

Lesson 5
The Early Church To
Early Reformation

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Class Schedule

- **The Ancient Church (100 – 313 A.D.)**
- 1. Historical Backgrounds and the World of the Early Church
- 2. The Church in Jerusalem and the Mission to the Gentiles
- 3. 1st & 2nd Century Conflicts with the State
- 4. Early Apologists
- 5. **Defining the Faith**
- 6. Christian Life

Defining the Faith

Lesson 5

“Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself.”

- Irenaeus of Lyons

Early Threats to Christianity

Gnosticism

Gnosticism

- Of all the differing interpretation of Christianity nothing seemed as dangerous as Gnosticism.
- This was not a well defined organization in competition with the church; rather, it was a vast & vague movement that existed both within the church & outside Christianity.
- After the fall of the Temple some Jews embraced a form of Gnosticism.
- Gnosticism incorporated the name of Christ & other items for the Judo-Christian tradition into its diverse systems.

Gnosticism

- Gnosticism was not a movement, but a family of ideas without strict orthodoxy from one location to the next.
- For centuries practically the only sources that historians had for the study of Christian Gnosticism were the descriptions of the Christian writers.
- It was not until 1945 that Gnostic writings were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. It was not until the 1970's that these writings became generally known. The latest discovery was in 2006.
- Most held that their gnosis (knowledge) was a secret, therefore even their own writings leave historians to wonder as to their worship & community life.

Common Traits of Gnosticism

- The Greek word gnosis means knowledge.
- They possessed a special, mystical knowledge, reserved for those with true understanding.
- All matter is evil.
- A human being is in reality an eternal spirit that has been imprisoned in a body (which is evil).
- The goal was to escape from the body & this material world in which we were exiled.
- The world is not our true home, but an obstacle to the salvation of the spirit.
- Everything was once spiritual.
- One supreme being created several spiritual beings.
- One of these spiritual beings fell into error & created the material world.
- In order to achieve liberation a spiritual messenger must come to this world, to waken us from our dream or spiritual confusion.

Common Traits of Gnosticism

- Since Christ is a heavenly messenger, and since body & matter are evil, Christian Gnostics rejected the notion that Christ had a body like ours.
- Many distinguished between the heavenly “Christ” and the earthly “Jesus.”
- Most denied the birth of Jesus.
- Several Gnostics did not believe that all humans had a spirit. Of those that did, the imprisonment sparks the spirit of the ones they called “spiritual.” They would be saved & return to the spiritual realm.
- They must learn the secret knowledge of the truly illumined, that is, the Gnostic teachers.

How Should a Gnostic Life be Lived

- Gnostics gave two divergent answers regarding how life should be lived:
- Since the body is the prison of the soul, control the body.
- Since spirit is by nature good & cannot be destroyed, leave the body to its own devices and let it follow the guidance of its own passions.

Marcion

Marcion

- Marcion's father was a bishop of Sinope on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea.
- Marcion profoundly disliked Judaism & the material world.
- He went to Rome in about 144 and gathered a following. Eventually the church at large came to the conclusion that his doctrines contradicted several fundamental points of Christian doctrine.
- He then founded his own church that lasted for several centuries (5th century) as a rival to the orthodox church.

Marcion's Teachings

- The world is evil, therefore its creator must be evil or ignorant or both.
- God the father of Jesus is not the same as Yahweh, the God of the OT.
- Hebrew scriptures are indeed inspired by a god, although this is Yahweh, and not the Supreme Father.
- Yahweh was an arbitrary god and vindictive.
- Far above Yahweh was the god of the Christians.

Marcion's Teachings

- This god did not seek to be obeyed, but to be loved. God was not judgmental.
- Jesus was not born of Mary since this would make Him subject to Yahweh.
- Marcion set the Hebrew scriptures aside.
- He created his own list of books that he considered true Christian scriptures. He used the books of Paul & Luke but removed any OT references. He considered OT references to be the work of Judaizers seeking to subvert the original message.

The Response to Heresy

The Response to Heresy

- When early Christians spoke of “Scripture” they meant the Hebrew Scriptures. Usually the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew OT.
- The church at large began to compile a list of sacred Christian writings. This was not done in a formal meeting (i.e. council or special meeting).
- What actually happened was that a consensus developed gradually.
- There was no question that the Hebrew OT was part of the Christian canon.
- Christian faith was the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, not a sudden new vision from heaven.

The New Testament

- The Gospels were the first to attain general recognition.
- Early Christians were well aware of the differences between these Gospels. That is precisely one of the main reasons why they insisted in using more than one book. This was a direct response to the challenge of Marcion & Gnosticism.
- As contact among the churches developed, they began to share their manuscripts & traditions.
- The acceptance & use of a variety of Gospels came to be seen as a sign of the unity of the church.

The New Testament

- The church at large sought to show that its doctrines were not based on the supposed witness of a single apostle or Gospel, but on the consensus of the entire apostolic tradition. – as opposed to a few holding all & secrete knowledge.
- It is true that by the 4th & 5th centuries there are perhaps hundreds of other Christian writings. It is not true that such writings were trying to find their way into the canon. Even their own proponents rejected the notion that there could be more than one inspired Gospel.
- The church at large never rejected the additional Christian writings. They simply didn't include them in the canon because they were not considered to be inspired.

The New Testament

- By the end of the 2nd century the core of the canon was established: the 4 Gospels, Acts & Paul's Epistles.
- There were no consensus until a later date on the shorter books of the NT; but there was also little to no debate either.
- By the second half of the 4th century a complete consensus was achieved regarding the books to be included in the NT.
- There was also consensus on which writings were not to be included.

The New Testament

- The NT canon was not decided by a decision making body, but it was a matter of consensus. This shows that very few considered this to be a burning issue to be solved.
- In this entire process the guiding concern was not theology in the abstract sense, but that of worship.
- The key question was, is this book to be read when the church gathers for worship?

Creeds a Response to Heresies

- Scholars have classified ancient creeds into “families” and such families can be used to trace the relations among the various churches. (i.e. a mother congregation to a daughter congregation)
- One of the main uses of creeds was in baptism.

An Example

- “Do you believe in **God**, the Father almighty?
- Do you believe in **Christ Jesus**, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the Virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?
- Do you believe in the **Holy Ghost**, the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?”

Application

- Since one was baptized in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Ghost these questions were posed as a test of true belief in the Trinity.
- The Greek word translated “almighty” literally means “all ruling” - There is nothing, certainly not in the material world, which falls outside of God’s rule.
- Jesus rules over this world and over all reality, and who is the creator of all things. Marcion’s & the Gnostic’s image of Christ was very different from this.

Application

- “of Mary the Virgin” was not used to stress the virgin birth - it affirmed the fact that Jesus was born, and did not simply appear on earth, as heretics claimed.
- Pontius Pilate is not there to put blame on the governor, but to date the event, thus insisting that it was a historical, datable event.
- “was crucified....died, & rose again” – affirmed that Jesus will return “to judge” – a notion that Marcion would not agree with.

Application

- “Holy Church” – compared to the Gnostics with their many schools & Marcion with his own church, Christians were beginning to underscore the authority of the church.
- “resurrection of the flesh” – rejection of any notion that the flesh is evil or of no consequence.

Creeds

- The Apostles' Creed, the Baptismal Creed of Caesarea, and some other creeds of the same family were the basis of the Nicene Creed. - We will look at that later.

Authority

- The NT & various creeds were valuable in the struggle against heresy, but the final debate came to the issue of the authority of the church.
- This is important, not simply because someone had to decide who was right and who was wrong, but because of the very nature of the issues at stake.
- All agreed that the true message was the one taught by Jesus.
- The Gnostics claimed that they had some secret access to that original message, through a succession of secret teachers.

Apostolic Succession

- The debate was over authority of the church against the claims of the heretics. Therefore, the notion of apostolic succession became very important.
- During the 2nd century those who could claim direct apostolic succession unanimously denied the existence of any secret teaching. Therefore, the Gnostic claim of a secret tradition in which they were entrusted is false.
- Some churches tried to show apostolic lineage in order to establish authority from generation to generation. A claim that the heretic groups could not.

Apostolic Succession

- Present day historians do not find such list trustworthy, for there was not a First Bishop in the sense of a single head of the local church, but rather a collegiate group of officials that were called bishops, elders and sometimes presbyters.
- Late in the 2nd century the principle of apostolic succession was inclusive rather than exclusive vs. the closed & secret tradition of the Gnostic teachers.
- This offered an open & shared tradition that based its claim, not on a single favorite disciple of Jesus, but on the witness of the apostles and the churches founded by them.
- Bishops were elected by the faithful in each city.
- It soon became a custom that after each such election that a prospective bishop would send a statement of faith to neighboring bishops, who would then vouch for his orthodoxy. As a sign of this several of those neighboring bishops would participate in the consecration of their new colleague.

The Universal Church

- The word “catholic” means “universal,” but it also means “according to the whole.”
- To distinguish itself from the various heretical groups the ancient church began calling itself “catholic.”
- This title underscored both its universal nature and the inclusiveness of the witness on which it stood. It was a church “according to the whole,” that is according to the total witness of all the apostles & all the evangelists.
- The Gnostic groups were not “catholic” because they could not claim this broad foundation.
- This was a warranty of the church’s orthodoxy, and this was the reason why “catholic” eventually became a synonym for “orthodox” or “correct teaching.”
- It would be centuries later for the word catholic to be centered on the person & authority of a single apostle, Peter.

The Necessity for Defense

- Church leaders who opposed the movements discussed in today's lesson, did not see themselves as innovators but as defenders of teaching that had been handed down to them from the apostles & their associates.
- These were standards of belief & common practices contained in the earliest apostolic teaching.



Bonus Notes

Persecution in the 3rd Century

Persecution in the 3rd Century

Bonus Notes

“The present confession of faith before the authorities has been the more illustrious & honorable because the suffering was greater. The struggle intensified, and the glory of those who struggled grew with it.”

- Cyprian of Carthage

Introduction

- In the last years of the 2nd century, the church enjoyed relative peace. The Empire was involved in civil wars & defending its borders against barbarians. Therefore, scant attention was given to Christians.
- Trajan's law was still in force (don't seek out, but deal with it when you have to).
- Whatever persecution existed was local & sporadic.
- In the 3rd century things changed. Trajan's policy was still enforce. But over & beyond there were new policies that deeply affected the life of the church.
- The Emperors who created & applied these new polices were Septimius Severus and Decius.

Septimius Severus

- Severus (193 – 211) was able to put down civil wars, but a fragile peace was the norm all over the Empire.
- The Emperor felt the need for religious harmony, and settled on a policy promoting a shared religion.
- His plan was to bring all his subjects together under the worship of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun), and to incorporate it over the various religions & philosophies then in practice.
- All gods were to be accepted, as long as a person acknowledged the Sun reigned above them all.
- Because of their growth, in 202 Severus outlawed Christianity & Judaism under penalty of death.

Septimius Severus

- The net result was an increase in local persecutions akin to those of the 2nd century.
- This new persecution was aimed more directly at new converts & their teachers. This was especially true for teachers who sought new converts.
- During this period we find writings regarding martyrdom in arenas. (*Martyrdom*)
- After Caracalla (211 – 217) succeeded Severus persecution was mostly limited to North Africa.
- Under Emperor Maximin (235 - 238) there was a very brief persecution in Rome.

Note

- During this time the number of Christians actually increased.
- There are records of some important families converting to Christianity.

Decius

- When Decius (249 -251) assumed the imperial purple the barbarians beyond Rome's borders were increasingly their incursions into the Empire & were growing more & more daring. There was also a serious economic crisis. The ancient traditions associated with the classical time of Roman civilization were generally forgotten.
- To a traditional Roman such as Decius, it seemed obvious that one of the reasons for all this was the people had abandoned the ancient gods.
- Therefore, if Rome's glory was to be restored it was necessary to restore its ancient religion.

Decius

- The new persecution was not about rumors of Christian immorality, or of punishment the obstinacy of those who refuse to worship the Emperor.
- This was an entire religious campaign for the restoration of ancestral religion – a religion that was being undermined by Christianity's continued growth.
- As Decius saw it, the survival of Rome itself was at stake.

Decius

- Decius' persecution was very different from earlier ones. The Emperor's purpose was not to create martyrs, but apostates.
- The exemplary deaths of Christians in those early years had moved many who had witnessed them. Therefore, persecution by martyrdom seemed to encourage the spread of Christianity.
- If, instead of suffering martyrdom, Christians were forced to recant, this would deprive Christianity of the heroic witness of the martyrs.

Decius

- According to Decius' plan Christians were not sought out to be persecuted, but rather to offer sacrifice to the gods and to burn incense before a statue of Decius. None compliance resulted in torture instead of death. This removed the glory of martyrdom.
- If they complied they were given a certificate attesting to the fact.
- Anyone without a certificate one would be considered outlaws who disobeyed imperial command and were severely tortured.
- This was no longer a sporadic or local persecution, but one that was systematic and universal.
- As proof of widespread application, certificates of having scarified have survived from remote parts of the Empire.

Decius

- One result of this new persecution was the new title of “Confessor” appearing within the church.
- Since there were fewer martyrs (those who died for their faith). Those who held to the faith during torture was considered “Confessors,” and highly respected by their fellow Christians.
- Overall this systemic persecution was rather brief, by 251 Gallus succeeded Decius and his policies were set aside.

A New Question for the Church

- Due to Decius' persecution the question arose about what to do with those who had "lapsed." Those who had in one way, or another, had weakened during this persecution.
- Not all "lapsed" (or fell) in the same way. Some ran to offer sacrifice as soon as they were told to. Some had purchased fraudulent certificates. Others had weakened for a time, but then reaffirmed their faith and rejoined the church during the persecution.

A New Question for the Church

- Some (mostly N. Africa) thought that only Confessors should have the authority to restore the fallen.
- Some thought that only Bishops should have this authority.
- Others felt the fallen should be accepted back only after severe rigor.
- Others felt the fallen should be restored by a simple renewing of their confession of faith in Christ.

A New Question for the Church

- The controversy divided the church in parts of N. Africa. A meeting of the area Bishops (a synod) was called to determine the matter.
- The meeting ended the controversy, but the schism continued for sometime to come.
- This may have been the 1st time the question of a need for purity vs. forgiving love as a characteristic of the church was recorded.
- The question of what to do when the Baptized sinned divided the Western church repeatedly. It was out of this concern that the entire penitent system developed. Much later, the Protestant Reformation was in large measure a protest against that system.