

Chapter Seven

AFTER THE NEW TESTAMENT

At the start of his textbook, *Early Christian Doctrines*, J N D Kelly remarks: 'the difference of atmosphere becomes apparent as one crosses from the apostolic to the post-apostolic age.'¹ Something indeed happened as the New Testament generation left the scene that, though we can hardly miss it, scarcely know how to describe, let alone understand. Suffice it to say of the transition that it's very important, and that we need to note this 'difference of atmosphere'.

In a sense, the Church was now 'on its own'. Its human 'parents', the Twelve and Paul, and those who worked with them, were no longer around. It had to make its own way in the world.

After Paul, T F Torrance has shown in *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*², the gospel of grace (grace alone), the only gospel there is, was no longer understood. 'The most astonishing feature was the *failure to understand the death of Christ* (author's italics)³. Repentance, not the death of Christ alone, now became the basis of being saved. Taking up the Cross and following Christ – if need be all the way to martyrdom – became the logic of salvation, not faith: what I should do for God, that is, not what he has done for me. Torrance goes on: 'Consonant with the failure to apprehend the death of Christ went failure to appreciate the person of Christ. The Cross is the central act in the life and work of Christ. To misunderstand that is to misunderstand Christ, and thrust him into the background. That is just what happened ...'⁴. As a result, 'The Christian ethic

¹ 1977 (5th edn.); London; A & C Black; ISBN 0 7136 1756 X ; p3.

² 1948; Edinburgh; Oliver and Boyd.

³ p137

⁴ p138

was codified, and the charismatic life under the constraining love of Christ reduced to rules and precepts⁵. The two undermining influences here, Torrence believed, were, on the one side, Judaism, and, on the other, Hellenism (the Greek worldview then prevailing)⁶.

The role that Christ and the Holy Spirit were meant to play in Christian initiation and discipleship had been undermined. And this, almost immediately, began to open up the way for alternative intermediaries to insinuate themselves into Christianity, so corrupting it – as we shall see.

Jewish followers of Jesus

Henry Chadwick in *The Early Church* describes Israel's initial response to the new movement that had arisen amongst them:

The initial impact of Christianity on the Jewish people seems to have been fairly considerable. The Church probably drew its membership from most of the diverse elements within the heterogeneous society of first century Judaism, apart from the Sadducees. It appealed both to the Pharisees' sense that the revealed will of God was a matter demanding to be taken with the most intense seriousness and also to the ordinary Jew's feeling that too much of the Pharisaic scrupulousness about the law had ended in niggling ceremonial niceties that missed the central point of religion. Before long there were substantial groups of Christian Jews not only in Jerusalem but also in the surrounding countryside of Judaea. That there were also important groups in the north of Galilee is probable enough, but of their relation to the Judaeans churches and of their later history we can only guess. They were rural communities in a backward area, and disappear from history. We know, however, that the faith rapidly reached not only Damascus but Antioch, the capital of Syria and third city of the Roman Empire, where the pagans soon gave them the nickname 'Christians', which quickly spread as the popular term. (The Jewish term for them remained 'Nazarenes' ...). Even some of the strictest adherents of the Mosaic Law and of its traditional interpretation, the Pharisees, were associated with the

⁵ p139

⁶ pp133-6

movement. Nevertheless, neither the authorities nor the people as a whole came to follow 'the Way'. On the one hand Christianity offered no encouragement to the nationalistic Zealots, awaiting the hour for revolt against Rome; on the other hand, it was far too revolutionary for the Jewish 'Establishment', which pursued a policy of political collaboration and religious conservatism. Above all, there was the delicate problem of the Christian attitude towards the Gentiles. This was an issue of principle causing deep division of opinion within the Church itself ...⁷

The Jewish revolt against the Romans, and the fall of Jerusalem to Titus (later Roman Emperor) in AD 70 proved a disaster for relations between Christians and Jews – already sufficiently strained. Around 85, a formal anathema was incorporated in the synagogue to exclude Jewish Christians: 'May the Nazarenes and the heretics be suddenly destroyed and removed from the Book of Life.'

The hostility from their fellow Jews, on the one side, and serious differences of belief and practice between them and the Gentile part of the Church on the other, left Jewish Christians isolated and exposed. Henry Chadwick again:

... the Gentile majority in the Church could not comprehend their continued observance of the traditional customs and rites of Judaism. Slowly the communities lost importance. In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* written about 160 it appears that they were still a force. Justin believed that a Jewish Christian was free to keep the Mosaic law without in any way compromising his Christian faith, and even that a Gentile Christian might keep Jewish customs if a Jewish Christian had influenced him to do so; only it must be held that such observances were matters of indifference and of individual conscience. But Justin had to admit that other Gentile Christians did not take so liberal a view and believed that those who observed the Mosaic law could not be saved. From Irenaeus onwards Jewish Christianity is treated as a deviationist sect rather than as a form of Christianity with the best claims to continuity with the practice of the primitive church at Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians called themselves Ebionites, a name derived from the Hebrew word meaning 'the poor' ... Since some of them had never accepted the tradition of the

⁷ 1993; London; ISBN 0-14-023199-4; pp15-16.

virgin birth of Christ, Irenaeus classified the Ebionites with other heresies that denied this ...⁸

The Church had rapidly become majority-Gentile, and Gentile Christianity came to see itself as the proper, standard – and only acceptable – form of the faith. It acknowledged no Jewish roots.

Now not to understand one's origins is rarely helpful. In this case it involved an inability to recognise a vital spiritual reality: that even the Gentile part of the Church really was rooted in (Jewish) Israel. Gentile Christianity needed Jewish Christianity – and it needed to see what God's purposes were for the Jews. But there was another problem. However much Gentile Christianity had been given clear revelation about the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures, Gentile understanding of them was far from exhaustive. Inevitably so, if only because the OT revelation is embedded in an account of Israel's history, and Jews understand that history in a way Gentiles never will.

One Gentile failure to get to grips with the priorities of the OT was particularly damaging: the lack of recognition of the implications of what the Bible teaches about Creation. In the Gentile world, creation-level issues⁹ had been tackled by pagans – and Christian leaders were doing everything they could to keep the Church away from paganism. At the beginning, understandably, there was no sense of urgency in dealing with creation-level issues – indeed, other concerns like the return of Christ (expected imminently) and coping with persecution were the natural priorities. Later on, the importance of looking at life holistically wasn't seen; as it doubtless would have been had the Jewish part of the Church been working in tandem with Gentile Christianity. Not until the rise of Christendom would a serious attempt be made to consider all aspects of life from a Christian perspective; by Augustine of Hippo (of whom more later).

⁸ pp23-24

⁹ By 'creation-level issues' I mean such areas of study as mathematics and science, politics and ethics, music and architecture – areas of life which so fascinated the Greeks, for instance, but which the early Christian community tended to ignore.

The gospel in a Greek world

These days, English serves as the primary global language. In the time of Christ, Greek was the commonly-understood language around the Mediterranean, especially at the eastern end. Given that the gospel was for the nations, it was only natural that the New Testament should have been written in Greek. This contrasts with the Old Testament, written almost completely in Hebrew, and the Koran, written in Arabic – both of them the languages restricted to a particular people-group.

Greek – of a more popular and modern kind than the classical version – was the language of a Hellenistic culture which had spread in the wake of Alexander the Great's amazing exploits (334-325 BC). In first century Galilee, for instance, out of a population of around 350,000, some 100,000 were Jews. These were 'largely Hellenised', and the primary language in Galilee 'was the universal Greek Koine [popular Greek], although many Jews spoke Aramaic'¹⁰. Significantly, the coinage minted by the Herods used only Greek wording.

But Greek was also the language associated with the dominant intellectual influence around the Mediterranean, Greek philosophy. So the educated elite in that part of the world tended to have it in common. Not all Romans were happy about Greek influence on Rome – but it came to be extensive, and many educated Romans considered Greek language and culture to be superior to their own. So Greek was well-known in the Latin-speaking West.

Because of all this, the Greek worldview prevailed in what was going to become the Western world, which the gospel was invading – much like Western liberal-democratic, free-market, consumerist thinking is dominant today across the developed world. A generalised Greek worldview backed up by the Greek

¹⁰ Art. on Galilee in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.

philosophical tradition was enormously powerful. It was with this that the early Christian community had to do business. (It could hardly ignore it). Anyway, as Torrance points out, 'The Apostolic Fathers [the leaders of the Church after NT times] were Greeks, their language Greek, and their minds necessarily worked with Greek modes of thought'¹¹.

The Christian faith was always going to have to be translated from a Hebrew idiom into that which prevailed in the Greek world. Maurice Wiles in *The Making of Christian Doctrine* identifies 'three outstanding motives by which the church was led on along the path of doctrinal development': (1) Evangelism – 'the need to express Christian truth in a form that would meet the requirements and answer the objections of the surrounding world'; (2) Heresy – 'the problem of those who, standing to a greater or lesser degree within the fold of the church, ... defined the tenets of the faith in a manner which seemed to the majority ... dangerously misleading'; (3) Understanding – 'the natural desire of some Christians to ... think through their faith as deeply and simply as possible'.¹² Of these three factors in doctrinal development, combating perceived heresy was the most important: 'The influence of heresy on the early development of doctrine is so great that it is almost impossible to exaggerate it.'¹³

One great problem is that there is no such thing as a perfect translation, except of the simplest words and phrases. All translation beyond that is a hazardous enterprise, and good translation is as much an art as a science – and requires considerable skill. A particular hazard confronting the Church was that the Greek worldview would infiltrate into the Christian understanding of things like some Trojan horse. This, though, is exactly what happened. Basic to the prevailing Greek worldview was a mixture of different systems of thought, but in which a modified form of what Plato had taught (Platonism) predominated. In this

¹¹ *The Doctrine of Grace*, pp 135-6

¹² 1967; Cambridge; Cambridge University Press; ISBN 0 521 06803 7 (h/b) or 0 521 09962 5 (p/b); p19.

¹³ p36

worldview, physical existence tended to be seen as more of a curse than a blessing – even intrinsically evil. Only what was ‘spiritual’ was considered truly real – and good. (Compare with this the understanding of the Letter to the Hebrews, say, where what is physical is real and highly important, but where what is spiritual is even more real, and of ultimate importance). Under the influence of a Greek worldview, marriage, meals and money, for instance – although in the Bible all good in themselves – came to be seen by many influential Christians as bad (or at least highly unhelpful) things. This is part of the explanation for the rise and development of monasticism; although only part of it, because the initial impulse there involved a call to radical biblical discipleship. It also largely accounts for the requirement for celibacy on the part of Catholic clergy and Orthodox bishops.

THE REVOLUTION IN THE GREEK WORLDVIEW Early classical Greece recognised a whole array of different gods, its ‘pantheon’. Each place had a shrine where devotion was offered to the local deity. But some gods gained wider recognition. To these the Greeks raised their striking temples. Related to the gods was a class of spirits the pagan Greeks interacted with that they called Muses (from which we get ‘music’, ‘musing’, ‘amusing’, and so on). These spirits came on certain people – who opened themselves up to be possessed by them – to inspire poetry, music, prophecy, and more. As happens in the non-Western world today – not that it hasn’t started to happen again here too – the person concerned entered some sort of ecstatic state ranging from a frenzy to a trance.

Then around 500 BC something happened – as fundamental in its impact as would be the Renaissance and Reformation combined in Europe 2,000 years later. More reflective Greeks – initially the intellectuals – lost respect for the gods, whose behaviour they regarded as shameful even by human standards. They started to ponder what the true God might be like. We would be right to respect this, even if the answer they came up with would eventually constitute a critical hazard for the Christian faith. The power of this ‘God’ of intellectual speculation

was sufficient for it to infiltrate itself into Christianity and substitute itself for the true God (the God of the Bible), without the process being recognised by the Church for what it was. Was Zeus, the head of the pantheon, the spirit that came to animate this 'God' of Greek philosophy? If so, it might explain the extraordinary influence of this new abstract deity, first among pagan Greeks and later in the Church. For early Christian teachers like Justin, the new concept of 'God' amongst the Greek intelligentsia could serve the cause of evangelism well – if regarded as preparing the Greeks for the gospel. That, sadly, was all too often not the way it worked in practice. The 'God' of Greek philosophy penetrated and damaged the early Church so easily because of the way the Church had so soon ceased to understand what Christ had done for us and, in consequence of this, who he really was – such that the Christian community became, to a dangerous degree, estranged from both Christ himself and the biblical gospel. That, in turn, meant a radical distancing of the Church from the Father – and the Holy Spirit. All of which created a spiritual vacuum, just waiting to be filled.

This 'God' of the philosophers was a remote and abstract being, more appropriately called 'It' than 'He'. It is often described in the negative, as to what it is not: immortal (not subject to death), impassible (not subject to emotion), unchanging (not subject to alteration), immaterial (not of the physical order), and so on. But the Platonist philosopher Albinus could give a rather more positive account of the deity:

The First God is eternal, ineffable [indescribable], self-sufficient – that is, without needs, ever-sufficient – that is, always perfect, all-sufficient that is, completely perfect; Deity, Substantiality [in its own being the most fundamental level of existence], Truth, Symmetry, Good ... (The brackets are mine)

Few would want to argue that this isn't real progress in thinking about the nature of God compared with the earlier, primitive – even barbarous – mythology that had governed Greek thinking about the spiritual world. But there was a fundamental arrogance in Greek philosophical discussion about God. A H

Armstrong in his *Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* refers to what he terms ‘that self-confident Hellenistic [i.e. later Greek] theological rationalism, that belief that a human philosopher can by his own powers give a satisfactory account of divine things’¹⁴. No sense here of any fallen-ness of the human race, and consequent moral corruption of human thought processes. No need for God to reveal anything to us – we’re the measure of all things, and there’s nothing we can’t figure out. So a ‘natural theology’, purely the product of human reasoning, could tell us all we need to know about deity, it was confidently assumed. To be fair, on Plato’s understanding of things, the intellect is the divine element in human nature – the challenge, arising from that, being to train it properly. On this view, if the mind – as opposed to the spirit (in Christian understanding) – is divine, it possesses the capacity to recognise deity. That said, Armstrong is still right.

In parallel with this, the old way of inspiration by the Muses seemed to have been left behind. In my estimation, this is *the* great deception under which we in the West live. The evidence suggests that the dynamic underlying the new way of knowledge was just as spiritually derived and controlled as the old way. Maybe surface characteristics changed – no more frenzy or obvious spiritual possession – but the underlying spiritual reality didn’t. The ecstatic had given way to the apparently dispassionate, the subjective to the apparently objective, passion to ‘sweet reason’, and so on.

The flowering of new learning associated with the new ways of inspiration and of understanding ‘God’ had spawned a quite new kind of education system. One key element in this, Plato’s ‘university’ in Athens, the Academy, gave us our term ‘academic’. But it is precisely here that our primary spiritual problem in the West lies: in our education system. ‘Reason’ and ‘Science’ – both fundamental to the Western academic tradition in recent times – need to be seen as distorting manifestations of an alien spiritual power, as well as usefully serving God’s commission to the human race to understand and ‘subdue’ and ‘rule over’ the

¹⁴ p179

created order. The arrogance rooted in both them derives from Greek philosophy. Greek wisdom, *sophia*, is depicted as an owl. We do well to recognise in this false *sophia* a powerful ‘owl spirit’¹⁵ that has all the spiritual character of a cuckoo. The ‘academic’ enterprise is not simply the objective quest for truth it presents itself as being, but – to too great an extent – a deceptive spiritual force with an aggressive agenda against the true *Sophia*, Christ.

We are subjected to the influence of this Greek owl-spirit very early in our lives. Our culture bombards us with its propaganda without our realising this; and deprives us of our natural ability to see the spiritual nature of the world¹⁶. In our formal education, from infancy, we’re subjected to its attack on us in a most sustained and concentrated manner. But it’s in our theological faculties and seminaries – where the thinkers amongst our pastor-teachers tend to be trained – that the worst damage is done. It’s here that the owl-spirit’s highest-level attack against the Church is conducted. ‘What has Athens [Greek philosophy] to do with Jerusalem [Christian thinking]? What agreement is there between the Academy and the Church?’, asked the lawyer and Christian thinker from Africa, Tertullian. This is a prophetic challenge to us 1,800 years on. We must hear him, even if he didn’t mean to be taken completely literally¹⁷. Earlier, Paul had written some surprising words to the Corinthian church (1 Cor 1:17, 22-4; 2:2):

‘... Christ [sent] me ... to preach the gospel not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power ... Greeks look for wisdom [*sophia*], but we preach Christ crucified ... foolishness to Gentiles, but to those God has called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom [*sophia*] of God ... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Christ and him crucified.’

Here Paul seems implicitly to criticise his earlier Athens sermon (Ac 17:22-31) – despite the fruit it bore – where, if he didn’t actually avoid mentioning the Cross,

¹⁵ associated with the goddess Athena

¹⁶ Seen in this light, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books may be doing the cause of truth a considerable favour!

¹⁷ Of one Roman Stoic philosopher, by contrast, he could remark: “Seneca often speaks like a Christian”.

he certainly underplayed its significance (compared with the Resurrection, which his audience there had latched on to). One has to ask: Had Paul come under a deceptive spiritual influence in Athens that he didn't recognise for what it was until he left the city – and went to Corinth – so escaping its influence again? Paul and Tertullian are outstanding examples of believers who worshipped the true God with their mind. But both understood that this needed to be done outside the deceptive, distorting power of Greek pseudo-wisdom.

[NOTE: In the book, for what's positive about our Greek inheritance I'll use a term such as 'the *genius* of Greece'; for what's negative, 'the Greek *spirit*', or similar.]

The impact of Rome

The Roman historian Varro calculated that the city of Rome had been founded in 753 BC. The partly-legendary Kingdom of Rome ended with the expulsion of Tarquin the Proud in 510 BC. Rome then sought to have a more representative form of government, 'The Senate and People of Rome' (S.P.Q.R.¹⁸) being a key idea. 'The Roman Republic presided over the city's growth from provincial obscurity to mastery of the whole Mediterranean.'¹⁹ But the Republic's political theory didn't always translate easily into practice: 'In the last hundred years of the Republic's existence the foreign campaigns became entangled in a series of civil wars. Successful generals sought to control the central government in Rome, whilst would-be reformers sought to satisfy the demands of the lower orders. The resultant strife led to intermittent periods of chaos and dictatorial rule'²⁰

Europe is a by-product of the expansion of the city-state of Rome. The city had been established in a militarily vulnerable place. The neighbours were predatory. Attack, for Rome, was her preferred form of defence. The first stage of expansion was, inevitably, local. But as the process moved beyond Italy, what we know as

¹⁸ *Senatus Populusque Romanus*

¹⁹ Norman Davies, *Europe. A History*, p153.

²⁰ Davies, p155.

Western Europe was generated by the push northward (for example, by Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars). Eastern Europe came into being, ultimately, as a result of Rome's eastward expansion, and the later founding of Constantinople (now Istanbul) as the Empire's capital in the east.

The Gauls (Celts), to the north, who'd sacked Rome in 390 BC, presented a continual threat. But greater still was the danger posed by the naval power of Carthage, the Phoenician colony in north Africa (modern Tunisia). It was the hundred years' conflict with Carthage, beginning in 264BC, that brought to maturity Rome's military competence – when, for instance, she'd produced a general of similar calibre to Hannibal and 'demonstrated that famous combination of stamina and ruthlessness' (Davies²¹). As a consequence of the fall of Syracuse, Hannibal was forced to withdraw to Africa. The young Publius Cornelius Scipio 'Africanus', survivor of the disaster at Cannae, and conqueror of the Carthaginian colony of Cartagena in Spain, followed him to Africa and not only defeated him, but broke the power of Carthage.

Alexander the Great's astonishing conquests had clearly impressed the Roman military²² but, as H.A.L Fisher in *A History of Europe* points out, 'while other cities of the ancient world had conquered and lost, what Rome conquered ... she held and welded into a [unity]. There was a method in her aggrandizement. She built military roads, such as only the Persian Empire had witnessed, and upon these at strategic points fortified cities garrisoned by Roman citizens. Other ... communities she united by ties of exclusive alliance and carefully graded privilege to herself.'²³ Beyond that, she excelled in her policy of 'divide and rule', targeted at those who would, if united, cause her difficulties. Fisher remarks, however, that 'It would appear that Rome was drawn into empire not indeed in a fit of absentmindedness [as was sometimes said of the British and their Empire],

²¹ p153

²² To the privileged aristocrats of the Roman Senate, however, his example posed a considerable threat to their own position and power.

²³ 1936; London; Edward Arnold; p55.

but half-reluctantly and of no set plan. The successive stages of her conquest of Italy were forced upon her because ... an orderly power ringed by turbulence always finds itself compelled to establish peace and security upon its frontiers ... There is no substance in the view that commercial and financial interests pushed Rome into conquest and annexation, except possibly in the cases of Carthage and Corinth, until the first century BC, when Pompey's annexation of Syria was probably due to the influence of the ... capitalistic class.'²⁴

That said, she became addicted to imperial expansion, and the plunder that went with it. But, push out as she might to find secure borders, she never succeeded in doing so. Defending her vast perimeter of insecure borders left her both permanently insecure, and committed to crippling levels of expenditure. Over time, however, she learned how to manage this unstable equilibrium.

Whilst the Greeks were thinkers and developers of the arts, Rome was pragmatic, systematic, and utilitarian. For the Romans, what tended to attract their interest was what worked, and worked well. And whatever worked well, they were usually able to make work better. For them, the means – however unimaginative or repugnant – justified the end. For instance, '[The achievements of Roman architecture] belong more to the realm of engineering than design'²⁵; and 'The calculated violence of Roman life was proverbial'²⁶. The activities of the amphitheatre were designed not only to entertain but to impart blood-lust to this militaristic society and to establish courage in the face of death as a basic value. As Davies points out, critics of Rome have accused the Romans of 'cruelty beyond measure'²⁷. It would be hard to disagree. In due course it would be the influence of Greece (coming under Rome's control in 146 BC) and, later, the impact of Christianity, that would bring Rome a measure of civilisation.

²⁴ p62
²⁵ Davies p174
²⁶ p179
²⁷ p150

From the beginning law was a fundamental – and civilising – concept for the Romans. They had a particular gift for it. Indeed, their legal tradition has been described as the Romans’ ‘most enduring [constructive] contribution to world history’.

Rome’s gods were seen as basic to her identity, and honouring them considered essential – appeasing them, even (in what was, like the Greek world, a fearful and highly superstitious society). But with Rome’s official religion it was outward form alone – the words and the correct performance of ceremonial – that really mattered. Any inner spirituality was an individual’s own business, and Roman state religion wasn’t in the slightest bit exclusive. Participation in other religions was (with rare exceptions) quite in order, provided a person’s religious duty to the nation was carried out.

‘Roman society was built on fundamental legal distinctions between the citizen and the non-citizen and, among non-citizens, between the free and the unfree. It was a strict system of hereditary social ‘orders’ or ‘estates’²⁸. In particular, Rome practised ‘a specially repulsive brand of slavery’²⁹. Several prominent families constituted an aristocracy. As with the general Roman tendency to legalism and a preference for external conformity in religious matters, this rigid social hierarchy, in which everyone knew their place and duties, would recur in much of Western European life that followed. So would the institution of slavery.

In due course, during the Empire period, the Romans would demonstrate a considerable capacity for wise government. To this they harnessed the efficient bureaucratic system they found in Egypt, somewhat modified. And they didn’t lack self-belief: “I shall find great satisfaction ...”, wrote the historian Livy (59BC-AD17), “by labouring to record the story of the greatest nation in the world.”

²⁸ p165

²⁹ p150. Greece was very much a society dependent on slavery too – but slavery in a rather less brutal form. Even Aristotle could assume – and explain – the basic rightness of slavery (!)

ROME RENEWED Shortly before the birth of Christ there occurred a profound social transformation that has been termed ‘The Roman Revolution’. The leader who emerged to take advantage of this was Julius Caesar – not only a brilliant military strategist and leader but, additionally, a shameless populist and self-publicist. It was he who brought the Republic to an end, becoming emperor in all but name. Falling to assassination, his far-sighted plans for reform of the Roman world would be taken to completion by his equally capable nephew Octavian, Caesar Augustus – the first official Emperor.

It’s worth noticing that it was an element in Augustus’ administrative and political reform that led – humanly speaking – to Mary and Joseph being in the right place for Jesus to be born (Luke 2:1-3). With the Greek text, here, and against the NIV translation, we should read that ‘all the world’ should be ‘registered’ – not merely ‘the Roman world’. The point is that the Romans had come, like Alexander the Great before them, to see themselves as masters of the whole world. There is the echo here of what it means to be Caesar, as well as a story about Christ the Lord. Rulership of the whole world would explicitly be claimed for (by?) Constantine in his reign, when the time came. There is real irony in the question posed to Jesus about the rightness or otherwise of paying taxes to Caesar, and his answer: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s ...” (Matt 22:15-21).

[NOTE: As with Greece, when I want to refer to the positive side of Roman influence, I’ll use the expression ‘the *genius* of Rome’, or similar. When I want to refer to the dark side of it, I’ll use ‘the *spirit* of Rome’ or ‘the Roman *spirit*’.]

A strongly-growing Church

In a significantly hostile environment, the Church grew, and grew strongly. There were blatant threats, such as general hostility from various quarters and periodic outbreaks of persecution, as well as insidious influences, such as those posed by

Judaistic thinking, the prevailing Greek worldview and philosophy, Roman ways and values, and the all-encompassing paganism.

Persecution fired the Christian imagination, but could cause havoc with the life of the Church. It produced other important results. Discipleship, when subjected to serious testing, strengthened the Christian community. The sheer faithful obedience of those who stood firm 'took spiritual territory' – so advancing the boundaries of the Kingdom within the Empire. But, most important of all was the submission to physical abuse and the laying down of their lives by Christians, in acts of self-sacrifice that generated spiritual power for the Kingdom, as only sacrifice can³⁰. Tertullian employed all his legal skills to argue against the injustice of condemning Christian believers to death simply for their faith, and to answer the accusations made against them. His words include some of the most memorable on the subject:

The name of faction is deserved [not by Christians but] by those who slander good and virtuous people, who cry out against innocent blood. They justify their enmity by the groundless plea that Christians are the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction visited on the people. If the Tiber³¹ rises to the city walls or the Nile does not rise to the fields³², if the heavens stay still or the earth moves, if there is famine or plague, the cry is at once: "The Christian to the lion". What! So many of them to one lion?

Apology 40

Your cruelty [against us] does not profit you, however exquisite. Instead, it tempts people to our sect. As often as you mow us down, the more we grow in number. The blood of the Christians is the seed [of the Church] ... The very obstinacy you criticise teaches for us. For who on seeing it is not excited to enquire what lies behind it? And who, having enquired, does not embrace our faith?

³⁰ As an example of the power of human sacrifice, consider 2 Ki 3:26,27: 'When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land.' Righteous self-sacrifice would be even more powerful.

³¹ The river running through Rome.

³² In Egypt, to make them fertile.

Apology 50

What Tertullian says here bears testimony to the widespread fear and insecurity that governed most people's feelings and reactions to events. The Christian life proved powerful to overcome this dynamic in individuals' lives. And he identified another factor which made an impact: the practical love shown by Christians towards one another and the general community in what was a fairly loveless world. They cared for the poor, and for widows and orphans, and visited their fellow-believers imprisoned for their faith. In time of plague, earthquake, war or famine, believers made great efforts to help non-believers too. Tertullian quoted what pagans said (without any hint of sarcasm): "See how these Christians love one another." The attractiveness of this alternative way of life made for impressive church growth. So he could get away with the following taunt:

We arrived on the scene only yesterday, but we have filled everywhere you occupy – cities, islands, forts, towns, market places ... tribal territories ... the Palace, the Senate, and the Forum. We have left nowhere to you except the temples of your gods.

Apology 37

But, if the Church was growing in size and strength, its life was becoming increasingly unhealthy. And this long before the days of Constantine and the Christendom that resulted from his years of rule – which is not what popular accounts of the Church's story tend to convey.

ANOTHER FORM OF CHRISTIANITY It's clear enough that people's lives were being radically changed in the AD100s and 200s. What doesn't seem to have been happening, in too many cases, though, was true evangelical conversion and baptism with the Holy Spirit. In other words, the common conversion experience of Christians had become less than the New Testament norm, and missed out on essential elements. What was developing was a sort of

hybrid version of Christianity and synagogue-type Judaism: a sort of Christianised Judaism, in effect.

The spiritual consequences of this were serious – and wouldn't really begin to be addressed until the Reformation. In the standard Christian life – the one described in the New Testament – believers have immediate access to God, without any need of intermediaries. In Peter's First Letter (2:4,5) he describes the true order of things: 'As you come to him, the living Stone (i.e. Christ) – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house (i.e. the Church) to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' In this understanding of things, the first thing is to come straight to Christ: me, just as I am, presenting myself before him. Then, if I really do that, he'll build me into his spiritual house (his Church) that he's constructing. "Come to me ... " was the invitation Jesus himself had given (Matt 11:28). And he, in turn, taught us to call his Father "Our Father", and approach him directly in prayer. The writer of Hebrews reminds his audience: "you have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant ..." (12:23,24).

But, at the period church life we're talking about, intermediaries start to be introduced. Confronting a somewhat confused situation in the Church, the influential Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (c 35 – c 107) asserted that the local bishop was the focus of unity in the Christian community, and that the sacraments of Holy Communion and marriage could only be administered on his authority. But he gave this a theological justification, claiming that the bishop is God's representative on earth, such that "we ought to regard the bishop as the Lord himself". Rome would in due course provide an even more robust justification of ministerial authority. This kind of thing prepared the way in the Church for the concept of an intermediary priesthood – somewhat similar to that of the Old Covenant, and congenial to a Judaised Christianity – which would be reinforced by Roman authoritarian-hierarchical influence. So now the bishop became an

intermediary priest between people and God; and the elder (presbyter or 'priest'), who ministered under him, was inevitably drawn into this intermediary role at a more junior level. The apostles and elders in the NT had never been intermediaries like this, though – even implicitly.

Again: 'A phenomenon of great significance in the patristic period was the rise and gradual development of veneration for the saints, more particularly for the Blessed Virgin Mary,' writes J N D Kelly. 'Earliest in the field was the cult of martyrs, the heroes of the faith whom Christians held to be already in God's presence and glorious in his sight. At first it took the form of the reverent preservation of their relics and the annual celebration of their "birthday". From this it was a short step, since they were now with Christ in glory, to seeking their help and prayers, and in the third century evidence for the belief in their intercessory power accumulates.'³³ Kelly refers to the First Epistle of Clement, written from Rome around AD96, and *The Shepherd*, written by the freed Christian slave Hermas around 150, in support of what he says. So we have here a situation here where the martyrs – as 'saints' – are now intermediaries too.

Ignatius of Antioch was the first mainstream Christian writer to give Mary any theological prominence; but this was exceptional so early. Indeed, before the time of Constantine most of the interest in Mary was theological, the development of a Mariology. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin tended to come later. But there were groups at the fringe of the Church that took an intense interest in Mary.

THEOLOGY Mariology provides a good example of the Greek influence – in practice, largely that of Platonism – on the interpretation of Scripture in the early Church. Under such an influence, the literal meaning of the Bible was seen as of considerably less value than spiritual or moral meanings. And the words of Scripture tended to be treated as allegory. Now there's no objective control over

³³ *Early Christian Doctrines*, p490.

allegorical interpretation – it’s a subjective exercise – so interpreters give themselves considerable (creative) freedom in the way they treat any passage. Marina Warner in *Alone Of All Her Sex* shows how the theologian Origen, from Alexandria, could write about Mary:

The burning bush that Moses saw was, like Mary, inflamed with the spirit of God and yet not consumed by the flames, as she was filled with the fires of the Holy Spirit and yet never felt the heat of lust. When Isaiah prophesied, “For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground ...” (53:20), he was pointing out that the Messiah would rise from a virgin womb, unfertilised. Therefore “dry”.³⁴

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus had defined allegory as ‘saying one thing, and meaning something other than what is said’. Philo, a Jewish writer, had begun a tradition of interpreting Scripture allegorically in Alexandria around the time of Christ, and Origen (c185-c254) proved to be only the most intellectually-gifted of the Alexandrian theologians who used this approach. Origen’s influence was as considerable in the Latin-speaking West as in the Greek-speaking East. But not all the Church was happy with the allegorical method. A rival school of biblical interpretation came into being at Antioch, which insisted on interpreting Scripture in its historical context. This involved taking the literal or natural meaning a lot more seriously. Over time, these rival methods served sometimes as alternatives, sometimes to complement one another. There were, in practice, limits to the degree to which Scripture was treated allegorically, even by those who followed the Alexandrian way. Moreover, a reasonable consensus emerged over time as to what allegorical interpretations were mainstream. But the Platonist worldview had penetrated the interpretation of Scripture.

Both Tertullian and Origen – more as independent thinkers than representing the Church in any formal capacity – made major contributions to the understanding of God as the Trinity. This may seem of minimal interest these days – not a good sign – but it was vital at the time. That said, such a step forward in grasping the

³⁴ 1976 / 1985; London; Wiedenfeld and Nicholson / Pan; ISBN 0 330 28771 0; p62.

meaning of what Scripture says about God wasn't matched by any parallel progress in the Christian community's experience of God. The first person of the Trinity was known as 'the Father', and in the Lord's Prayer, at least, he would be addressed as 'Our Father'. But one gets little sense from what's recorded about the early Church that he was really known by most Christians as 'Father' in any remotely intimate or affectionate sense. On the contrary, he seems to have become quite a distant figure – who will become still more distant. One of the things that dawns on one after a while, if one spends a fair amount of time in Roman Catholic church buildings and services, as I do, is that the concept of God as Father is largely missing – in either the liturgy or the iconography and art³⁵. The same is doubtless true of Eastern Orthodoxy³⁶.

The story of the Montanist movement of the 100s is particularly revealing about the role of the Holy Spirit in the early Church. From the beginning, this group seems to have been not entirely orthodox – and it became less orthodox as time went on. A particularly dogmatic, undiplomatic, and unyielding form of 'Charismatic' Christianity is the impression given by the evidence we have of the movement. They gave both (unweighed) prophecy and the obviously-miraculous far too prominent a position. And if the great Tertullian hadn't had considerable Montanist sympathies, it would be easy to dismiss Montanists as no more than a bunch of wierdos. But he was impressed by their revivalism and puritanism. And he attacked the mainstream (Catholic) Church he'd all but left behind for thinking that the Church was made up essentially of bishops rather than of spiritual people. The most effective reply to this line of argument came from Hippolytus of Rome, for the Catholics: it's good to look for the miraculous, but the greatest miracle is conversion; every believer equally has the gifts of the Spirit; and the most important thing beyond conversion is to live as part of the disciplined life of the Church. Hippolytus attacked the divisiveness, the irrationality, and the pride

³⁵ Art is as prominent as it's significant in Catholicism.

³⁶ More surprising, perhaps, is the struggle evangelical Protestantism is having to re-appropriate God as Father in a way that means something to believers in their personal experience. The question arises: What defect in evangelicalism is it which gives rise to the difficulty in the first place?

generated by Montanism. He also pointed out that, in contrast with Montanist prophets, the prophets of the Old Testament didn't prophesy out of a state of ecstasy³⁷. But Hippolytus didn't address the deep-seated problems within Catholicism itself. And that debate of 1,800 years ago is as relevant to today's Church as it ever was.

Part of the Catholic reaction to movements such as Montanism was an impulse towards recognising a definitive collection of New Testament Scriptures, or 'canon'. This had been happening anyway, but the process was hastened by a hardening of the conviction that revelation had come to an end with the passing of the apostles³⁸. In the Catholic view of things, the Holy Spirit confined himself (itself?) to working within the formal life of the Church – of which the bishop-intermediaries formed the key part. Before long, the bishops would come to be regarded as the sacramental dispensers of the Holy Spirit – if not in the rite of Confirmation, then in the consecration of anointing oil (chrism) for the ceremony which immediately followed baptism (where a bishop wasn't going to be directly involved).

The theory here is well removed from the thinking and practice of the New Testament Church. "[W]here the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom," Paul had said (2Cor 3:17) – and this is a general Kingdom principle. Freedom in the Spirit was steadily giving way to a formalised and ritualistic type of religious Church life. No longer was there the sense that 'everyone born of the Spirit' is as elusive as the wind that blows, as Jesus had said to Nicodemus was the case (Jn 3:5-8). No longer was it a matter of: 'When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation' (1Cor 14:26) –

³⁷ Which seems to be generally true. But ecstasy was hardly unknown amongst the prophetic community of the OT. See Num 11:24-29; 1 Sam 10:1-13, cf 1 Sam 19:22,23; etc.. J Lindblom in *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, p48, states that when it says that 'the hand of Yahweh' came upon Elijah in 1 Ki 18:46, this is an expression, when found in the prophetic narratives, which means being overcome by ecstasy.

³⁸ Ironic, this, because Catholicism subsequently was at pains to insist that revelation had **not** come to an end – within its own ranks, anyway ...

because now everything had to be top-down (hierarchical) and rigidly controlled. There's a strong, controlling Roman influence in play here.

Not surprisingly, 'church services' with elaborately-constructed liturgies became the established norm at this time. Such liturgies really required dedicated church buildings – for which the Church had felt no particular need until then. All this implied more complicated organisational structures and a developed bureaucracy for the Church – most of which would have to await the arrival of Constantine's state-sponsored Church.

TRADITION 'Tradition' means, literally, 'what is handed on' (from one generation to the next). All the time the Church's tradition was becoming more fixed and rigid. Some of it was very helpful – such as the statements of belief made by candidates for baptism, which were an early form of what we now know as 'creeds'. These not only provided convenient summaries of the faith, but they served to show up wrong belief for what it was; and so provided some sort of doctrinal protection for the mainstream Christian community in an age when maintaining 'quality control' was far from easy.

But – to stick with the example of baptism – the lengthy and demanding instruction that candidates were required to submit themselves to, and the elaborate baptismal liturgy that went with it, detracted from the New Testament understanding of Christian baptism. In the New Testament, people are thoroughly converted and then immediately baptised – for example the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:26-39), and the family groups of Cornelius the centurion (Ac 10:17-48) and the Philippian jailer (Ac 16:23-34). In the earliest Church, conversion is radically life-changing, so immediate baptism is feasible. And, just before, or just after, their immersion in water, individuals have the Holy Spirit come upon them (are 'baptised with the Holy Spirit'). When Paul comes across some inadequately-initiated believers at Ephesus, he asks them: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (Ac 19:2). (Clearly you couldn't receive the Holy

Spirit and not know whether you had done so or not – there’s something obvious about it). When the answer proves to be “No”, Paul rectifies the situation³⁹. But when ‘conversion’ is weak and anaemic, such that it fails to precipitate that radical life-change of which the New Testament speaks – as became the case so often after the apostles’ time – then the methods of the Old Testament, or at least the logic underlying them, have to be reverted to. So, in the case of baptism, what was meant to be fundamentally internal and rapid in a person’s life was replaced by something time-consuming (the instruction) and externally dramatic (the ceremony) – with the idea that the teaching would percolate into the candidates’ lives, and the impact of the ceremonial would affect their imaginations and emotions. History has shown what an unhelpful ‘tradition’, relating to baptism, the historic Church had developed – such that evangelical conversion, at the Reformation, and Pentecostal baptism with the Holy Spirit, centuries after that, had to be re-introduced to rescue historic Christianity (no less).

‘Tradition’ is a problem we have to recognise as such, and which we ignore at our peril – even given its in-many-ways beneficial character as a carrier down the generations of what has proved helpful and good. Jesus, countering the challenge issued to him by his Pharisee opponents, when he cut across some of their hallowed tradition, rebuked them: “... you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” (Mk 7:13). Church teaching and preaching seems to see this as a criticism only of the Pharisees. But, by implication, it poses a question from Christ to all our tradition: Just how faithfully in line with what Scripture says are its many and various elements?⁴⁰ What in our tradition is

³⁹ The impression given in many of the references to ‘baptism’ in the NT is that the whole of the inner-conversion / immersion-in-water / baptism-with-the-Spirit complex is included in the idea – and that these things belong together so intimately that the whole complex naturally attracts the one term ‘baptism’ to cover it.

⁴⁰ Of course, there’s a question here of how one is to understand what it means for any theory or practice to be ‘in line with’ Scripture. My own conviction is that (a) we need to work from first principles to determine what Scripture says and means (and not just quote texts – frequently out of context); and (b) our theory and practice need at least to be consistent with what Scripture implies, even if it doesn’t say it explicitly.

supposed to be in line with revealed truth, but actually isn't, is territory that Satan can and will exploit. Tradition that's not in line with Scripture isn't just 'misleading', 'unhelpful', or whatever – it's almost inevitably an alien spiritual stronghold; in the starkest terms, the haunt of demons. One of the biggest problems we Christians face is this: we love our traditions, and become highly committed to them – such that others who question them need to watch out!

The extent to which tradition has accumulated over two millennia is best estimated by examining such ancient expressions of Christianity as found in the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Armenian Church, Greek Orthodoxy, and the Roman Catholicism – and comparing them with new, first-principles expressions of church.

HERESY

The family of heresies that caused the Church the most difficulty in the 100s and 200s is known as 'Gnosticism'. As Henry Chadwick points out, the forerunners of these heresies had already made themselves felt in the New Testament Church:

At Corinth a spiritual aristocracy were inclined to pride themselves on the possession of profounder wisdom and deeper mystical experiences than their brethren or even than the apostle himself. Believing themselves to be already perfect, they regarded their fellow-Christians as inferior beings who had not risen to the truly supernatural heights. They were also dualists, believing that the spirit is everything, the body nothing (if not actually evil). This belief had immediate moral consequences. Some Corinthians concluded that physical acts were a matter of indifference; taking encouragement from Paul's doctrine of freedom from the law, and regarding the sacraments as magical guarantees of automatic bliss, they fell into moral licence. A rival group adopted extreme ascetic opinions, so that husbands and wives withheld conjugal rights from one another and betrothed couples abstained from consummating their marriage. Consistent with this dualism they rejected as crude the Hebraic doctrine of the resurrection of the body, preferring the Platonic doctrine

of the immortality of the soul; in any event, to those who were already perfect, resurrection could add nothing.⁴¹

At Colossae Paul was faced with a more serious heresy, a mixture of Christianity and unorthodox Judaism:

The Colossian Christians were being persuaded to worship intermediate angelic powers, identified with the heavenly bodies, and believed to possess a power to determine human fate unbroken by the Gospel. Special ceremonies and strict ascetic practices were enjoined, with feast-days drawn from the Jewish calendar.⁴²

Chadwick points out that this kind of religious teaching 'became an immense threat to the Church as the personal authority of the first generation of Christian leaders receded into the past'. The term 'Gnosticism', he says, 'is a generic term used primarily to refer to ... adaptations of Christianity propagated by a dozen or more rival sects which broke with the early Church between AD 80 and 150'⁴³.

Many of the elements that went to make up Gnosticism were available before the arrival of Christianity: Platonism; a Greek-influenced version of Zoroastrianism from Persia; and Judaism. But they don't seem to have been brought together in any organised way before the time of Christ. It was the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*, that gave Gnosticism its name. But this was spiritually-revealed knowledge, supposedly, not the knowledge our minds provide us with – intellectual knowledge. Chadwick again, this time on the knowledge Gnosticism claimed to be able to impart:

... a knowledge of human nature and destiny, based on a grandiose revelation about the origin of the world which explained how evil had come into being and how one should act in order to gain deliverance from it. What they claimed to know consisted of a myth about the creation of the world as the result of a pre-cosmic disaster which accounted for the present misery of our lot, and about the way in which the elect few

⁴¹ *The Early Christian Church*, pp33,34.

⁴² p34

⁴³ p34

may be redeemed. In the elect, they believed, there was a divine spark that had become imprisoned in matter and had lost its memory of its true, heavenly home. The content of the Gnostic gospel was an attempt to rouse the soul from its sleep-walking condition and to make it aware of the high destiny to which it is called. The present material world the Gnostics regarded as utterly alien to the supreme God and to goodness, and as therefore the creation of inferior powers, either incompetent or malevolent. The natural order of things reflected nothing at all of the divine glory and of the matchless heavenly beauty, and towards it the Gnostic initiate was taught to acknowledge no responsibility. His ethic was one of complete freedom from any obligation towards society and government regarding which he entertained the most pessimistic opinions. The world was in the iron control of evil powers whose home was in the seven planets, and after death the elect soul would be faced by a journey through the planetary spheres⁴⁴ back to its heavenly home. Much time was therefore devoted to learning the correct passwords and the most potent amulets, which would force the monstrous powers barring the ascent to open their doors and allow him to pass onward and upward to the realm of light. The rival sects, who hated one another as much as they hated orthodoxy, used to offer different sets of names and passwords to be learnt, each group claiming to possess the authentic forms, with each of which alone the soul's ascent could be successful. The details of the myths of the various sects were widely divergent. But the basic pattern can be seen to be constant.⁴⁵

... the story of the fall of Adam and Eve exercised a deep fascination over the Gnostic imagination. The Fall of Eve was taken to symbolize a pre-cosmic catastrophe in which a female power, the 'Mother', went astray from the divinely intended path. Or the story might suggest exciting speculations about the role of the serpent: the Ophites (i.e. serpent worshippers) argued that since through the serpent Adam and Eve had come to have knowledge of good and evil, he was a good power, the Leviathan encircling the cosmos with his tail in his mouth to symbolize eternity, who had out-manoeuvred the inferior creator and his son Jesus (whom the Ophites solemnly cursed in their liturgy). Apart from the book of Genesis the main ingredient which Gnosticism derived from Judaism was [an altered form of] apocalyptic. Jewish apocalyptic painted a dark picture of the present world as the bone of contention between rival angel armies, good and evil, and as the expected stage of a divine intervention redeeming God's elect ... The principal ingredient which Gnosticism

⁴⁴ Aristotle's picture of the universe – or something very like it – is in view here.

⁴⁵ pp35,36

derived from Christianity was the central idea of redemption. But not all the second-century sects included Jesus as the redeemer ...⁴⁶

It isn't difficult to imagine what modern film-makers or the developers of today's new cults might make of this raw material. Strange religious ideas could be as bizarre back then as they can be today.

The true Church was faced with the issue of its own authority as against the claimed authority of these other sects and their supposed revelations. What was the true interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, and how could that be known? As we've seen, Ignatius of Antioch's early answer was that the bishop is God's representative on earth, indeed stands in the Lord's place.

When the leaders of the church in Corinth were deposed around the year 100, and new men put in their place, Clement, the presiding elder of the church at Rome, wrote to express the concern of that congregation about the irregular nature of what had happened – implying some sort of divine inspiration for what he was saying. Basic to the line he took was the idea of the 'apostolic succession' – the unbroken chain of ordained leaders in the congregations belonging to the true Church from the apostles to the present time; with the assumption that what the apostles taught was identical to what is taught now.

This line was taken up in the 200s by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, by which time the Gnostic problem had grown far more serious, in his powerful book *Against Heresies*. In addition, he asked: If Christ had passed on any secret tradition in parallel with the publicly available gospel, wouldn't he have entrusted this to his specially-commissioned representatives, the apostles and their designated successors? Irenaeus argued for: an unbroken succession from the apostles to the bishops of his day; a single, worldwide Church; and an unchanged and unchangeable revelation to which all of this Church was committed. Points such

⁴⁶ p37

as these, in the masterly and thorough way he presented them, quickly broke the power of Gnosticism – at least insofar as it constituted a significant threat to the Church.

But new threats of a very different kind, as well as some of the old kind, lay ahead.