

The Emerging, Expanding Church

Lesson 9: Wednesday, January 4, 2006
Ralph D. Winter

W1409

In our previous lesson we saw the firm reality, and also the complexity, of a new beginning, a new tradition of Biblical faith through a lateral shift from Semitic to Greek and Latin cultures.

We noted the same kind of a confusing shift later on between the Mediterranean sphere and the Germanic sphere, in the Reformation. We pointed out the contemporary shift away from Western culture into the intricacies of African, Indian and Chinese cultures.

Today our concern is to see how well this NT lateral shift both survived and expanded in totally unexpected ways in the next few centuries.

Our first observation should be to recall that this shift really was not entirely sudden. It surfaced like a delayed-action fuse. It had been in the making for centuries before the birth of Jesus or Paul. At the time the Pauline letters were being written, literally thousands of Jewish synagogues had already been sprinkled throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Even more significant was the amazing and gratifying fact that the faith and faithfulness of these far-flung Jewish communities of what is called "the Jewish diaspora" - the Jewish Dispersion - was so real and had such integrity that it had already attracted two kinds of Gentiles: 1) Proselytes - perhaps as many as 100,000 individuals of Gentile background who had gone the whole way in adopting Jewish culture and faith, and 2) God-Fearers - perhaps a million who at

least attended the Jewish synagogues, to hear the scriptures and to enter into worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Much of this could not even have occurred had not what we think of today as the "Old Testament" been in the Greek language. In at least the East end of the Mediterranean, including Palestine, the Greek Bible, the Septuagint had become common. In Greek areas Synagogues were able to attract and maintain Greek God-Fearers precisely because of the existence of the Septuagint.

Thus, all this was a massive head start, which Christian historians have usually been loath to give its proper place. They sometimes have allowed the impression that Gentiles gained nothing and had nothing to gain from Jewish believers.

The divergence of the faith, even faith in Jesus Christ, between Jewish and Greek cultures can be seen in Romans 14, where Paul courteously cautions Greek believers against belittling the Jewish customs of the Jewish believers in Jesus. Paul himself, a bicultural of both Jewish and Greek culture, firmly believed, as he said in Romans 1:16, that the Gospel he preached had the power of salvation for both Jew and Gentile, but you have to wonder (after reading Rom 14) how many others truly believed that.

A tragic element also enters in. The Jews had fought and struggled to attain special favor and you might say, license, to pursue much of their own religion within the Empire. When Gen-

tile groups began to form it is apparently true that Jews sometimes called upon Roman authorities not to extend that same license to these new groups, within which there may not have been any Jews at all.

This could have led to persecution and even death of the early Gentile followers of Christ, and naturally, to the widening of the divergence between the two faith traditions. In the process thousands of Jewish followers of Christ became seen as more Jewish than followers of Christ. Before long, perhaps in a single generation, it became easier for the Jewish followers of Christ to identify with Jews rather than Gentiles.

As the rift widened and deepened, both sides began to think ill of the other, and Christian history is full of terrible evils inflicted upon communities of Jews throughout the Mediterranean and middle Europe. To the Jews, the word *Jesus* became associated with their persecutors.

Meanwhile, despite sporadic persecution, the initially substantial "God-Fearer" population expanded. Civil authorities began to identify them with the sneer-word, "Messiah Nuts" which is something like what the word *Christian* meant.

The testimony of daily life of Jews carried some of them into marriage with emperors. Now, in the same way, the integrity of life of the followers of Christ gained them respect. In one instance, in particular, one of two sub-caesars, Constantius, married a woman who had grown up in the East where Christianity was far more widespread. It is possible that this kind of

Christian influence caused him to refuse to implement the terrible decade of the Diocletian persecutions in his area of Western Europe including the British Isles. He sent his son Constantine as a formal hostage to grow up in the East under the watchful eye of the other Caesar, to ensure good relations.

Constantine grew up to inherit his father's role and eventually became the sole caesar, ruling favorably to Christianity for 45 years, early moving the seat of empire to the new city called Constantinople, today Istanbul. These 45 years, plus the rest of the 4th Century in general, are the amazing window we have into early Christianity. This is when Eusebius was commissioned to collect documents and information about the first three centuries, and compose his mammoth multi-volume study, apart from which we would know very little. It was this window which allowed the canon of the New Testament to become established. This is the period of the empire-wide Nicene Council and the resulting Nicene Creed.

After Constantine (called Constantine the Great) died, a younger relation, Julian, soon became an anti-Christian emperor. He did not make much headway in turning the clock back, and died prematurely fighting the Persians. Christianity then returned, became the official religion of the empire, with no further major threats.

No further threats to the identification of the Empire with so-called *Christianity*, but a huge destabilizing element loomed from the East. Oriental

peoples from the steps of Asia moved in on Visigoths and Goths north of Rome and Constantinople. This pushed the lightly Christianized Visigoths across the boundaries of the empire, temporarily. They were condescended to and mistreated and eventually seized Rome in 410 AD under Alaric. The occupation of Rome was relatively nondestructive, due to the fact that the Visigoths were somewhat Christian, did not burn the churches, respected women, did not harm those who did not oppose them.

Rome in the West had already yielded much of its glory to the New Rome of Constantinople, but after 410 was never on a par. Gothic rule was turbulent and within a third of a century, was further depressed when the Huns almost entered the city, in 446 AD, a date which scholars centuries later began to think of as "The Dark Ages," even though the centuries that followed were in fact the "Light Ages" for the tribal peoples to the North. Actually few scholars today think that the Dark Ages terminology is helpful. It was an invention of the 15th Century Renaissance.

Thus, from the rise of Constantine in the West until the fall of Rome to Alaric in 410 AD we have roughly a hundred-year window during which most of what we know about early Christianity either happened or was recorded. Eusebius the official historian, Jerome, translator of the whole Bible into Latin, Augustine, the most influential theologian of all time, even Pelagius, long misunderstood, unfairly blamed for "Pelagianism," were all in this century.

Because of Eusebius we have the ten volume *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, *ante* not *anti*, referring to the centuries prior to the Council of Nicea. Thanks to Eusebius we know of people like Clement of Rome, Mathetes, Polycarp, Ignatius, Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, in Volume II, people like Hermas, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria. In Volume III-VI, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus; Cyprian; Caius; Novatian, Gregory Thaumaturgus; Dinoysius the Great; Julius Africanus; Anatolius and Minor Writers; Methodius; Arnobius

From Volume VII on we encounter fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries, as well as whole documents such as The Gospel of Peter, The Diatessaron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Visio Pauli, The Apocalypses of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen's Commentary on John, Books I-X, Origen's Commentary on Matthew, etc..

Others have emulated Eusebius and added the so-called Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, the first series of 14 volumes contains mainly works produced or brought together by Augustine and Chrysostom. A second series of 14 volumes of additional materials relate to both before and after the Nicene Council.

This, of course, is all "printed page." Much that we will never know we must simply work like detectives to try to understand.

For example, we will never know in

this life the details of the earlier centuries of the many different varieties of the faith, nor can we know the whole picture after Constantine came into the picture because what we do know was highly influenced by political factors.

That Constantine gave close attention to the unity and growth of Christianity during 45 years of relative peace over which he presided we cannot doubt. That, like an earlier Napoleon, he was not just a general but paid close attention to civic affairs, presiding over the massive shift of the seat of empire from Rome to a new city that he named Constantinople, we cannot doubt. That in leaving he decided to turn over the Lateran Palace (the White House of his day) to the Christian leaders in Rome, we do know. That, after he died, the brief three years when Julian tried to re-establish earlier religion fizzled because the former priestly tradition had no idea of mercy and good works, we do know.

We also know that massive changes took place in the very form of the faith. In NT times, as with the Jews (and today's Mormons) the faith was primarily a shared experience in the household. The captivity had ended what temple-centric faith had developed, and the Deuteronomic focus on the family flourished. Built on the minimum basis of ten heads of family, Synagogues also were invented in captivity and survived and spread far and wide.

As Jewish faith was taken over by people of Greek culture, who had temples, the believers in Jesus as Messiah and King did not go near the pagan

temples but maintained their faith almost entirely at the household level. Unfortunately, the Greek word for household gathering (*ecclesia*) is routinely translated in English as "church" which goes back to "Kirk" which goes back to the Greek word "Kyriakon" which means *temple*. Today when we go to church or see a church burning down we assume that we are talking about a building.

But, all this is greatly due to the fact that under Constantine the believers could come out of the catacombs, could get together for more reasons than weddings and funerals, could even use the formerly pagan temples, and enjoy a government dole for their pastors. This remarkable transformation is perhaps the only thing that could have happened when the whole empire went Christian, and many good things came of it.

However, bad things also resulted. The Mennonites, who for many decades found no government friendly to them, have generally interpreted the transformation under the well meaning Constantine as Constantinianism, or simply "The Fall of the Church." They rightly fear the faith becoming official. Unfortunately, their own experience down through history seems very parallel because their communities, mainly perpetuated biologically, have routinely incorporated their own children whether or not they are heart believers. The resulting "official" faith for them has been inadvertently what could be called a "tribal constantinianism." In an attempt to forestall that process, one branch of the Mennonites, called Hutterites, require their young

people to live outside their communities for a year to make sure they want to come back.

Another bad thing that happened was the identification of Christianity with the Roman Imperial power. Samuel Moffett, in his authoritative *Christianity in Asia*, points out that in lands bordering the Roman sphere, like Persia (Iran) once Rome became Christian, anyone who professed the Christian faith was suspect of being sympathetic to their enemy, Rome. As a result, when that happened, more Christians were killed for their faith than during all of the previous centuries under sporadic Roman persecution.

In far more ways than we may realize our Christianity is part and parcel of the Roman cultural tradition - from the wearing of wedding rings and throwing rice at weddings to the celebration of Jesus birthday (which was probably in June) on the day of the annual Roman Saturnalia, celebrating Saturn including the giving of gifts. In later lessons we will see many other cultural traditions from later centuries woven into "Christianity" which do not at all derive from the Bible, including, of course, the assumption that to become a follower of Christ means automatically taking on and taking over the Roman form of Biblical faith which is called becoming a "Christian." We easily forget that no one in the NT called himself a "Christian" even though that sneer word was employed by outsiders for certain of the believers.

We certainly can appreciate the immense social and intellectual invest-

ment which is represented by the Christian tradition. At the same time, as we shall see, certain elements that became incorporated along the way clearly misrepresent the Bible. We may easily deplore some of Constantine's actions but it would be hard to imagine how history would have been rewritten if one of the largest and most powerful empires in human history, definitely superior to most others in those days and earlier, had not embraced the faith to the extent it did.

Both before and after the window century from 310 to 410 AD, grim conditions and chaos were more than likely the order of the day. This blessed incubation period allowed a movement to begin that all of the subsequent tribal invasions could not obliterate. Especially durable as understood by Mark Noll, professor of history at Wheaton, was the development of the monastic study/work centers. Of that development he says (contrary to much Protestant thinking):

The rise of monasticism was, after Christ's commission to His disciples, the most important - and in many ways the most beneficial - institutional event in the history of Christianity. (*Turning Points in Christian History*, p. 84.)

Indeed, apart from the work of these so-called *order* structures, very little happened in Christian history until Protestants invented their own equivalent in the form of the many globe-girdling Protestant mission societies.

Of that story we will inevitably hear much more in our later lessons.