

Lesson 6

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**

Christian Life

Lesson 6

“....not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth;....God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong”

- I Chor. 1: 26 - 27

Christian Life

- Since most early surviving documents deal with the work & thought of leaders of the church, or with persecution, there is always the tendency to forget that these writings present only a partial picture, saying little of the rank & file, or their religious practices.
- When one attempts to reconstruct the rest of the picture, one is faced with an almost total lack of sources, and must be content with piecing together bits of information.

Social Origins of Early Christians

- “Christians were ignorant folk whose teaching took place, not in schools nor in open forums, but in kitchens, shops & tanneries” - Celsus
- Wise scholars among Christians were the exception rather than the rule.
- The vast majority of Christians during the first three centuries belonged to the lower echelons of society.
- It was mostly out of the rank & file that legends & writings arose with a very different tone from that of the Christian scholars. The miraculous plays a central role in these writings, even to the point of ridiculous.
- However, this naivety should not lead one to underestimate those common Christians.

Worship

Worship

- Worship was one point at which Christians of all classes had a common experience.
- The main purpose of meeting on the first day of the week was not to call the faithful to repentance, or make them aware of the magnitude of their sins, but rather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus & the promise of which resurrection was the seal.
- Early communion services did not focus attention on the events of the trial, punishment & death of Jesus, but rather on the resurrection & the dawning of a new age. Christians gathered to celebrate that dawning & to become participants in it.

Worship

- Through most of its history, the Christian church has seen in communion its normal & highest act of worship.
- Only after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century did it become common practice in the Protestant churches to focus their worship on preaching rather than on communion.

Communion

- The most remarkable characteristic of those early communion services was that they were celebrations. The tone was one of joy and gratitude, rather than sorrow & repentance.
- In the beginning, communion was part of an entire meal. Believers brought what they could, and after the common meal there were special prayers over the bread & the wine.
- Though the “Lord’s Supper” took place at a meal setting it was distinct from the normal meal.
- By the beginning of the 2nd century the common meal was being set aside.
- Perhaps this was due to fear of persecution, or in order to quell the rumors about sexual “love feasts,” or simply because the growing number of believers made it necessary.
- Two of the earliest witnesses we have regarding Christian worship comes Pliny the Younger of Bythinia and Justin Martyr.

Justin's Writing

- “The day that is commonly called Sunday all those (believers) who live in the cities or the fields gather, and in their meetings as much as time allows is read from the memoirs of the apostles or from the writing of the prophets. Then, once the reader is through, the one presiding offers a verbal exhortation, urging us to follow these beautiful examples. Immediately after this, we all stand as one & raise our prayers, after which – as I have already said – bread, wine, and water are offered, and the president, as he is able, also sends to God his prayers & thanksgiving, and all the people respond “amen.”
(continued on next slide)

Justin's Writing

- Now following the distribution & partaking of the nourishment that has been consecrated by thanksgiving, and they are sent by means of the deacons to those who are not present. Those who can & will, freely give what seems best to them, and the offering is given to the president. With this he helps orphans & widows, those who are in need because of illness or any other reason, those who are in prison, sojourners, and, in short, the president provides for any who are in need. We hold this general gathering on Sunday, because it is the first day, in which God, transforming darkness & matter, created the world, and also the day which Jesus Christ, our Savior, rose from the dead.”

Worship

- From Justin & other sources we know that at least since the 2nd century there were two main parts in worship.
- First there were readings of scripture & commentaries on them, with prayers & singing of hymns.
- At the time it was impossible for an individual Christian to possess a copy of Scripture. This first part of the service was often the only way in which believers came to know the Bible. This part of the service could last for hours.
- After dismissing those who were not baptized, with a prayer & blessing, the second part of the service began, communion.

Worship

- The bread & wine was brought forth & presented to the one presiding, who then offered a prayer over the elements.
- This prayer was often lengthy, the saving acts of God were usually recounted, and the power of the Holy Spirit was invoked over the bread & the wine.
- Then the bread was broken & shared, the common cup was passed, & the meeting ended with a benediction.
- This service was also the occasion for the sharing with those in need, for who an offering was collected.

Worship in Catacombs

- Some authors have dramatized the “church of the catacombs.”
- Perhaps there were times when Christians hid there in fear, but the location of catacombs were well known by the authorities.
- There were two reasons for meeting in the cemetery.
- First: The church was not recognized by the government. Therefore, it could not own property, however funeral societies were allowed, and these could own cemetery property.
- In some cities Christians organized themselves into such funeral societies, and therefore it made sense for them to gather at their cemeteries, the only thing they could jointly own.
- Second: More importantly, many heroes of the faith were buried there, Christians believed that communion joined them not only among themselves & with Jesus, but also with their ancestors in the faith.

Worship with the Martyrs

- As early as the middle of the 2nd century, it was customary to gather at their tombs on the anniversary of a Christian's death (especially martyrs), and to celebrate communion together.
- The idea was that the dead in Christ were part of the church, and that communion joined the living & the dead in a single body.
- This practice gave rise to Saint's Day. Often celebrated not on their birthday, but on the day of their martyrdom, which was also considered their birthday.

Where They Gathered

- More frequently than in cemeteries, Christians gathered in private homes.
- As a congregation grew, some houses were exclusively devoted to worship.
- The oldest Christian church building was found during the excavation of Dura-Europos (on the bank of the Euphrates river, in today's Syria), and was built before 256. It seems to have been a private dwelling that was converted into a church building.

Baptism

- In Acts people were baptized as soon as they converted.
- This was feasible in the early church, where most converts were Jewish or had been influenced by it. Thus they had a basic understanding of the meaning of the Christian life and proclamation.
- As the church became increasingly Gentile, it was necessary to require a period of preparation, trial and instruction prior to baptism.
- This time was called the “catechumenate.” By the 3rd century this could last up to 3 yr.

The Christian's Calendar

- Every Sunday
- Friday was a day of penance, fasting & sorrow. Rather early, for reasons unclear, Wednesday also became a day of fasting.
- A special Sunday once each yr., the day of resurrection (what would become Easter), the greatest of Christian celebrations.
- By the 2nd century there was bitter debate about which day of the year should be the day of resurrection.
- Part of what took place on Easter was the baptism of new converts & their being added to the congregation.
- In preparation for Easter, there was usually a time of fasting & penance. This is the origin of present-day Lent.
- Early Jewish converts continued to observe the Sabbath as well as joining a Christian assembly on the 1st day of the week.

The Desire To Be Together

- As a consequence of growth of congregations it soon became impossible for all Christians in a particular city to gather together for worship.
- The unity of the body of Christ was so important that it seemed that something was lost when in a single city there were several congregations.
- In order to preserve & symbolize the bond of unity, the custom arose in some places to send a piece of bread from the communion service to be added to the bread to be used in other churches of the same city.
- To preserve & symbolize the unity of Christians all over the world, each church had a list of bishops of other churches, both near & far, for whom prayers was made during communion.

Organization of the Church

Organization of the Church

- The NT indicates that the governance of the local congregation was lead by men using the title of bishop, elder or presbyter, being interchangeable.
- By early 2nd century it can be argued that the title bishop might have been different that elder or presbyter. That may have been so in some locations for various practical reasons.
- Some locations, Rome included, were lead by not a single bishop, but by a group of leaders going by bishop or presbyter.
- One of the primary reasons for emphasis on the authority of bishop(s) was in response to the challenge of heresies in the late 2nd & early 3rd century.

Organization of the Church

- It is clear that by the end of the 2nd century the official leadership of the church was entirely male. However, there is certainly records of females serving in a variety of other roles including evangelism.
- Eventually some widows & virgins were supported by the congregation and performed some particular functions within it.
- One practical reason would be so she did not have to marry a non-Christian to support her. In order to live at that time a widow had to be supported by her family or remarry or figure out how to solely support herself.
- Male deacons of the church functioned in various roles of service, however there was a clear distinction regarding leadership authority when compared to the bishops.

Marriage

Marriage

- The church also began celebrating marriages by the beginning of the 2nd century.
- Ignatius of Antioch wrote to Polycarp that all marriages should take place with the knowledge of the bishop.
- Obviously devout couples would wish to consecrate their union before God.
- But, there was also a very practical reason.

Marriage

- The second reason involved marriage law at that time.
- According to law, the social status, and the accompanying rights, of a couple was determined by the status of a husband.
- In the early church women tended to be of higher social standing than men, and therefore official, legal marriages among believers could have serious civil consequences, depriving the wife of some of her rights & standing.
- The solution was to perform church marriages that had no official or civil sanction.

Missionary Methods

Missionary Methods

- Although we have no exact statistics, the enormous numerical growth of the church during the 1st three centuries is undeniable.
- The ancient church knew nothing of evangelistic services or revivals.
- Church worship centered upon communion of only the baptized.
- Evangelism, as Celsus reported, was done in the kitchens, shops & markets.
- Though a couple of famous teachers won some converts by debates held in their schools.

Missionary Methods

- Most converts were made by anonymous Christians whose witness lead others to their faith.
- The most dramatic of faith sharing was witnessed by those who watched the faithful being martyred for their belief. The word martyr originally meant “witness.”
- After the NT very little is said of any missionaries going from place to place, as Paul & Barnabas had done.

Missionary Methods

- Christianity spread mainly in the cities, and penetrated the rural areas slowly and with much difficulty.
- By 100 A.D. 64% of port cities in the Roman Empire had a church, and 24% of inland cities.
- By 180 A.D. there were churches in 86% of port cities & 65% of inland cities.
- It was long after Constantine that Christianity could claim most of the rural population of the Empire.
- Originally the word “pagan” had no religion meaning, but was used to refer to an uncouth, rural person.
- It was after most city dwellers became Christian that the ancient religions, which now existed mostly in the countryside, was dubbed pagan (paganism).

Early Art Forms

- Since communion was the central act of worship, scenes & symbols referring to it are the most common early art form. Sometimes what is depicted is the Lord's Supper in the upper room. In other cases there is simply a basket containing fish & bread.
- The fish was one of the earliest Christian symbols and for that reason appears frequently in communion scenes as well as in other context.

