

# The Classical Renaissance

Lesson 10: Wednesday, February 1, 2006  
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The first 400 years AD, are a glorious confusion of dynamism and diversity. At the same time we can look back and see how predictable the different main views were. Finally, we can see amazing parallels today to the main perspectives then. This is a truly rich and significant period to study.

However, my first duty in this lesson is to make clear that the very title, *classical renaissance*, is my own concoction. I don't know of anyone else who has dared to employ this phrase in the way I do. The obvious danger is that the phrase, *classical renaissance*, may lead people to assume I refer to *The Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries*, which, in fact, was, in part a "rebirth" of interest in the Roman/Greek *classical* world.

In this case I am drawing attention to a *renaissance* within the 4th century itself. After all, the word *renaissance* is, like most words, not under lock and key and has been employed in many other ways. As I have studied the development of Western civilization I have noticed down through the centuries what I first thought I might call various "flourishings" of peace and quiet and faith. Later I boldly decided to call all of them "renaissances," using the word in a more general sense.

Specifically, I have found reason to think of five renaissances in the last two thousand years of Western history. After identifying these five "flourishings" or "renaissances" I noticed that in four out of five of the cases others had already employed the

word *renaissance*.

I also found that if you utilize a grid of five four-hundred-year periods, 0 AD to 400, to 800, to 1200, to 1600, to 2000, you will find that the five renaissances fall in the latter part of each period:

1. 300-400, The Classical Renaissance
2. 700-800, The Carolingian Renaissance
3. 1100-1200, The Twelfth-Century Renaissance
4. 1500-1600, The Renaissance
5. 1800-2000, The Evangelical Renaissance

Each of these epochs or pulses is described in some detail in my article in the *Perspectives Reader*, entitled "The Kingdom Strikes Back," where I have a diagram which shows the essential equivalence of these five renaissances to pulses Latourette describes.

Notice that the flourishing portion of the last period started earlier (1800 not 1900) than just the last century of that final four-century period. Actually, in each of the five epochs the renaissance begins a little earlier. By the fifth it is even greater.

Just in general, this breakdown in four-century periods is just an impartial grid and means no more for the structure of history than 100-year centuries. No one pretends that history falls into either 100 or 400-year periods. I feel it is helpful, to use such a grid to which to tie things. That seems easier than to track 40 centuries!

Thus, even though there are some

things (these renaissances) which seem roughly to coincide with 400-year periods, other very significant things don't seem to pay attention to that grid, such as the doings of the Celtic Christian movement or the rise of Islam.

One other thought is that many of these periods begin in chaos or persecution. Roman government crack-downs in the first, Gothic and Saxon invasions in the second, Vikings invasions in the third, for example.

However, in this lesson we continue to focus on the 4th century and our first, "Classical Renaissance." In our last lesson we already pointed out the lifting of persecution under Constantine and the scholarly work that followed. There was also scholarly work needing to be opposed. Indeed, Eusebius brought together documents which were themselves critiques of opposition to some earlier streams.

Probably the most formidable opponent of standard Christianity was associated very early with a wealthy businessman, eventually a Bishop, named Marcion. His reaction to the Bible, and even the Pauline message was to ignore anything that was appreciative of earlier Hebrew faith. Consequently he threw out the whole OT and most of the New - anything which seemed more Hebrew than Greek.

His perspective was a predictable conclusion, and his kind of ethnocentrism bedevils us to this day whenever we find it difficult to figure out how any Hebrew before Christ could ever have been "born again," or how any Catholic before Luther could be born again, or how any Lutheran before the Evangelical Awakening could be born

again, or how any Evangelical before the Charismatic movement could be born again, etc.

Marcionism, ancient or modern, represents the inability to see one's faith clothed in unfamiliar garments, customs other than one's own.

Marcion, himself no doubt a dedicated believer, accomplished (accidentally) one good thing: scholars believe his drastic abandonment of treasured documents actually assisted in the process of firming up the "Canon" - that is, a list of approved NT documents. The LXX had already firmed up what we call (misleadingly) the Old Testament, but Marcion's influence may have speeded up the formation of what we call (misleadingly) the New Testament. [I think it would be better for us to speak of the Bible, Part I and Part II.]

Marcion's fairly strong following may have survived to some extent in another major divergence just a little later, namely, Manichaeism. Mani carried Zoroastrian full-blown dualism (both a good and a bad god) into Christianity, in a very strong movement into which the famous 4th-century theologian, Augustine, was first caught up. After a number of years in this stream Augustine abandoned it and tended toward the neoplatonic concept in which all evil is the mysterious work of the one God.

Augustine's pendulum swing has defined what some scholars regard as a long-standing syncretistic element in Christianity of the West. This resulted in only a vague idea of Satan. It talks of Satan being completely defeated at the Cross and no longer "walking

around as a lion seeking whom he may devour” - even though the latter phrase was penned by Paul *after the Cross*.

Another ancient perspective we have inherited is the idea of the heresy of Pelagianism. Although none of the writings of either Marcion or Pelagius survive (only criticisms by their opponents), our understanding of Marcion may be more correct than our view of Pelagius. Latourette felt he had to suggest that Pelagius probably was not a Pelagian but only a “semi-pelagian.”

Similarly we can note that many other ancients are popularly misunderstood. That is, the Stoics were not stoical, the Epicureans did not have epicurean tastes - any more than Calvin’s thinking was equivalent to Dutch Calvinism or the Puritans were puritanical.

There are in fact many features of Western Christianity that do not derive from the Bible and there are many features of the Bible that have not properly survived in Western Christianity. The phrases *kingdom of God/Heaven*, which occur 98 times in the NT, do not appear at all in the early creeds. Even the Cross as a symbol was not in use in the early centuries.

In other words every cultural vehicle of faith in history is in part an earthen pot in which the glory of God is carried, our own form of faith included.

It is commonly assumed that the doctrine of the Trinity was always held by Christians, but for over half a century an alternate perspective (named after Bishop Arius - Arianism) was the

official creed of Roman Christendom. And, admittedly there has been some real Biblical truth in Arianism, Marcionism, Manichaeism, Augustinianism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, even Islam. Some of these are better than others. None is perfect. Fortunately God judges us by the heart and not just by our heads, and much less by our labels. Donald McGavran is famous for saying of the huge African phenomenon of marginal sects (52 million and over 10,000 denominations) that “It does not matter what they believe for now if they just keep on studying the Bible.”

In any case, the final, flourishing Fourth Century involved significant changes. Followers of Christ were definitely labeled *Christians* in the Fourth Century, even though the word in the NT was used merely as an outsider’s label for Christ’s followers.

The Fourth Century was when, in Rodney Stark’s words, two different forms of Christianity emerged, the *Church of Power* and the *Church of Piety*. The *Church of Power* phrase referred to the public and official which was partially funded by the Roman government, and to which eventually included all Roman citizens whether they individually were believers or not. The latter, the *Church of Piety*, referred to the highly selective and elite small communities (“orders”) of “monks” who wanted to be more fully faithful than was required by public morality.

The “orders” proved to be a great blessing to Western Christianity. They maintained libraries, made copies of books, both Christian and secular.

Apart from their labors only four manuscripts exist from the period of the Roman empire. Lynn White, Jr., UCLA's famous medieval scholar said that apart from the orders' literary endeavors we would know no more about the Roman empire today than we know about the ancient (and apparently brilliant) Georgian empire. These monks who sang their way through the Psalms each week were, in White's words, "The first intellectuals to get dirt under their fingernails."

But in the relatively brief Fourth Century, the Roman Church of Power is not known for sending missionaries beyond its borders. They did exile "heretics" such as Arian leaders whose faith was picked up among the gothic tribes. This unintended mission effort explains in great part the fact that when tribal peoples later invaded the empire they represented a "heretical" version of the faith but at least were remarkably gentle invaders, and they kept their word. Some Roman aristocrats said they were more Christian than the Romans.

Ironically, the so-called "Fall" of the Roman empire is usually pegged with the overrunning of the Roman peninsula. There were, however, two quite positive factors in that unprecedented event.

First, it marked the achievement of significant military skills on the part of the tribal peoples north of the empire (middle Europe) who had for many decades been rotated into the Roman army.

Second, the prime mover of the decline of Rome in the West, was the pressure of the Huns invading Europe

from the steppes of Asia. They pushed the mildly Christianized Gothic tribal peoples into empire territory, Alaric finally invading Rome itself in 410. The Huns themselves arrived at the Roman gates forty years later. By that time the actual seat of the Roman empire was no longer the city of Rome but the city of Constantinople (today's Istanbul) which had been established over a hundred years earlier.

By the end of the Fourth Century, while the Gothic tribes were only superficially Christian, the faith had penetrated the Celtic parts of Europe in a much more serious form and resulted in advanced scholarship. In our next lesson we will go further with the remarkable Celtic movement to Christ.

Here, at the very end of the fourth century Pelagius, already mentioned, is graphic testimony to the advanced Biblical scholarship already the case among the Celtic peoples.

Pelagius was so advanced he was an embarrassment to the Latin scholars, such as Augustine. Yet, because he came from an ethnic background generally despised in both the Latin and Greek worlds they did not feel they could learn from him or agree with him. His native language was within the Celtic sphere, yet he arrived in Rome with a command of both Latin and Greek when most of the Latin scholars, such as Augustine, knew only Latin. Considerable commotion ensued. Doctrines for which he was blamed were condemned (he was too optimistic about the human will). But in a number of face-to-face trials he was able to defend himself success-

fully, especially at the Greek-speaking end of the empire where his Latin accusers who followed his tracks, unlike Pelagius, had to work through translators. Most of the differences between the two parties we would call semantic. It is probable that people like Jerome, who considered the Celtic peoples "pigs," felt they had to arrive at some sort of formal rejection of Pelagius's insights.

In any case, Pelagius stands as a durable example of the surprisingly advanced Biblical scholarship which existed by the year 400 on the part of a tribal, head-hunting people into whose midst the faith of the Bible had gained a deep and permanent foothold. In our next lesson we will see how their grounding in the Bible allowed them to "re-evangelize" England after the Anglo-Saxon invasions had encompassed all of the southern part, and to contribute very significantly in the renaissance of Christian faith which occurred at the end of the next period. It is difficult to imagine how the Christian tradition in the West would have survived without the help of these "mission field believers."

Curiously, the fall of Roman power in the West after 400 AD precisely allowed the faith to spread beyond former Roman borders, while the continued military power of Rome in the East, due to its identification officially with Christianity, essentially prevented the spread of the faith beyond the limits of the empire.

I believe we can see a parallel between the rise of Christianity in Western Europe following the decline of Rome in the West, and the contin-

ued and even accelerated spread of Christianity in the colonial world as the colonial powers in modern times rather suddenly withdrew following World War II.

We will see in the next few lessons that in Western Europe even the Latin version of Biblical faith - despite being considered a universal faith centered in Rome - eventually gave way to many different versions both before and after the events surrounding the tumultuous "Protestant Reformation."