

The Opposition of the Early Church

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – an overview of the opposition to the early church and its value to the history of Christianity
2. aim – to cause us to recognize the value of opposition within God’s design for the church
3. passage – John 15:18-21

b. outline

1. The Beginning of Physical Opposition
2. The Beginning of Doctrinal Opposition
3. The Response to Worldly Opposition

c. overview

1. the *timeline* of our location
 - a. with the advent of the *primordial church*, we “jump” over the history of the church in Acts
 - b. but, there are some events “within” its timeframe that are essential to our understanding
2. the *point* of our discussion tonight
 - a. the *primordial church* gives way to a more “settled” church
 - b. however, in the face of *opposition*, the church grows, and its doctrine *advances* in the world

I. The Beginning of Physical Opposition

Content

a. the fire in Rome (64AD)

1. Nero reached the Roman throne in October, 54
 - a. he was infatuated with dreams of grandeur, and fancied himself an artist and a poet
 - b. he was, at first, well received, but within 10 years was deeply despised by the populace (mad?)
2. the fire occurred June 18, 64
 - a. it lasted 6 days / 7 nights – 10 / 14 major sections of the city were destroyed
3. the idea that Nero “fiddled” while Rome burned is a myth (started by rumor)
 - a. he actually helped organize the fight against it and offered help to the homeless caused by it
 - b. later rumor blamed Nero for the fire, especially after he used some of the land for his new palace
4. so, Nero turned the blame onto the Christians, who Tacitus said held a “hatred for humankind”
 - a. Tacitus also records that Nero would use them “for sport,” trying to gain sympathy for the fire
 - b. it is likely that both Paul and Peter died under the reign of Nero
 - c. however, it appears likely that the persecution of Christians was limited to Rome (for now)
5. Nero was deposed in 68 and committed suicide
 - a. Christian persecution ebbed and flowed from this point to 311AD

b. the fall of Jerusalem (70AD)

1. Rome sent a series of governors to Judea after Herod the Great
 - a. **e.g.** Pontius Pilate, Felix, Festus, and Florus (later in the Acts account)
2. the Zealots (and Pharisees) looked for change; the Zealots pursued *political* and *military* change
 - a. the Sadducees were *accommodationists*, willing to compromise to maintain the *status quo*
3. Florus sent a brigade into Jerusalem (66) to quell rebellion after he seized silver from the Temple
 - a. the Zealots attacked Masada (Herod’s Dead Sea palace) and took it
 - b. the Temple captain stopped the daily sacrifices for Caesar
 - c. the city went into an uproar in support, and the Jews expelled or killed Roman soldiers in the city
4. Gallus (the new governor) besieged Jerusalem with 20,000 soldiers for 6 months (failed)
5. Nero sent Vespasian to quell the revolt; he cleaned up the “outer rim” revolts first
 - a. however, when Nero died, Vespasian was recalled to Rome and declared emperor
6. Vespasian sent his son Titus, who vanquished the city; his soldiers burned the Temple in anger
 - a. tens of thousands of Jews were killed, the rest dispersed
 - b. the destruction of the Temple ended the sacrificial system and the records storehouse
 - c. most Christians fled Jerusalem *before* its siege (**read Luke 21:20-24**) to Pella (in Transjordan)
 - d. the church found a more “permanent” home in Antioch, to the N (**note Acts 11:19-27**)
 - e. the fall of Jerusalem serves as an “impetus” to force the Christians away (**read Acts 1:8**)

II. The Beginning of Doctrinal Opposition

Content

a. the rise of Gnosticism (c. 120AD)

1. Gnosticism = a largely 2nd century movement, with roots in Judaism, Christianity, *and* pagan philosophies, that held to the belief that the secret to salvation was a special, mystical knowledge that only some were able to find
2. Gnosticism was only largely understood prior to 1945 from the *heresiologists*, those who wrote *against* Gnosticism during the time of its ascendancy
 - a. the letters of John and the Fourth Gospel address a form of *proto-Gnosticism* of the 1st century
 - b. the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Truth*, and *Gospel of Judas* were all discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, and give deeper insight into what Gnosticism really was
3. Gnostics believed the following:
 - a. all physical matter is evil (or unreal) – thus, they denied the *literal* incarnation of God (docetism)
 - b. since matter is evil, the “goal” is to escape the body – thus, they denied a *literal* resurrection
 - c. the Supreme Being only created a *spiritual* world – a fallen demigod created this one
 1. this demigod was from a long stream of spiritual beings emanating from the Supreme Being
 - d. to be saved, a spiritual messenger must come and “reveal” a way out the material world
 1. in Christian Gnosticism, that messenger is Jesus, who reveals the “way” to God
 2. thus, they denied that Jesus was the Supreme Being; he was only a messenger from him

b. the rise of Marcion (c. 144AD)

1. Christian through his father, the Bishop of Sinope on the S coast of the Black Sea
2. he went to Rome in 144, and started a church; but, despised the “material world” (and Jews)
3. he argued that the Supreme Being is *different* from Yahweh, the god of the O.T.
 - a. he saw Yahweh as vindictive and arbitrary, choosing Israel and then punishing them
 - b. the “real” Father (he insisted) was loving and compassionate (as pictured in Jesus)
4. he discarded the O.T. and selected only certain parts of the N.T. as Scripture
 - a. **i.e.** the Epistles of Paul and an *edited* Gospel of Luke (the only ones to understand Jesus)
 - b. he claimed that Jesus was *not* born of Mary, but appeared as a grown man under the reign of Tiberius, without a literal body of flesh
5. his rival church lingered on for centuries, even after being soundly denounced as heretical

III. The Response to Worldly Opposition

Content

a. the development of the Canon of Scripture (2nd C.)

1. the 39 books of the O.T. (the LXX) were well accepted in the early church, even by Jesus
2. it is against the backdrop of Gnosticism and the Marcionites that the N.T. canon began to take shape
 - a. Marcion’s “Scriptures” required a response from the church
 - b. by c. 120, all of the books we now have were widely circulated; the Gospels and Paul’s letters were well known and read in the churches; John’s Gospel (or James) came last
3. the canon of the N.T. developed *over time* (**no council declared it**)
 - a. first, the Gospels; different ones read and adopted in different places
 1. the variations of content in the Gospels was for *multiple attestation*
 2. there were *hundreds* of writings attesting to the person and work of Jesus, but the church did not adopt them as *normative*; **i.e.** there was no *exclusion* of “valid” works by a council
 - b. then, Acts and the Pauline epistles, finally the smaller books over the next century
 - c. the process used *throughout the churches* asked and answered the following questions:
 1. was the book written by an apostle or the companion of an apostle (**i.e.** Luke or Mark)?
 - a. James and Jude accepted for being brothers of Christ and important converts
 2. was the book consistent with the orthodox understanding of Jesus and the faith?
 3. was the book useful in worship – did it lead to a deeper reverence of Christ?

b. the development of the early Christian Creeds (2nd C.)

1. the earliest creed: the Apostle’s Creed
 - a. *not* a dictation of the original apostles, but a form of confession *encapsulating* apostolic teaching
 1. originally developed as a *confession* admitted to by baptismal candidates
 2. probably varied amongst churches (**see Romans 6:17**)
 3. undoubtedly a confession that *limited* baptism to those who professed orthodox beliefs

- b. the old Roman form (R) c. 140:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ His only (begotten) Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost; the holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; (etc.)"
- c. the received (current) form :

"I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of Heaven and Earth; and in Jesus Christ His only (begotten) Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen."
- 2. the later works:
 - a. the Nicene Creed (c. 381) – very similar to the Apostle’s Creed
 - 1. adds the phrase “the Holy Spirit ... who proceeds from the Father and the Son”
 - 2. the *filioque* – a “dual” procession of the Spirit, denied by Eastern Orthodoxy
 - b. various confessions (e.g. London Baptist, Westminster, New Hampshire, etc.)
- 3. the rise of creeds (along with a canon) as a *response* to heresy (esp. Gnosticism and Marcion)
 - a. Baptists often *eschew* creeds over the Bible, but creeds (and confessions) are necessary *summaries* of biblical teaching designed to determine what is believed by all
 - b. the early creeds were designed to clearly identify orthodox teaching from heresy
 - 1. they are *Trinitarian* in structure (dismissing the Gnostics)
 - 2. they treat God as *pantokrator* – Almighty (dismissing the Marcionites)
 - 3. they give the most attention to *Jesus* (dismissing groups that denied his deity/humanity)
 - 4. they give reference to specific historical events – Pontius Pilate (eliminating ahistorical views)
 - 5. they give reference to the Virgin Birth (dismissing Docetists)
 - 6. they make the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus *central* – the “core” of orthodoxy
- c. the beginning of the catholic Church (2nd C.)
 - 1. catholic = universal; united; of one mind and belief
 - 2. the need for *apostolic succession* – the ability of local churches (e.g. Rome, Antioch, Ephesus) to trace their historical connection back to the apostles, thus demonstrating their orthodoxy
 - 3. during the early 2nd C., most churches could trace the lineage of their bishops back to an apostle
 - a. although the idea of multiple bishops or elders appears to be common
 - 4. however, as time went by, such “lineages” were more difficult to produce
 - a. which led (eventually) to the mistaken belief that the papacy had its roots in Peter
- d. the importance of physical and doctrinal opposition
 - 1. opposition becomes the *primary force* in moving the gospel out from Jerusalem (and Jews) to the whole world
 - 2. opposition is what Christ said for his church to expect (read John 15:18-21)