

Chapter 4.06 The Early Church 3: Church Growth

This chapter begins with an illustration of heretical alternatives to standard Christianity. After that, it switches to its main topic, the growth of the early Church and the changes that came along with growth.

Heretics.

Just to show that the early Church was sensible for its time about Jesus' identity, and it more often had to defend Jesus as a man than as a god, here are two foes of the early Church, one in the Church, one a rival religion.

Marcion of Sinope (about 85 – 160 CE).

Marcion might be the favorite heretic of every writer on early Church history. He might have lived earlier than the usual given dates. Marcion was probably a bishop, and was a well-known commentator (theologian) of the early Church in his lifetime. He thought the life and teachings of Jesus were not compatible with nearly all of the Old Testament (Tanakh), in particular with the idea of Yahweh. Yahweh was too parochial, crude, and cruel to be the Father of Jesus. Instead, there must have been another original God, whom Jesus called "Father", and whom modern theologians might call "Godhead". The Father created Yahweh, who then usurped some of the authority of the Father to use to arrange life on earth, with the Jews as his instruments. To shape the behavior of the Jews, Yahweh rewarded and punished them. The Father sent Jesus to straighten things out. Jesus was pretty much an avatar of the Father and only used a human body for convenience. Marcion thought Paul was the only apostle to have understood correctly. Marcion rejected all writings about Jesus except ten epistles of Paul and most of the Gospel of Luke. He rewrote the Gospel of Luke to emphasize Jesus' ties to the Father and Jesus' purity. He rejected works that today the Church finds inspired such as the other Gospels. He pretty much condemned Jews. Marcion was a dualist in that he divided the Father, Jesus and saved people on one side versus Yahweh, Jews, and crude humanity on the other. He was also Gnostic in using levels of divinity, seeing Yahweh as a usurper, and thinking the true story was a secret that liberated people from the misrule of Yahweh. Most histories of the Church label him a Gnostic but he was not a fully developed Gnostic.

Marcion was very popular. He was a "rock star", including his own groupies. When other theologians rejected his ideas, he and his followers carried on their own Church. In the official version, he split from the "real" Church. In his version, the church split from his "real" Church. His church was about as popular as the now-official Church for about a hundred years. Even now, many people like the ideas that Jesus is too good for the god of the Old Testament, and that the religion of the Jews based on Yahweh is inferior and vulgar, although they do not say it out loud much.

Before Marcion, Church leaders did not think much about which works should be considered holy and authoritative, that is canonical. Because of him, Church fathers had to decide what books to include and exclude, and why. The reaction to Marcion began the process that eventually led to the New Testament.

Mani and Manichaeism (210 – 276 CE).

Mani might have been born in what is now Iraq but he flourished in Persia. Mani was an almost Classic Gnostic. The world is divided into the forces of good and light versus the forces of evil and darkness. They do not sustain each other in some kind of overarching Hegelian Romantic symbiosis but are plainly at war. It is not clear that the forces of good and light will win. Spirit tends to be good and light while anything material tends to be bad and dark, including the human body and all animal urges. The leaders of the forces of darkness are spiritual too, so I am not clear on the full relation between spirit, matter, good, and evil. Later versions of this kind of strong dualism gave the forces of light and the forces of good each their own highest leader. The idea of the leaders of the forces of darkness and evil was one origin of the Christian devil.

Humanity is the main battleground. Just because it is a non-material soul, the human soul is supposed to ally with light, but it can be corrupted to the dark side. Temptations of wealth, power, emotions, and of the body can lead the soul down the wrong path. The body is a danger because it is material and so tends to sink the soul into bad and dark. Sometimes a champion of good and light arises. Although the champion appears to have a human body, really his body is irrelevant. What matters is that his soul is entirely of light and entirely on the side of good. (I do not know if there were ever any women champions.) People need to see the original nature of their souls, to purge their souls of material, dark, and evil, and so return to the light. Champions show the way. Jesus did not figure in all versions of Manichaeism but when he did he was one such champion of good and light.

Manichaeism was very popular in its time. It was a religion unto itself, and also influenced all the major religions, including Christianity. It lasted for about a thousand years, and spread as far as China. Eventually the mainstream Christian Church saw Manichaeism as a serious rival and condemned it. Reaction to developments such as Manichaeism eventually led to the Nicene Creed. Islam tolerated Manichaeism but did not promote it and officially viewed it as un-Islamic although unofficially it seems to have had quite an influence on Islam. Saint Augustine was an official Manichean until he converted to Christianity. Despite orthodoxy, I think Manichean dualism still pervades much of Christianity and Islam. Even though Augustine tried to purge Manichean ideas from his own thinking and writing, I think Manichean ideas were still strong in Augustine and are still strong in Church doctrine that comes from him, especially his views of Paul and views of Paul that follow him such as of Luther and Calvin. Manichean dualism lives on today. Manichean dualism supports ideas such as that all Muslims are terrorists and servants of the devil, or that the United States is the agent of Satan (Great Satan) in our time. You should recognize Manichaeism in many movies such as in the Sci Fi, horror, slasher, and serial killer genres. “Star Wars” and “The Matrix” are almost Manichean texts. You should see Manichaeism in Right and Left Wing slanders of each other, and in policies of the recent Bush administration.

Family Values Again.

Early Christians did have a different sense of the family, and did behave differently toward spouses and children, than many people in other religions. Christian ideas have roots in Jewish values, which contrasted from neighbors, but Christian ideas also differ from Jewish values. Christian attitudes helped the growth of the early Church. Modern so-called Christian family values are related to the family values

of the early Church but are definitely different too. The practices of Jews and their neighbors often had a basis in adaptation to ecology, economy, politics, or society but I do not discuss that here. I do not evaluate in terms of political correctness or anti-political correctness. I do not cite texts for support for each point. General support is in the lists of readings.

Non-Jewish Sexual and Family Behavior.

I do not distinguish between various Jews and between various non-Jews. I use simplistic dualism. Groups of Jews differed, and some adopted behavior like the non-Jewish behavior listed here.

-Non-Jews might have allowed human sacrifice, including child sacrifice.

-Non-Jews allowed abortion and infanticide. In particular, non-Jews exposed baby girls, or even girl children, so that they would die. In some cases, this practice might have been viewed as child sacrifice for the welfare of the remaining members of the family.

-Non-Jews allowed multiple wives and/or families for the same man.

-Non-Jews allowed fairly easy divorce for the man.

-Non-Jews allowed extramarital affairs by both husband and wife, but primarily by the husband.

-Non-Jews allowed or encouraged homosexual relations between males or between females, including boys, men, girls, and women.

-Non-Jews allowed prostitution, and allowed married men to visit prostitutes without stigma. Prostitution included homosexual prostitution.

-Non-Jews sometimes institutionalized prostitution, sometimes in religious temples, sometimes in guilds protected by the city, sometimes just by tolerating it.

-Non-Jews discouraged celibacy in the family.

-Non-Jews allowed suicide for the good of the family, the city, the country, or for the peace of mind of the individual. They emphasized quality of life as much as quantity of life.

Jewish Sexual and Family Behavior.

I do not distinguish between various Jews.

-Jews did not allow human sacrifice, including child sacrifice.

-Jews discouraged abortion and infanticide. They would not have seen it as sacrifice for the welfare of remaining members of the family.

-Jews also allowed a man to have multiple wives and families, and to divorce his wife (wives) without too much trouble.

-Jews rarely allowed a wife to divorce a husband, and almost never allowed a wife to have extramarital affairs.

-Jews discouraged homosexual relations and they looked down on male homosexuals (gay men) and/or transvestites.

-Jews allowed prostitution and allowed married men to visit prostitutes.

-Jews did not institutionalize prostitution. Jews were fastidious in separating sexuality from worship and so disliked the idea of temple prostitution.

-Jews wanted family continuity and family increase. They discouraged celibacy either within the family or without the family.

-Jews felt that women wanted sexual activity more than men. If women did not get sexual satisfaction within marriage, they would look for it outside of marriage. If a man did not satisfy his wife, then she might have an extramarital affair.

-Jews held a strong "double standard" on gender matters, at least in public. Women were subordinate to men. Men had to control the women under their jurisdiction. If a man and a woman committed a sexual offense, the woman was usually punished more harshly than the man. For adultery, a man might go free while a woman might be stoned.

-Jews did not oppose the mind to the body, or sexuality to mentality. They did not look down on sexual activity or physical activity. They did contrast obvious bodily functions, including sex and death, to religious grace; but the opposition was usually temporary for the purposes of a ritual duty.

-Jewish ideas about the family have their roots in the idea that life is good and holy, and that it should be respected and increased. Life is precious and should be taken care of.

-Jews did not allow suicide. It is simplistic to say that they emphasized quantity of life over quality of life but they did not want short-term rationalizations to undermine the reverence for life.

Christian Ideas.

Christians were much like Jews, with the following modifications. For non-Jews to adopt Jewish ideas would have been quite a change and would indicate strong forces at work.

-Christians had the same ideas about abortion, infanticide, suicide, homosexuality, and the value of life.

-Christians did not allow divorce except for adultery by the wife.

-Christians did not allow multiple spouses.

-Christians did not allow prostitution or visiting of prostitutes.

-Christians allowed people to be celibate. Christians allowed people to be celibate even within marriage. At first, many Christians extolled celibacy over married life. Christians thought of celibacy as being like Jesus.

-Christians encourage people to marry so as to have an outlet for sexual desire, rather than to visit prostitutes. This was true for both men and women.

-At first, Christians discouraged marriage and having children, especially when they still thought the end of the world was near. After they realized the end of the world was not near, they allowed people to marry and have children.

-Christians did not stress family life until later.

-Christians at first were much more equal between men and women than Jews. Women were powerful in the early Church. They supported early Church activities financially and by giving use of their houses. Women acted as disciples and apostles even if they were not called that. Women were deacons. Women spoke in church. Women were probably not officially bishops. I do not know if any women carried out the duties of a bishop without the name but I suspect so. Within a few decades after Jesus died, the Church began to push women back into traditional Mediterranean and Jewish roles. Nearly all the written evidence we have, such as the New Testament, comes from after the time when women were already being pushed back, so we have to be careful reading it. The notorious advice by Paul about keeping women in their place should not be read as the attitude of the original Church or of Jesus but as the later attitude of returning to earlier times.

-Christians were nearly pacifists. They did not resist violence and they did not resist authority. They did not engage in righteous rebellion against the oppressors.

-Christians did not allow their sons to join the military until after the time of Constantine in the middle 300s. Some allowed sons who were drafted to fill out their conscripted terms but did not allow them to voluntarily re-enlist. Early Christians avoided the military and looked down on the military (I do not know how they felt about individual soldiers). In sharp contrast, modern "family values" Christians revere the military, praise their children who join, and too often glamorize violence. I see no way to reconcile the two attitudes.

Church Growth.

Christianity was not the most popular religion even after it became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine in the 300s. Other religions held on for hundreds of years afterwards, including Greek and Roman paganism. Christianity became dominant only after the Empire had trouble and people lost faith in traditional religions and the other alternatives to Christianity.

The Christian Church only had to grow a few percent per year to reach the size estimates for the Church at particular times in the history of the early Empire, less than 5% per year would do easily if it were steady. That growth rate is less than the growth rate of some modern churches such as the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), the “Moonies” before about 1990, the mega-churches, and New Age. The Church did not immediately appeal to all the masses and immediately lead to a general “call to Christ”. It grew for many reasons. I do not know if it grew because some people wanted the charismatic gifts of Christians, so I do not discuss that topic.

Whether or not true faith was always the biggest reason for the growth of the early Church, it certainly was a big reason. Christianity appealed to people. Jesus as both God and man, who sacrifices himself for us, meant something to people. The ideal drew people to the Church, and still does.

On a more worldly level, I have personally seen the biggest reasons for the growth of Christian churches, especially in the Third World, and I think the early Church grew for similar reasons.

(1) The need for order fuels growth of any institution that can supply order, especially in a changing world. People in America in the 1970s were lost. They went back to Jesus, or went to New Age, or found Marx, Political Correctness, the free market, or Reagan and the Right, because they needed any kind of real order in their lives. This is sad.

(2) Growth arises from mutual help. Churches in the Third World operate as social security and financial security agencies. They give social opportunities and financial opportunities. They educate children that would otherwise remain ignorant and without a certificate. They give medical care to people that would otherwise die or remain maimed. They allow children to survive. They give food. They allow employers and employees to find each other. They allow people to make business deals with some assurance of honesty. The same benefits apply in many churches in Western countries but the power of the church is more important in the Third World because the Third World does not have the other social controls of the West such as a reliable general police force. Many people that join do not understand the dogma of the church but their children grow up with it and accept doctrine without thinking. Some people do understand the doctrine. People are theologically sophisticated even in the Third World. I heard the Thai call joining a Christian church “selling your soul” (“khai winyan”), and that is true in many cases, but joining a church is not always that cold. A lot of Western people cultivate church membership with more calculation than Thai people, and we do not always look down on calculating Americans. Benjamin Franklin held membership and prominent pews in at least three churches at the same time, and he did not believe in standard dogma. It is possible to be a personal friend and a business associate at the same time and it is possible to be a real church member and to benefit from membership at the same time.

These practical reasons would be important in the countryside but they would be even more important, maybe vital, in towns and cities. In the country, people still know each other, know reputations, can check reputations, and can badger kin in case somebody does not come through. In the countryside, land can be used as a capital base, if you own land. In the city, these safeguards do not exist and people often do not have any capital base. Members of the working class and the small business class need something, which church membership provides. That is why Church membership shifted to the city and why it grew so well in the city.

(3) The Church was not the only mutual aid society. To use mutual aid to explain growth, we need to appreciate how the aid offered by Christians differed from the aid offered by other groups. Listing and evaluating alternatives would require a social science book but maybe one example illustrates mutual aid: funeral societies. People would pay a little bit every month so that their funeral would be covered when they died. In the meantime, members had the right to borrow from the mutual funeral fund to help with their business. This kind of society funded the beginning of jazz in New Orleans. The early Church differed from other mutual aid societies in the variety of its work, and the depth of its commitment. Christians really did give aid to the sick and poor. They really did go to prisons. They really did help bury people. They even helped people that were not Christians, although I think aid tended to get aimed more at Christians as the movement grew. Cities of the Roman Empire were unhealthy. Only somebody who has lived outside Europe or the United States can know what a Third World slum smells like and how hard it can be to find a clean glass of water. People got sick and died. The equivalent of a major flu epidemic happened every year. Infant mortality was over fifty percent. Unlike the non-Christian rich, Christians, even rich Christians, did not flee the cities with the annual plagues and they did not have safe houses outside the city. They did not shun the houses of the sick. They stayed to save lives. They really helped out. They were like "Doctors Without Borders" or like Red Cross volunteers in disaster zones. This was hands-on work, even by rich Christians. Rich Christians opened their houses as schools and hospitals. Modern Christians should take note. Non-Christians saw this devotion and were deeply impressed. Pagan philosophers of high moral caliber were deeply impressed. Even authorities that might otherwise be suspicious of Christians or persecute Christians were impressed. So the Christian movement grew fast enough to eventually dominate the Empire.

(4) Christian family values appealed to peasants, the working class, and the modest middle class of cities. Especially Christian family values appealed to women. A family that was not large and wealthy had trouble making it unless it stayed together. It could not afford to waste resources on prostitutes, side families, or sideline affairs. Men had to use their energy and wealth on primary wives if they wanted to reproduce and carry on the family. Even homosexual affairs would undermine a working class or middle class family on a tight budget. If you had only one son, and he was homosexual, then the family could not so easily carry on. Celibacy could be confined to family members that would not have reproduced anyway because they were too poor to find spouses or to raise children, such as extra girls. These family members could be honored while at the same time they contributed to the other family members that would reproduce. Families that lived by Christian values endured and slowly grew while families in similar situations that did not live by Christian values often dissipated. Non-Christian families saw the success of Christian families and emulated their ideas and practices; sometimes they even converted to Christianity.

The success of Christian family values at that time does not mean the values are from God or are absolutely right. The success of Christian family values at that time does not mean we have to live only by those values and that we cannot find somewhat different successful values now.

Modern "family values" Christians do not live by those values; they have selected, rejected, and interpreted to seek their greatest success under their modern situations. The success of Christian family values then does not mean that stereotyped Christian family values now are from God, or are correct, or even that they are the values most conducive to success for all families. The success of Christian family values then does mean we have to think about the roots of those values and we have to think about our

own values.

Divine Jesus as Warrant.

Would Christians have acted so well in managing resources, helping neighbors, and in their family practices, if they did not believe Jesus was Christ the God but instead believed he was only a prophet? That question is impossible to answer. Probably some Christians needed to believe that Jesus was God to act as well as Christians did. I do not mean to sound cynical. Sometimes we need to bolster our courage with divine backup. Some Christians then might not have believed Jesus was God yet still acted well. Not all Christians then believed in Jesus' full divinity, or that he was divine at all, yet still acted morally, bravely, and to uphold strong family life. Many people today do not believe Jesus is God yet still act according to the high standards set by Jesus and followed by Christians.

The Original Church Again.

To people questing for the original essential pure early Church, or the original essential pure early Jesus Way, the real early followers of Jesus the prophet and Christ the God are not homogenous enough to be a sure guide. The original followers were various groups held together by overlapping ideas, experiences, and codes of conduct but not necessarily by any single set of ideas, experiences, or code – not even belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Whether the early group of followers is one enough for standard Christian doctrine now is unclear. If you want to pick an early subgroup to serve as justification for your practices now, you are free to do so, and I hope you give good reasons; but other people need not follow you.

Nor can the New Testament alone serve as a guide. At the very least, the New Testament requires Church tradition for its validation. When any author of the New Testament speaks of “scripture” it does not mean the New Testament because that did not exist then, the author means the Tanakh, the “Old Testament”. Nowhere does the New Testament say it is the one and only source of ideas about holiness and truth, above Church tradition, even apart from Church tradition. The New Testament was never ratified in a single meeting of the early Church. Instead, it was accepted gradually over about the first four hundred years in the hierarchical Church. So Church tradition is as much the basis for the New Testament and its validity as the New Testament is the basis for Church tradition and its validity. Of course, it is not a good idea to try to justify by using tradition any church doctrine that clearly goes against the New Testament. It is also not enough to argue against any church doctrine by saying it does not have a clear warrant in the New Testament. Old traditions deserve respect. History really did make a contribution.

The message of Jesus is clear enough so that we do not have to worry too much about finding authentic scripture and practice in some version of the pure essential early Church. If your present church does not get in the way of doing what Jesus taught, you get along well enough in your church, and you do not have to do anything against its dogma, then do not worry too much.

I offer a warning to people that seek egalitarianism in the early Jesus Way, in the early Christian Church, or in some early subgroup of followers. These ideas arose and matured along with Church offices and stratification: Jesus was God; Jesus is all about salvation, whatever that is; and the magic of his birth,

death, and resurrection. I think you cannot nurture these ideas except in a stratified organization. The hierarchical organization of the Church is an old part of its tradition. Any church larger than a couple dozen people has to have some un-egalitarian organization. Large scale, hierarchy, and ideas about divinity and magic go together. If you want divinity and magic, you almost have to have hierarchy and organization or you will have chaos. The development of Church hierarchical organization is as logical, reasonable, and balanced as development of ideas about the divinity of Jesus and ideas about the Trinity. Ideas of the divinity of Jesus, or his identity as the emissary of Love and Acceptance, go along with hierarchy and institution. I do not endorse elaborate organized hierarchical churches but I think they cannot be dismissed as non-Christian without also questioning all Christian doctrine including the divinity of Jesus, salvation, the magic of his birth, death, and resurrection, and his modern roles such as emissary of Love and Acceptance. If you want a totally egalitarian church, you have to consider if a divine Jesus would want a totally egalitarian church. If a totally egalitarian church implies at least some chaos and dissension, then you have to think if a divine Jesus would want a totally egalitarian church. If you want a divine Jesus and/or the emissary of Love and Acceptance, then you have to think about what kind of hierarchy you want in the church. If you want many followers of Jesus, that is a large church, then you have to think about what kind of hierarchy you need, and what any hierarchy inevitably does to the content of belief.