

## **Institutionalization: The Universalization of Faith and Practice & The Formalization of Patterns of Authority within the Church**

Charismatic → Institutional

Local → Practices are standardized across broader geographical areas

In the second century we see a variety of local practices in use in different places with different assumptions being made about how and why certain things should be said and done. As people moved between different regions and the Christian movement expanded and developed regional administrative/regulatory structures (bishops and local councils) to try to maintain a semblance of order and work through problems that emerged, local usages were increasingly seen as a problem. For example, if you were a merchant and traveled extensively, you would soon discover that Easter was celebrated at different times in different places. You could stop in Jerusalem and celebrate Easter, then travel to Antioch in time to celebrate Easter there, then stop over in Ephesus and find that Easter was being celebrated there, due to the different ways of calculating when Easter should be held according to the lunar calendar or some other system in use. In what sense then could these different Christian communities be regarded as united in faith and having an agreed basis for common practice?

The **Quartodeciman controversy** can serve as an example in point. In Asia Minor (=modern Turkey), a many (but not all of) the churches had agreed that Easter should be celebrated on Passover (the 14th of Nisan according to the lunar calendar used by Jewish communities). (Early Christians fasted during the day during Lent/Holy Week, so one needed to know when Easter was to occur so that one would know when to stop these fasts). There were some problems that emerged.

- 1) One had to ask Jewish informants when the feast was to occur within the present year (the lunar calendar used by Jewish communities was not the one in regular use throughout the broader society); this seemed to conflict with Christian claims about the abrogation of the Jewish ceremonial law (or rather its fulfillment in Christ's own self-offering?).
- 2) Jewish communities in different areas were not always agreed as to precisely which day was the 14 Nisan (lunar calendars based on the cycle of the moon allow some leeway in interpretation).
- 3) In most years, the 14 Nisan did not fall on a Sunday, while Easter commemorated the Lord's resurrection on a Sunday (which had become the regular day for Christian worship).
- 4) The Christian community in Rome, which was gradually becoming more influential, had a different local practice, celebrating Easter on a Sunday that recurred at certain time every year based on the solar calendar, which meant that the proper date for the celebration could be announced in advance to all churches in the region). They were not at all happy about immigrants from Asia Minor disparaging the Roman practice and demanding that Easter be celebrated according to the Jewish calendar! (This conflict was handled badly and a presbyter, Blastus, who had come to Rome from Asia Minor was deposed for celebrating Easter on the 14 Nisan and then began a schismatic group that rejected the authority of the Bishop of Rome.)

In Asia Minor, although there was a certain tension (fear of identifying Jewish and Christian feasts), discussion could take place without the severing of communion. This question was taken up at a number of local councils from southern France to Syria, with the Roman bishop Victor (c. 189-199) being the most antagonistic and ready to break communion, but criticized and restrained by others.

In the third century, this problem was resolved by some legislation which aimed to address a different but related problem, namely to prevent Easter from being celebrated more than once a year (the lunar calendar is shorter than the solar calendar by a number of days). Taking over a similar regulation from Diaspora Judaism (Aristobulus) and possibly the Samaritans concerning the Passover, Anatolius of Laodicea and Dionysius of Alexandria recommended that Easter be observed after the vernal equinox (a festival belonging to the solar calendar), so any calculation of the date of Easter according to the Jewish lunar calendar was automatically disqualified. This regulation was approved in the canons of the Council of Nicea (325) and priests breaking this rule were to be deposed according to Roman and Syrian church orders. By the end of the fourth century, virtually the only people who still observed Easter on the 14 Nisan were the Montanists, a sectarian group in group in Asia Minor that preserved a number of ancient local usages proper to rural Asia Minor (besides celebrating Easter on the 14 Nisan, they also allowed women to baptize, a practice also found in second century Bithynia among the Marcionites).

Another kind of problem occurred when a local leader tried to develop a more systematic account of the faith that was subsequently rejected by other Christian leaders in other areas. Here we might look at the example of **Marcion** and the development of the Marcionite churches. Marcion's initial questions are very reasonable ones:

- (a) Why are there so many evils in this world? Why are there harmful animals like poisonous snakes, stinging wasps and man-eating wild beasts? Why do we observe catastrophic natural events like earthquakes, floods and drought?
- (b) Why are there so many evils in the Old Testament? How can the Old Testament God issue threats, impose harsh punishments and command the genocidal slaughter of hapless Canaanites?

The clue, according to Marcion, is to recognize that these questions should be asked together and that their answer is to be found in Paul's opposition between Law and Gospel in Galatians. The Law and Gospel are not only fundamentally different in character but also fundamentally different in origin. Creation's faults can be explained if we suppose that the one who made the world (the Creator or Ruler of this world) had limits to his knowledge. This would also explain why, in the Old Testament, he is so quick to impose commands that cannot be kept and then to become enraged, making threats and meting out harsh punishments, when his creatures fail to observe perfectly the rigorous and difficult commandments he has imposed. What this ignorant Creator did not recognize was that there was a higher power that was as good as the Creator was just (evil and ignorance being incompatible with divine goodness). This higher power sent his Son Jesus Christ to reveal himself to the Creator and redeem, by subjecting himself to death, all those who the Creator had punished and consigned to Hell. This salvation, since it was unforeseen and freely offered, represents the grace of the good God, which stands in contrast to the obedience to the works of the Law demanded by the ignorant and angry Creator. Because the Creator had promised through the prophets the coming of a savior,

he was able to confuse and deceive the apostles who authored the books of the New Testament, so that the Gospels and Epistles are a mixture of true teachings emanating from the good God who is the Father of Jesus Christ and false teachings which were placed by the ignorant Creator in the mouths of Moses and the prophets and deceived all those who trusted in them. This provided a theological principle by which one could edit the Gospel of Luke and Epistles of Paul, eliminating anything that connected Jesus Christ and his Father with creation, the giving of the Law or the testimony of the Prophets.

Question: In your view, how well does this solve the problems Marcion is attempting to address? At what cost? What are the limits of this approach?

Sometimes the problem was that traditionally-accepted practices were taken in directions that undermined received patterns of authority or put a great deal of authority into the hands of people who had not previously been given authority by the Church. Here we might look at **Montanus and the rise of Montanist churches** as an example. It is not easy to reconstruct what Montanus and the early Montanists thought, although we are helped somewhat by the appearance of two collections of primary sources (Roland E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia*, Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1989 and William Tabernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism*, Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997) and a recent interpretative study (Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996). Opposition to the Montanists is discussed by William Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism*, Brill 2007.

Around 165, a new type of prophetic movement ("the New Prophecy") emerged in Phrygia (west-central Asia Minor). A man named Montanus, about whom not much is known, is traditionally said to have been the founder. Montanus is said to begun prophesying in a village named Ardabau, whose present location is unknown. His role in the movement was soon overshadowed by the prophecies given by two women, Maximilla and Priscilla, who are traditionally identified as co-founders of the movement. Supporters believed that these women were prophetesses in the tradition of the New Testament (e.g. Philip's daughters). Their critics accused them of have been married but having "left their husbands the moment they were filled with the Spirit" and speaking in "a frenzied manner, abnormally and unsuitably."

This movement was strongly opposed by local clergy almost from the beginning of the movement, who excluded the Montanist prophets from the church and rejected the value of their messages. Supporters of the New Prophecy established a headquarters for their movement in the Phrygian villages of Pepouza and Tymion (current location unknown), from which the movement spread quite rapidly throughout the Greco-Roman world. Unsuccessful attempts were made by bishops opposed to the movement to exorcise Priscilla and Maximilla. Montanus' opponents accused him of encouraging the dissolution of marriages, legislating fasts, naming Pepouza and Tymion "Jerusalem" (i.e. the new religious center) and collecting offerings to pay the salaries of those who proclaimed the message of the New Prophecy.

The supporters of the New Prophecy apparently saw themselves as ushering in a new and final age in which the spiritually minded would be able to live out a properly spiritual lifestyle in preparation for the coming of the end and the descent of the New Jerusalem. The New Prophecy thus aimed not at the revelation of new doctrines but at a

more serious and rigorous Christian life which would be able to persevere through present persecutions and sufferings and attain the goal of the heavenly kingdom, which was near at hand.

Perhaps the best way to begin thinking about the movement is to read the authentic Montanist oracles (Heine, pp. 3,5,7 plus the vision of a Montanist woman in Stevenson, pp. 175-176) and ask yourself the following questions:

(1) What is the locus of authority here and why? How would this compare or contrast with models of authority in other early Christian writings we have examined so far? How does prophecy change the dynamics of authority within a Christian community?

(2) What can you infer to be the major challenges or problems facing the Church? How does the New Prophecy present itself as an answer to these particular challenges/problems?

(3) What do these prophecies represent as the ideal of the Christian life? How? Why is a certain strictness of discipline and mode of repentance observed and what does it involve?

(The demise of Montanist communities in the sixth century A.D.; see Stevenson, CCC, pp. 154-155)

### **For next week?: The Rule of Faith and the Development of the Biblical Canon**

#### **The Rule of Faith (*Regula fidei*)**

- Rule of faith=brief summary of faith (often taught to the person who was to be baptized and then repeated back by them at baptism) which emphasized the essential features of the faith.
- This could be referred back to as a criterion for rejecting teachers/teachings which supported docetism (see Ignatius *Trallians* 9) or claimed to transmit hidden sayings/teachings of Jesus that did not agree with the faith of the Church (see Origen *On first principles*, preface 2-10).