

Early Christianity

An independent Bible study class
2020?

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Course Syllabus

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General Material

These notes provide the framework for a class on earliest Christianity. The class meets Sunday evenings 6:30-8pm in room 3191 at Valley Church, Cupertino, California. The class will likely move into this material after James, and before or after studying Paul. A complete text (translated to English) of these writings is available as a free PDF at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.html> and other places. Two courses from The Teaching Company provide an excellent perspective and overview. [From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity](#) and [After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers](#). If they are not available at your library, I am willing to lend my copy. Most are in MP3 format.

The latest version of these notes is always available on the web page for this class:
<http://www.nemecfamily.net/fan/writing/EarlyChristianity/>

Disclaimers

I accepted the role of leader or facilitator of this class by request of the people attending this Sunday evening Bible study. I intend to encourage attention to certain questions and issues, as can be seen by the rest of this syllabus. I intend to offer some of my ideas on these and related subjects. I do not speak as a teacher or other official of Valley Church. The ideas are mine, not those of Valley Church, its elders, pastors, or staff. This is not an official Discipleship Elective of Valley Church.

The first item in the [doctrinal statement of Valley Church](#) reads, “We believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being inspired by God and completely inerrant in the original writings and of supreme and final authority in faith and life.” This encapsulates a Fundamentalist position. Mine is Conservative, but not Fundamentalist. I discuss this in my [notes on the gospels](#). I neither insist nor expect that people agree with me on this or any other opinion I have or express.

When I express a view about biblical scholarship in class, unless I say otherwise, it is generally a consensus or a broadly held view among modern biblical textual scholars (not theologians), and of scholars of the history and religions of the Ancient Near East. I say so when I express an idea that is my own. But because of my memory problems, I may forget that I've read it somewhere. Significant ideas in my written notes are nearly always annotated with their source.

The primary source for this class is the collection of writings called the Apostolic Fathers. The objective is to read them and understand them, not to read into them.

Orthodoxy

Christianity developed for centuries before any meaningful sense of orthodoxy developed. The term counterfeit is inappropriate without a reference standard of genuineness. In earliest Christianity, for nearly 3 centuries, there were several major variants on equal footing, all claiming apostolic authority. Besides the proto-orthodox, there were Ebionites, Marcionites, Docetics of various kinds, Gnostics of many kinds, and more. With political pressure from Constantine and later emperors, proto-orthodox won, thus by definition becoming orthodox. The others became, by definition, heterodox. Each attacked competing ideas as heresy.

Is every composer besides Bach a counterfeit? Every artist besides Monet? Every operating system besides Unix?

Guiding Questions

1. What were they thinking? Were their ideas more Jewish or more Greek?
2. How do their ideas fit in the context of Ancient Near East religions of the second and late first century?
3. Which ideas persisted into modern Christianity? Which didn't?

The Writings

Didache

The ethics specified in Didache are not specifically or uniquely Christian. I think it talked about voting for elders, something the Roman church (per 1 Clement) would not approve.

Clement

These letters are traditionally (and falsely) attributed to Clement. Written around 96CE, 1 Clement was considered canonical in Corinth, Syria, and Alexandria. The theme of 1 Clement was an exhortation to remain faithful to God. Jealousy leads to bad results. Therefore, don't kick out your leaders. God is a god of order. The earliest church at Corinth was charismatic. That is, it was led by operation of the gifts of the Spirit (See 1 Corinthians), not by pastors or elders. They wouldn't need any. The apocalyptic worldview was nearly universal at this time. The apocalypse is near, so you don't need to plan for the future.

This letter shows an early attempt by the church at Rome to exert its authority (or at least influence) over other churches. Peer writings suggest this was more influence than authority, though it is neither subtle nor restrained.. It shows the early ideas leading to doctrines of apostolic succession. Here, the idea is governing authority, not narrative or doctrine. The message is that church leadership should be chosen by church leadership, not by the people. Also note that nearly all early Christian writings claim apostolic authorship or apostolic origin of the ideas. These ideas varied over an extremely wide range. It displays themes of Hellenistic Judaism, Stoicism, and Christianity. Extensive reference to Tanakh show that the Roman church considered it part of the Christian canon. Not all of Christianity felt that way. However, it places the phoenix myth on peer status with Tanakh.

Chapter 42 is very interesting:

The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus, the Christ, was sent from God. 2Thus Christ is from God and the apostles from Christ. In both instances the orderly procedure depends on God's will. 3And so the apostles, after receiving their orders and being fully convinced by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and assured by God's word, went out in the confidence of the Holy Spirit to preach the good news that God's Kingdom was about to come. 4They preached in country and city, and appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. 5Nor was this any novelty, for Scripture had mentioned bishops and deacons long before. For this is what Scripture says somewhere: "I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith."

This seems to cite Isaiah 60:17, but taking great liberties with poetic license.

Ehrman (I think) suggested that the theology of the Roman church became the proto-orthodoxy, and then the orthodoxy, because the Roman church was rich. They provided money to feed the poor and to free slaves. Loyalties tend to run toward those who benefit you. Rome was also the political center of the world. Surely it should also be the center of the religious.

2 Clement is much later, perhaps 140-160 CE. It seems to be a homily (sermon), the oldest surviving sermon outside the NT canon. The introduction is an example of midrash pesher, showing Presentism. See my Gospels notes for more detail. It cites Isaiah 54:1 (about Israel in Babylonian captivity) but claims it is talking about Christians in the Roman Empire. It rails against competing religious ideas about Jesus. The introduction suggests the congregation is converted polytheists. It provides a relatively early stake in the ground, for a time where writings considered apostolic were granted peer status to the Bible (the books, Septuagint). Chapter 7 shows the author does not hold the Calvinistic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Chapter 8 shows eternal life dependent on obedience and repentance while on earth. Chapter 16 includes "Almsgiving therefore is a good thing, as repentance from sin; fasting is better than prayer, but almsgiving than both."

First Apology of Justin, the Martyr

[I am looking for my notes about those who sought martyrdom. Polycarp? Irenaeus? Someone writing a letter on the way to be executed. See also Gospels.odt.]

Written around 155 CE by a Gentile Christian of Greek background, it follows the classic form of

philosophical propaganda tracing back to Plato's Apology of Socrates. "Though in form a plea for toleration, the Apology was certainly written even more as an appeal for conversion." (Richardson, p. 196). He refers to the rival sects of Marcionites and Mithraists, and to the broad collection of philosophical concepts called logos.

The section beginning with chapter 21 is often entitled *Superiority of Christianity to Paganism*. I don't know if the title is in the original text. Is it asserting superiority? Or is it simply asserting that it's not inferior? Practically all peer religions except Judaism were polytheistic. If Christianity is not inferior to the nearly universal religious paradigm, it should be hard to justify persecuting it.

Chapter 62 might be the first appearance we have of the idea that Christ was the voice of the burning bush to Moses.

Chapter 66 seems to describe a belief in a form of transsubstantiation in the Eucharist. The similar Mithraic idea is presented as an imitation by 'wicked demons'.

Irenaeus

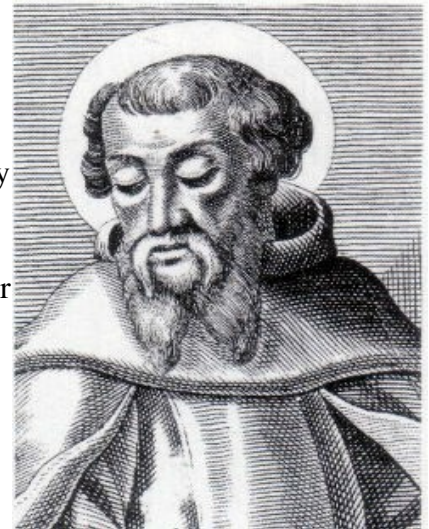
Bishop of Lyons. We have selections from the Work Against Heresies (Book I), "The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called", written around 180 CE. Lyons has been called a 'lesser Rome'. I read that it's against Gnostics and is also an early sign of the supremacy of Rome in terms of power. No wonder Roman Catholicism sainted him! From Wikipedia:

In Book I, Irenaeus talks about the Valentinian Gnostics and their predecessors, who go as far back as the magician [Simon Magus](#).

In Book II he attempts to provide proof that [Valentinianism](#) contains no merit in terms of its doctrines. In Book III Irenaeus purports to show that these doctrines are false, by providing counter-evidence gleaned from the [Gospels](#). Book IV consists of Jesus' sayings, and here Irenaeus also stresses the unity of the Old Testament and the Gospel. In the final volume, Book V, Irenaeus focuses on more sayings of Jesus plus the letters of [Paul the Apostle](#).

According to some biblical scholars, the findings at Nag Hammadi have shown Irenaeus' description of Gnosticism to be largely inaccurate and polemic in nature.

Irenaeus is also our earliest attestation that the Gospel of John was written by [John the apostle](#), and that the Gospel of Luke was written by [Luke, the companion of Paul](#).



He is an equal opportunity fault-finder, blasting even his homeland and its language, and of course any doctrine different from his. Feigning humility, he spends every word declaring how he is right and everyone else is wrong. He begins with a concise expression of a Trinitarian doctrine that aligns very well with the Christianity of today. As most, he exaggerates the uniformity of belief. "the real Church has one and the same faith everywhere in the world." In effect, he is saying that the real Church is the one which holds his doctrines. He refers to God as a Demiurge. The Platonic idea is of a subordinate being responsible for building the material world. Gnostic usage tends to portray this being as inferior,

and often identifies it with the creator God of Tanakh.

He describes views of Valentinus (c. 100-160 CE), who according to Tertullian, was once a candidate for bishop of Rome. This is a strong indication that he was not a niche philosopher. Nearly all the fragments we have of his writings or ideas are in the form of refuted quotations in the works of his opponents. Thus they may be more caricature than accurate. He had a large following of Gnostic Christians. A key Gnostic idea he held survives into modern Christianity. Only those of a spiritual nature receive the gnosis (special knowledge). This is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2. Valentinus is credited with (accused for) devising the idea of the Trinity as three hypostases of the Godhead, deriving them from Hermes and Plato.

Irenaeus describes only Valentinus's complex mythology of 30 aeons descendent in various ways from the Godhead.

Others

Melito of Sardis may have been the first to accuse anyone (the Jews) of deicide. You killed Jesus, and Jesus is God, so you killed God.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 CE), in *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*, covers the parable in Matthew 19. In IX, Clement says, “says that he is not perfect as respects [eternal](#) life, inasmuch as he had not fulfilled what is perfect.” He misinterprets the parable. It's one of the many ways a sage talked about where obedience to Torah was lacking. As with the prophets, the solution is to repent and change your behavior. Salvation, with the Christian definition, was unknown in Tanakh, and even during the lifetime of Jesus. This is a sermon, based loosely on Bible texts, not too unlike modern ones.

Sometimes cited as a source, Papias has also been characterized as an unreliable fourth-hand earwitness. <http://ehrmanblog.org/papias-as-an-earwitness/>.

Constantine I

Emperor Constantine I converted to Christianity in 312 CE. The very next year, he issues the Edict of Milan, which granted religious tolerance. It thus made Christianity illegal and no religion illegal. He convened the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which demanded resolution of the Arian controversy.

Not until 380 CE, with the Edict of Thessalonica (*Cunctos populos*), did Emperor Theodosius I declare Christianity the state religion.

References

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