

Conclusions so far...

- The Jesus movement **began at the bottom of the social ladder**, but **did not remain there very long**.
- **Geographical spread, cultural adaptation and spread among folks higher on the social register** all helped to create **widely diverse ways of being Christian**.
- Paul tried to teach us that whether we are **Jewish, Roman, Egyptian, Armenian, Syrian, Ethiopian, etc.**, ... and whether we are **rich, poor, literate or illiterate, etc.** – we are all part of **one compassionate community “in Christ”** who need to care for and respect each other.
- **The (written) Christianity that has come down to us** began as **a struggle to form a type of Christianity that was Roman**, as opposed to Jewish, and **literate rather than oral**.
- **Unfortunately, that struggle did not go well**... and that is **our story for today**.

Week Three

So far, we have looked at **two things that contributed** to the rise of early Christianity **up the social register** of the Roman world:

1. **Geographical spread** and the consequent cultural, linguistic and theological **diversity**
2. **Writing** -- letters, theological discussions/arguments and written versions of the Jesus story -- which **cemented that diversity into Christian history**

Today we are going to look at the **two more factors** that drove and accelerated the rise:

1. An emerging **hierarchy** of ecclesiastical **leadership** and its **entanglement** in existing **civic and political rivalries** all across the empire
2. An empire-wide **convergence of the interests of Church and State** that led to **Christian nationalism** and **Christian political leadership**

Hierarchical Leadership

We begin with the **emergence of a hierarchical leadership...**

As congregations developed in cities where Paul and others had spread the Jesus story, it was obvious that **leadership of some sort was needed**.

In Acts 6 we are told that the **“apostles” decided to appoint “deacons”** to carry on the charitable work of congregations, leaving Apostles free to continue spreading the story into new areas.

The term **“deacon”** (Grk :*diakonos*) **means “servant.”** But recent research makes clear that **deacons were more like what we call “pastors”** -- teaching, liturgy, preaching, administration, etc.

The first ones noted, in Acts 6:3 were seven **men**: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus.

But it is also clear that **women served this role**. In Romans 16:1 **Phoebe** is called a **“deacon.”**

The book of Acts (11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 20:17) tells us that as the apostles planted churches, **they also appointed “elders”** (Grk: *presbuteros*) to oversee them. Titus is told to **“appoint elders in every town.”** Titus 1:5

Early on (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-7) the term **“elder”** was interchangeable with the term **“bishop”** (Grk: *episkopos*) -- its basic meaning is **“overseer.”** Acts 20:28 says these leaders were made “overseers” by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But **things began to change**... and it is not hard to see why. **Cultural adaptation** began to emerge.

Rome possessed a **potent cultural brand**. Everywhere Romans went, **law, relationships, language, and daily life took on flavors of “Roman-ness.”**

A key factor: Roman society was **obsessed with rank and order**. Even the smallest distinctions in rank or prestige were taken with utmost seriousness.

Over the centuries, a variety of **“ranking” systems** were used in order to determine rights and opportunities in all areas of Roman life. **All were based exclusively on wealth.**

Wealth, calculated to the last denarius, **determined:**

- Voting rights and the weight of votes in elections
- Legal rights, court privileges and legal penalties
- Eligibility to join the military and military rank
- Residence rights
- Political office eligibility
- Marriage options
- Number of names allowed
- Type of work permitted
- Taxation

In the early Christian era, the Roman Emperor Augustus **regulated the social classes** (“*ordo*”) in Rome and set wealth standards for membership in each level.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one result of the gradual “**Romanizing of the Christian Church**” was that by the end of the second century **the offices of elder and bishop** had become distinguished in a **hierarchy** that placed **bishops at the top of the ecclesiastical polity**.

Very quickly these **Bishops** became “**overseers**” of **multiple congregations** in particular cities, geographical or cultural areas.

They came primarily from **the “retainer class”** that knew how to **read, write, organize and ... rule**.

A SAD NOTE

Feminine leadership in the Church did not last very long. The ***Didache***, a Christian document from the middle of the second century, discusses the election of bishops by congregations. It makes the office **exclusively male**.

Most scholars argue that what led to this **rapid emergence of hierarchy** was the **ferocious turf battles fought over theology and practice** we talked about last week.

These battles **exploded in the second century** among the widely diverse Christian groups and that in turn led to **pressure for key leaders** who could represent and defend a particular group’s views.

Looking back, **Jerome**, one of the most learned and respected theologians of the fifth century, describes how the factionalism of this early period led Bishops into **intense rivalries, demagoguery and denunciations of each other as “heretics” and “false teachers.”**

That intense theological in-fighting inevitably began to destroy **the unity of the Church**:

- Localized theological trends became mandatory.
- Dissenters were punished or exiled
- New Gospels - versions of the Jesus story - got written
- Church councils, aimed at settling disputes, ended up cementing divisions
- Factionalism became the dominant reality of Church life

As this continued, **leadership of the church** was increasingly drawn from the **educated, intellectual and politically connected strata** of Roman society.

Moreover, **city rivalry made it worse**. Folks today are not always aware that “**nations/countries**” **did not exist in antiquity**. They are an invention of the modern world.

Instead, for most of the period of early Christianity, **cities were the seat of political authority** and therefore **the entity in which one held citizenship**. One could be a citizen of Athens, Corinth, Ravenna, Rome, etc.

Both politically and economically **cities struggled bitterly for dominance over each other**. **City rivalries** were an **enormous part of ancient life**.

In fact, **most ancient wars were wars between cities**: Rome conquered Athens, and Corinth, and Jerusalem, and so on.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the **churches of major cities** began to **dominate Christianity in areas they controlled**.

Even in the earliest years of Christianity, **the political rivalry between Antioch and Alexandria** – both part of the Roman empire, but independent enough to struggle with each other – **had a deep impact on Christianity**.

Both were **major centers of Christian growth**.

As **Christian groups** in these two cities began to **take on the characteristics of local culture and practice**, the **theological wrangling** between them inevitably **began to take on political overtones**.

Their bishops became “theology police,” enforcing the beliefs of “**The One True Church**” in Antioch, for example, against the **heretics** in that **miserable city of Alexandria**.”

In this way a **hierarchical church leadership** -- whose status and sophistication reflected the cities from which they came, **and who mimicked the rank and order of everything else in the Roman world** -- became the **voice of third and fourth century Christianity**.

Inevitably these leaders **had to be people well up the social register** to have the clout necessary to protect the **interests and influence of their congregations and traditions**.

Church and Empire

And this brings us to the **final step in the long rise** to the top of the social register.

Here we need to jump to the **end of the third and beginning of the fourth century**.

In 284 c.e., a **vicious persecution of Christians** - the only empire-wide persecution that ever occurred - exploded as the emperor Diocletian tried to totally destroy Christianity. **It lasted for 10 horrific years**.

It was **gruesome and terrifying... but it failed**. In 305 c.e., Diocletian gave up, resigned (the only Roman emperor ever to do so), and persecutions of Christians ceased.

Shortly thereafter, **civil war broke out** in the empire and after years of fighting **Constantine prevailed** in a final battle that he won after claiming he had **seen a vision of the cross** and was told, “**In this sign conquer**.”

Think about that: “**In this sign conquer**.” For the first time, **Christianity became associated with military conquest?!?!**

In 313 c.e., **Constantine issued an edict of toleration**. It gave protection to all religions, not just Christianity, but it meant that Christianity had **full protection for the first time in its history**.

Very quickly and enthusiastically, Constantine began to heap the **fruits of imperial patronage** on **Christian bishops and believers**.

He embarked on a **massive effort to build churches, missions and shrines** everywhere he could, **likely hoping to create religious unity**.

But Constantine quickly discovered that the **Church was not the united body** he had hoped for. **The nasty and on-going theological disputes threatened to undo what he was trying to create.** Theology police were still hard at work.

In response, Constantine – naively in my view – **convened the great council of Nicaea** that produced the **Nicene Creed** that is still in use today.

He wanted unity. But, alas, **it did not succeed as he hoped.**

The **two bishops who refused to adopt the new creed** were **exiled to Illyrica** (in the Balkan peninsula), and all copies of **writings by Arius** (the losing bishop in the debates) **were ordered burned.**

Thereafter, anyone who **owned a copy of these writings** was to be **put to death.**

But the constant **theological/political wrangling did not stop.** It consumed the Church for the **rest of Constantine's life.**

How Christian was Constantine?

The record is **mixed... and contradictory.**

He was clearly **enthusiastic and supportive of the Church** and its mission. But...

He had used the “**sign of the cross**” to gain **political power.**
Was it simply a ploy?

He **rarely attended worship** and frequently **used** the Church as a **tool in public policy**

His coins and inscriptions frequently **invoked the symbols of Sol Invictus** – sun worship. On his great commemorative arch in the Roman Forum – which still stands - there are no Christian symbols.

He remained **a brutal, violent egomaniac** who **murdered his own son and wife** because he thought they were conspiring against him.

Theological wrangling aside, during Constantine's lifetime **Christianity became so Romanized** that it began to take on a **military tone, a preference for Latin, a network of hierarchical rulers (bishops, cardinals, popes)**, and a distinctly Roman taste for **monumental architecture and spectacular ritual**.

When Constantine died the empire was split among his three sons and infighting and **civil war began anew**.

The dominant son, **Constantius II**, who eventually gained control of the empire, **became a fierce advocate of Christian domination** of the empire.

Under one of his successors, Theodosius I, **the Nicene Creed** began to be weaponized as a **brutal tool of imperial power**.

In 381 c.e., **Theodosius** issued the **Edict of Thessalonica**: a law that made **his form of Christianity** (Nicene) **the official imperial religion**.

The Nicene Creed became the **law of the land** and **a tool of imperial authority**. People were **forced to adopt it** and risked exile or severe punishment if they refused.

Christianity, **led by members of the 1%**, was now **firmly embedded in the culture and politics of Rome**. A full-blown **Christian nationalism** had arrived.

* * * * *

Obviously, we cannot follow that long story any further in this class. We can simply note that by now **the damage had been done**.

Christians were at the top of the social register, wielding wealth and power in **a Christian nationalism that was as ugly and evil as anything in human history**.

The message of Jesus for the poor and outcast lived on - it was never completely extinguished – but it existed **mostly in local groups far from the seat of power**.

In some degree the **Church had Christianized the Roman empire**, but to a much greater degree **the empire had Romanized the Christian church**.

If you know much history, you likely know that the **evil that resulted from the marriage of Church and empire** – Christian nationalism - **reached its zenith in the Middle Ages**. The story became ugly, and tragic.

But Christian nationalism is not gone. That tragedy that keeps rearing its ugly head, emerging in new countries and new forms. Sadly, it **continues to plague us yet today**. Yes, **right here in America**.

For **us at Westminster**, who live pretty far up the social register of American society, and **who see a rise of Christian nationalism** threatening American life at every turn, the lesson of this history is something from which we would be **wise to remember**:

The Church does not exist to **support the empire/nation** ... and the **empire/nation**, is not the **foundation on which the Church should rest**.

So perhaps a good way to end this class would be to recall a few **words of Jesus**:

“You know that the **rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you**; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave...” Matt. 20:25-28

And finally...

The first commandment is this: **You shall love the Lord your God** with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this, **'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'**

There is no other commandment greater than these." Mk. 12:30-31

Bibliography

1. Patterson, Stephen, THE FORGOTTEN CREED
2. Schottroff, Luisa, JESUS AND THE HOPE OF THE POOR
3. Horsley, Richard, JESUS AND EMPIRE
4. Tabor, James, PAUL AND JESUS