

Session 2

THE PRE-CONSTANTINIAN CHURCH

Transition to post-biblical history by transposing redemption history theme; Church's incredible spread through its sense of kairos, proletarianization of population arising from distinctive Roman history; opposition which this outreach aroused, mainly Roman and official; Church's response in face of Christian Holocaust; turning Roman State around through Church's martyrs.

Last time we spoke of the Church's identity narrative as the prerequisite for its restoration and our conversion, and we laid the basis for this narrative by discerning the theme of biblical redemption history: Power lies ultimately in acceptance of our powerlessness. We also saw the discernment of this theme as induced by a conversion experience.

This time our subject is the early, pre-Constantinian Church, extending in time from Pentecost to the Edict of Toleration issued by the Roman Emperor Constantine, in 313 C.E. Here, though, we make a major transition: from the biblical to the post-biblical era. We pass also from the history of a small nation, even of a group within that nation, to that of the whole Roman world. And we must do these things while remaining within our already-established framework if we are to maintain coherence in our narrative—as we must do if it is to qualify as the Church's identity narrative. Making biblical and post-biblical history into a continuous story in this fashion is an even greater novelty than discerning the theme of biblical redemption history. It corresponds perhaps to the point in Magellan's voyage where he set out across the Pacific and two of his ships deserted him (perhaps you will now feel similarly inclined yourselves). Or, in terms of another aqueous simile, it is like crossing the Rubicon: a boundary which once having been breached, as Julius Caesar did on his way to Roman power, does not permit any turning back. This in fact comports with the nature of conversion.

We make this fateful transition through a transposition of the theme of biblical redemption history. From "Power lies ultimately in acceptance of our powerlessness" we proceed to "When the Church is not involved in worldly power, it can be powerful spiritually. When it becomes involved in worldly power, it tends to lose its spiritual power." (This transposition is much in the spirit of the Radical Reformation/Anabaptism, which we will encounter in Session 4. Curiously, when I first came up with it I was little aware of the Radical Reformation.) The first part of the transposed theme characterizes the pre-Constantinian Church, the second the Church from Constantine on. Already the first part has two radical implications.

- To understand the pre-Constantinian Church we must view it in the light of the Roman social, political, and economic system and its dynamics, which was its context.
- The martyrs of this Church are not to be dismissed but instead constitute the key to the transformation that it wrought.

Both these implications are opposed to the tendency of academic historians, which is to regard patristic writings—of Church Fathers like Origen, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa—

as the essence of the early Church and also to dismiss its martyrs as ignorant fanatics, who failed to understand that in order to get along you have to go along.

The early, pre-Constantinian Church can be conveyed in three moments: its outreach, the opposition which this outreach attracted, and the Church's response. We will consider each in turn.

1. Outreach

The outreach of the early Church was incredible; nevertheless it is sufficiently documented. From Pentecost to the Edict of Toleration, a span of some 280 years, it spread throughout the Roman world, from Britain in the northwest to Mesopotamia in the southeast and to the places in between--Gaul, Spain, and North Africa as well as Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor. This outreach has no real parallel in the history of the world. And it all came from 12 illiterate men going out from Jerusalem as the Apologist Justin Martyr put it, writing in the middle of the second century.

But if the *where* of this outreach is reasonably apparent, the *when* and the *how* are little known. The sources--accounts of martyrdoms largely--usually reveal only that there were Christians in a certain place at a certain time. This is a limitation which academic historians tend to gloss over. Indeed, we ourselves may not have thought of the matter in this way. After all, do we not have the Book of Acts in the New Testament to tell us how the Church reached out following Pentecost? And are not St. Paul's missionary journeys reflected in his letters, also in the New Testament? But Acts covers perhaps only the first 30 years following Pentecost, and the span reflected in Paul's letters may be no more than a dozen years. And there are no further accounts bearing directly on the question until the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius, written in the early 4th century. The reason for this may be seen not only in the illiteracy of many of the early Christians but in the fact that clandestine organizations tend not to keep records. As we will see, records kept by the Church could have been used against it by the Roman authorities.

But surely, we may suppose, the early Church had a missionary strategy, a program. The Book of Acts is instructive here. The course followed in the wake of Pentecost by Jesus' disciples and their converts can only be described as opportunism--non-pejoratively. There was no system in their approach; they simply took advantage of opportunities that presented themselves, as when they were dispersed from Jerusalem by the persecution set off by the martyrdom of Stephen. Some of the same pattern is evident in Paul's missionary journeys. It was primarily when invited to speak by synagogues in cities he visited that he delivered his message.

What then explains the early Church's incredible spread? In the end we can only point to the operation of the Holy Spirit. We can discern a couple of the Spirit's modalities even so. One of these was the sense of *kairos* that, as evident in Acts, came to the disciples with the Pentecost event. Along with *chronos*, *kairos* is a Greek word for time. But where *chronos* refers simply to its undifferentiated flow (as measured by a clock or *chronometer*), *kairos* conveys a unique time, as of ripeness or fulfillment. And Pentecost marked their perception of Jesus' resurrection as the supreme *kairos*, as God's decisive intervention in human affairs, to be made known whatever the difficulty and at whatever cost, and of *now* as the time in which this was to be done.

A second modality was the receptivity of the Roman population, or major segments of it, to the disciples' proclamation. We will speak of this at length. But for future reference we will first note still another modality, conveyed in the dictum of the Apologist Tertullian at the end of the 2nd century: *Semen est sanguinis Christianorum*--the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

The receptivity of major segments of the population came out of their proletarianization--a rather long word. Here I am taking proletariat simply in the sense of Arnold Toynbee in his monumental *Study of History*: those who are in but not of society. And their proletarianization came in turn out of the distinctive history of Rome. This we may comprehend in terms of three phases.

Roman origins. Here we should forget Romulus and Remus. Indeed, we need not pay much attention to the period of Etruscan domination, ending about 500 B.C.E. Instead we should regard geography as destiny. Rome was located at the juncture of the Tiber River, the main route across the Italian peninsula, and the highway along the western coast, the main route up and down the peninsula. This gave it easy access to its neighbors, but at the same time gave its neighbors easy access to it. Thus, given the conditions of the time, as Rome emerged from the Etruscan shadow it found itself engaged in a particularly intense struggle for survival with these neighbors. And this struggle, in which it eventually prevailed, forged a discipline not just in a monarchy or a dynasty but in a whole class, which we may refer to as the patricians. This was a new element in the development of the State, a quantum leap beyond what had been known before. And it enabled Rome to go on to take over the whole of the Italian peninsula and, eventually, to administer a vast empire coherently.

Confrontation with Carthage. When the Romans arrived at the tip of Italy, they found themselves opposite Sicily, about 20 miles away across the Strait of Messina. This brought them into direct confrontation with Carthage, the other main Mediterranean power, then in control of Sicily. There followed the long, desperately fought Punic Wars, in which Rome nearly went under but in the end won out. The Roman triumph had the profoundest results. It led to the take-over of the whole Mediterranean littoral and, subsequently, of western Europe as well. It led also to a flooding in of slaves--captives of war and other prisoners--by the millions. Indeed, it has been estimated that some 40 percent of the population of Italy came to be made up of slaves. Thus Rome developed a slave economy, one of the relatively few in history (others being ancient Athens, Brazil in the 19th century, and the American antebellum South.) Given the unproductive nature of some other elements of the population, it may be supposed the slaves accounted for half or more of the Italian gross domestic product.

The Empire, soon under an emperor. In the wake of these developments the patricians shifted their stance significantly. Previously they had employed a measure of conciliation in dealing with both their allies and their own lower orders. Now they shifted to force, resting their system mainly on the denial of any intrinsic value in human life. Concomitantly they appropriated the spoils of conquest largely for themselves. And they invested the bulk of their proceeds in agricultural land in Italy, which they formed into vast estates known as latifundia. These they operated with the slaves who had recently become so abundant, dispossessing the small farmers who had previously tilled them.

We can now list the elements of the Roman proletariat and assess the appeal that the Church had for each of them.

Slaves. These were the largest element. Most of them lived and worked in incredibly harsh conditions. Along with this they were subjected to deliberate dehumanization: being exhibited naked in the slave markets, being allowed only the name their master gave them. And they were liable to the internalization of their dehumanization, probably the most devastating consequence of their condition. In their powerlessness they were akin to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt--here is the main link of the early Church with Israel. The oppressiveness of their treatment gave rise, in the late 2nd and early 1st centuries B.C.E., to three massive slave revolts, climaxing in the one led by Spartacus. These were suppressed by the Romans with utter ruthlessness, closing off permanently that avenue of escape from their predicament. But the Church afforded them spiritual power in the midst of their physical powerlessness and personhood in the face of their dehumanization. Friedrich Engels, the sidekick of Karl Marx, made a connection between the failure of the slave revolts and the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. In terms of our analysis he was on to something. In any event slaves constituted probably the main component of the early Church's membership.

Plebeians. They were largely the small farmers dispossessed by the latifundia. Drifting off to the cities unemployed, hungry, and often violent, they also formed an important proletarian element. But as freemen they were not subject to the same repression as the slaves. Their openness to the Church's message was further limited by the State's provision of bread and circuses, namely a subsistence ration of grain and the notorious Roman games--gladiatorial combats and the like--in the arena, to distract them from their discontent. Significant numbers of them would nevertheless have responded to the Church.

Spiritual proletariat. This term may be applied to those among the patricians who felt spiritually cramped by the intellectual and psychic distortions inevitably arising from a system as repressive as the Roman. To them the Church offered release from these constraints. Such people were few in number, to be sure, but their placing of their education and professional disciplines at the service of the gospel gave them an importance out of proportion to their numbers, as we will see.

2. Opposition

The opposition which the Church aroused was commensurate with its outreach. Some of this, particularly in the beginning, was from Jewish quarters--though from the establishment, not the rank and file. On occasion Christians were attacked by mobs, of which plebeians bought off by bread and circuses probably made up a large part. But the opposition was mainly not only Roman but official. The question arises of why.

The answer lies in much the same circumstances as gave rise to the receptivity of the population. The patricians arrogated to themselves the fruits of society beyond their own contribution to it. Hence to maintain their position they were led to rely substantially on force. But force begets counterforce, so that their reliance only increased their insecurity. This, and also the need to overcome their own scruples, led them to erect a façade civic duty and the general interest in front of their self-interest and, beyond that, to invoke a divine sanction for their position in society, culminating in emperor-worship. The Church, on the other hand, was non-coercive; indeed one incurred disabilities for joining it. Thus it had no need to distort the truth to maintain its hold on its members. And implicitly, merely by being itself, it tore away the ideological façade of the patricians. Further, its rehumanization of slaves seemed to vitiate the force on which patricians relied to control them.

The reaction of the Roman élite to this apparent undercutting of their position was one of fear and loathing. The account by the pagan historian Tacitus of the Emperor Nero's scapegoating of Christians for the great fire in Rome in 64 C.E—which he may have set himself—is instructive.

... Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City [Rome], where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular...

So much for us Christians.

Nero's was followed by a series of persecutions down to the climactic one under the Emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the 4th century. Some were apparently only local but others extended to most if not all of the Empire--as with the outreach of the Church our information is spotty. In them in any case the whole coercive power of the State, psychological as well as physical, was devoted to wiping the Church out. The touchstone that the magistrates applied to individuals brought before them was whether they could be brought renounce Christ and perform an act of worship to the emperor. If not, they would be subjected to the most horrible tortures and death. And all this was simply *pro nomine*, for the name of Christian, without regard to any acts that Christians might have performed or even to the nature of Christianity itself.

3. The Church's response.

By the end of the 1st century it had become apparent that persecution of the Church by the Roman State was not just Nero's aberration but settled official policy. This amounted to a Christian holocaust albeit over a long period rather than just a few years. As such it was perhaps the gravest crisis that ever confronted the Church. What were the options open to it? One might have been flight as with the Hebrews in Egypt, except that its members were dispersed rather than concentrated and there was no place really to flee to. Another, suggested by modern practice, might have been sabotage of roads and aqueducts in hopes of destabilizing the system. But this would have required a change in the very essence of the Church. Still another, probably the first to have occurred to us, would have been to worship the emperor but with mental reservations. The Church, however, saw the impossibility of this in a way that we perhaps do not. Finally, it might simply have disbanded, admitting that what it offered the world was a way of death not life.

And here the Church had to make perhaps its most momentous decision. How it was made—whether by council or simply emerging consensus—we do not know and probably never will know. But that it was made we do know. The option chosen was the most difficult humanly speaking but the only one that accorded with the theme of biblical redemption history that we have discerned. The Church would adhere to non-violence, without exception. It would adhere also to civil obedience, accepting not only the payment of taxes but the institution of slavery, repugnant as this would have been to so many of its members. The one point at which it would stick was emperor-worship, in any form. Further, it would maintain its policy if necessary over a period not just of years or even decades but centuries.

This was indeed a superhuman undertaking. Many of its members, perhaps most, did not comply with it. But thousands did, to the point of death. Here is perhaps the main historical evidence of the reality of Jesus' resurrection, for only by its power could they have done this. And it was sufficient to turn the Roman State around, by their witness—the root meaning of martyr—obliging it to accept the Church that it had sought so desperately to wipe out, to accept also the intrinsic value of human life, on the denial of which the Roman system had been based.

Such was the early Church's achievement through its martyrs. But their significance, vital though it was, needed to be articulated if it was not to remain implicit and thus perhaps only transitory. And this was something that by definition they could not themselves do. The function was however performed by a group known as the Apologists. Effectively they came from the educated and disciplined spiritual proletariat that we noted previously. They did not go around apologizing for the Church in the usual sense—far from it. Instead they presented the Church's faith to those outside it, speaking in terms drawn from the secular thought-world from which they had come, and thus intelligible to it. Likewise they based themselves on the critical disciplines derived from their own secular professions, essentially the approach followed in my book and in this course.

We previously named two Apologists, Justin Martyr and Tertullian. The latter is especially remarkable. He had an extensive legal background and in his *Apology*, written around 200 C.E., he used this brilliantly to show that the Roman policy of torturing and executing Christians *pro nomine*, simply for the name of Christian, was contrary to the Romans' own jurisprudence, and to many of their other principles as well. Thereby he made apparent the treasure that we have in the martyrs, a treasure sufficient to reunite as well as restore the Church. And for this we may say, as the martyrs themselves regularly said on hearing their death sentences pronounced: *Deo gratias*—Thanks be to God.

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