
- 5) Christianity in America (1700-Present)

Cultural Context: The Greco-Roman World in the 1st Century

Classical Greece: great city-states (500 – 333 BC)

Great philosophers towards the end: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle

Alexander the Great conquers Near East (333 BC)

Greek Empire: West meets East

Hellenization: Greek cultural influence (especially in cities)

Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria

Tensions in Judah

Some Jews support Hellenization, others resist

Rise of Roman Empire

Founding of city of Rome circa 700 BC

Roman republic begins in 509 BC: Senate

500 – 250 BC: Roman expansion

Controlled Italy, Spain, Sicily, N. Africa, Carthage, Greece

133 – 30 BC: long series of civil wars

63 BC: Romans under general Pompey conquer Judah

44 BC: Julius Caesar becomes dictator back in Rome (killed)

Herod the Great is appointed as “king” of Judea (37-4 BC)

30 BC: Octavian ends Republic, begins Empire

Receives imperial title Caesar *Augustus* by Senate

Pax Romana = 200 years of peace (27 BC – 180 AD)

Roman roads and aqueducts

Roman Empire built on Hellenized world

Greeks: philosophy, science, and arts

Romans: administration, government, law

Latin language in West, Greek in East

Jesus of Nazareth

4 Gospels: our major source of information about him

Born at end of reign of Herod the Great (37-4 BC)

During reign of Augustus Caesar (Roman Emperor)

Jesus born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth

Lk. 3: baptized in 15th year of Tiberius Caesar = 27-29 AD

Influence of John the Baptist

Proclaimed “reign of God” (word & deed), repent, “good news”

Did not announce or form a new “religion” or “institution”

Came to renew God’s people Israel: include the Gentiles

Called, gathered, formed a community of disciples
Men and women: sinners all
Formed a leadership of “Twelve” out of them: renewing Israel
Lk 10 also mentions a leadership group of “seventy”
Jesus sent (*apostolein*) them out to do his work of kingdom building

Did Jesus intend to found a “Church”
Greek word *ekklesia* (“church”) appears in gospels only twice
Mt. 18:17 – refers to local community
Mt. 16:18 – “Upon this rock I will build my church”
Why was Jesus so silent about forming a “church”?
Not interested in founding new religion/structure
Jesus announced the immanence of the Reign of God
The great “turning of the ages” announced by the prophets
Yet, he foresaw interim period between his death/resurrection and coming of Kingdom

Jesus gradually revealed his identity to his disciples
Called God “*Abba*” (Father): Jesus as unique “Son”
Reinterpreted Law on his own authority: “...but I say to you”
“Who do you say that I am?”
Peter: “You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God” (Mt 16)
Jesus’ preferred title for himself was “Son of Man”

Passion and death in Jerusalem: circa 30 AD
Jesus saw this as his destiny: key act in coming of God’s reign
Last Supper: Passover context
Gethsemane and arrest by priestly cohort
Trial before priests and Sanhedrin: religious crime
Trial before Pilate: political crime, revolutionary
Scourging, crucifixion, burial: presence of women, Magdalene

Resurrection: empty tomb and appearances
The “Eleven” finally began to understand Jesus’ true identity
He sent them out to proclaim the Good News (Gospel)
Breathed the Holy Spirit upon them
They would proclaim the kingdom by proclaiming Jesus as Christ, Son of God, and Lord: in word & deed
Early Church gradually discovered its identity & mission
Paul’s churches more focused on charismatic gifts than structure
Later NT writings begin to focus more on church structures
If Church is in it for the long haul, need for structures to ensure faithful handing on of Good News

What Did the Early Church Look Like?

The New Testament (NT) reveals unity & diversity
Circa 30 AD: Jesus died and rose
30 – 65: oral preaching of the apostles (Good News)
Beginning in Jerusalem and spreading into the Greco-Roman world
Acts of the Apostles tells some of this story: but written later (80’s)
Paul as the great apostle to the Gentiles
50 - 65: letters of Paul (written to different early communities)
7 of these are undisputedly by Paul (Rom, 1-2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thes, Phlm)

Glimpse of Pauline churches 50 – 65 AD

6 of the letters are disputed by scholars (2 Thes, Col, Eph, 1-2 Tim, Titus)

Development of Pauline churches after his death (65 AD)

1-2 Timothy & Titus may be as late as 110 AD

Circa 70 AD: Mark as earliest written gospel

Written to particular community, by unique author from that community

80 – 90 AD: gospels of Matthew and Luke written

Used Mk as main source: included Jesus traditions from their communities

Luke added a companion volume about early Church: Acts

90 – 100 AD: gospel of John written

Very different from other gospels: unique community tradition

Letters of John (1, 2, 3) give glimpse of Johannine communities circa 110 AD

Other NT writings:

“Letter” to the Hebrews

Letters of James & Jude: tradition from relatives of Jesus

1-2 Peter: tradition from Peter

Revelation: visionary work from persecuted community circa 95 AD

Unity among NT writings & their respective churches

From their common focus on Jesus as the Christ

Who he is and what he has done for the world: salvation

Written mostly for “insiders”: believers & churches

How to faithfully hand on Tradition about Jesus and salvation

Especially after the original eyewitnesses (apostles) passed away

What did Jesus say/do about unity in his community?

Jn 17:20-23 --- Jesus prays for unity, that the world may believe in him

He established basic leadership structure of Twelve: Peter as head

He poured forth the Spirit upon the community

Diversity among NT writings & their respective churches

From differing community locations, situations, histories, etc.

Unique perspectives of the authors: emphases, concerns

Jesus did not leave clear blueprint or how-to manual for Church

He established basic leadership structure of the Twelve: Peter as head

But no mention of pope, bishops, priests, deacons, councils, etc.

He promised that the Spirit would guide the Church into all truth (Jn 14)

But discerning the promptings of the Holy Spirit is tricky

All the diverse communities had to deal with similar problem

How to faithfully continue on after death of founding eyewitnesses?

Their varying answers would be repeated throughout the ages

Differences among churches today lies in the proportionate arrangement of these answers

Diverse Answers: Unity & Diversity

Mark: suffering and crucified savior heals broken sinners

Peter and the Twelve are portrayed as broken and “clueless”

Matthew: importance of Law, respect for authority

Special interest in the authority of Peter

Luke-Acts: the intervening power of the Holy Spirit

John: individual connection to Jesus (vine & branches)

“Love one another as I have loved you”
All are equal as disciples: John never uses title “apostle”
Letters of John show earliest evidence of schism: “anti-Christ”

Letters of Paul

In most of his letters he urges people to be united
Galatians: he urges return to his original “gospel” (justification)
Also baptism and his own apostolic authority
1 Corinthians: church as body of Christ (diverse yet one)
Eucharist, charisms: early hierarchy of apostles, prophets, & teachers
The most important thing is love
Romans: further development of “justification by faith”

Colossians & Ephesians (disputed authorship by Paul)
Emphasis on the Church as a whole: holy “bride of Christ”
No reflection on the church at the local level: diverse

Pastoral Letters (1-2 Tim, Titus): disputed authorship
Emphasis on church structure and office: bishop/presbyters, deacons
Emphasis on orthodox body of “doctrine”
Silencing of new ideas and “itching ears”
Clear distinction between the teachers and the taught

Revelation: focus on the end times

The rulers of state are portrayed as agents of Satan
Believers are united by their sense of being persecuted

New Testament period: 50 – 110 AD

These writings would gradually gain status as “Scripture”
Alongside “Old Testament”
There were many other Christian writings from this period
The Church and its leaders had to discern which were normative and inspired: “canon”

Growth and Spread of Church after the New Testament Period

Good News was spread at first mostly in cities

From Jerusalem north and west: to Asia Minor, Greece, Italy
Roman peace and Roman roads enabled this

Less known story of spread east beyond Roman Empire
Acts of Thomas: India

Also south and west into Egypt and North Africa
Spread by great apostles and leaders: but also ordinary folk

Apostolic Fathers: writings from immediate post-NT

Some of these are actually within late-NT period

1st Letter of Clement

1 Clement: from church of Rome to church of Corinth

Same factionalism that Paul dealt with in Corinth circa 57 AD

Flared up again circa 95 AD: jealousies and rivalries

Younger men deposed established leadership

Church of Rome attempts to mediate

Earliest joining of Peter & Paul at Rome

Ch. 5: veiled reference to Peter & Paul’s recent martyrdom in Rome

Memories of persecution in Rome by Emperor Nero (64 AD)
Reference to current persecution: Emperor Domitian (95 AD) (*Revelation*)

1 Clement emphasizes succession of authority: proper order
Still two-tiered ministry at the time in the church in Rome
Presbyter/bishops and deacons
Like Pastoral Epistles no distinction between presbyters & bishops
Collegial form of church leadership
Three-tiered structure wouldn't develop in Rome until circa 150 AD
Single bishop, group of presbyters, group of deacons
Reference to presbyter/bishops "offering the gifts" (eucharist)
Early tradition claims Clement as 3rd "bishop" of Rome
But no evidence of single bishop in Rome until circa 150 AD

Ignatius of Antioch (circa 70-110 AD)

7 Letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch: 105 AD
Arrested in Antioch: sent to Rome under guard for execution
On his way he wrote 5 letters to local churches in Asia Minor
Sent letter ahead to church in Rome
Sent letter to his friend Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna
He was presumably thrown to lions in Coliseum of Rome

Ignatius' main concerns:

False teachers in the church: Judaizers and docetists
He affirms Christ's true divinity and true humanity
Unity and structure of the churches
Mono-episcopate key to ensuring unity & orthodoxy
Three-fold ministry: bishop, presbyters, deacons
In his letter to Rome he says nothing of bishops
Church in Rome still under a group of presbyter-bishops?
He also uses some eucharistic language
First use of word catholic to describe church (*Smyrna* 8)
Gk. *cata-holos* = "according to the whole"
Became term commonly used to describe the whole Church, as opposed to individual local churches

Polycarp of Smyrna (circa 69-155 AD)

Bishop of Smyrna in 107 AD
His friend and mentor Ignatius wrote to him on way to Rome
155-160: Polycarp dies martyr's death at age 86
Key link in continuity of apostolic faith
Irenaeus (circa 180) says Polycarp was a disciple of apostle John in Ephesus
Friend of Ignatius
Young Irenaeus knew Polycarp

Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians
Shows extensive familiarity with OT and writings which would become NT (even *1 Clement*)
Written soon after Ignatius' death
He inquires of the Philippians of Ignatius' fate in Rome
Key theme: orthodoxy and orthopraxy
Uses word "catholic" for Church (ch. 8)

The Didache
(The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)

Known of from ancient references in Church Fathers

1873: Greek priest discovers ancient manuscript

Who wrote it, where, and when still mystery

Ch. 1-6: “Two Ways” of life and death

Basic instruction in Christian life, preparation for baptism?

Ch. 6-15: Church practice and order

Baptism, fasting, prayer: earliest known Eucharistic prayers

Charismatic order, but evolving toward more structure

Wandering prophets & teachers

But each community is to elect its own presbyter/bishops

Dating the Didache (60-150)

Very difficult, no historical references

Transition from charismatic to more structured ministry

Perhaps glimpse of church in Syria circa 100 AD

Prior to 3-tiered structure at time of Ignatius of Antioch (110 AD)

Gnostic Christianity

Greek *gnosis* = “knowledge”

Not intellectual, but spiritual or mystical knowledge: elite

Group of religious movements circa 80-200 AD

Arose in eastern part of Roman Empire: Syria, Babylonia

Alongside of Christianity, or through it?

“Parasitic” upon Christianity

Combination of Greek philosophy, oriental mythology, Christianity?

Sectarian mentality: unmasks pretensions of “orthodoxy”

Sources of our information about gnosticism

Early church writers who fought it: Irenaeus

1945: discovery of codices at Nag Hammadi, Egypt

The Gnostic “myth”: story of reality

All reality originally spiritual

Supreme Being generated (emanated) many spiritual beings (eons)

One eon, the Creator, fell into error: created our world

Often equated with God of Old Testament: creates men and women

Some men and women have sparks of divinity within them

These “spirituals” are ignorant of their heavenly origin

So God sends down redeemer to bring them *gnosis*

Christ is this heavenly redeemer: but gnostic Christ did not truly become flesh, suffer, die, and rise bodily

At death the elect escape prison of body, return to heaven

Dualism: body and material world are evil trap

Immortality of soul: not resurrection of body

Christian Apocrypha (100-250)

Greek *apocrypha* = “hidden writings”

100’s of works similar to NT writings in form

Pseudo-Pauline: lost letters of Paul

Acts of various apostles: John, Peter, Paul, Thomas
Career after Pentecost, travels to distant lands, martyrdom
Apocalypses (Paul, Thomas): next world revealed through visions
Gospels: many among Nag Hammadi find (1945): Gospel of Thomas
Most of these date to the 3rd century AD
Gospel of Thomas may be from 2nd century: gnostic influence?

Marcionism

Marcion of Sinope (northern Asia Minor): son of bishop
Marcion developed dislike of Judaism & material world
Circa 140 he came to Rome: absorbed gnostic teachings
Excommunicated by Church of Rome in 144 AD

Marcion's teaching

God of OT is evil creator of material world
God of justice, vengeance: God of the Jews
Physical body and world evil: rejected marriage
God of NT is loving Father of Jesus Christ
God of love and grace for all people
Christ only "appeared" human (not subject to Creator)
This would later be termed "Docetism"
Not truly born of woman: suddenly appeared
Experiences and suffering merely apparent, not real
Marcion rejected bodily resurrection

Marcion first to develop Christian canon: list of sacred writings
Rejected OT: witnessed to a lesser God
Thus NT writings favoring continuity with Judaism had to be rejected
Marcion's NT had only Luke (properly edited) and 10 letters of Paul
He believed only Paul had not corrupted Jesus' message
Marcionite churches: more dangerous to orthodoxy than gnostics
Set up bishops and NT canon, baptism
Used water, not wine, at communion: ascetic
Movement continued until 4th century

The Apologists

No systematic persecution until mid-3rd century
Illegal to be Christian, but not sought out
Localized: depended on good will of neighbors
How to gain neighbors' good will?
"Apologists"
Strove to refute rumors and misconceptions
Base rumors of commoners: incest, cannibalism
Refined critique: unreasonable, new (not ancient)
Class prejudice: Christians seen as low class & ignorant
Spoke to outside world, rather than inner
Christianity as reasonable in Greco-Roman world

Justin Martyr (d. 165)

Born in Palestine circa 100 AD, of Greek parents

Passionate search for truth & meaning when young

Studied various philosophies: liked Plato best (religious and mystical side)

Conversion: while walking & meditating along beach

Wise old man exposes his over-confidence in philosophy

Points him to OT, prophets, and Christ

Gave his whole life to newfound Christian faith

Saw Christianity as the “true philosophy”

What philosophers had searched for in the past, God has now fully revealed in Christ

Logos became incarnate in Christ (John 1)

Opened school of Christian philosophy: Ephesus and Rome

Justin's *First Apology*

Addressed to emperor Antoninus Pius

Tries to clear up rumor and misconceptions

Argues Christianity's higher morals and reason

Glimpse of baptism and eucharist circa 150 AD

Irenaeus of Lyons (circa 130-202)

Born in Asia Minor (Smyrna?) circa 130 AD

Disciple of Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna)

Migrated to Lyons in southern Gaul (France)

Ordained presbyter, sent to Rome with message

While there persecution broke out in Lyons & Vienne

His bishop, Photinus, perished with many others

Irenaeus elected bishop: he was a pastor at heart

Key work is *Against Heresies* (*Adversus Haereses*)

Written to combat gnosticism & Marcionism

Stresses fundamental Christian doctrines

Creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, resurrection

Refuted gnostic claims to secret knowledge by appealing to apostolic succession and tradition (NT)

Stressed unity of old & new covenants: Christ fulfillment of prophets

Irenaeus and developing New Testament canon

Gnostics claimed “secret” unwritten traditions in addition to writings of apostles

Irenaeus saw need for fixed canon: first whose NT nearly corresponds to eventual canon (quotes every NT work except 3 John, James, & 2 Peter)

Given these accepted “public” works, why would apostles hand on “secret” teachings?

Apostolic succession

He claims each church of apostolic foundation could trace a line of successors (Corinth, Ephesus, etc.)

Only gives us Rome's list (1st – 12th “bishop”)

Idealized? – 6th bishop named Sixtus

Churches should be in agreement with the church where Peter and Paul were martyred

Reference to eucharistic realism: incarnational

Irenaeus contrasts the one true Church with endless gnostic variations

Unchanging monolithic Church of orthodoxy, standing on rock of apostolic tradition

Very influential vision of church in developing Catholic tradition

Montanism

Sect founded by prophet Montanus circa 160 AD

In city of Pepuza, Phrygia (western Asia Minor)

Believed prophetic spirit descended on him

Spoke as God, not for God: "I am the Father, Son, Spirit"

Very rigorist: celibacy, fasting, relished persecution

Fanatics, not heretics: tongues, visions

"New Jerusalem" would come soon in Pepuza

Often called themselves the "New Prophecy"

Saw OT as age of Father, NT as age of Christ

Now New Prophecy announces age of Spirit

Second Coming immanent

Excommunicated by church synod in Asia Minor

Montanists survived in Phrygia & Africa until 5th century

Tertullian (circa 160-230)

Born in Carthage of pagan parents

Father was captain of a Roman legion

Became a reputable lawyer

Converted to Christianity circa 193 AD

First Christian author to write in Latin

Latin replaces Greek as common language of West

Three periods

Catholic: 193-206

Semi-Montanist (no break with Catholic Church): 206-212

Montanist: 212-230

Lawyer's defense of faith (rhetorical)

Not just defensive, but offensive against pagan culture

Radical opposition between faith and culture

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"

Christian life as battle with the devil

Christian must keep separate from idolatrous world

This rigorism eventually led him to Montanism

Saw larger Church & its leaders as compromised with world

Famous quotes

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"

"I believe because it is absurd"

"See how they [Christians] love one another"

"*Apology*": defense of Christianity

Christians are not a threat to the Empire

"*Prescription Against the Heretics*": One true Church has right to interpret Scripture: apostolic succession

"*Against Marcion*": attacks Marcion and the Gnostics

"*Against Praxeas*"

He saw Praxeas as a modalist: Father, Son, and Spirit as three "modes" of one God

Tertullian developed language of three *persons* in one *substance*

Coined the term *trinitas* = Trinity

Set the Trinitarian language of Western theology