

Doctrine is Not the Underlying Cause of Lasting Division in the Church

As the last chapter discussed, organizational divisions and factions in the Church are caused in the first instance by divisive people, not divisive ideas. The ideas, the doctrinal differences, are merely a cloak for the self-serving agendas of one or more heretics. However, taking a long view of church history, most heretical movements are quite short-lived. They are very dependent on the personality of their founder, and disappear, separate from Christianity entirely, or merge back into the mainstream of Christianity within a generation or two after their founder's death. It appears almost without exception that the exceptional heresy that survives to become a lasting division in the Church (as opposed to a cult or separate religion outside the Church) has something beyond the appeal of its founder or of its doctrines to support it—it has the support of Christians associated with a secular political, national, social or ethnic group that have at some time adopted it to justify maintaining their own separateness within the Church.

One of my required courses in the Eighth Grade was Medieval History¹, taught by Mr. Hildebrandt. Mr. Hildebrandt, who taught me history and economics on through my High School years, was the best teacher I ever sat under. He gave me my love for history, and also the foundation of my sense of historiography—my theory of history—to this day. The focus of Mr. Hildebrandt's theory of history was “follow the wealth”—that is, to understand what is really happening in history, follow carefully what individuals and groups are gaining and losing wealth and power. Except maybe in the Bible, where God gives the explanation himself², don't trust the moralizing apologies of the ultimate winners, who invariably paint their leaders and heroes with halos and everyone they opposed with horns. Always remember that history is written by the victors.

Certainly this approach to history applies with great force to the history of the Church. The warring parties in any doctrinal or inter-denominational dispute tend to generate public materials that are polemical—designed to increase the loyalty of their own members and win arguments for the benefit of the undecided, usually at the cost of over-simplifying or caricaturing opposing positions. This can be seen clearly enough in disputes that are presently still ongoing. As applied to older, long dead disputes that wracked the Church, this also means that it can be difficult to ascertain just what the demonized (and now defunct) groups now labeled as “heretics” actually taught and why the disputes were deserving of the wars that were fought over them. The victors will have systematically destroyed their opponents' “heretical” documents, sometimes leaving the victors' polemical arguments against a belief as the only evidence of what it was. Often it is easier to trace the worldly political roots of the conflict than the real doctrinal positions of the losers. This is true of several of the ancient examples discussed below of long-term divisions caused by worldly political or social divisions.

Another group of examples pertains to a second issue that was raised in my mind, many years ago, by Mr. Hildebrandt's Ancient and Medieval History classes—just what is the Church? Is it a political entity in this world, a work of God that is not of this world, or both? Even though Mr. Hildebrandt was a good Catholic, and a lay teacher in his Catholic parish, he consistently applied this view of history even to the history of his own Church. For instance, in his Medieval History class, he taught that the two worst disasters that ever befell his Church were the donation of Pepin and the coronation of Charlemagne—the first because it made the Pope an earthly prince, the ruler

of a territory, and the second because it gave the Pope, at least in theory, the power to make and break kings. To these two events I would add, for reasons I will explain below, two other events that occurred just prior to the medieval period: the “conversion” of Constantine in 312 C.E. and the decree of Theodosius I in 381 C.E. that converted the whole Roman Empire into “Christendom” (although this term for it was not used until much later). This hazy and dangerous concept of “Christendom” as a political entity figures prominently in many of the following examples of politically-caused divisions.

Most of the underlying historical facts in the examples below are not controversial. What is different about my presentation of these facts is the associations I draw between them and the conclusions I draw from them. My principal sources for most of these examples are Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (2 Vols.) (NY: Harper & Row, 1975); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (NY: Penguin, 2009) and Jacques Ellul (G.W. Bromiley, Tr.), *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1986). For specific subjects and time periods, I have also relied upon Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (NY: Penguin 2005); John P. Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia—and How It Died* (NY: Harper-Collins 2009); Leo D. Sandgren, *Vines Intertwined: A History of Jews and Christians from the Babylonian Exile to the Advent of Islam* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010); Samuel H. Moffatt, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500 (2nd Rev. Ed.)* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1998); Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century (2nd Ed.)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1997); and Jacques Ellul (D.B. MacKay, Tr.), *Islam and Judeo-Christianity: A Critique of their Commonality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2015). Sources for controversial factual assertions, and for material not taken from one or more of these sources, are separately noted.

Judaizers and The Legal Advantage of Being a Jew in the Roman Empire

One early example of this discussed in the New Testament is the heresy of the “Judaizers” and the separation of a large portion of the Jewish believers from the larger Church. The false doctrine involved was the insistence that one must first be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses in order to come to Christ for salvation.³ In essence, this was an insistence that one must either be born a Jew or convert to Judaism before he would become able to receive Christ. This message drew no complaints in Jerusalem, where the believers were all Jewish, but caused dissension when men went from Jerusalem into the mixed congregation in Antioch to teach it.⁴ The church in Antioch submitted the question to the apostles and elders in the church in Jerusalem for a decision. The apostles and elders listened to the words of Peter and James, who pointed out that the prophets had predicted the Gentiles would come to God, and advising that the Church should not make it difficult for them to come to God by laying on them legal requirements even the Jews themselves had not been able to bear.⁵ Therefore, the apostles and elders wrote to the Gentile believers that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood and from sexual immorality, and laying no other legal requirements on them.⁶ However, after this decision was made, there was a group of Jewish believers who “separated themselves” from the Church with its Gentile believers, refusing to even eat with Gentiles, and continued to teach that one must first become a Jew to be

saved.⁷ Unfortunately, in spite of Paul's efforts to correct this schism, it lasted for centuries and ultimately resulted in the virtual disappearance of Jews from the Church.

The preceding explanation of the problems created by the dissension between the early Jewish believers in Christ and the mostly Gentile churches outside Judea and Galilee is generally agreed upon. However, a very important secular political element of this dispute is commonly ignored. The Roman Empire was generally quite tolerant of the religions of its subject peoples, with one large qualification—in addition to worshipping the gods of their own people, subject people had to be willing to do homage to the Roman state, or, later, to the genius of the Emperor. The only systematic exception to this rule involved the Jews. In 48 B.C.E., Julius Caesar was pinned in Alexandria by forces loyal to Ptolemy XIII, who claimed the monarchy of Egypt against Julius' ally Cleopatra VII. A relief force led by Mithradates of Pergamum was unable to break through Ptolemy's defenses to relieve Caesar. In response to this situation, Hyrcanus, the High Priest in Jerusalem, and his Idumaeen handler, Antipater (the real power behind the throne in Judea), raised an army of Jews that went to Mithradates' assistance, and also convinced the Jews in the strategically important Onias district of Egypt to switch their allegiance from Ptolemy to Caesar, with the result that Caesar defeated Ptolemy and conquered Egypt for his mistress and subject Cleopatra. Julius Caesar subsequently rewarded Antipater and Hyrcanus for their assistance by confirming them in power in Judaea. Additionally, Hyrcanus was named "ethnarch" over all of the Jews in the empire. The Jews, as an ethnic group, were also rewarded with a package of rights to live within the Empire according to their own customs, unmolested. This included the right to worship their God alone, with no required homage to the Roman state. The *quid pro quo* for this concession was that the priests in the temple in Jerusalem were to make regular sacrifices to their God for the peace of the Emperor and that Jews throughout the realm were to pray for the Emperor⁸. These rewards were confirmed by the Roman Senate, and, with occasional exceptions, formed the basis of the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Jews from the time of Julius Caesar until the time of Constantine. Judaism became a *religio licita*, a religion sanctioned by the Roman authorities. These rights were confirmed once again during the reign of Octavian (Augustus Caesar), after Antipater's son, Herod the Great, switched sides in the war between Octavian and Antony—who ruled from Alexandria—and greatly helped Octavian defeat Antony. So, for purely political reasons, Jews had one great advantage in the early Roman Empire—they were the only ethnic group in the realm that was *not* required to pay religious homage to the Roman state or its Emperor.

Therefore, pride in their Jewish heritage was not the only reason the early Jewish followers of Christ wanted to cling to their Jewish identity. Keeping the "Way" of Jesus Jewish, so it could be portrayed as a sect within Judaism, also permitted the early Jewish Christians to argue that their religion was lawful in the eyes of the Romans, even though they refused to do homage to the Roman state. However, the outreach of the Apostle Paul and others to the Gentiles threatened this protected legal status. If Gentiles could follow Jesus Christ and become a part of the Church, His Body, without first converting to Judaism and accepting Jewish customs, this would imply that Christianity was not merely a sect of legally-protected Judaism. Instead, it was a separate religion not recognized or protected by Rome. Jewish Christians were, understandably, reluctant to surrender their protection as part of a *religio licita* to face certain persecution by the Romans, in

addition to the persecution they already suffered from their own people. This, I submit, was one of the major causes of the early schism between Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ. As Paul wrote, “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who want you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”⁹”

Endnotes

1. This admission certainly dates me! Few American schools teach this subject any more.
2. Mr. Hildebrandt was a committed Roman Catholic.
3. Acts 15:1, 5.
4. Acts 15:2.
5. Acts 15:8-20.
6. Acts 15:28-29.
7. Galatians 2:11-14.
8. One suspects that many of these prayers were similar to the prayer of the Rabbi in the *Fiddler on the Roof*—“May God bless and keep the Czar... far away from us!”
9. Galatians 6:12.