

## LESSON EIGHT – Early Christian Life

### Early Christian Life

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

**I Corinthians 1:26-27**

- When looking at the history of the church, we must remember that the sources themselves are not a fair representation of all that was taking place.
- Most of the surviving documents deal with the work and thought of the leaders of the church.
- When reconstructing the life of the early Christians we must be content with piecing together bits of information from the scarce sources that have survived.
- Wise scholars among the Christians were an exception and not the rule. From the perspective of cultured pagans, Christians were a despicable rabble.
- The common Christians should not be underestimated. Some of their writings reflect Scripture more accurately than the writings of educated Christians of higher class.
- There was not perfect uniformity among the early Christians, but even though there were various emphases and interpretations, there was a common faith in Jesus and a common core of apostolic teachings that set limits to diversity.
- Frequent travel and communication by letter or messengers prevented most communities from developing isolation from one another.
- Worship was one area which Christians from all social classes had a common experience.
- Besides the data offered by the New Testament, it is possible to reconstruct early Christian worship by piecing together information from various extant documents.
- Two of the earliest witnesses we have regarding Christian worship come from Governor Pliny the younger of Bythia and from Justin Martyr. Justin's writing on worship is rather brief.

**“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 writings 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 and 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 and thanksgiving, and all the people respond, “amen.” Now follows the distribution and partaking of the nourishment that has been consecrated by the thanksgiving, and they are sent by means of the deacons to those who are not present. Those who can and will, freely give what seems best to them, and the offering is given to the president. With this he helps orphans and 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**

**and matter, created the world, and also the day in which Jesus Christ, our Savior, rose from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>**

- From this and other sources we know that at least since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century there were two main parts in a communion service.
- First, there were readings of Scripture and commentaries on them, with prayer and singing.
- Second, those who were not yet baptized were dismissed and the rest of the assembly partook in the Lord’s Supper.
- Another early custom was to gather for communion at the tombs of the faithful. This was the function of the catacombs.
- The catacombs were cemeteries whose existence was well known to the authorities because Christians were not the only ones with subterranean burial arrangements.
- Since the church was not recognized by the authorities, it could not own property, but funeral societies were allowed and these could own cemetery property.
- Christians organized themselves into such funeral societies and therefore it made sense for them to gather at their cemeteries.
- But the more important reason was that many heroes of the faith were buried there and Christians believed that communion joined them not only among themselves with Jesus, but also with their ancestors in the faith.
- More frequently than in catacombs and cemeteries, Christians gathered in private homes.
- The oldest Christian church, found in the excavations of Dura-Europos and built before 256, seems to have been a private home that was converted into a church.
- At the beginning, the Christian calendar was simple and basically a weekly calendar. Every Sunday was a sort of Easter, and a day of joy; and every Friday was a day of penance, fasting and sorrow.
- Early on, for reasons unknown, Wednesday also became a day of fasting. There was a very special Sunday, once a year, the day of resurrections.

**Part of what took place on Easter Sunday was baptism of new converts and their being added to the congregation. Justin tells us that “once those who have believed have been washed and joined us, we take them to where those who are called brothers and sisters are gathered, in order to offer fervent prayers for ourselves, for the recently illuminated and for all others all over the world...then there is a kiss of peace, the president is given bread and a cup of wine and water...,” and the Eucharist is celebrated.<sup>2</sup>**

- In preparation for these events, there was a time of fasting and penance. This is the origin of our present-day Lent.
- The earliest feast day in connection with the birth of Jesus was January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany, the day of His manifestation. This was originally the celebration of the birth itself. Later, particularly in some areas of the Latin-speaking West, December 25<sup>th</sup> began to take its place.
- Baptism was the other great event of Christian worship. In order to partake of communion, one had to be baptized.

- Baptism was usually administered once a year, on Easter Sunday. Early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century it was customary for those about to be baptized to fast on Friday and Saturday, and to be baptized very early Sunday morning, which was the time of the resurrection of Jesus.
- The candidates were completely naked, the men separate from the women. On emerging from the waters, the neophytes were given white robes, as a sign of their new life in Christ. They were anointed, making them part of the royal priesthood.
- Baptism was usually performed by immersion or by kneeling in the water and having water poured over the head.
- The Didache (a document of unknown authorship on practices of the early Christians) prefers baptism in running or living water and cold water was preferred to warm water. Where water was scarce it could be administered by pouring water three times over the head in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- To this day scholars are not in agreement as to whether the early church baptized infants. By the late second or early third century, there are texts indicating that at least sometimes the children of Christian parents were baptized as infants.
- *The Apostolic Tradition* which has been credited to Hippolytus is one of the early references to the baptism of little children.
- Burial inscriptions that give information on the time of baptism and on the age at death, show a close correlation in time between baptism and death, whatever the age of the person.

### **Christian Morality**

- Jewish moral teaching was adopted by the early Christians. The 10 Commandments were elaborated so that the prohibition of killing included abortion and abandoning small children.
- The prohibition of adultery included fornication and homosexuality. There was an emphasis on the heart as well as outward actions.
- Christian apologists made Christian moral life central to their argument for the truth of Christianity.
- Charity for the poor and underprivileged was a characteristic of early Christianity. The strong sense of brotherhood brought a corresponding sense of obligation to alleviate the physical needs of other believers.
- Benevolence toward others was seen as an imitation of God's philanthropy for human beings. Already in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century Ignatius had to caution against excesses in the use of church funds to purchase the freedom of slaves.
- Early in the second century there were three distinct positions of leadership in the church: bishop, presbyter or elder and deacon.
- Some historians have claimed that this hierarchy is apostolic in origin, but the extant documents would seem to point in an opposite direction.
- The New Testament seems to indicate that the organization of local churches varied from place to place, and that the titles of bishop and elder were interchangeable. There are also some historians who are inclined to believe that some churches were not led by a single

bishop, but by a group of leaders who were sometimes called bishops and sometimes called elders.

- As the church became increasingly Gentile, the danger of heresies rose and this in turn led to a greater stress on episcopal authority.

### **Women in the Early Church**

- Women are mentioned principally in their traditional roles of wives and mothers, where they were expected to be loving and faithful to their husbands and manage their households in an orderly manner, and to educate their children in the fear of God.
- On the other hand, a celibate lifestyle was adopted by many – both virgins who never married and widows who did not remarry.
- Women were also involved in the missionary outreach of the gospel, accompanying apostles and evangelists on their travels and working in women's quarters of households to which men did not have access.
- By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the official leadership of the church was entirely masculine. But the matter is not quite clear in earlier times. Particularly in the New Testament, there are indications that women had some positions in leadership as deaconesses.
- In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century there is documentation of women being appointed deaconesses.
- New Testament restrictions of women doing public teaching, and against women filling the role of elder, seem to have been uniformly observed in the mainstream of the church.
- Widows and virgins were recognized as having special serving roles in congregations from early times. Only in Montanism and some Gnostic sects did women engage in public preaching and presiding at liturgical functions.
- Tertullian, for one, objected to women performing baptism, but other sources indicate their assisting at the baptism of women.

### **Evangelism in the Early Church**

- The enormous growth of the church in the first few centuries is undeniable. This leads us to question what methods of evangelism was used to achieve such growth.
- After the New Testament, very little is said of any missionaries going from place to place like Paul and Barnabas did.
- The enormous spread of the gospel in those first few centuries was not due to full time missionaries, but rather ordinary Christians who traveled for other reasons, slaves, merchants, exiles and the like.
- The spread of Christianity was mainly in the cities and it penetrated the rural areas very slowly and with much difficulty.

### **Eschatology in the Early Church**

- Two patterns of eschatological hope emerged early in Christianity. From a certain strand of apocalyptic Judaism there developed a chiliastic eschatology. According to this view, all the deceased wait in the Hadean world for the coming of the earthly, temporary messianic kingdom, with the righteous and unrighteous separated in different compartments.

- Christian chiliasm placed the resurrection of the righteous (the first resurrection) at the time of Jesus return and the inauguration of his earthly rule from Jerusalem. Based on Revelation 20:3, this view fixed the length of this rule as 1,000 years, hence the designation millennium which is Latin or chiliasm which is Greek. At the end of this period the remainder of human beings will be raised for judgment with the subsequent eternal separation in either heaven or hell.
- An alternative, non-chiliastic, pattern of eschatology understood the future kingdom of God and Jesus as heavenly, not earthly. According to this view, also derived from Jewish sources, the righteous dead are already in the kingdom of heaven and there is no trace of an interim earthly kingdom.
- In place of the ideas of the abode of the dead in Hades and an earthly millennium, this view embraced the belief in an intermediate stay by the righteous in the heavenly realm in the presence of Christ. Often there was expressed conviction that Christ at His resurrection delivered the righteous dead of the Old Testament from Hades and took them with Him to the intermediate heavenly realm.
- This non-chiliastic form of Christian eschatology interpreted Revelation 20:3-4 as referring to the binding of Satan by the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the coming to life of those beheaded for the sake of Jesus as the resurrection of their souls at death in order to enter paradise with Christ and the 1000 years as symbolic of this present interim rule of the faithful with Christ in the heavenly Jerusalem. At the second coming there will occur the resurrection of the bodies and final judgment.
- Present in all forms of orthodox eschatology was the belief in the bodily resurrection, in contrast with Gnostic views of the resurrection of the soul only.

### **Early Christian Art**

- As soon as Christians began having their own cemeteries and their own churches, Christian art began to develop.
- Since communion was the central act of worship, scenes and symbols referring to it are most common.
- The fish was one of the earliest Christian symbols and for that reason appears frequently in communion scenes, as well as in other contexts. The significance of the fish, apart from its connection to the feeding of the multitudes, was that the Greek word for fish – ICHTHYS – could be used as an acrostic containing the initial letters of the phrase: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

### **Conclusion**

- In conclusion of early Christian life, the ancient Christian church was composed mostly of humble folk for whom the fact of having been adopted as heirs of the King of kings was a source of great joy.
- This was expressed in their worship, in their art, in their life together and in their valiant deaths.

- The daily life of most Christians took place in the drab routine in which the poor in all societies must live. But they rejoiced in the hope of a new light that would destroy the dark injustice and idolatry of their society.
- Why did Christianity succeed? By the end of the third century Christians made up a sizable minority population of the Roman Empire.
- The success of Christianity on the political level in the 4<sup>th</sup> century turned on the conversion of one man – Constantine the Great.

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<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 109

<sup>2</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., pages 111-112