

Lecture One

The Diversity of Early Christianity

Scope: Modern Christianity is widely diverse in terms of its social structures, beliefs, and practices. But this diversity is mild in comparison with Christianity during the first three centuries, when people claiming to be Christian did not agree on the most basic of issues, such as how many gods there were (one? two? thirty? 365?); whether Jesus was human, divine, both, or neither; whether the world was created by the true God or by an evil deity; whether the Jewish Scriptures were truly divine or inspired by a false God. This first lecture considers the diversity among early Christians and situates the formation of the Christian "canon" of Scripture in the struggles over what to believe. We will see that Christians struggling to establish "orthodox" beliefs determined which books should be included in the New Testament and which books should be left out, leading to the New Testament we know today.

Outline

- I. When we speak of Christianity in the modern world we naturally think of one thing. But at the same time, we know that Christianity is, in fact, a wide variety of things.
 - A. This can be seen in the range of beliefs of different Christians, including such major beliefs as those about God, the nature of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus.
 1. Many Christians think of God as a personal being, a kind of superhuman in the sky. Others find it blasphemous to make God in our own image. Still others view God as an impersonal force that lies behind all that lives in the universe.
 2. Many Christians place great importance on the belief that Jesus died on the cross for salvation. Others place more emphasis on his life and great moral teachings.
 3. For some Christians, the resurrection is an actual, physical reanimation of Jesus' corpse. Others consider the resurrection of Jesus to be a symbolic claim.
 4. Hell, for some Christians, is the destiny of those who don't hold the right beliefs. Others consider hell to be a metaphor for life apart from God.

- B. The same can be said of Christian practices, such as baptism and Eucharist (communion), not to mention unusual practices of some Christian communities (snake handling, baptism for the dead).
 - 1. Baptism can mean, for example, a rite that removes original sin, the Christian substitute for circumcision, an outward sign of spiritual cleansing, or a way to salvation.
 - 2. Some Christians believe that in partaking of communion, they are literally eating the body and blood of Christ, whereas, for other Christians, the Eucharist is a symbolic meal.

 - C. Of particular relevance to this series of lectures are the widely different views of the Scriptures among different Christian groups today-both their content (which books actually belong?) and their character (in what way, if at all, are they inspired?).
 - 1. How were decisions made about which books should be included? Who made those decisions and on what grounds?
 - 2. Are the Christian Scriptures the literal and precise words of God?

 - D. Thus, despite what we might think, Christianity is no monolith. And it never has been. In this lecture, we will consider the varieties of Christianity in the ancient world-varieties that make the modern differences among Christians look tame by comparison.

 - E. In particular, we will look at the early forms of Christianity that did not survive, that died out, that lost the struggles to win converts and establish dominance, forms of Christianity that then became lost. And we will be especially interested in exploring the Scriptures of these lost Christianities, to see what they urged followers of Jesus to believe and how they expected them to act.
- II. It is important to consider the scope of our inquiry.
- A. Our time frame will cover the period immediately after the New Testament and up to the famous Council of Nicea in the early fourth century: roughly the various Christianities of the second and third centuries A.D.
 - 1. A wide variety of beliefs is found in the New Testament-but that subject is covered already in another course of lectures.
 - 2. For this lecture, it is enough to point out that there are several different kinds of books in the New Testament and that they were written by different authors, at different times, to different

audiences, and with different messages.

3. In many instances, these messages are not only slightly different, but they appear to represent different understandings of the significance of Jesus, the way of salvation, and the relationship of faith in Jesus to the religion of the Jews.
4. These differences continued into the second and third centuries.
5. We will end our inquiry at the beginning of the fourth century, around the time of the Council of Nicea, because that is where we find the first official proclamation of "orthodox" Christian belief, which once and for all eliminated, for most Christians, many of the earlier options.

- B. Our subject is not the wide range of ancient religions in this period, but only religious groups that claimed to be Christian, that is, claimed to adhere to the religion taught by Jesus and his followers.
- C. The range of beliefs among these groups is remarkable, whether with respect to God (was there only one?), the world (was it created by the true God?), Christ (was he human? divine? both?), his death (did he die for sins? did he even die?), and a variety of other critical doctrines.

III. This variety of early Christian beliefs raises an important question: Why didn't the various early Christians who held such bizarre ideas simply read the New Testament to see that they were wrong?

- A. The answer may be obvious to some but startling to others. These Christians of the second and third centuries did not read the New Testament because the New Testament did not yet exist.
- B. The books themselves, of course, had been written, but they had not yet been collected into a sacred and authoritative canon of Scripture.
 1. The term *canon* refers to a collection of authoritative books.
 2. One of the points we will learn is that our canon did not yet exist as an officially recognized collection during the second and third centuries.
 3. The twenty-seven books that initially made it into the New Testament canon represent twenty-seven books written by Jesus' followers in the second half of the first century.
 4. The canon consists of four types of books: gospels (stories of Jesus' life); the Book of Acts (an account of the life and ministry of the apostles after Jesus' death); Epistles (letters written for Christian

- individuals or groups); and the Apocalypse (an account of what will transpire at the end of time).
5. Other books were written at the same time, however, also claiming to be by Jesus' followers.
 6. Each of the early Christian groups that maintained its own distinctive beliefs and practices had books that were believed to be written by Jesus' own apostles—gospels, for example, allegedly written by his disciples Thomas and Philip, and Mary Magdalene.
- C. To set the context for these questions, it is important to understand some basic features of the spread of Christianity from the time of Jesus up to the early fourth century, as Christian communities sprang up in different parts of the Roman world over time, with distinctive understandings of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and distinctive written authorities for their views.
- D. The existence of these "other" Scriptures leads to other questions.
1. If, in the second and third centuries, there were lots of apostolic books read by lots of Christian groups, which ones were right? Which wrong? Which were actually by apostles? How would we know?
 2. Better yet, how did the church fathers who finalized our canon of twenty-seven books know? And what happened then to all the other books that did *not* make it in, once these particular Christian struggles were ended?
 3. These will be the issues that we will address in this course, as we look at the other forms of Christianity that did *not* win and the Scriptures that these forms of Christianity could appeal to, some of which we have known about for a long time, others that have been serendipitously discovered in modern times by archaeologists and rummaging bedouins.
 4. The following are some of the questions we will ask: What do we know of these various groups? What kind of written authority did they have for their views? Do we have the remains of any of these books? What do they say? How did one group end up winning the struggle? And how did our current New Testament canon emerge from it?

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapters 1, 6-9.

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*.

Supplementary Reading:

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*.

W. F. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Think of some of the clear manifestations of diversity in modern-day Christianity. How do you explain that Christians, who all claim to worship the same God, have so many differences among themselves?
2. In what ways do you think the presence of the canon of Scripture in modern-day Christianity (held to by the vast majority of Christians throughout the world) puts some restraints on theological and ecclesiastical diversity today?