

A History of the Early Church

Introduction

This book is an attempt to reconstruct the events which lead to the formation of the Christian church and its development to the time of Constantine when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. It looks principally at the first century AD and draws its information mainly from the New Testament. It is fairly obvious to anyone who studies the New Testament that there are often different, contradictory versions of the same events, that some of the events described are not easily credible and that the main purpose of writing down the events was not to tell a historical story, but rather to reveal God's messages to mankind.

One cannot attempt a book of this sort unless one has a specific view of that history, on what is the essential truth and what events may or may not be true without it seriously affecting the message. Personally I have never held the view that the Bible was the literal word of God, dictated to human scribes in some mysterious way and to be taken word for word as absolute truth. Thus I believe the fundamentalist position to be quite untenable. But religion without belief or conviction is also untenable. So I need to start by trying to make clear my own position, for it is from that perspective that I shall try to recreate the story.

That there is a God I have no doubts whatsoever. He is a product of human experience and almost every society known to history has among its beliefs a sense of a being and a presence beyond human knowledge. Equally I cannot hold an exclusive view of God. There cannot be a God whom Christians worship, a God whom the Hindus worship and a God whom African animists worship. There is one God and only one God, we know Him in different ways.

The heart of the Christian faith is that God came down to earth in human form, lived amongst us for a number of years, suffered a humiliating execution and demonstrated as clearly as possible that there was life after death and that we could experience God in our own lives.

That faith has been preserved by a body which we refer to as the Church. This word Church has two distinct meanings, The first being a building in which worship takes place. It also has a collective meaning as the set of people who have accepted the Christian faith and the specific meaning of an organisation embracing ministry and authority. It is this latter meaning that I take when I talk about the history of the early Church, because I have a specific interest in how that body came to be formed and how it received its authority. Over the subsequent centuries the Church has developed dogmas and theology, it has split and quarrelled within itself, but whatever else one may believe about it, it remains as a visible and tangible body.

It was in the first 100-200 years that the crucial splits occurred. There were three main tensions; the Jewish church under James which saw Jesus's teachings as an extension of traditional rabbinic teaching; the Pauline church which saw Christianity as a distinctive faith for all men and the Gnostic traditions which saw Jesus's message as a path to personal enlightenment. In the end it was the Pauline church which triumphed and it was that Church which compiled the writings which we now know as the New Testament and dismissed as heresy any writings that disagreed

with their core beliefs.

It is a plain fact of history that members of the Church wrote all the books of the New Testament and that the Church existed perfectly happily for many years without a formal Bible, using a wide variety of writings to record, teach and inspire. Each congregation used its own selection which often included works which are no longer in the modern canon. It is equally true that in no case do we have an 'original version' of the text. All versions we have today are copies of earlier versions, and when copies were made there were often significant errors in transcription, often huge chunks were omitted and other text inserted. We have copies of text from a variety of sources and ages, but it not sensible to assume that an older version is truer to the original than a later version. The later version may be based upon a copying sequence which was much truer to the original than the earlier work.

One further point needs to be made. Many modern versions have attempted to present the text in language which is familiar to and understandable by the present generation. The Good News Bible for instance tries to translate all weights and measures and currency into modern metric values. In many cases this completely loses the point that the author is trying to make, and anyway there is not a lot of agreement as to what the conversion factors really are. There is therefore a very strong argument for sticking to a version which is a good translation of whatever text it is based upon and which retains a majesty of phraseology which can inspire. My own personal preference is for the New English Bible. One also must recognise that typing in the whole text of the New Testament would be a formidable task, so I am most grateful to those who have done the job for me and made their text available via the Internet I have not been consistent in the versions used. Matthew is quoted from the New International Version, Mark from the Revised Standard Version and Luke from both the RSV and the New English Bible. In all cases I have made slight modifications to convert the spelling back to the UK standards from those of the US.

There are three types of text in the New Testament. There is history, there is poetry and there are stories. It is often difficult to tell the difference between them. Of the life of Jesus we have four books to choose from. But of these only John seems to be reliable as history, and he was not primarily concerned with writing history. Luke who on the surface is writing a history is perhaps the most unreliable. What he seems to be doing is filling in the gaps. He was writing for an audience that wanted to know how it happened. By the time he came to write it, there would have been no one alive who was a first hand witness.

Luke does appear to have used some long forgotten book as a basis for his own account. But much of Luke is of the nature of Kipling's 'Just-so Stories'. This was a very popular medium at the time. A truth was known and the author set out to spin a yarn to explain how the truth came about. Jesus and John the Baptist were real live historical figures. Jesus particularly was recognised as someone very special. Not just special, in the eyes of Christians he was the Son of God, the Messiah.

The first thing therefore to explain was how he came to be born. There had to be something very special about his birth, what better than to look in the scriptures to see what the prophets had written about the coming of the Messiah and to weave a story around their prophecies. It was little wonder therefore that Matthew and Luke told different stories and that they were inconsistent, not just between themselves but with the known facts of the Roman world. Mark and John ignored the matter.

In the three synoptic Gospels it would appear that Jesus began his ministry in Galilee and then moved to Jerusalem where almost all the action took place just before the Passion. John on the other hand has Jesus going to and fro all over Palestine - a much more realistic scenario considering His ministry lasted about three years.

When we come to the account of the Passion again, only John, seems to have any understanding of Roman laws and procedures. He also displays a first rate knowledge of the geography of Jerusalem and an understanding of life in Judea, sadly lacking in the three synoptic Gospels which describe events and places in Judea from a purely Galilean perspective. It is very much as a present day English person might describe events in South Africa, compared with the version of a native South African. The point is therefore that John's account is much better founded on fact, much more credible and is the version I shall use as the basis of the rest of this book.

What I am trying to do in this book is to tell the story of the early church using the material that is in the Bible. The majority will of course come from the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The arrangement is generally strictly chronological, starting from just before Jesus' birth to about the end of the first century when the church was well established. This means picking and choosing sections and putting them in a different sequence than appears in the bible. Where one book tells essentially the same story, only one version will be provided in full, the variants will be referenced and the variations noted.

On the whole the teachings and stories that Jesus told will not be included. A separate volume is planned to include all the residual parts of the New Testament which are not relevant to the specific theme of what actually happened. Appended will be a cross reference index showing the relationship between the traditional New Testament sequence of text and the sequence used here.

A major problem of the four gospels is that to many, the events described do not fit together or appear to tell a credible story. For many the story of the three wise men fits this description; but there are alternative ways of weaving the stories together. After the main account following traditional teachings I try to construct a somewhat different story which makes more sense of the historic background and tends to support a number of alternative traditions which the Church has often condemned as heresy. But was the twisting of sequences done deliberately by the writers and editors of the gospels in order to protect the early church? That is a question that I am unable to answer; but it does seem to me that, at the end of the day, Constantine was using the church and the Christian messages for his personal political objectives and would have had few qualms about exercising his own brand of censorship.