

Changing Social Location of Early Christianity

About **20 years** after the death/resurrection of Jesus, the **earliest known Christian document** (Paul's letter of 1 Thessalonians – 49 c.e.) provided indisputable evidence of **earth-shaking change** that had occurred in the life of the early church:

- The **Jesus movement had re-located** from its origins in peasant Galilee **to the urban settings of the Roman empire**...
- ... and **from the illiterate world of Jesus**, up the social scale to the, **literate world of Greco-Roman cities**.

Its future would forever be in **a different culture and a different language** – a change in social location that was **transformative and irreversible**.

This is what our class today will explore. There were **several steps along the way** and each is important:

Geographical Spread

The **first change** we need to think about is: **geographical spread**.

The book of **Acts** recounts the **missionary activity of Paul and others** in first spreading the Jesus movement into the **Greek-speaking cities of the eastern Roman world**

The movement **spread quickly** around Asia Minor (Turkey), Syria and Egypt into cities like Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, Edessa, Pontus, Bithynia, and Alexandria. It also arrived very early in Rome.

The **numbers were not large**, but the **geographical spread was significant** because each new area was **a new social location**.

The **endemic wars of the Roman empire also scattered people**, including **Christians**, in all directions.

When the Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 c.e. broke out, **the small Christian community in Jerusalem fled** -- many went to Antioch in southern Asia Minor (Turkey). Others fled to Egypt, Edessa or a dozen other urban areas in the eastern empire.

A principal **aid in all this** was the fact that by the first century c.e., far **more Jews lived outside Israel than in the Jewish homeland**.

Late in the first century about **10% of the population of Rome were Jews**, most of whom lived in a **slum across the Tiber from Rome itself**.

That is significant because Paul and other missionaries usually went first to **urban synagogues** to tell the story of Jesus the Messiah. **Jews were an obvious natural audience**.

For these diasporan Jews, including Paul, **Greek was their mother tongue**. That immediately re-located the story into **another language and another culture**.

But the **oral tradition about Jesus** actually spread into **many languages** in **many geographical areas**, and **wide variety of local cultures**.

Within generation or two after Paul, the story was being told in Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, Persian, Ethiopic, Slavonic, Armenian, Georgian and a variety of other languages and dialects. **Each one of these was a new social location**.

Geographical spread created **new audiences**, with **new life issues** and **ever new renditions of the story**.

But the most important point here: **it spread to CITIES**. It was **no longer primarily a village phenomenon**.

Each **new social location** re-shaped the Jesus story **into something unique – and local!**

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But to understand the magnitude of these changes, **we need to stop here** and think about a phenomenon scholars call **“cultural adaptation.”**

“Cultural Adaptation”

What this means is that imported **stories, ideas, beliefs, practices and social or religious movements** cannot survive long-term without taking on **characteristics of the cultures into which they migrate**. The early church is a good example.

Within one generation, the **Christianity of Rome** was strikingly and irreversibly different than the **Christianity of Egypt**, which was different yet from the **Christianity in Antioch**.

It affects us too: **our Christianity has been “Americanized”** in ways that **completely baffle** Christians in other parts of the world.

Inevitably, then, the geographical spread of early Christianity introduced **ethnic and cultural diversity** that **changed Christianity forever**.

Oral to Written Gospel

The next change was even more momentous: **writing**!

By 49 c.e. **Paul was writing letters** to Christians in Thessalonica. By 51-53 c.e. he had written at least 7 letters to folks in Corinth (we have only 1 complete letter and a paste-and-scissors job of several others), and soon thereafter he penned letters **to a variety of small groups in far-flung places**.

Think about it! **These were LETTERS!** You don't send letters to the **85% of Roman urbanites who were completely illiterate!?!?**

Writing is therefore **irrefutable evidence** that a **new class on the social register** of antiquity had begun joining the Christian church.

Then around 70 c.e. the **Gospel of Mark appeared**. It is the earliest complete Gospel we know of today, though it is obvious that bits and pieces of the story and collections of Jesus' sayings were **circulating in writing in a variety of places well** before Mark wrote.

Matthew was probably written about 85 c.e., likely in Antioch, and **Luke** appeared soon thereafter -- though we don't know who wrote Luke or where it was written.

Both Matthew and Luke **are in sophisticated Greek**, so these authors were not peasants. The Gospel of **John** came a little later, perhaps around the year 100 c.e.

Soon **Gospels began to proliferate**. We know of **more than 40** from this earliest period **in a dozen different languages**.

Each told the story in a slightly different way, motivated and shaped by **different agendas** and **different life issues**.

This raises fascinating questions: **Who in these congregations** was doing the writing? **Who** could read? **Who** could afford to own a book or scroll?

We will be back to these questions below

It is hard to overestimate the enormity of the leap from **oral to written communication**, from **oral storytelling about Jesus to a written Gospel**.

We who have **lived with writing our entire lives** have no real sense of the **magnitude of the change** that writing created.

Oral Communication

Think for a minute about the **characteristics of oral communication**.

Jesus was a speaker of radical and often disturbing words – **an oral performer**.

Spoken words breathe life. They draw strength **from sound**. They carry a sense of presence, of intensity and instantaneousness. **They are always personalized**.

A BIG POINT: Oral speakers have unlimited opportunity for improvisation – recrafting language for a new place and a new moment.

Oral speech ALWAYS diverges into a **plurality of forms and directions** in new moments, new places, with new speakers.

Oral speech is above all an **intensely communal act**. People speak to each other. That means **speaker and audience ALWAYS interact**.

Interestingly, **many ancient Rabbis opposed silent reading** because it takes **away the community** and misses the **rhythm, catch phrases and tenor of spoken words**.

We also have to remember that **oral speech** disappears as soon as it is spoken, it **only lives on** in the hearts and minds of those **who identify with what is said** and thus **remember it**.

This means that **if oral words are alien to an audience**, matters of indifference, or socially unacceptable, they get **altered, adapted or eliminated by forgetting**.

In other words, oral speech is **controlled by the moment**— not the future. The idea that Jesus imagined himself speaking with a conscious regard for **distant posterity and eternal preservation is preposterous**.

In addition, there is **no evidence** - anywhere - **that oral traditions survive with verbatim accuracy**. Stuff that gets orally repeated **always varies in form**.

The bottom line, then, is very clear: **oral speech** can never escape the influence of **an audience and immediate circumstances** – neither of which are **transmissible to future generations**

Moreover, there is **another reality** we **literate folks** usually do not recognize...

Non-literate folks **deeply distrust ALL writing**. And why not? **If you cannot read** contracts, or wills, or laws, or bills, or court decisions, **you are at the mercy of those who can**.

Thus, one thing the spread of written Gospels **does not mean** is that everyone in the early urban congregations **could read, wanted to read, or even wanted to hear written stuff read aloud** – because the vast majority of ancient folks **did not trust writing... or the people who could write ... or the people who could read**.

An interesting example...

If I met with a disciple of the elders, I questioned him about the words of the elders – what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip or by Thomas or by James ... or by any other of the disciples of the Lord. **For I did not think that what was to be gotten from books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice.**

Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis (ca. A.D. 140)

Implications of a Written Gospel

A written text tends to **override oral variability** and **delegitimize multiple or varying accounts**.

Or ... as ancient, **non-literate folks might have suspected**: by putting the Jesus story into writing, Mark was attempting to **control the content of the message**.

Another important reality ... **because written words are potentially transmissible with a verbatim accuracy**, it wasn't long before early Christians began to develop an obsession with **original form, a fixed content and textual accuracy**.

So, it is no surprise that **dueling texts** and **endless theological wars** were off to the races!?!?!?

Moreover, the specter of “**theology police**” constructing **doctrinal litmus tests** were looming on the horizon ...

But that is part of our big story for next week!

Put to put the bottom line simply ... for better or worse ... the oral Jesus tradition has largely been lost. Almost **EVERYTHING WE KNOW** about Christian origins **is what got into writing**.

A Big Note for Our Time

The rigid demand that **everything be “biblical”** – an absolutist, textual mentality so often demanded today **among American evangelicals** – would only become widespread after Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press and the **spread of literacy across the general population.**

Parenthetically, we might also add that **“literalism”** – assuming that everything in the Bible is “literal” – **is the fetish of literate people!** Non-literate people simply do not think that way.

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So, because of geographical spread and the introduction of written letters and Gospels, things have changed... and we need to think about **the new social class** that had begun to respond to the message of Jesus: **folks who could read and write.**

From the **simple fact that they were carrying on a correspondence** with Paul, and producing written Gospels, we know they were from **the top 10-15% of Roman society.**

There is yet **no evidence they were from the top 1%,** so the overwhelming likelihood is that they were those we have identified as **“retainers”** - the wealthy, professional and politically-connected folks who depended on the 1% for their position in life.

They were **literate,** they **could afford to own books,** and they were **comfortable with writing** as a means of communication.

This means they were the **recipients of all the letters of Paul and all the written Gospels** that caused **significant changes in both the Christian message and the practice of Christian faith.**

Remember, these are the folks who **worried about maintaining a prosperous lifestyle,** surrounded by their own kind, in gated communities or prestigious neighborhoods, that provided a bit **of physical and social distance from the riff-raff.**

Remember also, from last week: **their primarily interest in religion** was to demonstrate **their loyalty to the society and thereby stay in the good graces of the 1%**, on whom their life chances, wealth and status depended.

Assuming the **commitment of these folks as Jesus followers was sincere**, and I think it was, that created **two really difficult problems**:

1. First, it **put them in close and constant contact with the urban poor**, who were the vast majority of early Christians, and who were the very **people of the lower classes the retainer lifestyle was designed to avoid**. Faith thus threatened to blur the boundaries of the social classes.
2. Second, **the Jewish origins and character of the Jesus movement**, together with its **insistence that the gods of Rome were not real**, **threatened the place of these literate converts in Roman society**. It made them look unpatriotic.

Let's look at each problem...

First, **their faith put them in close contact** with the **very people their whole lifestyle was designed to avoid**.

The **only retainers in the story of Jesus had been his opponents** and his message to them was intensely critical. He claimed that what they needed was **to repent of their arrogance, self-righteousness and love of status, power and money**.

But now retainers were beginning to appear in Paul's communities and indeed were destined to become its leaders with **written Gospels in hand**.

It is interesting, then, that in the writings of Paul, **concern for the urban poor** arises primarily when he is declaring his dismay about **friction between rich retainers and the nameless poor** in his scattered communities.

That friction gave Paul fits and accounts for his constant plea - in his **LETTERS** to the retainers - that **we are all "one in Christ."**

A sample of Paul's comments...

For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body. 1
Corinthians 12:13

And **those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor**, and our less respectable members are treated with **greater respect**; whereas **our more respectable members do not need this**.

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, so there may be **no dissension within the body**, but the members may have the same care for one another.
1 Cor. 12:23-25

Paul's writings focus heavily on the fact that **such elitest attitudes** were destroying **the unity of the Christian communities**.

But the second problem was even tougher...

Remember that - above all else - **retainers needed a religion** that could **support – and not damage – their relationship with the 1% on whom their livelihood and place in society depended**.

They needed religion to serve as a means of **displaying their loyalty to the Roman state and the Roman emperor**. Their religion needed to be **ROMAN**.

There is no getting around the fact that this became **THE central issue** of Roman Christianity for its first 300 years:

HOW CAN I FOLLOW **A JEWISH JESUS** WITHOUT RISKING MY PUBLIC REPUTATION AS **A LOYAL, PATRIOTIC ROMAN?**

Sound familiar?

(We must note here that the persecution of Christians was primarily because of Roman fear that Christian refusal to worship the Roman gods would endanger the state and undermine the rule of the 1%.)

Thus, we come to what became the heart and soul of **Pauline Christianity and the message of Paul**. You **do not have to follow the Jewish law** to be a follower of Jesus.

Pauline Comment on the Jewish Law

For **Christ is the end of the law** so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Rom. 10:4

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) **so that I might win those outside the law**. 1 Cor. 9:21

Yet we know that **a person is justified not by the works of the law** but through faith in Jesus Christ. Gal. 2:16

But if you are led by the Spirit, **you are not subject to the law**. Gal. 5:18

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself **one new humanity in place of the two**, thus making peace and **reconciling both groups to God in one body...**through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. Eph. 2:15-16

Of course there is **NONE** of that in **the teachings of Jesus**.

Here is what **Jesus said**:

A man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, **what must I do to inherit eternal life?**" Jesus said... **You know the commandments**: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, **I have kept all these since my youth**." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "**You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor**, and you will

have treasure in heaven; **then come, follow me.**" When he heard this, **he was shocked** and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Mark 10:17-22

It should now be clear that in the developing story of early Christianity, a **new social location had produced a new ways of thinking.**

The letters of Paul address a **new social location** with a **new set of issues** that was nothing like the message of Jesus to the poor. And it dramatically **changed both the emerging church and its message.**

With Paul's letters to the retainer types in his churches the struggle had begun in earnest to discover **what a ROMAN Christianity would look like?**

That struggle would go on **all the way to the time of Constantine and beyond.**

Would it surprise you, therefore, to learn **Paul almost never quotes Jesus!!!** In fact, **the teachings of Jesus are almost totally absent** from all of Paul's writings.

The message of Jesus – "good news to the poor" - **may have been repeated orally** in Paul's ministry, but it is **totally absent from the Pauline letters.**

Paul does not repeat the message **of** Jesus, he creates a message **about** Jesus.

Jesus' message that salvation is **in trusting God...**

... has been replaced by a message that **one can remain Roman** while **trusting a salvation created by the death and resurrection of Jesus.**

To say this is **baffling** is a genuine **understatement.**

In sum:

By the second half of the first century, **everything had shifted...**

A written story, the product of geographical spread and urbanization, controlled by a group higher on the social register than rural peasants, **had changed Christianity forever.**

That said, if there is one thing I have learned about early Christianity in all my academic work it is that **fancy theology** did not **start or grow the Jesus movement.**

It began and developed in the **struggles of real people's daily lives.**

Moreover, in the struggle, **Community and compassion** came long before literate types got hold of the Jesus story AND long before the **theology police began constructing doctrinal litmus tests** for who is in and who is out.

That is something we would be wise **NEVER** to forget. But next week we will encounter all that in tragic detail.

Next week: the **final step to the top of the social scale** in the world of Constantine...

And a few thoughts about **faith in the social location of ... Westminster Presbyterian Church.**