

UNIT FOUR: THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

SESSION SEVENTEEN: GO INTO ALL THE WORLD

Summary of the Seventeenth Session of the Course

The purpose of this lesson was to provide an overview of the church's spread and development from its beginnings in Jerusalem to the time just before the Protestant Reformation. So, we needed to cover about 1,500 years in an hour. Obviously, we could not cover the subject in depth but only give an overview, but even overviews have their particular slants, and so did this one.

We began with the "Great Commission" found at the end of Matthew (28:16-20). All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus: he is Lord of all. But he is always the Servant Lord. Jesus did not come to lord it over anyone; he came to serve and to give himself to ransom many people. The slant throughout this overview is the contrast between the servant church and the lordly church. The difference lies in the church's view of Jesus, of itself, and of the world of people. The lordly church follows the way of glory, the thinking for which is called by theologians, "the theology of glory." The servant church follows the way of the crucified Servant of God, the thinking for which is called, "the theology of the cross."

Jesus tells his followers to "make disciples of all the nations." The gospel is to be spread, and people from all nations are to be called to the new life of trust and obedience in trust. We recalled the promise to Abraham that by his name all the families of the earth would be blessed. The mission of Jesus continues to be a mission in the world and for the world. So, the church does not exist for its own salvation but for the world's.

Before going ahead with the church's mission and the spread of the gospel, we looked again at the two great commandments: love God wholeheartedly, and love your neighbor as yourself. The Great Commission and the great commandments are not at odds; they do not represent two different ways the church may go. They must, however, be combined, or the church's mission will go off on the wrong track. Whatever is done without love is worthless to God (see I Corinthians 13). Mission without love (real love, not paternalism) turns into exploitation and oppression. I paraphrased for the whole church what Jesus says of the individual: "What does it profit the church if it gains the whole world but loses its soul?"

Next, we looked at Acts 1:6-11. The witness to Jesus is to move outward from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. The time in-between Jesus' resurrection and his coming is for witness, mission, and service.

The mission is seen as eschatological: done in expectation of and preparation for Christ's coming. We are to live and serve now in terms of the end God has in mind and will bring to fulfillment. We cannot bring that end to reality, but neither can we afford to forget it. I used the metaphor of the artist's vanishing point: the point out there somewhere off the canvas that draws all the lines of perspective toward itself. You can see a vanishing point by looking down railroad tracks. From your perspective, the tracks meet in the distance, even though in reality they continue to run parallel. The promise of salvation's completion and fulfillment serves as the vanishing point (or drawing point) that gives perspective to our life and mission. We have to be realistic about life and people, serving Jesus within the context of our time and place, but we must live and serve in his way and in terms of all God has promised. Paul says we must not be conformed to the world but must, instead, be transformed by the mercy of God. As he also says, we live and serve with our eye of the prize of the new life to which Jesus calls us. That's why we seek peace and pray for it in a world that loves conflict and war and why we insist upon justice in a world that serves self-interest.

The First Stage of the Church

Although what some call "the Jesus movement" began in Galilee, the first congregation gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection. These people were Jews who, like Jesus, spoke Aramaic (a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic). They were called "followers of the way" and were Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah, crucified for us and raised by God.

The followers of the way in Jerusalem held all material goods in common. All contributed what they had to give, and the goods were shared as needed. As an economic system, this form of "communism" doesn't seem to have worked very well, even though its theory is based on the love and shared life of Jesus' followers. In not too many years, Paul would be collecting money from the congregations he started to relieve the financial distress of the believers in Jerusalem.

The Second Stage

At the time, the Jews were already dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, the common language of which was Greek. The first step outward for the gospel seems to have been from Aramaic-speaking Jews living in Judea and Galilee to Greek-speaking Jews living in the Dispersion but drawn to Jerusalem for religious reasons. The two language groups had different cultures in many ways, and they read the Torah and the Prophets in their different languages, but they were all Jews. In Acts 6, we see a conflict in the earliest "church" when the Greek-speaking Jewish widows complain about not receiving their fair share of the food (all held in common). Six men are appointed by the apostles to oversee the food distribution, and those six have Greek names such as Stephen and Philip. It is clear, however, that they do much more than just distribute food fairly. Stephen becomes the first martyr for Jesus, and both he and Philip spread

the gospel. Although the six are not called deacons, we Presbyterians base our concept of deacon on them.

The Samaritans were descended, they claimed, from the ancient people of the northern kingdom of Israel, from the tribes destroyed by the Assyrians. They and Jews despised each other in Jesus' time, as we know from the gospels. Today, there are still Samaritans living in Israel/Palestine. They worship Yahweh but hold as scripture only the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, which they read in their own version known to us as the Samaritan Pentateuch.

The Big Step

At first, the people who would come to be called Christians were Jews, and what would become Christianity was seen as sect of Judaism. So, the followers of Jesus were protected under Roman law because Judaism was a legal religion within the empire. After 70 A.D., when Rome brutally crushed a Jewish rebellion, the situation for the followers of Jesus became confusing and uncertain. Being Jewish was no longer safe, but the greater problem was that the gospel was spreading to Gentiles.

Acts shows us the vision of Simon Peter which lead him to take the gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius. Paul, then, became the great apostle to the Gentiles. The jump, however, was not an easy one. Would Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christians? Would the men have to be circumcised (not exactly a selling point for the gospel)? Would they all have to keep Jewish dietary restrictions? Paul won his struggle, and the answer was "No" to circumcision and "No" also to the dietary laws as long as the Gentile believers refrained from eating the meat of animals that had been strangled or sacrificed to idols and from eating the blood. The new Gentile believers were to stay away from idols and from fornication. (It seems that idolatry and sexual immorality were seen as the great evils of paganism.)

As Christian faith spreads, the churches become more and more Gentile. Over time, the church loses its Jewish nature and becomes Gentile – Greek in its thinking rather than Hebraic. We noted that, as the gospel changed the pagans, so also the Hellenistic (Greek philosophical) ways of thinking influenced the gospel. There was not time for us to go into this subject much, except to note that the low regard of some Greek philosophies for the human body (and all things material) seems to have had great negative influence on Christian thought. We discussed the difference between belief in the immortality of the soul and belief in resurrection. In the former, death releases the immortal soul from the "mortal trash" of the body so the soul can be absorbed back into the Over-soul. Individuality is lost. The soul lives forever but the distinct person is lost. In resurrection, the basis for which is God's love for the person, that distinct personhood is maintained into eternity. At the beginning of the course, we discussed the question of, "Who am I?" and I said we needed to understand the importance of the pronoun "who" in order to understand resurrection. *Who* is a matter of love, and love is the way of God.

The Churches and the Roman Empire

Once it was seen as a distinct religion, Christianity enjoyed no recognition from the Roman Empire. Christians were sometimes tolerated, sometimes persecuted. Many of the early believers were women and/or slaves. Most were not from the higher classes. Under the emperors Nero and Domitian, persecution was at its worst.

The Emperor Constantine changed the situation. He claimed to have had a dream in which he saw a cross with the words, *in hoc signo vincet*, “in this sign you conquer.” He and his successor Theodosius, made Christianity the religion of the empire. The change for the church was drastic and enormous. Before Constantine, Christian was not the thing to be in the empire. Suddenly, Christian became very much the thing to be, especially if one aspired to political favor or power. This change in status transformed the church in nature, makeup, and attitude.

As the imperial religion, Christianity needed a theology suitable to its stature and purpose. What purpose? As the established religion, Christianity was expected to support the establishment of the empire and sanctify its power. The proper theology, therefore, was the theology of glory. The Roman emperors were not servants, and so Christianity could no longer be a servant religion. The church had to maintain the glory of the risen and exalted Christ, seated in power at “the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” The emperors would not follow a crucified servant. They were the ones who crucified slaves and rebels. So, the church’s theology became hierarchical, just as the empire was, and the church presented itself to the world with dignity, splendor, power, and authority.

Still, the cross remained central in the New Testament and in the faith. It was not possible to eliminate the cross from Christianity. So, what could be done with it? The answer was to make the cross the evil suffered by Christ who then triumphed over his foes in his resurrection and exaltation. Who were those foes? They were the “Christ-killers.” The Jews. So, the church’s faith in its crucified Redeemer was perverted into the preaching of hatred for Jesus’ own people. Under the theology of glory (also called *Triumphalism*), the Jews became the scapegoat. Thus, the church was released from its rightful form of humility and service (and from its servant Lord) to follow the ways of power and glory.

After the fall of Rome, the power and influence of the Bishop of Rome increased to fill the vacuum left by the absence of an emperor. In time, he (the bishop) became the Vicar on earth of the risen and exalted Christ in heaven – the Pope.

The tension remained, however. The theology of glory never completely stamped out the theology of the cross. Even in the church’s darkest hours, there were always people of faith who followed, as well as they could, the way of Jesus.

The Dark Ages

The Roman Empire at its end had two capitals, Rome and Constantinople. After the fall of Rome in the west, Europe fell into the Dark Ages – centuries of pervasive ignorance, superstition, poverty, sickness, and fear. Learning was maintained in Jewish ghettos and Christian monasteries (as well as among the Muslims and others in the East). The church remained powerful, and the Pope was the lord of kings. These centuries gave us the Crusades, the Inquisition, pogroms, and witch hunts but, also, as always, people of faith. Europe became the center of Christendom, which was supposed to be the kingdom of Christ on earth but was actually the kingdom of the church and the officially Christian nations.

Today

Our time is called by some theologians post-Constantinian and post-Christendom (not post-Christian, as others call it). In Europe, the churches have long since lost their power and influence; in the United States, the change is mixed, but its influence can certainly be felt in the Northeast. The Bible-belt maintains, in its own way, the church of power and glory with emphasis on authority and control, but in the nation as a whole the age of Constantine is ending.

Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian, asks if this day might not be the time when we, the church, become the servant people we were meant to be. Without power and glory, we might be able to follow the way of the cross. We might become again the disciple community, the followers of the way.

Questions

We discussed the question, “Was it good or bad for the church that the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of the empire?” We saw that, in some ways, it was good. Rome stopped killing and persecuting Christians. One person did, however, note that it was only Christians who were no longer killed. The empire became neither tolerant nor benevolent.

We talked about the power to do good and the corruption the use of power even with good intentions can bring. Jesus gave up power in order to restore people to God. He emptied himself and took the form of a servant (Philippians, chapter 2). There seemed to be some discouragement in the air, I think because the adaptation of the church and its gospel to power and cruelty show how hard it is for God to change the world and the human heart. Jesus’ crucifixion is not, for God, a thing of the past but an ever-present reality in the sufferings and sins of people in our world. But we are held to the promise.