

Gospel and culture from the Didache to Origen

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Aims

The aim of this paper is to examine the different responses to this issue in the early post-apostolic church. We will attempt to answer two questions - what were the responses, and why were they made? We will then consider the implications for the issues of Christian distinctiveness, and the relationship of the gospel to a non-Christian culture.

Introduction

In his book "Christ and Culture" (1952), Richard Niebuhr set out to describe how the question of the relationship between the two has been answered throughout the history of the church. This has become a classic formulation and a starting point for much subsequent discussion. We will begin with a brief survey of the five different positions he identified, and use them to locate the various responses proposed in the early church. They can be placed on a continuum.

1. Christ against culture (opposition)

In this position, Christ is opposed to the values and achievements of a particular culture. People are challenged by an either/or decision. The North African theologian Tertullian is often named as an advocate of this way of thinking. We will examine the validity or otherwise of this categorisation of Tertullian later in this paper. Niebuhr identified the first letter of John, and the Johannine Apocalypse, as the representatives of this position.

2. Christ and culture in paradox (duality)

Here, the authority of both Christ and human culture (in their legitimate spheres) is recognised, as is the opposition between them. The claims of Christ cannot be limited to those of society, but obedience to God requires obedience to both the institutions of society and to Christ (who sits in judgement on that society). This was Luther's understanding, and can also be seen in the writings of Paul.

3. Christ the transformer of culture (conversion)

Human fallenness is found in and transmitted by society, but the opposition between Christ and culture does not lead to withdrawal nor an exclusive focus on a transcendent or future salvation. Christ converts and transforms fallen culture and society. This classic Reformed position can be traced back to Augustine, and is also seen in the Gospel according to John, especially in the Prologue.

4. Christ above culture (synthesis)

In this understanding, Christ fulfils cultural aspirations and values, and yet also transcends them. He enters human life from above, with gifts which human effort alone cannot attain. This position was given classic formulation by Aquinas in his understanding of 'grace and nature', and also by Clement of Alexandria. In the Bible, Matthew can be seen as representing this view, in his presentation of the relationship between Jesus and Torah.

5. Christ of culture (agreement)

Here, Jesus' life and teachings are seen as the greatest human achievement. He confirms what is best in the past, and guides the process of human cultural development to its proper goal. Niebuhr assigned this view to the nineteenth-century liberalism of Ritschl and Harnack. It can also be seen (with different outcomes) in the early church in the Ebionites and in the Christian Gnosticism of Basilides and Valentinus. The clearest biblical example may be the Judaizers whom Paul opposed.

Early post-apostolic writings

Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)

Introduction

This short book (shorter than the Sermon on the Mount) was referred to by both Clement of Alexandria and Origen as 'scripture', and yet no copy was known to exist until the late C19, when it was found in a manuscript discovered by an Orthodox monk.

It bears many similarities to Matthew 5-7. This may mean it had a Syrian origin. In the manuscript, it is placed between 1 Clement (AD96) and the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (early C2). This may be a chronological listing, as there are no hints in the Didache of the 'single bishop for each church' system so strongly advocated by Ignatius. Travelling apostles and prophets are still held in high regard. Thus it is certainly early, and probably late C1.

What is the book about?

It is an instruction manual for order in the Christian community. It deals with Christian behaviour and ethics, gives directions and prayers for worship, and offers advice on the credentials of church leaders, both local (bishops and deacons) and extraordinary (apostles and prophets). There is a final injunction to watchfulness on the basis of Christ's imminent return (the problem of the 'delayed parousia' wasn't too pressing, then).

Contents

Chapters 1-6 deal with Christian behaviour, which is presented as an option between 'Two Ways', the 'way of life' and the 'way of death'.

The 'way of life' requires the following; "love God, who made you"; "love your neighbour as yourself"; there is also a negative formulation of the 'golden rule', "whatever you do not wish to happen to you, do not do it to another".

Other quotations from the Sermon on the Mount include "bless those who curse you", "pray for your enemies", "turn the right cheek", "go the second mile", and so on.(1)

There is also an expansion of the Decalogue:

"you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not corrupt boys; you shall not be sexually promiscuous; you shall not steal; you shall not practise magic; you shall not engage in sorcery; you shall not abort a child or commit infanticide". (2)

The 'way of death', by contrast, is characterised by "murder, adultery, lust, fornication, theft, idolatry, magic, sorcery, robbery, false testimony, hypocrisy, duplicity, deceit, arrogance, malice, stubbornness, greed, foul speech, jealousy, audacity, pride and boastfulness" (5)

The liturgical directions in chapters 7-10 cover baptism, fasting, the Lord's prayer (which is to be prayed 3 times daily), and prayers for the Eucharist.

Then follow directions for welcoming and evaluating travelling apostles and prophets (11-13):

"Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord. But he is not to stay for more than one day, unless there is need, in which case he may stay another. But if he stays 3 days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night's lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet" (11.3-6)

Christians are enjoined to gather and 'break bread' every Lord's Day (14), and instructions are given on appointing and honouring bishops and deacons (15). Finally, there is the command to be watchful, since Christ will return soon (with parallels to Mk 13 and Mt 24)(16)

Summary

The Didache is concerned with perseverance, which is defined as faithful Christian living, according to the ethics of Jesus and the Decalogue. This is demonstrated by right behaviour and order within the Christian community.

The epistle of Barnabas

Introduction

Longer than the Didache, this work is probably the result of the rising Jewish nationalism of the early C2, which culminated in the Bar-Kochba revolt of 132-135AD. The Jewish Christians of the time were probably unable to avoid sharing in this national spirit, with a subsequent re-emergence of Judaizing tendencies within the church.

What is the book about?

The bulk of the epistle is an allegorization of the Old Testament into guidelines for Christian ethical behaviour, in order to counter the Judaizing spirit. This allegorization suggests that Barnabas was probably written by someone familiar with Alexandria, and the allegorization of the Old Testament there by Philo.

“He who is very patient, when he foresaw how the people whom he had prepared for his Beloved would believe in all purity, revealed everything to us in advance, in order that we might not shipwreck ourselves by becoming, as it were, ‘proselytes’ to the law” (3.6)

“Be on your guard now, and do not be like certain people; that is, do not continue to pile up your sins while claiming that the covenant is irrevocably yours, because in fact those people lost it completely in the following way Moses hurled the two tablets from his hands, and their covenant was broken in pieces, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart, in hope inspired by faith in him” (4.6-8)

‘Barnabas’ thus aimed to undermine the Judaizers by claiming that ‘everything had been revealed to us in advance’, i.e the behaviour which pleases God, and in any case the covenant with the people of Israel was broken almost before it was made.

Some of the interpretations are more acceptable to us than others:

Jesus as the suffering servant of Isa 53 (Bar 5.1-2)

Jesus as the ‘scapegoat’ of Lev 16:20-22 (Bar 7.6-11)

CONTRAST

food laws of Lev 11; Deut 14 (Bar 10.1-12)

Barnabas is not alone in using allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament to counter Judaizing tendencies (cf Gal 4:21-31), but he is a good, very early example of what became the dominant method of interpreting the Bible in the early and medieval church.

The final chapters of Barnabas (18-21) contains the same ‘Two Ways’ ethical instruction as the Didache:

“But let us move on to another lesson and teaching. There are two ways of teaching and power, one of light and one of darkness” (18.1)

The content of these ‘two ways’ is similar in some respects to that of the Didache, though with some differences.

Barnabas had his own reasons for advocating and using an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. But like the Didache, he is concerned primarily about ethics and behaviour in the Christian community.

Discussion of the Didache and Barnabas

We have looked at two examples from the earliest post-apostolic Christian literature. What do they illustrate about the early church’s attitude to the relationship between the gospel and culture?

At first appearance, the Didache doesn’t seem to have much to say about the issue of the gospel and culture, or even about mission at all. It is concerned with internal church administration and behaviour. Barnabas, while also concerned about ethics, was taking a stand against his context. Rising nationalism was leading to Judaizing tendencies, which threatened the church’s distinctiveness.

In fact, the sub-apostolic church is often criticised for its focus on itself. It is suggested that it abandoned the Pauline emphasis on mission and justification by faith through grace, and developed into early Catholicism, with an emphasis on the institution and a works-righteousness sensibility, in which the gospel is turned into a new law, which must be kept if Christians are to be saved. This tendency is sometimes traced back into the New Testament itself, especially in the Pastoral Epistles and Luke-Acts.

However, this suggestion was first made by liberal Protestants with an anti-Catholic bias. Reading these authors missiologically can put a different ‘spin’ on this trends within the early church.

Non-Western Christians are often more dogmatic than Western Christians about what does or doesn't constitute acceptable Christian behaviour, both in general and in matters of church government. For example,

- < there is a strong emphasis on ethical and liturgical orthopraxis
- < sin is defined in concrete terms (murder, adultery, apostasy), although there is also a more general awareness of sinfulness or imperfection
- < there is a strong emphasis on right behaviour, especially on avoiding sin. Salvation by faith is clearly believed, but justification and sanctification are not clearly distinguished.

Such attitudes are sometimes ascribed to a hangover from older missionary beliefs and teaching, or attributed to traditional (tribal) concerns for social order and propriety. But the similar environments within which the subapostolic church and contemporary African church exist, for example, may suggest other reasons.

Both exist in highly syncretistic, pagan, immoral societies. Perhaps in such contexts the church *has* to stress the need for high moral standards, in order to maintain Christian distinctiveness and to prevent it being sucked back into the syncretistic maelstrom.

In the early church this helped the church to stand against syncretistic tendencies like Ebionitism or Gnosticism, as well as the generally low public morality; in modern Africa, it is necessary for both these two reasons as well as the need to distinguish 'true' Christians from the merely 'nominal'.

From both the Didache and Barnabas, we can see that the "Christ against culture" position was a necessary one for the early church. Without it, the church's distinctive identity and message could have been lost, either through the external pressure of a syncretistic paganism, or the internal tendency to 'judaize' which so troubled the primitive Christian church.

The late-second century

Moving on a hundred years, to the late-second/early-third centuries AD, we will examine two other Christian writers, who were contemporaries of one another - Tertullian and Origen.

There were of course many other Christian writers between the Apostolic Fathers, of whom the Didache and Barnabas are representatives, and these two theologians. The Greek apologists sought to defend the church and commend the gospel in a period when the church was beginning to come to public notice. Their writings do bear on the question of the relationship between the gospel and culture (because they were usually trying to establish a relationship between the two). But since Tertullian was an apologist himself, as well as a theologian, and Origen built on the work of Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr (who wrote 2 Apologies), we can deal with their approach in the context of these two thinkers.

Tertullian

The North African Tertullian is seen by Niebuhr as the epitome of the "Christ against culture" position. It is not surprising that he should be thought so:

1. He advocated Christian withdrawal from participation in pagan public life.
"I wish that we did not even inhabit the same world as these wicked men! But though that wish cannot be realised, yet even now we are separate from them in that which is of the world; for the world is God's, but the worldly is the devil's" (On the Games 15)

"We renounce all your games as strongly as we renounce their origin in idolatry, which we know was conceived in superstition ... among us nothing is ever said or seen or heard which has anything in common with the madness of the circus, the atrocities of the arena, or the useless exercises of the wrestling-ground" (Apology 38)
2. He rejected any validity in Greek philosophy or belief-systems.
"What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What agreement is there between the Academy and the Church, between heretics and Christians? Our instruction is from the porch

of Solomon, who himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart'. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition!" (On the Prescription of Heretics 7)

3. He accused heretics of using philosophy, not Scripture, as the basis for their belief systems. He argued that Valentinus' idea of the 'aeons' (which make up the universe) came from Platonism, and that Marcion's idea of a 'tranquil' God is from Stoicism.

It has been suggested (as Niebuhr himself did) that Tertullian sounds more radical and consistent than he actually was. Despite his antagonism, he could not free himself or the church from reliance on and participation in culture, pagan though it was.

Harnack argued that despite Tertullian's apparent commitment to Montanism (which Harnack identified as representative of 'true' Christianity), Tertullian was infected with Stoic philosophy and over-reliant on his legal training. He was thus heavily in debt to his own culture, even if he used it in the service of the gospel. As such, he was as committed as the Greek apologists and the Gnostics to an alien, philosophical Christianity.

But this interpretation of Tertullian does not do justice to the gifted communicator that he was.

1. His attitude to Greek philosophy

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church, between heretics and Christians?" (On the Prescription of Heretics 7)

Here Tertullian is not saying that Greek philosophy and culture is of no use whatever. Elsewhere he accepts that it contains elements of the truth, although he maintains (like Justin Martyr did) that these had been stolen from Scripture, and was overwhelmed by error in an attempt to be original.

"The philosophers may seem to have investigated the sacred Scriptures themselves for their antiquity, and to have derived thence some of their opinions they changed them, as their desire for glory grew, into products of their own mind. The consequence of this is that even that which they had discovered degenerated into uncertainty, and there arose, from one or two drops of truth, a perfect flood of argumentation" (To the Gentiles 2.2)

The clue to what he meant in the 'Athens and Jerusalem' quotation is in the final words mentioned above - "between heretics and Christians". It is not philosophy but a 'mottled Christianity' that Tertullian is afraid of. The heretics Marcion and Valentinus are being syncretistic, and it is this that Tertullian seeks to oppose. Like the earlier writers of the Didache and Barnabas, he is trying to arrest a decline into the syncretistic morass.

2. His attitude to public life

It is this fear of syncretism that Tertullian also has in mind when he advocates Christian separation from public life. Gerald Bray has argued that, for Tertullian, the pursuit of holiness is the chief goal of human life. Tertullian's concern for sanctification is also asserted by Kwame Bediako in his book "Theology and Identity : the impact of culture on Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa".

This concern for distinctiveness led Tertullian to address such issues as the gladiatorial 'games', female dress, and the possibility (or not) of Christians becoming soldiers of magistrates. The issues of public life were not ignored, but considered from a Christian perspective.

3. His use of language

The possible legal background to the words 'person' and 'substance' in Tertullian's doctrine of the Trinity has probably been overemphasised. His terminology in all his writings comes not from legal practice, but the Latin of the inhabitants of Carthage. His Latin is *koiné* Latin, typical of his period, and in this way he tried to express in common speech the truths of the gospel. His writing style does not resemble the classical prose of his pagan Latin contemporaries - instead he used the living language of Carthage to describe the Christian life.

Conclusion

Tertullian has been wrongly categorised as an anticultural separatist, who was nonetheless riddled with inconsistency as he used the tools of the society he rejected to communicate the gospel. Instead, he was a complex, rigorous, passionate writer, whose commitment to Christ was such that he

wanted to see all of Roman life, including its language and public entertainment, changed by the gospel. As such, he is the predecessor of Augustine and Calvin, hoping to transform his culture, not merely oppose it.

The fact that Tertullian has been accused of inconsistency in this area warns us of the danger of cultural containment even by those who are most sceptical about any relationship between the gospel and culture. Os Guinness, as champion of a Reformed understanding of the place of the gospel in public life, has said as much in relation to some forms of evangelicalism, both pentecostal and conservative. In cultural detachment, little energy is expended responding to social and intellectual pressures. Withdrawal aims at resisting any influence, and so there is no engagement with the culture. As such, there is sometimes an uncritical, unconscious assimilation of thought and behaviour patterns which are contrary to the gospel. As examples, Guinness points to racism, materialism, nationalism, and a preoccupation with technique. Tertullian may not be guilty of such mistakes, but that doesn't mean we might not be.

Origen

The city of Alexandria was well suited to be the nursery of one who would do more than anyone to relate the gospel to the Greek philosophical worldview. A prominent Greek commercial and cultural centre, it was also the centre of Roman administration in Egypt. In the early 3rd century, it was the greatest intellectual centre in the Roman Empire. Christians, like the Jews before them, were confronted there by the whole mass of Hellenic culture, which could not be ignored.

It is no surprise, therefore, that it became one of the earliest centres of Christian learning. A catechetical school was founded there in the mid-second century, by Pantaenus, who was described by Jerome as being of "great prudence and erudition, both in Scripture and secular literature", and it was students of this school who would do the work necessary to relate the gospel to Greek philosophy.

Background to Origen

The idea that it might be possible to relate the Christian faith to Greek philosophy was not confined to Alexandria. Justin Martyr became a Christian at the end of a long search for truth, during which he attached himself to various philosophical teachers. It is no surprise, therefore, that in his Apologies, in which he sought to defend the truth of the gospel before a pagan audience, he defined Christianity in the terms of a philosophy, and the best one at that.

"Each one (Plato, Stoics, poets) spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the seminal 'logos'. Whatever things were rightly said among all teachers are the property of us Christians for all writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted 'logos' that was in them" (Apology 2.13)

Recent Roman Catholic theologies of inculturation (cf Aylward Shorter) use Justin's concept of the 'seminal logos' to develop ideas of partial revelation or truth within non-Christian worldviews and religions. But this wasn't Justin's point. His aim was to demonstrate that whatever truth other philosophies may have had, Christianity was the 'best'.

Clement of Alexandria succeeded Pantaenus as head of the school in Alexandria. His use of Greek concepts in his doctrine of God is more developed than that of Justin. For Clement, God was absolutely transcendent and unknowable, and can be known only through his Son, who is the intermediary between the divine unity and this world of plurality.

Yet Clement was not as positive about philosophy as Justin.

"Philosophy educated the Greek world as the Law did the Hebrews, to bring them to Christ. Philosophy is therefore a preparation, making ready the way for him who is being perfected by Christ" (Miscellanies 1.5)

For Justin, philosophy remained the paradigm, in which Christianity is the best. For Clement, the philosophical paradigm is superseded and surpassed by Christianity.

Origen's attitude to Greek philosophy

Clement's successor, Origen, was accused in his own day, and even more so thereafter, of corrupting the Christian faith through his devotion to Greek philosophy. In 374, the heresy-hunter Epiphanius of

Salamis charged Origen with being blinded by Greek culture.

In fact, Origen was even more critical of Greek philosophy than Clement.

1. Christianity surpasses philosophy

In *Contra Celsus*, Origen quotes Plato

“It is a hard matter to find out the Maker and Father of this universe; and after having found him, it is impossible to make him known to all”

as well as Celsus’ comment on this passage

“you perceive then how ‘divine men’ seek after the way of truth, and how well Plato knew that it was impossible for all men to walk in it”

Origen then responds

“these words of Plato are noble and admirable; but see if Scripture does not give us an example still greater in God the Word, who “was made flesh” in order that he might reveal to all, truths which Plato said it would be impossible to make known to all” (*Contra Celsum* 7.42)

Origen consider that philosophy was at best a preparatory discipline for the Christian

“I wish to ask you to extract from the philosophy of the Greeks what may serve as a course of study of a preparation for Christianity” (Letter to Gregory 1)

He certainly doesn’t give the impression of peaceful relations between Christianity and philosophy

“let us consider who those persons are, whose guidance Celsus would have us follow ... if he had specified their names in particular, we should have felt ourselves bound to show him that he wished to give us, as guides, men who were blinded to the truth, and who must therefore lead us into error” (*Contra Celsum* 7.41)

2. Philosophy can be used cautiously

Origen’s favoured approach in using Greek philosophical concepts was that of ‘plundering the Egyptians’ (Ex 11:2; 12:35), a concept used later by Augustine in his “City Of God”. In his correspondence with Cappadocian missionary and church leader Gregory Thaumaturgus, in which he advises Gregory to study philosophy, he adds:

“Perhaps something of this kind is shadowed forth in what is written in Exodus from the mouth of God, that the children of Israel were commanded to ask from their neighbours, and those who dwelt with them, vessels of silver and gold, and clothing, in order that, by plundering the Egyptians, they might have material for the preparation of the things that pertained to the service of God (i.e. the tabernacles and its artifacts)” (Letter to Gregory 2)

He does however also warn of the dangers of this:

“And may I tell you from my experience that not many take from Egypt only the useful, and go away and use it for the service of God. These are they who from their Greek studies produce heretical notions, and set them up like the golden calf in Bethel For we who read the things of God need much application, lest we should say or think anything too rashly about them” (Letter to Gregory 2-3)

Origen thought that pagan philosophy and culture could be studied and used by Christians, provided it was integrated into a Christian worldview:

“He thought that we should obtain and make ourselves familiar with all other writings, neither preferring nor repudiating any one kind, but hearing what all of them have to convey. And it was with great wisdom that he acted on this principle, lest any single saying should be heard and valued above others as alone true, even though it might not be true, and thus enter our mind and deceive us” (Gregory, Letter of Thanks to Origen 13)

Origen’s use of Greek philosophy and culture to communicate the gospel

For all his scepticism towards Greek philosophy, Origen applied all his immense understanding of it to the defence and propagation of the apostolic tradition. In ‘On First Principles’, he produces a cosmology and theology far more Greek in form than anything Clement or Justin produced. He used Greek language and concepts about the nature of the world to develop a doctrine of the Trinity, and to expound the way in which God relates to the world and brings about human redemption.

‘On First Principles’ has been described as the first-ever Christian systematic theology. But while Origen did describe it as an attempt to explain the church’s “rule of faith”, we must note that it is not a

comprehensive summary of all his thought. It had a very specific aim.

His primary goal was to oppose the Gnostic teachers in Alexandria who, as he saw it, presented the greatest threat to the survival of apostolic Christianity. He first encountered Gnosticism in the house of the woman who supported his studies after his father's martyrdom. The 'fashionable' discussions of the 'chattering classes' he encountered there permanently inoculated him against Gnosticism.

After reconverting his future patron Ambrose from Gnosticism, he set out to destroy this 'culture Christianity', which had so thoroughly assimilated Christ into the Greek worldview. In the dedication of his 'Commentary On John' to Ambrose, we wrote that he aimed to

- set down sound and true teachings in opposition to the heterodox
- reprove those who pursue knowledge (*gnosis*) 'falsely-so-called'
- take a stand against heretical fabrications
- prevent the educated of Alexandria, who had become Christians, from being seduced by heretics

'On First Principles' was not therefore a full systematic theology. Instead it sought to communicate, in Greek philosophical terms, a doctrine of Trinity, thus securing the apostolic teaching that in Jesus humanity encounters God himself, not an intermediary between this world and a speculative super-reality.

Much of Origen's greatness, and the confusion and irritation he inspired and inspires in his interpreters, stems from the way he blended the Christian faith with the philosophical outlook of his cosmopolitan native city. It has been noted that "in his thought these two elements are so wedded as to be indeed one flesh" (RA Norris).

The difficulty of arriving at a simple evaluation of Origen is that he was a third-century Alexandrian, and we are not. His attempt to communicate the gospel into his culture was so successful, that part of his thinking will always seem alien to us. Nonetheless, he provided an intellectually-defensible form of Christianity to counter the Gnostic threat in Alexandria, and contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity in the East in the succeeding centuries. For whereas Clement was concerned to make the gospel *relevant* to his society, Origen used Platonist thought forms and concepts to communicate a message and a worldview which transformed the foundations on which that society rested. Perhaps such a thorough contextualization can only occur when there exists a deep awareness of the dangers inherent in such activity.

Conclusions

The question of the relationship between the gospel and culture absorbed the energies and thoughts of the greatest of the early Christian theologians (even if they never heard of the term 'missiology').

The sub-apostolic writers, because of the threat their context presented, concentrated on distinctiveness, not bridge-building. Both Origen and Tertullian inherited this scepticism, and it allowed them to use every skill at their disposal to communicate the gospel, while retaining a deep commitment to the teachings of the church. Perhaps the contextualization the Christian faith, for the sake of evangelism and pastoral care, is most secure when it comes not from a frustration with the church's 'irrelevance', but from a deep commitment to its message and distinctive identity, and a desire to communicate it in a fallen world.

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