

Setting of Early Christianity

Today we will talk about the social backgrounds of early Christianity. It is beneficial to understand the problems that the New Testament books were addressing. For example, a number of the books that we will read are directed to people who are suffering persecution. It might be helpful to know what that persecution is. Also, a number of books talk about proper uses of wealth or teach biblical paradigms for family living. It helps to understand what the prior paradigms for good family life or bad family life might have been. What did people presuppose in antiquity about family life? How should they have used their money? How should they have related to the potentially crushing powers of the Roman Empire?

Here is a simple introduction to some aspects of life in the ancient world. First we will talk about the socioeconomic life. Look at 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. Paul is talking about the people in Corinth who became Christians. He says, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many were wise by human standards and not many were influential, not many were of noble birth, but God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly and the despised things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one should boast.” That passage is taken by many people as an indication that Christianity was a movement of the lower classes in antiquity, that the average person who was a Christian was poor and an outcast, not significant in the eyes of the world. That is a misconception.

One reason people think that about 1 Corinthians 1 is that they have the “diamond model” of the socioeconomic world, described as the ideal by Aristotle. There are a few people at the top, a large middle class, and a few people at the bottom. In the West, a tiny number of people make over a million dollars a year, a few make \$500,000 or \$100,000, and most make \$40,000 or \$60,000 a year. There are a few people who are living on almost nothing, so we think that the middle class has to be 80% or 90% of all people. A better model, the way it was in antiquity, would be to think not of a diamond, but of a pyramid. Only 1% or 2% were upper class and everybody else was further away from the upper class. The majority of people were not in the middle, but near the bottom. So when Paul says, “Not many were noble, not many were wise, not many influential,” he is not saying that everyone was at the bottom, but that most were not at the top. He is saying that most of them were like everybody else; only 1% or 2% were at the top.

Why do I say that we have a triangle and not a pyramid? In antiquity, most people did not talk much about class. The upper class was a very small number of people, and others were simply described as “not upper class.” Class is not the best way of describing antiquity. A better way of thinking about the ancient world is simply, “How much did people have? What was their grade of living? How much did they own? How much power did they have? How much leisure did they have?” This is harder to define. Let us look at the issue of American slavery to help us understand. We think of slavery as the condition that describes those who are the lowest class. Our tendency is to think of American slavery as the wicked act of stealing men and women, taking them from their home country, and locking them up. Accounts of American slavery show that slaves had to wear inferior clothing. If a slave and a free person worked side by side, the slave might get a fraction of the money. It was almost impossible to get out of slavery, not only in America, but also in other places in the world in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It was very different in antiquity. You could not tell who was a slave and who was not by their appearance, because slavery was not based on skin color or social or cultural background. You could not tell who was a slave and who was not a slave by their clothing; everybody could wear the same clothing. In antiquity, a free person and a slave were paid the same amount for working the same job. They had

the same pay, the same language, and the same appearance. The only difference was that a slave was not free to relocate, whereas the free person was.

Another indication of how different things were is that slaves almost always bought themselves out of their slavery. If they lived to maturity, they could earn enough money to buy themselves their freedom. Slaves sometimes got wealthy enough to buy and own other slaves. People also sometimes sold themselves into slavery because of the advantages that it gave them, including job security, the ability to work for a great man, and the ability to get training for a job. If you were paid well, you could buy your freedom at any time. Some prominent positions actually demanded that the person be a slave. City treasurers sometimes had to be slaves because of the danger of stealing the gold and running away. Although we often think of slaves as lower class, a slave could have been a prosperous person.

Some scholars believe that as many as half of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves at some point during their life. Others believe that in some cities half, or even more than half, of all the people were slaves, which means the entire workforce was comprised of slaves. I do not actually believe that, because of the ease with which people bought themselves out. But slavery was very common, and we should not think that everybody who was a slave was lower class. The real issue was the kind of job, the kind of skills, and if it was possible for them to buy their freedom.

Another problem with the notion that Christians were poor is to remember which cities Paul visited. What cities did Paul visit to start churches? He visited Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Rome. These were big cities. Jesus ordained that His disciples, Paul, Peter, and the others, go to the centers of the ancient world. They were not usually appealing to the small towns or villages. They went to the cities. Why? They wanted to change the world. These were all centers of trade and commerce. They were more open to new ideas. People were commonly capable of speaking several languages. Almost everybody knew Greek, and many would have known Latin and another language. Even if they were illiterate, they would probably know how to speak two or three languages. The very fact that Paul went to cities indicates that he went to areas that were generally more prosperous and more educated, and with more worldly wisdom.

Another indication of the class or level of those who read and were saved by the New Testament is the readers. If you look at the books of the New Testament in the original languages, they are not high literature. They are not Goethe, or national poetry. They are not the elite writing for the elite. They are good, solid, well-written, vigorous books with large vocabulary, at ease with a wide variety of literary structures, with large sentences and dense ideas and argumentation. This would be at the level of good, sharp magazine writing or the best level of newspaper writing. It is high-quality, but written for the ordinary person. The idea that it is well-done and written carefully to appeal to a broad but fairly sophisticated readership indicates that Christians were not lower class.

However, I do not want to give the impression that Christians were upper class, prominent, or wealthy. Paul repeatedly states that he is willing to work with his hands; he was a tent maker. The commendation to the Thessalonians that they should work with their hands indicates that Paul is interested in blessing manual labor. There was a debate in antiquity among philosophers as to whether manual labor was good or demeaning. The Epicureans said, "No, we should get as far as possible from that because it makes our lives vulgar." The Stoics said, "No, it keeps us in touch with the world." The rabbis at that time thought that everybody should work with their hands. Paul said he worked with his hands. He was saying that it is good to work in this world; God blesses manual labor. This was a powerful message for the ordinary people who worked with their hands.

Now let us jump to the religious scene in the ancient world. In Acts 17, when Paul visits Athens, he says, “Sirs, I see that you are very religious.” That would be an apt statement. Today, at most traffic intersections, there is a stoplight standing sentinel to keep us from crashing into each other. The sentinels that stood in the city of Rome in the year 73 A.D. were the statues to gods. An historian wrote that there were 265 main intersections in Rome in the year 73 A.D., each guarded by statues of different deities. The concept of the Roman pantheon was that the various gods of the people conquered by the Romans were invited into the house of the gods. The conquered people were expected to honor the Roman gods, especially the emperor, and in turn the Romans would acknowledge the other deities. The spirit of the day was open-minded, with a shallow but broad interest in religion. People would borrow from any religion whatever looked or sounded interesting. The term for the buying, borrowing, and blending of different creeds is ‘syncretism.’ It comes from “sync” (together), with “creeds”—putting different creeds together. The same person could easily be initiated into six different religions and could even be a priest in up to three religions.

I experienced a modern verification of this when I traveled to India on a mission trip. In India, there are tens of thousands of deities that are honored in Hinduism, so the spirit and policies of syncretism pervade. We had a man named Budgen who cooked our meals and cleaned up. When I asked the host whether he was a Christian, a Hindu, or some other religion, the answer was, “Well, we think he is a Christian.” I said, “What does that mean, you think he is a Christian?” The host answered, “He comes to church sometimes but we have also seen him occasionally by the road dressed up as a Hindu holy man. A Hindu holy man will have cow dung smeared in his hair and a brown stripe going down the middle. We spotted him with his shawl and the cow dung and a little plate where you could donate money for wisdom. We said, ‘What are you doing here, Budgen? I thought you were a Christian.’ He answered sincerely that he had to make a living any way he could.” That answer fits in India, where polytheism is everywhere. If there are hundreds of gods and you like five or six of them, why not be involved with five or six?

One of the crucial elements in antiquity was emperor worship. Returning to the idea of a triangle or pyramid representing class status, the very top of the upper class was the emperor. He had the ability to rule the world, with thousands of people to do his will. He was thought to have the spark of the divine. People not only thought of him as the greatest of all men, but also as being the highest of mortals or a low god, as gods were also ranked in classes. Emperor worship was a very useful thing for those in power. Not only did the emperor have the mortal power to award, punish or put someone in jail, but he was also a god, so everyone should have listened to all he had to say.

Gibbons’ *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* addresses the political value of various gods under polytheism. He says that the various modes of worship that prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful; it is useful to believe your emperor is also your god—it instills obedience.

There is very little ethical content in any of these religions. We must not think of ancient religions like ours. They are a body of teaching, a body of doctrine, prayers found left over from antiquity. They do not have ethical aspirations. They plead with the gods. Sometimes five or six dozen gods will be named in one prayer, as if to say, “If there is anybody listening, here is what I want.” Gods are invoked in prayers for health, successful business ventures, and successful childbirth, with very little ethical content.

What was emperor worship like? It was required for everyone to show loyalty to the emperor. Performed up to three times a year, it involved dropping a pinch of incense on an altar and offering a prayer. Prayer could have two forms: praying **to** the emperor, or praying **for** the emperor. Many people did not make a distinction between these two, and apart from Christians, it was very relaxed. Christians, however, would pray for the emperor, but not to him. The officials soon realized this and tried to force Christians to pray specifically to the emperor.

Most emperors did not take emperor worship very seriously. The Romans looked down on it and thought it showed too much pride and seizing of power. There were, however, two emperors in the New Testament era who took it seriously. The first was named Domitian. Many people who were close to an emperor would call him by his first name; however, Domitian insisted that people call him “my lord” and “my god” under threat of death.

The second was Caligula, also known as Gaius or Caius. When Caligula heard that the Jews did not have any images of him in Jerusalem and were not worshipping him, he sent a delegation to force them. The Jews met the delegation, and in passive resistance, stopped farming and tending the crops. When Caligula heard this, he ordered that all the Jews be killed. Through marvelous providence, Caligula was overthrown and killed before the order could be carried out, so their lives were spared. Caligula was deposed for insisting on his own deity, among other reasons.

It is unfortunate that, during this period, only Christians were known to be unwilling to participate in emperor worship; the Jews had long taken a stand against it. If Jews were loyal and prayed for the emperor, they were not forced to participate because Judaism was an ancient religion with a narrowly-defined area. The Christians were new, growing rapidly, and were not all Jewish. This made the officials nervous, so they would often try to force Christians to worship the emperor.

There were many deities, with the most popular being a group of religions known as “mystery religions.” Mystery religions were much more involved than emperor worship. They were voluntary associations where people gathered together to perform rituals. They would share meals, secrets, and bond with each other. It was physical, appealing to the senses. It was glamorous and mysterious. The goal was union with the gods, but without an ethical content.

Here is an account of an initiation of a priest into one of these religions—a Mithra cult. I invite you to close your eyes and picture it.

The high priest, who is to be consecrated, is brought down underground in a pit dug deep, marvelously adorned with a fillet binding his festive temples and chaplets, his hair combed back under a golden crown, wearing a silken toga caught up in a gabbie girding. [So there he is underground, beautifully dressed, but in a hole in the ground.] Over this they make a wooden floor with wide spaces, woven of planks with an open mesh [picture a lattice work]. They then divide or board the area and repeatedly pierce the wood with a pointed tool that it may appear full of small holes. Hither a huge bull, fierce and shaggy in appearance, is led bound with flowery garlands upon its flanks, its horn sheathed, yea the forehead of the victim sparkles with gold, and a flash of metal plates colors its hair. Here, as is ordained, the beast is to be slain and they pierce its breast with a sacred spear. The gaping wound emits a wave of hot blood and the smoking river flows into the woven structure beneath it and

surges wide. Then, by the many paths of the thousand openings in the lattice work, the falling shower rains down a foul dew [That is to say the blood is dripping all over the place], which the priest, buried within, catches, putting his shameful head under all the drops, defiled both in his clothing and in all his body. Yea, he throws back his face. He puts his cheeks in the way of the blood. He puts under it his ears and lips. He interposes his nostrils. He washes his very eyes with the fluid. Nor does he even spare his throat, but moistens his tongue until he actually drinks the dark gore. Afterwards the servants draw the corpse, stiffening now that the blood has gone forth, off the lattice and the pontiff. [The priest], horrible in appearance, comes forth and shows his wet head, his beard heavy with blood, his dripping fillets and soaked garments. This man, defiled with the contagions and fouled with the gore of the recent sacrifice, all hail and worship at a distance because profane blood and a dead ox have washed him while concealed in a filthy cave.

For those who are ordained or have observed ordinations, compare this account to your church's ordination. What is difference? It is dirty and dark instead of light and pure. It defiles rather than makes pure. It involves death rather than life, and homage to a lower creature. It is a blood sacrifice with blood cleansing the priest. Is this like Christianity? There *is* a blood sacrifice in both, but this is a superficial similarity because the Mithra ritual was enacted every time a priest was ordained or initiated; the cleansing sacrifice of Christ was only once. The biggest difference is the absence of words in this ritual—unlike Christianity there is no message, no ethic, no charge. They are just rituals, not interpreted or explained. They do not lead us into holiness or righteousness or into God. They are so different than Christianity.

Paganism is ritualistic; Christianity is historical. Christ was sacrificed once, and for all. What God does, He did once and we remember and hark back to it. Paganism is mystical; Christianity is rational. There is no thought content to paganism, no ideas behind it; ideas from different gods and from different cultures can be blended together. Paganism is syncretistic, whereas Christianity is exclusive. Christians got into trouble when they refused to participate with other religious services and activities; Christianity is deeply ethical. Paganism is polytheistic but Christianity is monotheistic. Ancient mystery religions were manipulative. You did things to get the gods to give you what you wanted, performing rituals to get their attention. Christianity is not manipulating God, but God giving His redemption to His people.

Let us discuss more about the philosophies of the New Testament era. Gnosticism arose after the 1st century A.D., having little impact on our understanding of the New Testament. Gnostics believe you are saved by what you know; learning mysterious passwords will allow you to pass through the heavens and into eternity.

There were two dominant philosophies of the New Testament era. One was Epicureanism, believing that the good life is a life of pleasure. This is not the same as hedonism. Epicureans were not seeking sex, drugs, and rock and roll. They were not seeking wild self-indulgence. Epicureans sought a life free from care and filled with refined pleasures such as music and poetry, material things, and comfort. They did not believe people should simply indulge the flesh. They sought pleasures of body and mind.

The Stoics had a different approach and had more in common with the New Testament. They were pantheistic and very ethical. In fact, some had an ethic much like a New Testament ethic. The motives were entirely different, but the goal was to live in harmony with the universe. Stoics believed that fate

governed the universe, and that everything was determined in advance. The goal was to fit in with what was necessary and to be self-sufficient. In Philippians 4:12 Paul says, "I have learned how to live in plenty and in want. I am sufficient in all things." He uses the word that Stoics love, *altarcabic*, meaning "the ability to please oneself." The Stoics' highest ideal was to be able to take care of oneself and to be happy no matter what happened, to be able to fit in and accept it. Paul's idea was not true self-sufficiency, of course, but self-sufficiency through Christ, a very different idea. However, their concept was to fit in with the world, be wise, and not fight against the flow of one's destiny. Paul, James, and Peter occasionally wrote about the Stoic ideal of doing what was fitting as opposed to what was not fitting.

One more item about life in the ancient world is family life; it was very different from family life today. We bemoan the fact that the divorce rate is 50% today, and that unmarried people live together commonly and freely. However, in ancient Rome most people never got married at all. People who did marry usually had money or property. If there was a death or divorce, that money and property had to be divided. Because of this, instead of divorcing, one person would simply leave. Records for this were not kept, so it is difficult to say how common this was.

Today we rightly bemoan and become upset about abortion as a scourge in our land. Curiously, in antiquity they agreed that abortion was a terrible thing, and it was often a crime that was punishable. However, they abandoned their children. Our thinking today is the opposite; we can kill an unborn baby, but it is a horrible thing to abandon a baby who has been born. In antiquity, killing an unborn child was a crime. However, if you abandoned it, somebody might pick it up, and the child had a chance to live. It would live as a slave, a menial laborer, or even a sacred prostitute, which was unfortunately very common in some places in antiquity. Abandonment was a common practice, proved in this letter from a man, Hilarion, to his wife, Alis:

Many greetings, likewise, to my lady, Beruse, and Apolonarion. Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not be anxious if they really go home; I will remain here. I, beg and entreat you, take care of the little one and, as soon as we receive our pay, I will send it to you. If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be. If it is a girl, cast it out. You have said to Aphrodisius, "Do not forget me." How can I forget you? I beg you, do not be anxious.

Do you see how casual the reference to abandonment is in this letter? "We are here, we are making money; I will send you the pay. I will be back, do not worry. If you have a boy, keep it; if you have a girl, dump it." That is the way it was. Unfortunately, quite a number of girl babies were abandoned. This resulted in tragic situations in places like Corinth, where it is estimated that there were as many as 8,000 cult prostitutes, who would have all been abandoned girls, who served the goddess of love, Aphrodite. There were also children who died, and as a consequence, there was a shortage of marriageable women in biblical times.

Another aspect of daily life in the ancient world is entertainment. Often we get upset about the violence and sensuality on TV. Current entertainment, even as bad as it is, pales in comparison with the entertainments of antiquity, the most popular being the gladiatorial shows. I include them in the family living topic because many gladiators were children who were abandoned and taken to gladiatorial schools. The gladiatorial battles commonly ended in the death of the losing combatant. In Rome, which had a population of one million, there were two coliseums that held a total of 300,000 people. It would be possible for 300,000 people to be present on one day, watching for entertainment not movies about

blood but the real thing. Sometimes hundreds, and on occasion even thousands, of gladiators were killed in a single day.

Here is one account of a gladiatorial battle from Augustine. Augustine's noble friend, Elipius, was a good pagan. Elipius and Augustine had friends who thought the gladiatorial shows were interesting and entertaining. Elipius told them he was not interested and did not want to go, as he found it degrading. His friends forcefully persuaded him to attend once, and he asked, "Even if you drag my body into this place, can you fasten my mind and my eyes on the shows?" He sat with his eyes closed the whole time. They would not let him leave and were curious if he could keep his eyes closed. At one point, a mighty roar went up from the crowd and struck Elipius with such force that he was overcome by curiosity. He opened his eyes and was wounded more deeply in his soul than the man who was wounded in his body. He fell more miserably than that gladiator at whose fall the shout was raised. It entered into his ears. It opened his eyes. The result was that his spirit was struck down. His spirit was more bold than strong, and was weaker because it presumed upon itself.

Elipius was so caught up in the bloodshed that he became one of the most rabid fans of the gladiatorial games. He went back with his friends every time they occurred until one day, God, by His grace, touched Elipius not with moral resolve, but with spiritual resolve. He was liberated by it, and became again an adversary of the games.