

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 17

Liberals vs. Conservatives – An Early Dispute

Have you enjoyed your two-week breather from church history? Are you ready to get back into it? We are about to march into the 300's, one of the most significant centuries of the church and its changes. With Constantine's endorsement of Christianity as the state religion, changes come in church structure, church theology, church architecture, art, music, and more. But before we get into Constantine, we need to take a deep breath and look at an issue that confronted the church in the century before.

We are calling it here a liberal versus conservative controversy, but by doing so, we are using current terminology. Those are certainly not the terms used in the 200's!

At its roots, this controversy has some of the formative issues that will ultimately lead the church to split between the East (the "Greek church") and the West (the "Roman Catholic church").¹

To best understand the controversy we discuss this morning, we need to review some basics we have already covered to some degree. This will help put the discussion into context and also serve as a review/refresher for our two-week hiatus from church history.

JEWISH ROOTS OF THE CHURCH

Our earliest church history comes from the New Testament itself, especially the history book we call "Acts." We know the church's Jewish roots. It was through the Jewish lineage that Jesus Christ was incarnated. Christ's ministry reported through the gospels centered on the Jews. Christ's apostles were all Jewish as well.

We see the seeds of a church that is larger than Judaism when Jesus told his apostles that they were to go into the whole world and preach the good news to all nations. While some may have thought this might have been a directive to take the church only to the Jews that were dispersed throughout the world, living in

¹ This split occurs on several occasions. The "final split" is usually reckoned in 1054 when the Roman Patriarch (the Pope) and the Greek Patriarch excommunicate each other and their respective followers. There are a large number of issues that caused division over the years. No one issue alone can be reckoned the cause.

many nations, and speaking many tongues, the Apostles gradually came to understand that God's plan was much greater.

In Acts, we see that the Spirit came upon the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Those Jews took their faith in the crucified and resurrected Savior to their homes in Jerusalem and beyond. Thus, the church was born. The church starts as a movement within Judaism, but quickly grows beyond that boundary.

Peter takes the gospel to Cornelius after a vision where God makes it apparent that the gift of atonement in Christ is for more than God's chosen people, the Jews. Still, we find the church is operating within the confines of its Jewish roots.

Enter into this picture Paul, a man fully Jewish, yet uniquely fashioned by his life and education to communicate to Greeks. We meet Paul at a time when he is zealously living his Pharisaic life of rules and diligence, protecting his understanding of God's place on earth by rooting out and destroying the infectious Christian disease that is growing in Judaism. While going to Damascus to confront and arrest Christians within Judaism, the risen Christ confronts Paul himself. The church's history then takes a drastic and surprising turn.

Instead of purifying his Jewish people by destroying the faith in Christ, Paul begins truly purifying his Jewish people by proclaiming the faith of Christ. Paul brings not Pharisaic doctrinal purity, but true purity of soul with the saving faith that is the bedrock of the church.

Paul takes the gifts and teaching God has worked into his personal history and begins something unheard of in history – the mission trip!² Unlike his predecessors, Paul goes out into the Greek world to teach and proclaim faith in a risen Lord. Taking his Old Testament as scripture, Paul moves through Asia Minor, into Greece, and at least into Italy as well, spreading faith in Christ and concurrently spreading the church.

While Paul's efforts are in the Greek world, Paul still primarily teaches to those versed in and affiliated with the Old Testament and Judaism. Most of the Greeks he converts are those who attend the Jewish synagogue as "God fearers."³ The

² By and large, earlier historic efforts to go into the world and convert someone to a religion was never much more than the forced conversion that might come with a military conquest.

³ Acts tells us also of Paul approaching Greeks unaffiliated with Judaism in Athens. Similarly, we can assume that Acts tells us only that information that Luke thought it important to write, but we must remember that it is not a full accounting of all that Paul or the other early witnesses achieved in their missionary efforts. In other words, simply because something is not said, we cannot assume it was not done!

teachings of Christ and the basics of Christian life are delivered to those who already have a healthy respect for Jewish scripture and Jewish thought.

DISTANCE FROM JUDAISM

The majority of our New Testament, and certainly Acts itself, covers a time period up through the early 60's A.D. As noted above, this is a distinctly Jewish time period. In the late 60's and early 70's, world events take a turn that profoundly affects the church. The Jews in Jerusalem rebel against the Roman authorities. The rebellion is bloody with many men, women, and children dying. Among the Jews that died for their independence, history does not record Christians among their number. Early church historians explained that Christians left Jerusalem and did not take arms with their Jewish kinsmen. In fact, most historians agree with little dispute that the early Christians were pacifists. For them, the teachings of Christ to turn the other cheek, to submit to authorities, to refrain from hatred and murder, as well as the example of a submissive Christ who had authority and resources to turn the Roman empire upside down, chose instead submission and pacifism that led to Calvary and crucifixion.

The result of the departure of Christians from the controversy caused great consternation among the Jewish power structure that survived the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the rebellion in 70 A.D. Judaism regrouped and tried to find a national identity and religious foundation outside of the Jerusalem Temple and its leaders. The new phase of Jewish history would center on synagogues outside of Jerusalem. Because sacrifices were to be offered only upon the holy altar of the Temple and by the Temple priests, those sacrifices were stopped until the Temple might be restored. Jews found their faith and practice in a dispersion. Without the unity that came from a united practice in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders needed to clearly delineate what was and was not tolerated in the dispersed Jewish faith.

Meeting at Jamnia a Mediterranean coastal town (modern Jebna), the surviving Jewish leaders rewrote much of Jewish daily practice to work outside the Temple system. In the process, the Jewish benedictions were rewritten. The rewritten benedictions specifically excluded those adherents of Christianity from the Jewish synagogues and life.

Here, the church began walking a different road. What had started as a renewal movement in Judaism found itself excluded from that faith and its worship. So, we have a church founded on faith in a Jewish Savior, which has Jewish scriptures, Jewish leaders, a strong cadre of the Jewish intelligentsia, as well as a natural breeding ground of further converts in those attending Jewish synagogues.

And, that church is made anathema to faithful Jews. By necessity, this put the church on a road that turned decidedly Greek.

What does the new road mean? Well, we see that the church finds new believers and a new generation of faithful who are not as conversant with the Old Testament scriptures, who do not have a good understanding of the Jewish culture and traditions that explain and underscore the life of Christ and the gospels themselves. The new influx of church leaders for the next generation are not the thought leaders and intelligentsia of Judaism. Instead, they are Greek educated, philosophy-minded gentiles with a decidedly non-Jewish bent!

At this point, we enter the second and third centuries that bring about the tensions and controversies covered in this lesson. The writers we have already covered in this class include some Greek giants who wrote effectively against the martyrdoms of saints. They wrote defenses of the faith not only on legal and moral grounds, but they also wrote from an academic angle, explaining the intellectual integrity behind the Christian's faith. Many of these writers were actually Greek philosophers who came to embrace the faith in Christ as the logical answer to their philosophical questions. Among the greatest of these thinkers/teachers/writers was Clement of Alexandria, whom we covered in an earlier class that looked at his allegorical approach to understanding scripture.

It is quite understandable that these Greek thinkers would write about their faith in ways that used Greek thought over that of the Jews, which we read as authors of the New Testament. The teachings themselves were, of course, by and large integrated with the New Testament scriptures, which were recognized as authoritative, apostolic writings to these church leaders. However, the understanding and writing about these scriptures was often in very "Greek" terminology. This also came at a time when the church was trying to understand some issues that were not set forth clearly in scripture itself.

For example, the central Christian issue of the church concerns the salvation Jesus brings to humanity. Consider Irenaeus of Lyon, who we studied in our lessons on Gnosticism. He stood firm in his teachings against heresies of his day, but he did so in logical Greek fashion. In the process of explaining the deviations of Gnostic heresy, Irenaeus set out the true salvation wrought by Christ, as he understood it. For Irenaeus, Christ brought salvation to the race of Adam through what theologians call "recapitulation" (The word itself is not that useful, so you can safely tuck it away for a bit and try for the thought behind it instead!)

Irenaeus taught, somewhat as an extension of Romans 5, that Adam's sin automatically affected all people because Adam is the progenitor of all humanity. The problem for Irenaeus that Christ had to rectify was not merely how to get a human's soul back into the hands of God for eternity. The problem was a material, flesh, and blood problem. How could a child of Adam have flesh and blood that had eternity with God? Irenaeus understood Jesus, God incarnate, solved this problem – that is, God made flesh. By Jesus being born an infant, taking up the material substance that was the substance of Adam, Jesus brought a salvation to that substance. Jesus was not merely a heavenly sacrifice for sin, but was made king of the material creation by taking material substance and redeeming it through his life and death. Every aspect of flesh and blood, every walk every day, Jesus reversed the failings and shortcomings of Adam. So in Christ, we have a true joining of heaven and earth – a new Adam – a new progenitor of a new race. The Christians renewal is not only a spiritual one of grace, but also a material one that will find a resurrection of flesh and blood.

While those distinctions may seem overly complicated to us, they rooted out the Gnosticism of Irenaeus's day, and became central to some of the church's thought as it started the road wrestling with what it meant for Christ to be fully divine and yet fully human.

We also see this thought of Irenaeus to be a great leap beyond the simple Christian basics of, "accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and lead a moral life before God and man." It was an interesting time when great Christian thinkers alternated between reflecting and writing on the mysteries of God and Christ and fleeing for their lives from a persecuting world. The faithful wrote books, and the pagans burned them!

In this world, we find a controversy over what should be the church's mission and message. This controversy found its center in two African towns, Alexandria and Carthage. As discussed in an earlier lesson, Alexandria was the seat of a Catechetical School (read that "a seminary-type school") and was the center of an approach to scripture that used allegory as the key to interpretation. Alexandria was the second largest city in the world, had the world's largest library, and was home to a great number of educated students of Greek philosophy. A preeminent example of Alexandria's thought and approach was found in Clement of Alexandria, covered in our previous class on this subject.

Meanwhile, just a few hundred miles to the west was the city of Carthage, which was located on what is now the coast of Tunis. If Alexandria was a scholastic town with great interest in Greek philosophy, Carthage, at least measured by its Christian practices and writings, seemed a more pragmatic town. We have studied one of the key leaders in the Carthaginian church earlier – Tertullian. Tertullian

and Cyprian are two key players in the church life of this part of North Africa. They were the first Latin writers of the church, Clement of Alexandria and others wrote in Greek, the language of the New Testament. They set the church on a different direction than the leaders from Alexandria.

Roger Olson, in his *Story of Christian Theology*, does a good job of setting the stage and making a bit of modern sense of the differences between these two approaches. Olson considers Clement as “the prototype of the broad, liberally minded, intellectual and philosophical Christian theologian who seeks to synthesize Christian belief with culture as much as possible.” This is compared to Tertullian who “sought to produce a purely Christian system of belief untainted by pagan or secular modes of thinking” (Olson at 85). In our thought system, we would consider Clement and his progeny the “liberals” and Tertullian and his progeny, “conservatives.”

Let’s consider a comparison of the two approaches and then ask what it says to us today, especially in light of scripture.

CLEMENT’S APPROACH

Clement was well trained in the Alexandrian schooling of Plato.⁴ While Clement certainly rejected a number of Platonic teachings that were inconsistent with scripture (for example, Clement insisted that God created the world out of nothingness which was contrary to Platonic philosophy⁵), he did try to integrate what he considered philosophical truth into his Christian faith. Believing that all truth was God’s truth regardless of where it is found, Clement integrated contemporary secular philosophy into his faith at each possible opportunity.

We should add that Clement rarely did so at the cost of scripture or apostolic teaching. Clement believed that his approach was fully consistent with scripture and apostolic authority. In fact, Clement believed that God had providently provided the world with Socrates and Plato to prepare the Greeks for the gospel in the same way that God provided the Old Testament to prepare the Jews for the

⁴ Plato, of course, had lived and taught centuries earlier in Athens, Greece. His teachings spread through the educated world and were developed further into what modern philosophers consider “Middle Platonism” and later into “Neo-Platonism.” Those distinctions are not really relevant in this discussion.

⁵ Platonism taught creation was never anything specifically directed by God but was merely an emanation from a divine source.

gospel.⁶ Where Paul seems to make negative statements in his epistles about the deceptions of the world's philosophies, Clement understood Paul to be concerned with certain wrong systems of thought, like the Stoicism and Epicureanism Paul confronted in Athens.

Clement almost uses Aristotle's logic in approaching the usefulness of philosophy. For Clement, philosophy meant a clear, precise way to understand what is right and wrong, what is truth and falsehood. In philosophy, Clement could find good examples of how Christians should think and live.

TERTULLIAN'S APPROACH

Tertullian was not at all like Clement! Tertullian challenged the usefulness and propriety of Greek philosophy as a part of Christian teaching and thought. Tertullian would exclaim, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" As a trained trial lawyer, Tertullian critically examined any approach to faith, looking for the source of the teaching. In Tertullian's mindset, the only useful truth for religious consideration was the revelation of God to Israel and the apostles.

In Olson's terminology, "Tertullian was horrified by Clement's overall approach to Christian theology. He spent much of his energy combating it" (Olson at 90). Tertullian was much less trusting of man's ability to correctly think and process philosophy outside of scripture itself. For him, it was a very slippery slope into heresy. Furthermore, studying philosophy with an effort to integrate it into Christian faith was adding extra grease to that already slippery slope!

We err with Tertullian if we consider him a non-intellectual. He certainly worked out details of the trinity in ways that no one had previously. He also wrote against heresies, and wrote in defense of Christian faith. But, Tertullian would defend the faith and interpret truth only from within the confines of scripture and apostolic tradition. Tertullian was suspicious and rejected non-biblical sources for interpreting biblical truths.

Both Clement and Tertullian were not in isolation. In Alexandria, Origen followed his mentor Clement and took Clement's approach and teaching even further. Similarly, in Carthage, Tertullian would influence Cyprian, who left a deep impression on what would later become the Roman Catholic Church.

⁶ Clement would refer to Plato as "the truth-loving Plato" who was an imitation of Moses, who brought the law to the Jews.

Origen would write over 800 treatises and would open up the catechetical school to pagan philosophers. Ultimately, the church would proclaim Origen a heretic, in spite of the many wonderful things he did for the faith, because of certain Greek philosophical doctrines that he adhered to, most notably, the idea that human souls pre-existed their birth⁷ as well as the idea that God ultimately would save all creatures (“universalism”).

Origen would appeal to the Old Testament for his belief that Christianity properly used Greek philosophy. Going to the Exodus story, Origen noted that God had the Israelites flee with possessions of the Egyptians. Origen taught that it was fully appropriate for God’s people to use the “spoils of the Egyptians” which, for him, meant the philosophies of the Greeks!

Cyprian, on the other hand, was as pragmatic and non-philosophizing as Tertullian (whom Cyprian termed, “the Master”⁸). For Cyprian, his concerns were about how to live daily and how the church could best organize and provide for its members. Cyprian cared deeply about the church’s unity, abhorring both heresy and schism equally. Cyprian set out instructions for basic Catholic uniformity as he taught that the Spirit worked through Bishops, and that the church structure is properly built around the Bishops and administration of baptism and communion.⁹

⁷ This came in handy for Origen when he considered Paul’s writings in Romans that God loved Jacob while he hated Esau before either was born. Origen believed that Jacob and Esau had pre-existed their births and had, as spirits, made bad choices upon which God had based his love and hatred.

⁸ Cyprian was not an actual student of Tertullian. Tertullian had died by the time Cyprian became a Christian. Cyprian was a student of Tertullian’s writings, rather than of the man himself.

⁹ While Cyprian was central to the structure of the Catholic Church for centuries to come, at least as far as the guidelines for Bishops and clergy roles among the laity, Cyprian also presented the Catholic Church with a difficulty. Cyprian had quite a public fuss with the Bishop of Rome, Stephen. The dispute was over whether any one Bishop outranked another. In modern words, this means does the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) have authority over other Bishops who rightfully stand in apostolic succession. Stephen was asserting the supremacy of the Roman Bishop in a Papal sense, and Stephen would have nothing of it! Ultimately, both Cyprian and Stephen died before the matter was pushed to a head.

WHAT DO WE MAKE OF THIS? (A/K/A POINTS FOR HOME)

What are we to make of this controversy? What does scripture say about it? First, we need to make a few core observations from scripture.

1. Our salvation is based on *whom* we know, not *what* we know. Paul writes, “I know *whom* I have believed and am persuaded that *he* is able to keep that I’ve committed to *him*,” (2 Tim. 1:12) not “I know *what* I have believed.” This cuts both ways. Can someone be saved if he believes something that is not “Biblical?” Certainly! Heaven’s entrance is not a catechetical examination. It is acceptance of the death of Christ on our accord!
2. Is what we believe beyond the atonement of Christ therefore irrelevant? Absolutely not! Paul is quick to talk and write about God, Christ, and pure doctrine. Why? Because doctrine breeds action. We do not live a segmented life where our beliefs exist in a vacuum. What we think is true effects how we choose to live. Jesus said he is the “way, truth, and life” (Jn. 14:6). In this sense, he equates all three, the way (our salvation) with truth (reality and thought) and with life. What we think changes what we do.
3. Is there no use of philosophy? Can we leave abstract thought out of the picture and concentrate only on faithful living? We must recognize that many different people seek God from many different mindsets. What God uses to reach one may be different than what he uses to reach another. Paul noted the importance of becoming Roman to the Romans and Greek to the Greeks. We need to see God’s incredible reach.
4. By the same token, all truth is God’s truth. God himself is truth. God is the ultimate reality. Yet what we know of this, our measuring rod is the revelation we have from God himself. That is given us in scripture in a way that we can read, study and use to constantly measure the truth we may find elsewhere and verify it!