

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

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#26. "The Importance of the Story" (third & fourth centuries)

We find there are many associated with Christendom who are interested only in emphasizing "Christian behavior." Whether or not Jesus was truly a supernatural Savior from Heaven is unimportant to them. Supernatural events, such as the virgin birth and the performance of miracles by the Messiah need not necessarily be factual to be of value to such people. In Orthodoxy, the literal truthfulness of the Biblical account is a matter of considerable importance. The early church would not consider the marginalization of the story as even a remote possibility. Paul had denounced such an idea in the strongest terms, pronouncing a curse upon any message who deviated from the original, central message of the Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

The early church certainly advocated Godly behavior, but such matters were secondary to correct belief about the person of Jesus, His nature and His actions. Belief in the identity and nature of Jesus was a test of true Christianity. "Orthodoxy" is a term used to describe correct belief and practice. It is the "right belief" that is officially endorsed by the church. "Heresy" refers to a doctrine or behavior that is rejected by the church. A person who rejects doctrine or practice, that is generally embraced by the church as a whole, is called a 'heretic'.

We need to understand that although there was agreement on essentials from the earliest days, some of what we call Orthodoxy was not clearly articulated until as late as the fourth or fifth century. It wasn't that the doctrine didn't exist, or didn't emerge until a late date, but rather that the churches as a whole saw the need to make statements acknowledging those doctrines, practices, and beliefs so that everyone was on the same page in matters of faith.

Doctrinal orthodoxy was a process of articulation of truths that had been embraced from the beginning. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4, Ephesians 4:4-6, and 1 Timothy 3:16 are considered to be first century creeds which contained the core doctrine of the Apostles. Some of the doctrines were clarified because heretical views emerged that threatened to distort the Gospel and destroy the faith of Christians. This process was not problem-free. It is not always easy to relate perfect Divine Revelation into imperfect human language. In the earliest days,

almost all Christians were Jews, and the Gospel was presented and understood within the context of Old Testament Scriptures. As the church turned increasingly Gentile, the challenge shifted to helping non-Jews understand the Jewish roots of their faith.

Various battlegrounds emerged in this changing culture. The Deity of Christ, and the understanding of His nature as fully God and fully man was one area of conflict. The Jewish Ebionites taught that Jesus was the perfect man, but just a man nonetheless. He "earned" his way to Messiahship by living a perfect life. Others embraced "Docetism," a view that insisted Jesus was not a man at all, but some type of spiritual phantom. The idea of being "fully God AND fully man" was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23 KJV).

"Gnosticism" is a term describing several movements that divided sharply between spirituality and materialism. They were known also as "Dualists." The physical world was seen as inherently evil, while the spiritual world was seen as essentially pure. Those Christians who were soulish or worldly were described as "the psuchichoi" (the soulish, emotional ones). Those who were enlightened were called "pneumatikoi," the spiritual or enlightened ones. The Gnostics divided Christians into differing classes, while seeming to acknowledge basic Christian doctrine. Nothing could be further from the truth. Though Gnostics sounded orthodox and highly spiritual, they never embraced the core tenants of the Gospel. Because of their confusing double-talk, Gnosticism plagued the church for centuries.

There were also many writings that contended for status as Scripture such as The Gospel of Thomas. The denial of Jesus divinity was not the issue for Gnostics. They doubted His humanity. There was no way that a human creature could secure salvation. As a result of Gnosticism, a document called "The Apostle's Creed" was developed in the churches of second-century Rome:

I believe in God Almighty and in Christ Jesus, His only son, our Lord. Who was born of The Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried but on the third day He rose from the dead. Who ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God The Father from whose side He comes to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy (universal or catholic) Church. I believe in the forgiveness of sins. I believe in the resurrection of the dead. I believe in the life everlasting. (author's translation)

Christianity resisted the onslaught of Gnosticism. Men like Tertullian (in North Africa), Irenaeus (in Turkey), and Origen (in Egypt) all taught and wrote against Gnosticism and affirmed the message of the four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The church survived by defending the importance of the story as related by the Apostles and embraced by the earliest Christians.

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