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PLEASE TYPE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THIS LESSON SUBMISSION AS THEY
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ASSIGNMENT 3: RESEARCH PROJECT (35%)

Complete a typewritten 3000-3750 word critical research paper that addresses the contributions of a particular person, event, theological issue, or movement in the history of the Christian church. Your paper should include reference documentation from scholarly journals as well as primary and secondary sources. In doing research for this assignment, in addition to library research, students should interact with the Hunter Theological Library available in the TOLC and other scholarly online resources. Significant use of primary sources is expected. The 3000-3750 word range does not include footnotes or bibliography.

Christendom verses the Kingdom of God

This paper will discuss the consistent tendency in church history to institutionalize the church of Jesus Christ and the refusal of the true church to be confined to those institutions. We will see that there has been a historic and constant tension between human initiated tradition and institution and the Spirit-led liberty in the church. We will also see that this tension often revolves around the key question of where authority lies in the church.

Lessons from our Jewish roots

The temple, and later the synagogue, was the center of Jewish life. The synagogue was the foundation of sorts for the early church (Acts 15:21). It was a bridge between the symbolism of the temple and the spiritual reality of the church. But Jewish tradition could not co-exist with the church. Just as having a king was never God's plan for Israel, the temple was man's plan, never the plan of God.

Judaism could not contain the life of Christ in His church within its traditions, and this is the pattern we see repeated time and again in the history of the church. "When that which is revealed of God is crystallized into a tradition, rigidly held and propagated with purely human energy, it becomes an impenetrable barrier to the truth. The life of the Spirit can never be confined within the framework of religious tradition."ⁱ

Jewish believers/Gentile believers

Perhaps the first epic struggle of Christianity to break free from a religious paradigm was the tension between Jewish and non-Jewish believers. The Jewish believers struggled to imagine a move of God that was outside of their ethnic privilege. That God would grant salvation to any people outside of the Jews and their covenant privilege was completely off their grid. A huge adjustment was necessary, requiring a supernatural vision, an open-minded assessment of the dynamic works of God in their own context (Acts 11:1-18), and ultimately a fresh interpretation of the prophet Amos (Amos 9:11-12) and a consensus among the brethren (Acts 15).

Eusebius, renowned early church historian, gives us this account: "But the gratuitous benevolence of God, being now poured out on the rest of the nations, Cornelius was the first of Cesarea in Palestine, who, with his whole house, received faith in Christ through a divine vision and the agency of Peter, as did also a great number of Greeks at Antioch, to whom the gospel had been preached by those who were scattered by the persecution of Stephen."ⁱⁱ This shift, which reflected the purpose of God, was a bursting of a man-made wineskin which could never hold the new wine God was pouring out on the earth.

Jerusalem and Antioch

A careful examination of the attitudes of the early Christian congregations in Jerusalem and Antioch reveals a curious difference in the postures of the churches in these two key cities. Jesus' instruction could not have been clearer:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:7-8 NIV

Despite his repeated exhortation to spread the news (Luke 24:46, Mark 16:15), the record in the book of Acts reveals that the church at Jerusalem seemed to be comfortable in its isolated existence. In fact, it took the sword of persecution to propel the church from its comfort into the world, as "many Christians were forced to flee from Jerusalem because of this persecution, but they spread the good news about Jesus wherever they went – throughout the province of Judea and into Samaria."ⁱⁱⁱ (see also Acts 8:1) It is notable, upon study of historical church trends, that in spite of the intent of God, the church periodically needs certain people or events (God's 'ways and means committee') to instigate change and thrust the church into its originally intended condition and function in the earth.

As the church spread to other parts of the world, non-Jewish believers, not being held back by Jewish tradition and outward form, seemed to understand the concept of a spirit-led church. When the church at Jerusalem balked at the command to spread the gospel, God revealed another model in the Antioch church, where teams of missionaries made of prophets and teachers, were sent out as the Lord commissioned them (e.g. Paul and Barnabas, Acts 13:1-3).

As Paul and Barnabas traveled, they went to the synagogues first. Yet, those Jews who were supposed to be representing God on earth were found withstanding the very work of God. The flow of life was stopped, or severely hindered, by tradition.

Judaizers: Institutional Law versus Grace and Spirit

The Council at Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 dealt with legalizers from Judea who asserted that in order to be saved, one must both obey the gospel *and* keep the Law of Moses. These legalist fanatics followed Paul throughout his travels, trying to undo his efforts to establish the young Christian churches in grace. There had to be a breaking free from the institution of the law, and Paul wrote extensively in his epistles to this end, especially to the Galatians, the Romans and the Ephesian believers. I see this, not only as a theological argument, but as an argument of fundamental religious paradigms. A religious system had to be breached. The liberty of grace and life in the Spirit had to be proclaimed and jealously guarded by the early church.

Earle Cairn reminds us, "The liberation of Christianity from observance of the ceremonial Jewish law was the long range result of the Council. Henceforth, faith is the only means by which salvation comes to man... Christianity must never forget the lesson of the Jerusalem Council. If it does, it will lose that which makes it vital. The same problem was faced by the Reformers, who saw that the Roman church was demanding man-made works in addition to faith as the condition for salvation."^{iv}

Clergy/laity – Institutional hierarchy verses distributed leadership

The church, as recorded in the book of Acts and the epistles, relied on personal training and discipling and raising up faithful men who manifested Christ-like character to lead the church. Early in the 2nd century, with the recognition of monarchical bishops, the first official distinction between clergy and laity began. While Jesus seemed to gather his disciples in ways shared by other Rabbis, the Christian communities developed different forms. Key apostles, or “pillars” were recognized. Three offices emerged as important in first century congregations: bishop (episkopos), elder (presbyter) and deacon. Because the idea of apostolic succession was prominent, “to stand against the bishops was to stand against the apostles, Christ and God. During an argument for proper discipline and order in the church, *I Clement* used *laikos*, the term associated with average or “lay” members, for the first time in the sense that such persons were the lowest rank in the *ekklesia* and were to take orders from the officials.”^v

Fighting early Christological and Trinitarian heresies led the church toward strengthening the established hierarchical order and authority of bishops in the church. Yet, a pre-occupation with defining what is right and resisting error does not ensure spiritual life in the church. Knowledge tends to replace the life of the Spirit and an ever-growing set of truths requires an ever-growing church organization to enforce them.

Although some early church fathers, such as Origen, held that the church was spiritually based, the church gradually gravitated away from the Spirit-gifts of Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher (Ephesians 4:7-13), to the hierarchical order of bishop that became the form of the institutional church. When the element of political alliances was added, this form aided in 1) choking the life of the Spirit in the church and 2) elevating often wicked men to positions of influence in the church.

“Good” limits: canon and creed

Of course, there were good examples of proper boundaries in the early church. Early heresies required that lines were drawn, that truths were confirmed and that orthodoxy was established. This, through a period of centuries, resulted in the canonization of what we now know as the Holy Bible and the setting forth of the many creeds of the church. The roots of the first known creedal summary of apostolic doctrine are found in an ancient baptismal formula used in the churches of Rome, later known as the “Old Roman Creed” or the “Apostles Creed”. “The fact is that some form of the Apostle’s Creed or Old Roman Symbol was widely accepted as an authoritative summary of the apostolic tradition in the third century. Its purpose was to provide a criterion for membership in the church catholic and orthodox. Its wording intentionally excluded Gnostics and certain other heretics.”^{vi}

From this we gather that, while binding traditions are to be avoided and room for the life of the Spirit is to be provided, there are limits to what is to be taught as truth. Established orthodox teaching exists because of the dangers of heresy. Yet, orthodoxy and orthopraxy often live in tension. We can establish what truth is, but we cannot always establish what the practical out-working of that truth out looks like (i.e. religious forms). We can also extinguish the power of truth through our tradition, as Jesus taught, "*Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.* Matt 15:6-7 (NIV)

The Imperial or State-sanctioned church – The impact of Constantine

The Roman emperor Constantine believed that the Christian God had assisted him in his conquests and therefore, in what appears to be a political move rather than an indication of personal faith, gradually elevated Christianity to the status of a state-sanctioned religion. His personal faith was questionable, but "this much can be said with assurance: 1) his intervention in religious affairs was in large measure dictated by what he considered to be politically expedient and 2) from the beginning of his reign, he increasingly identified himself with the church, took a commanding interest in its internal affairs, and finally in the later years of his life openly called upon his subjects to give up paganism."^{vii}

The advent of Constantine and the state church was a great triumph for the institutionalization of Christianity. The impact of this era includes:

- the cessation of persecution of Christians
- the development of an "official" theology
- worship became a larger, more sensuous experience (processions, incense, choirs, officiating ministers in luxurious garments, etc.) – hence the congregation participated less and observed more
- masses flocking to the church

Yet this era was also an unspeakable tragedy for the *spiritual* life of the church. When the state is given say in the affairs of the church, power struggles and corruption are sure to follow. The masses coming into the church meant that that baptisms and foundational teaching were lacking. True Christians were now faced with the question as to how to be obedient in a new age while remaining faithful to an old message. During this time, we begin to see the development of monasteries, as many felt that the mass conversions cheapened the dedication that was required of true Christians and they needed to separate themselves to greater devotion. It seemed evident that there was something lacking in the institutionalized, state-sanctioned church

The rise of and the reaction against the Roman Church

When the Roman Empire fell, a great vacuum was created in the West which was filled by the institutional Roman Church. It was the barbarian invasions that brought the great upsurge in the pope's authority. The Western church became the guardian of what was left of the civilization, order and justice.

With this power came great political, ethical and theological compromise through the following centuries. By the late 15th century many shared the view that the Roman Catholic Church had become too corrupt to provide people with the guidance they needed to obtain salvation. “The Reformation was the last stage in the long history of reaction against the Christianity's engagement in political affairs--a history that began with Constantine's declaration of Christianity as the Roman state religion in the fourth century. As a result of the Reformation, a substantial number of Europeans ceased to recognize the supremacy of the pope.”^{viii} This was a radical shifting of authority away from the established church and toward the scriptures. This led, not only to the Reformation movements of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, but, in reaction to those movements, to a reformation of the Reformation.

It seems that the true, spiritual history of the church often takes its course through the generations of those who were despised by organized Christendom. There is always a movement from form and institution to intense, personal faith and individual groups not connected to the established church. In some instances, however, the breaks from Rome were followed by just another man made religious system, bound by tradition and politics. Luther and Zwingli broke from the Catholic Church and started movements which, aligning with the state, ended up being less than desirable even to them.

Intolerance for those outside the new “established” churches grew until those who had endured persecution were themselves persecuting those who opposed them (another pattern to be repeated over and over throughout church history). The intolerance of Lutheranism and Zwinglianism led to gross acts of violence against fellow believers. – Error comes when we fail to understand that both the Word and the Spirit are necessary; and above all, love is the highest law.

The early 16th century saw the emergence of the Anabaptists. This group, neither Catholic nor Protestant, held that one must be baptized after coming to faith as opposed to being baptized as an infant. They were severely persecuted. Zurich’s government declared that all Anabaptists should be killed (ironically, many by being drowned). Again, those who escaped from persecution and intolerance were now inflicting it on those who differed from them.

In reaction to these events, many believers in Christ sought fresh forms in which to worship. Groups such as the Bogomils, Cathars (Puritans), Waldenses all emphasized the authority of the Scriptures, prayer and holiness of life. In these movements, God the Spirit was the head of the church and there was no great gulf between clergy and laity. Elders ruled local bodies and salvation was through faith.

Pietism was a protest to the spiritual decline of the Reformed churches. The Pietists stressed the participation of all believers and were often criticized and persecuted by the established churches. The poor masses were cared for and conventions were broken. One example of such was the movement founded by John Wesley. “In order to preach the gospel to the poor, (Wesley) was willing to break the religious convention that also defined his own well-disciplined life. In order to bring a message of “deliverance, recovery and liberty” in Christ to the people who had

never heard that message, Wesley would preach out of doors, he would “Submit to be more vile”^{ix}

Where the testimony is stamped out through persecution in one area, it springs alive in another place. The Pilgrims had given up on the institutional church and sought to escape it altogether and start a new form of Christianity. The Puritans, however, largely sought to reform the existing church traditions, not separate from them. “The essence of this kind of “reformation” was enrichment of understanding of God’s truth, arousal of affections Godward, increase of ardor in one’s devotions, and more love, joy and firmness of Christian purpose in one’s calling and personal life.”^x

Kierkegaard’s question – Christendom vs. Christianity

In the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard pitted the institutional church or organized Christianity against the true work of the Spirit toward the purposes of God. For him, Christendom (the religious system) was the greatest enemy of Christianity. Kierkegaard asserted that, one must pay the price that a costly faith demands. Without this kind of faith, it is possible to be a member of ‘Christendom’, but not a true Christian. “Hence, Kierkegaard’s great problem, which he sought to pose before all: how to become a true Christian when one has the disadvantage of living in the midst of Christendom.”^{xi}

Tensions in our time

There have been many similar situations within the last 100 years. In Latin America, where the Spanish and Portuguese spread Catholicism in the colonial era, the twentieth century saw superficiality in the church, with many claiming to be Catholic and yet not taking place in the life of the Church. Justo Gonzalez points out that “For a long time, the Catholic hierarchy responded to all of this with futile attempts to return to the past. The more widespread the new ideas became, the more vehemently the hierarchy condemned them. Eventually, many Latin American Catholics came to see faith as something to be held independently and even against the authority of the church. Therefore, when Protestantism made its appearance, it found the fields ripe for the harvest.”^{xii}

The last generations have seen a remarkable spread of Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on the life and gifts of the Spirit, throughout Latin America, as well as Africa and Asia. This river of life is filling the void left by the stagnant, institutional church. Indeed, it will most likely be from these “two-thirds world” believers, filled with the fresh fire of the Spirit, that the present and future generations of the declining Western Church will be reached with the gospel. The institutional forms are certainly not getting the job done.

We also see movement from Western, established churches into the house church movement, as many are finding the spiritual vitality and community in smaller groups that they found lacking

in the institutional church. Millions of North Americans, for instance, are turning to smaller groups that meet in homes because they are disenchanted with conventional church.

Conclusion: Where is the Authority?

A survey of the defining moments in the history of the church reveals that in those critical moments, it was the seat of authority that was questioned or established. At first, the authority was Christ himself, who passed his authority on to his disciples, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" Matt 28:18-20 (NIV)

From there we see the authority passed on to the Apostolic Fathers, who hammered out the theological positions of the church. In the Constantine era, the authority was dangerously shared with the state, resulting in a representation of Christianity that was less than authentic. After the Fall of Rome, the Papacy and monastic fathers carried the church on their authority, which was, although sometimes questioned, asserted much: "...we do firmly believe and sincerely confess that there is one Holy Catholic Apostolic Church, and that outside this church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins."^{xiii}

The Reformation and movements that it spawned placed the authority, not in human being or human institution, but in Scripture alone. This, however, has led to another clash between systematic doctrinal constructions and faithful exegesis of the Word of God, as delineated and espoused by Carl Barth.

Other Christian movements tend to place authority on individual experience or authentic community. Ultimately, however, it is Jesus, the incarnate Word of God. That is to be the final and constant authority of the life of the Church. As his disciples learned on the Mount of Transfiguration, neither Moses (representing the Law or the Scriptures) nor Elijah (representing the prophets or spiritual fervor and commitment to covenant) are to be given the ultimate place. In the end we see Jesus alone, and hear the voice from heaven saying, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* Matt 17:5 (NIV).

God's true church has always existed, albeit sometimes obscurely. It has Christ as its head, the Word as its guide and the life of the Spirit and holiness as its defining characteristics.

End Notes

ⁱ Kennedy, John W., *The Torch of the Testimony*, Christian Books Publishing House, Auburn, Maine, 1965, p. 9

ⁱⁱ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Complete and unabridged, Translated by C.F. Cruse, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1998, p.39

ⁱⁱⁱ Ed. Dowley, Dr. Tim, *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 62

^{iv} Cairn, Earle E., *Christianity through the Centuries*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1967, p.72-73

v Wagner, Walter H., *After the Apostles; Christianity in the Second Century*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 126

vi Olson, Roger E., *The Story of Christian Theology, Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*, Intervarsity, Downers Grove, 1999, p.130

vii Ed., Baker, Archibald G., *A Short History of Christianity*, Phoenix Books, Chicago, 1940, p.34

viii <http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101%5Cweb%5C37luther.htm> (West Chester University of Pennsylvania; © 2002)

ix Noll, Mark A., *Turning Points, Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1997, p.223

x Ryken, Leland, *Worldly Saints, The Puritans as they Really Were*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1986, Forward by J.I. Packer, p. xv

xi Gonzalez, Justo, L., *The Story of Christianity, Vol.2*, Harper Collins, New York, 1985 p.292

xii (Gonzalez, p. 281)

xiii Ed., Bettensen, Henry and Maunder, Chris, *Documents of the Christian Church, Papal Bull*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p.126 – Papal Bull, “Unam Sanctam “