

EARLY CHRISTIAN SCHISMS

Sects and Denominations in the Early Christian World

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EARLY CHRISTIAN SCHISMS

Christianity was born as a small sect within the greater Jewish community, shortly before the world of Judaism collapsed around the end of the first century. The message of Jesus had been one of love and brotherhood. As he stated, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets... not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-8).” The Law referred to the ancient sacred scriptures of the Jewish people, the Torah. It was about the Torah, which Jesus spoke most profusely. He derided and chastised the existing Jewish sects for their misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the Law to achieve their own agendas. To Jesus, the Torah was a manual for an exemplary life, and he preached this message as an itinerant teacher. His condemnations of those in power and messages of hope to the common man soon alienated Jesus from the powerful, and so it was from the lower classes that Jesus drew his disciples.

These disciples, or apostles, as the New Testament scriptures call them, carried the messages of Jesus after his death. They also taught that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead after his execution for a crime that is quite unclear. The teachings the apostles brought to the common Jewish man gave him hope that not only perfection before God was possible, but also that eternal life was also within his grasp.

Peter, chief of the apostles, was the first to bring the messages of and about Jesus, which came to be known as the good news or gospel, to non-Jews or Gentiles. In doing this Peter had opened a door that would forever alter the course of history. From within the newborn Christian community there now emerged three groups, one of which would eventually overshadow and overpower the other two. Early Christianity would split into

Jewish-Christianity, preached by the apostles lead by Peter and James, Gnostic Christianity, a melding of Judeo-Christian ideas and elements of philosophy and mysticism, and Orthodox Christianity, the powerful branch and predecessor of the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestant Churches

Beginning as a small community within the larger Jewish faith, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth soon had to come to grips with this situation. As such,

Christianity is in the peculiar position of being a religion which...is obliged to be occupied with Judaism... Christianity understood itself more or less as the heir of Judaism and as its true expression... As the vast majority of Jews did not agree with their Christian brethren in this claim, Christianity became a religion of Gentiles... The nature of these splits in the history of religion varies, and it is difficult to locate the exact moment when a given group ceases to be a sect and becomes a separate religious community or even a new religion. (Flusser 617-8)

The one moment most historians look to is the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70CE. With their world turned upside down and their religious beliefs in turmoil, the rabbis gathered in the town of Yavneh in Judea. There, they

attacked these Jewish Christians shortly after the fall of Jerusalem, thus making absolute the divorce between Church and Synagogue. Seeking to establish a new uniformity in religion as a necessary basis for a new unity, the rabbis introduced into the synagogue service a formula which the Jewish Christians could not pronounce, to the affect that 'for the Nazarenes [Jewish Christians] may there be no hope.' They followed this by sending letters to all Jewish congregations in the Diaspora denouncing the practice and faith of Christianity. (Davies 46)

In turn, the Gentile Christians, progenitors of Orthodox Christianity, would mount a campaign of their own against Jewish Christians, eventually directed against all followers of the Law of Moses. Remnants of the attack can still be unearthed today in examining the text of the New Testament. One of the most clearly evident places of the antipathy between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians is referenced in the story of

the centurion of Capernaum, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. According to Matthew 8:5-13, the exemplary faith of the Gentile centurion is used as evidence that “the kingdom of God will be taken from Israel and will be given to...the Gentile Church (Flusser 627).” The writer, or editor, of Matthew has combined the original parable, recorded in Luke 7:1-10, with the lesson of another parable, recorded in Luke 13:22-30, where Jesus actually had alluded to Psalm 107:1-3, a prophecy of the future ingathering of Israel. “Matthew has rewritten this passage and changed its meaning completely, ...[being] far more extreme than Paul and even more simplistic than John (627-8).” The writer of Matthew was probably a convert of the Gentile Church, determined to clarify their separation from the Jewish Christians. This passage, as well as countless others, would become the scriptural basis for the mainline Christian belief that the Church had supplanted Israel as God’s chosen people.

Even though it is evident that Paul believed the Jewish people would be saved, (Flusser 634) he still spoke negatively about his fellow Jews. In Galatians 4:21-5:1, he spoke of two covenants, one of slavery, symbolized by Hagar and representing the Old Covenant of Sinai, and one of freedom, symbolized by Sarah and representing the New Covenant of Christ. Although it can never be certain that Paul and other first century evangelists were aware that their message was helping separate Christianity from Judaism, it is evident that for the success of Christianity as a world religion such separation was necessary. “Only a Christianity free from the Law could separate itself from Judaism (632).” It was to be considered heretical to combine the practice of the Law with the Christian faith, and by the second century this idea had become the official position of the bishops, those in authority in the Church (617).

By this time in the early second century Christian writers had begun to use the words of the Hebrew prophets to condemn the Law of Moses. But, the very commandments themselves were contained in the Old Testament scriptures the Church considered authoritative. Writing between 120 and 150, Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr reasoned that the Jews had been shackled by the Law because of the hardness of their hearts (Flusser 634). Writings like these would later be used as the foundations of Christian anti-Judaism, the forerunner to modern anti-Semitism.

Now that Christianity had clearly delineated itself from the old faith of Judaism, it was time for the next major challenge the nascent faith would face. In such a forceful separation as was enacted between the Church and the Synagogue, it was inevitable that many believers would take the message to far. Gnosticism is the umbrella term for the first such group of belief systems.

The oldest theory of Gnosticism represents it as the radical Hellenization of Christianity, with its forerunners being the classical Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. "Some have interpreted Gnosticism as a pre-Christian religion, others as the result of a failure of apocalyptic thought in Judaism and Christianity (Hinson 26)." In any case, Gnosticism emerges from a variety of traditions, Jewish, Christian, and non-Christian. Gnosticism is characterized by a metaphysical dualism in which matter is evil and spirit is good. In turn, the physical world, or matter, could not have been created by the One, true God, who is pure spirit. The One must have entrusted creation to a lesser god, or Demiurge (26-7). To separate God from the evil creation, a series of spheres, or aeons, existed, each guarded by other lesser gods or demons (93). Salvation, or redemption, was attained through a release of the spirit, which was imprisoned in the

body. This release was achieved through death, but one could prepare for the impending separation, either through asceticism or, according to some, over-indulgence (93). Souls were divided into three categories: the spiritual, who would ascend to God automatically; the material, who were lost; and the psychic, who could attain salvation through Gnosis, or secret knowledge (27).

Gnosis referred to a mystical knowledge of the cosmos. The key to this was knowledge of the names of the demons that ruled each of the aeons, as well as each demon's password that allowed for passage to the next aeon. Therefore the ultimate goal of the Gnostics was "a mystical vision and enlightenment that would bring deification (94)." This would occur upon the spirit's entry into the realm of the One. Gnosis was obtained from the Redeemer, whom Gnostic teachers identified as Jesus the Christ. The human Jesus was seen merely as a vessel for the Christ, which descended from the One at Jesus' baptism and then returned to God at the crucifixion (39). While on Earth, the Christ had imparted knowledge to certain apostles, and gospels were composed in their names, about the time the gospel of John was being written. In fact, "some New Testament writings, particularly Johanine [Gospel of John, I John, II John, III John, & Revelation], explicitly repudiated Gnostic dualism (27)." The Gospel of Thomas, discovered in a Gnostic 'library' at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, interweaves well known sayings of Jesus from the synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, with otherwise unknown sayings of Jesus (94).

Although the term Gnosticism can refer to variety of belief systems, three systems or schools were very important in shaping the early history of Christianity. They include

the schools of Simon Magus and Menander, Basilides and Valentinus, and Cerdo and Marcion.

The first of these Gnostic ‘schools’ has its origins in the New Testament, in the Acts of the Apostles, the continuation of the Gospel of Luke. Simon, or Simon Magus (the Magician), is mentioned in Acts, chapter 8:

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people... But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized... Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip. ...Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that...they sent Peter and John to them. ...Now Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. ...Now when Simon saw, ...he offered them money, saying, “Give me also this power...” But Peter said to him, “...because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money, you have no part or share in this...” (Acts 8:4-24)

Simon’s chief contribution to Gnosticism was his interpretation of most of the Hebrew Bible as allegory (Robinson). Menander was a disciple of Simon, and he carried on Simon’s work in Rome (Hinson 89).

Basilides founded the second great school of Gnostic thought in Egypt, early in the second century (Hinson 93). His successor Valentinus brought his ideas to Rome where he spread the most influential Gnostic doctrines. Valentinus perfected the ideas of the aeons and brought his teachings to the island of Cyprus as well. The school of Valentinian Gnosticism lasted the longest of the ancient schools, well through the fourth century, before it was crushed by the ‘orthodox’ church (Robinson).

By far the most influential Gnostic teacher was Marcion, whose instructor was Cerdo. Marcion’s father had been a bishop in Pontus of Asia Minor, who was forced to excommunicate his own son for an unknown incident. Marcion then migrated to Rome where he ran afoul of the Bishop of Rome, Pope Anicetus probably, and was

excommunicated again. He then proceeded to found his own church, about the same time as Valentinus was teaching. Marcion established a set of 'Antitheses' between the One, True God, and the God of the Hebrew Bible. Subsequently, he rejected the Old Testament and formed his own canon of New Testament writings, consisting of ten of the Pauline epistles and the Gospel of Luke, all of which were edited extensively to remove as much 'Jewish' influence as possible. Marcion denied the institution of marriage and promoted strict asceticism and fasting (Hinson 91-2).

Gnosticism provoked an even stronger reaction amongst 'Orthodox' church leaders than had the Jewish-Christian schism. This reaction was characterized by three occurrences: the formalization of a 'canon' of scripture, the emergence of creeds, and the advent of monoepiscopal authority. The earliest known canon, or authorized list, of scriptures other than Marcion's was the so called Muratorian Canon, dated between 170CE and the end of the century, clearly a response to Gnostic claims and ideas (Hinson 100). The first known Roman creed seems to address Gnostic theology in at least one, maybe two, points (90). Also clear by the end of the second century was the emergence of monoepiscopal authority, or the concentration of power in the hands of a single bishop, as evidenced by the actions of Bishop Victor of Rome regarding the dating of Easter (Davies 91).

A turning point had been reached during the last decades of the second century, forced upon the Church by the Jewish-Christian schism and the Gnostic schism. From about 170CE to around 313CE, the focus of the Church shifted, from dealing with the world in which it existed, to dealing with practices of the many diverse congregations spread across the Mediterranean world.

Already mentioned was the controversy regarding the date of Easter, the festival celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. Ideas polarized around to centers, one in Rome, symbolized by Pope Victor, and the other in the churches of Asia Minor. The Asian churches celebrated Easter on the actual day of the Jewish Passover, the fourteenth of Nisan, hence the name of the controversy, 'Quartodeciman.' Victor and the Roman church, along with most other congregations, celebrated Easter on the Sunday following the Passover. After several synods were held across the Christian world, the Roman date was confirmed. However, the Asian bishops refused to yield, and Victor thereupon excommunicated the stubborn churches. Several great theologians upbraided Victor for exceeding his bounds (Kelly 12). It is unknown how Victor reacted, but the Asian churches evidently considered the break in communion a personal schism with only Victor himself. Eventually all churches would come to celebrate Easter according to the Roman practice, later divorcing the calculation from Judaism entirely by fixing the celebration solely to the phase of the moon.

At about the same time a new sect within Christianity was emerging. Founded on the teachings of one Montanus, this new practice spread forth from the region of Phrygia in Asia Minor. Known as Montanism, this sect concerned itself with the continuing role of prophecy in the life of the Church. The Holy Spirit spoke through living prophets, Montanus having reawakened the prophetic mission. Although sometimes confused as a Gnostic sect, Montanism stood firmly in opposition to Gnostic tenets, fully accepting the authority of the Old Testament. Montanist bishops would soon come to regard their prophecies as superior to the revelation of the gospel, and the line was drawn against the

Orthodox faith. Surviving well into the fourth century, the triumph of the Orthodox faith would erase Montanism from the spiritual field by the following century (Davies 89-90).

By the early decades of the third century, the Emperors of mighty Rome began to take notice of the new religion spreading throughout the Mediterranean world. Viewed as an agent of divisiveness, Christianity was persecuted throughout the century. This brought an acute problem to light, namely what should be done about those who forsook their faith during times of trial. In Rome, Victor's successor Zephyrinus treated such apostates leniently, prescribing penance. On the death of Zephyrinus, the Roman clergy chose his chief advisor Calixtus as bishop. Hippolytus, the most outspoken critic of Zephyrinus, objected to the choice of Calixtus, whom Hippolytus considered an apostate. Hippolytus prescribed the hard line, claiming that once one has apostatized in his heart, he can never return to God. Certain Roman clergy made Hippolytus their bishop, thereby inaugurating the first papal schism (Davies 129). He also charged that Calixtus subscribed to Sabellianism, a theology that denied the doctrine of the Trinity and insisted that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were identical and the same (Hinson 98). The schism over the readmission of apostates was not healed until Pontian, second successor of Calixtus, was exiled and martyred along with Hippolytus thus leaving the Roman church in need of a leader (Kelly 16).

The new leader, Anterus, as well as his successor Fabian were also probably martyred. By this time the issue to re-admit had been settled in its favor, and a new controversy arose over the possible need to re-baptize those who apostatized. The priest Novatian, chief proponent of re-baptism, led the Roman church during the persecution of Emperor Decius around 250CE, and fully expected the clergy to choose him as bishop as

soon as the persecution abated. Instead, they chose Cornelius who was opposed to re-baptism. As with Hippolytus, some priests supported Novatian and named him their bishop, thus inaugurating the second papal schism (Kelly 17-8). Meanwhile the fanatical Valerian became Emperor and rekindled the persecution. Novatian probably died during this persecution, as did Stephen and Sixtus II, successors of Cornelius. The controversy over re-baptism continued to burn into the fourth century.

Inaugurating the greatest persecution of Christians the world had seen Emperor Diocletian was indirectly responsible for reopening the re-baptism controversy. The early years of the fourth century saw Christians forsaking their newfound faith in droves. Led by Bishop Donatus of northern Africa, the hard-liners favored the complete excommunication of apostates, while the majority of bishops favored leniency. Thus began the Donatist schism, separating many Orthodox bishops from the crushing weight of Donatist rigorism. Forms of Donatism would survive until the advent of Islam in the seventh century (Hinson 148-52).

Without a central authority the early Church was often torn between multiple paths to finding God. All that changed with the accession of Constantine as Emperor in the West. Constantine declared toleration for all religions, but specifically he began to assist the Christian Church in hopes of using the young faith to unify the troubled empire. Throughout most of the fourth and fifth centuries it was the Emperor, more than any bishop, who came to control the Church, and indirectly create a truly 'Orthodox' faith. It was the emperor who called the landmark ecumenical councils of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. There the old creeds were expanded and codified, enshrining the Orthodox doctrines in the liturgy of the Church. The canon of scripture was

authoritatively established, and the powers of the bishops were confirmed. The Orthodox Church became the spiritual arm of the imperial government. Although schisms would occur continually throughout Church history, not until present times would the world once again see the diversity of belief of which Christianity is capable.

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