

Lesson 2
Study Guide
Formation and Struggles - The Birth of the Church AD 33- 200

Chapter 4 & 5

“In virtually every chapter of the Book of Acts there is evidence of ongoing theological disagreement, at the surface or hovering just beneath it. In its own way, this disagreement is a measure of the seriousness with which the apostolic generation took questions of theology and principle as well.....grace and free will (9:1-4), reason and revelation (7:22; 17:23), the interpretation of scripture (8:30-31) and predestination (13:48).”
(Jaroslav Pelican, ACTS, p.170)

The Christian Church took root when the believers passed on their faith in Christ to other faithful believers. Jesus’ original disciples fathered others by the verbal and written word in letter or scripture and taught the traditions helping to guide all to the truth. The rise of Christianity began with the earliest community in Jerusalem led by Jesus’ apostles. They witnessed Jesus’ death and resurrection and received the Holy Spirit in which to begin the evangelization of the laos under the Great Commission of our Lord and Savior (Matthew 28:19-20).

Religious Syncretism

The age of religious syncretism began with the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323BC) who brought the Greek culture and language to the Greece, Asia Minor and the middle-east. He was the major contributor to syncretism – the union of different, often opposing, religions and practices. When the Roman republics took control over Italy in 275 BC and then on to Syria and Egypt and then Jerusalem to 14 AD. However, soon there was a search for a monotheistic deity. Stoicism became the dominant trend among educated classes in the Hellenistic world. They allegorized all myths to save them. Later in Greece, Asclepius a god of healing appears as a most humane god. In contrast, Jesus enters the world healing “every disease and infirmity among the people” (Matthew 4:23-24). Soon the church enters the world as the religion of healing, reconciliation and salvation. This deep craving of the people for healing fell right into the hands of the Christian missionaries who proclaimed the Lord as someone who, “casts out the spirits with a word, and heals all who were sick.” (Matthew 8:16) In the Hellenistic centers of Pergamum and Corinth we meet Asclepius medical schools in the Second Century where treatment included herbs, therapy, baths and fasting.

Nevertheless there was greater danger to the church other than religious cults and Roman persecution for there were Christian insiders (Gnostics) who substituted their own speculations and theology. Couple this with the age of religious syncretism where the Roman conquerors brought their own gods and learned new cults. This had a profound effect on all religious life in the Hellenistic cities. While Christianity did not rebel against Roman society, it did reject the cult of the emperor. Christians prayed for the emperor (love your enemies, Luke 6:27) and refused to pray to the emperor.

While there have been similarities between the mystery cults and Christianity, Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Origen dismissed them as “demonically inspired imitations” of the truth of Christianity. Clement of Alexandria denounces the cults as “godless sanctuaries” and “as without sanctity” versus Christianity as the “sacred mystery.”

Summary

The point of this chapter is that given all this cultist environment and anti- Christian empire pressure neither the church before Paul nor those founded by Paul were dependent upon the mystery religions. Truly he had opponents in every community whether Jew or pagan cultist or Roman governor. Paul emphasized the oneness of all baptized accepting all of mankind, man or woman, master or slave. Paul's preaching, letters and other New Testament sources clearly show that the early church was firmly rooted in the events of the life of Jesus including his death and resurrection.

Questions

Given what you have read in this chapter, your knowledge of the Judaism at the time of Christ's birth and the conversion of St. Paul why do you think: "now is the accepted time" and what is the acceptable time for? (2 Corinthians 6:2)?

What are the Mystery Religions or cults today and why do you think that today's people accept them over the traditional Christianity?

Chapter 5 - The Apostle Paul's Upbringing and Conversion

Briefly describe Paul's early life as a Jew including place of birth spoken languages and education.

What was it about Paul's conversion that was different?

What was so important about the Jerusalem Conference and its impact on early church and all of us today? Where is this found in the Book of Acts?

+++++ The End+++++