



St Johns Lent Course 2022

"Who do you think you are?"

OUTLINE NOTES AND SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS SESSION 1. FOUNDATIONS - Canons, Creeds and Councils March 9th 2022

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

- Purpose- to explore the story of the Church from the end of the book of Acts c AD 60 to the present day
- General fascination with origins- gives us clues to our identity and explains why things are like they are
- Highly selective! I am picking out a few major themes in the story- for more detail read books on church history!

The Story of Acts

Acts 1.8 **"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem; in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth"**

1-7 Mission in Jerusalem

8-12 Mission in Judea and Samaria

13-28 Mission to the ends of the earth (The known world)

The period from AD50-AD 60 could be described as the first ever "Decade of Evangelism" Paul conducted 3 missionary journeys and evangelized the 4 Roman provinces of Asia Minor, Galatia, Macedonia (N Greece) and Achaia (S Greece)

- Acts story begins in Jerusalem (the Sacred Capital) ends in Rome(The Secular Capital) with Paul under house arrest but witnessing to his guards
- By AD 60 at the end of the book of ACTS churches had been established in the four provinces above, in Judea and Samaria, along the North African coast , possibly in Ethiopia and almost certainly in India.
- Paul was released from house arrest; may well have travelled on to Spain and was eventually re-imprisoned and martyred under Nero around AD 64

WHY?

1. Roads
2. Language
3. Pax Romana
4. Jewish diaspora
- 5 Moral and Spiritual state of the Empire



What Happened Next?

1. Geographical Expansion
2. Theological fragmentation
3. The church decentralized
4. The emergence of a body of Leadership in the church who were collectively known as the CHURCH FATHERS
5. Christianity ceased to be a house church movement
6. There was a preoccupation with identifying and locating authentic sites in the Holy Land
7. The Church was under enormous pressure!

The Three battles!

1. Spiritual Battle
2. Mental Battle- "Battle for the Mind"
3. Physical Battle.

1. The Spiritual Battle

- The core issue of these early centuries was the identity of Jesus and the uniqueness of his claims
- (a) Inside the Jewish constituency **Judaizers** who said that Gentiles could follow Christ but they would have to be effectively Jews as well
- (b) Outside the Jewish constituency **Syncretism**- multi faith world- Rome's religious supermarket-

2. The Mental Battle

- This was primarily a philosophical battle inside rather than outside the church
- two major areas of controversy

(a) GNOSTICISM

- The influence of Greek Philosophy
- Paul in Romans 6 addresses this ANTINOMIANISM (as it is called) by saying "**Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?**"
- The derivative of this Greek thinking was to become a major issue in the second half of the first century- called "GNOSTICISM"
- The word means special knowledge or revelations and referred to a group of Spiritual know alls who claimed this superior knowledge
- The Early Church Fathers challenged these false teachings head on!
- IRENAEUS became Bishop of Lyons in AD177, studied under the martyred Bishop of Smyrna POLYCARP.



- Two of his works survive "Against Heresies" (5 books exposing and overthrowing the so called "knowledge" (gnosis) and Proof of Apostolic Preaching (a statement of Christian orthodoxy at that time)
- Other defenders of the faith included men like JUSTIN MARTYR(Ephesus) , ORIGEN,(Alexandria), TERTULLIAN (Carthage) and CLEMENT (Rome)
- Gnosticism was one of the most powerful internal heresies in the early church
- The discovery of the so called "Gnostic Gospels " at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1946 triggered much interest- dating from nearer 400AD these consisted of more than 50 works including the apocryphal "Gospels" of Thomas and Philip
- They are not to be confused with the later discovery in 1947 of the Essene Library at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls) which dated from 100 BC and predate The oldest previous OT manuscripts by 1000 years
- The Gnostic Gospels became the happy hunting ground for people like Dan Smith and the Da Vinci Code
- **(b) ARIANISM**
- Arius(AD 256 -336) was a Libyan priest who began teaching a new doctrine on the person of Christ and challenged the orthodox view of the Trinity
- **"If the Father begat the Son, then he was begotten had a beginning in existence and from this it follows that there was a time when the Son was not!"**
- Is this important now? Modern cults, notably the Jehovah's witnesses are an incarnation of Arianism- the early church rejected it then and the church today rejects it now!

3. PHYSICAL BATTLES

- Beginning with the Emperor Nero in AD 64 there were ten periods of intense persecution of Christian believers in the Roman Empire
- Much of it directed at their refusal to subscribe to the cult of the Emperor "Caesar is Lord" NO! JESUS IS LORD!

The church had three defences at this time

1. THE **CANON** ("rule") Books of the NT

2. THE **COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH**

3. THE **CREEDS-**

These three defences bridged three key dates in Church

AD 311 The Conversion of the Emperor Constantine

AD 386 The scholar Jerome, based in Bethlehem, translated the Bible into Latin- the Vulgate version

AD 396 The appointment of Augustine Bishop of Hippo in N Africa who would become the greatest of the Christian writers and theologians of that period of History



Conclusions from Episode 1.

- (a) Significant numerical and geographical growth
- (b) Distinct structural changes in how the church shifted from being a small sect "The Way" within Judaism to becoming an established Empire wide religion
- (c) Suffered enormous persecution
- (d) Engaged in quite fierce theological debate about the person and work of Christ and worked through to a position of Christian orthodoxy on fundamental Christian doctrines
- (e) Agreed the body of Holy Scripture that we call the New Testament

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Read Matt 16 13-20

What does this passage tell us about the identity of Jesus?. What were people saying?
What does Peter affirm and what does Jesus say?

2. John 8 is a long theological debate between Jesus and the authorities over his identity.
What does Jesus say about himself? Note v 58 and their response in v 59
(see also Exodus 3.14 for a clue!)

2. Look at Philippians 2 6-11 This is a very early "creed". What truths about Jesus does it affirm?

4. How do we deal with conflicting views today about who Jesus is? What might we say to Jehovah's witnesses or Muslims for example?

5. Persecution is a real issue for Christians in many countries today? How might we affirm and support them?

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