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The Primitive Christians

E. G. Sihler

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Primitive Christians.

I.

They were first called Nazarenes or Galileans. The name Christians, or Messiah believers, was first applied to them at Antioch (Acts 11, 29), and, it seems, in scorn. The Messiah in whom the Jews hoped was something entirely different. Their conception of Him was connected with the Temple tax, which was annually sent to Jerusalem from all the provinces of the Roman Empire. Let us hear Philo of Alexandria, who flourished at the beginning of the Christian era. "The Temple has as resources not only sections of land, but even much greater other ones, which will not be destroyed by time. For as long as the human race shall endure, always will the resources of the Sanctuary be guarded, enduring coequally with the universe. For it has been ordained that every year those [Jews] beginning with twenty years shall offer up first-fruits. The contributions are called 'first-fruits'; hence, too, they give the first-fruits most eagerly, radiant and rejoicing. It happens that, as the nation [of the Jews] is most populous, the first-fruits, too, are most copious. For in almost every town there is a treasury of the sacred fund, into which it is customary to enter and pay first-fruits." (Philo, *De Monarchia*, II, 3.) Elsewhere Philo says: "And when they shall get this unexpected freedom, they, who a little while before were scattered" (the Diaspora) in the Greek and non-Greek world, "over islands and continents, rising with a single impulse, some from this, some from that, point, they set out eagerly toward the one spot appointed." (*De Execrationibus*, II, 436.)

It is curious how our Lord's disciples themselves clung to such worldly visions (Matt. 20, 20). Salome, the mother of James and John, when our Lord was going up to Jerusalem for the last time, Matt. 20, 21, said: "Grant that my two sons may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on the left in Thy kingdom." They understood not, even then, the spiritual character of this Messiahship. With terrible distinctness He foretold the end of Jerusalem, Matt. 23, 37. Even those closest to Him had not yet learned that the Kingdom is in the souls of men, Luke 17, 21. And so the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, after the crucifixion, said: "But we trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel" (chiefly from the Roman yoke), Luke 24, 21. Even after His resurrection they asked of Him, saying: "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?"

As for the Jews, they, even before the beginning of the Christian era, had absolute freedom of worship; such privileges had been guaranteed them by Caesar, by Augustus, by Agrippa, by Claudius (as attested by a proclamation preserved in a papyrus of Egypt). See *Biblical Review*, 1925, p. 563: "Wherefore still even now I solemnly

adjure the people of Alexandria to bear themselves in a kindly and gentle manner toward the Jews, who have resided in the same city long ago, and not to commit outrages on their established usages of worship, but let them enjoy the same customs which also they did enjoy under the *divus Augustus*." We also know that the messengers who carried the annual contributions of money for the Temple to Jerusalem were protected by imperial decrees issued from Rome. These funds were large, even in Cicero's time. I now quote from my *Cicero of Arpinum*, p. 199: "During Cicero's own consular year" (63 B. C.) "his famous friend" (Pompey) "had taken Palestine, a mere minor appanage — to the conqueror's vision — of Syria. Many Jews then were Roman citizens, and their compact organization and cooperation was well known to the political or social observer. Now, Flaccus" (as proconsul of the province of Asia) "had issued an edict that no gold was to be exported from his province to Palestine. This was the annual usage among the Hebrews of the Mediterranean world. Perhaps Flaccus appropriated these exportations under pretense of inhibiting them." (Imperial protection came later.) The following words of Cicero illustrate for us how a given religion was considered strictly a political and national thing: "Each state has its own religion. We have our own. While Jerusalem is standing, and after the Jews have been subjected, still the religion of those rituals was shrinking from all contact with the brilliancy of this empire, the impressive might of our name, the customs of our ancestors, now indeed the more so because that people made a display by armed resistance, of the sentiments which it entertained of our sway. How dear it was to the immortal gods is taught by the fact that it was vanquished, has been defeated, has been let out" (to the tax collectors), "that it has been enslaved." So a state religion depended on a state's power. After the fall of Jerusalem, 70 A. D., every Jew in the empire was ordered to make his annual contribution to the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill at Rome.

But the religion of Christ was to be not for any single nation, but for all the world. After His resurrection our Lord said to His disciples: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," Mark 16, 15. And so the British and Foreign Bible Society in London has translated the Bible into many hundred languages and dialects, and as you enter the offices in London, 146 Victoria Street, you observe these words, chiseled in marble: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away," Mark 13, 31. The ethics of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the stern tenets of the Stoics, with their glorification of the sage's soul, the gods of the Greeks being changed to the forces of nature, all these have become dry leaves, reposing in the herbaria of classical seminars. Whereas the parables of the Merciful Samaritan and of the Prodigal Son are an enduring

blessing and directive for all the children of men, and for all time, appealing at once to the hearts and consciences of all mankind, lettered or unlettered; they are what the sun is to the human eye or pure air to the human lungs.

Even in Athens, in St. Paul's day, Greek religion had become mainly an archeological thing of architecture, marble, and bronze. He spoke of the countless idols there; his spirit was stirred within him when he saw the city wholly given up to idolatry (literally covered with idols), Acts 17, 16. The Stoics and the Epicureans in no wise affected the traditional idolatry. The entire first book of Pausanias is devoted to the temples and figures. The *xoana*, the figures carved from hard wood, older than bronze and marble, were much more honored than the supreme works of Phidias, Polyclitus, or Praxiteles. But no real spiritual attitude to these man-made figures of the sculptors and poets, the gods of Greece, was possible; they were men and women, lustful, selfish, vain, vindictive, and as for conduct and conscience the First Psalm is infinitely more precious and sovereign to the soul than all the mythology of Homer and Hesiod, while the few legends of Rome are absolutely without any spiritual content.

We have two epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians: let us learn something *apropos* from Strabo, a contemporary of Augustus, who died under Tiberius. At Corinth the fame of Aphrodite (Venus) was once so high that the city possessed some 1,000 "sacred" or "consecrated" handmaids of the lust-goddess (Strabo, p. 3783), whose income, nay, wealth, came largely from the sailors and commercial folk coming to the Isthmian emporium, most of the women's fees going to the priests. One of the girls boasted that she had in a short time "furl'd three sails," *i. e.*, ruined three skippers. In Corinth, in St. Paul's time, there was also a temple of Octavia, the sister of Augustus.

Passing now to the Tiber and the capital of the world, we quote from the young Stoic the poet Persius of the Neronian age: "Most of our magnates pray for what they dare not utter aloud. Any one can hear their petitions for a sound mind and good report, but the prayers for the death of an uncle, a ward, a wife, the prayer for sudden gain, are mere whispers. Strange that, in order to prepare for such impieties as these, men should go through all the manners of lustral services and entrust to the ears of Jove what they would not breathe to any mortal." Juvenal wrote (X, 23): "The foremost vows and those most familiar to all the temples — are for riches."

The Jews in Rome (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, *s. v.* Diaspora) had five cemeteries in the suburbs. Eight thousand Jews in Rome escorted the delegates from Jerusalem who demanded the deposition of Archelaus (6 A. D.). Augustus banished him to Gaul. There were eight

synagogs in Rome; according to Reinach the members bore these names: Augustinians, Agrippians, Volumnians, Campensians (on Campus Martius), Suburians (the suburra quarter was the Bowery of Rome), Hebraians (probably the only one still using the Hebrew language in their worship and not the Septuagint), Elaians, Cascaresians.

II.

It is very difficult for us modern Christians to realize the attitude of the primitive Christians to the world and of the world to them. Our Lord first took the name of the physical universe, the *kosmos*, and applied it to non-Christian humanity; Christ had established a veritable abyss between His own Church and the world as well as Judaism with its ceremonial, its holidays, its permitted and forbidden food. "If the world hates you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you," John 15, 18. So also He said before Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world." In the first place, the new society was universal, all-embracing, and knew no ranks, classes, racial divisions, or nations. "Where there is neither Greek nor Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all," Col. 3, 11. Then the hatred for the new religion: "And ye shall be hated of all nations for My name's sake," Matt. 24, 9. Why? When we compare the ethics of the Beatitudes with the narrow and exclusive tenets of Plato and Aristotle, we marvel. Plato was interested in an intellectual aristocracy; he had no concern whatever for the common people. Aristotle wrote with contempt of craftsmen and slaves. (*Pol*, I, 11.) Now, the very disciples of our Lord were of humble rank, John and James, Peter and Andrew, were fishermen. Elsewhere Aristotle wrote that the slave is the body of the master, the master the soul of the slave. (*Ethica Nicomachia*, VIII, 13.) It is notable, too, that the term *witness* (martyr, Greek) of Christ in the history of the Christian Church assumed the meaning of *martyr*, who having borne witness of Christ, *i. e.*, having confessed his belief in Christ, gave up his life for the confession, became a martyr.

Now it is clear that in many parts of the Roman Empire, even before the Neronian persecution, 64 A. D., the name of Christian was one of great danger to the bearer, or confessor. The First Epistle of St. Peter was addressed, in the main, to Jewish Christians; the very term *Diaspora* betokens this. Peter names the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia, Asia (the Roman province so called, of which Ephesus was the capital). In chap. 1, 18 we read of the "ancestral mode of living." What does Peter mean? The King James version gives it thus: "from your vain conversation [the Greek is *anastrophe*] received by tradition from your fathers," *i. e.*, the feasts, Sabbaths, forbidden and permitted foods, all of which the Christian converts abandoned. Now, who stirred the hatred directed at the Christians in these eastern provinces of the empire? Clearly those

who resented the abandonment of Judaism by converted Christian Jews—the first Jews of the Diaspora. As long as the new converts had been consistent Jews, they were free from all persecution, protected in their traditional worship by the Roman government, from Caesar onward. Now, who would resent the abandonment by the new Christian of the synagog and the Jewish life but the orthodox Jews? We must especially examine 1 Pet. 4, 12 ff.—5, 14: “if ye are reproached” (abused, *ὀνειδίζεσθε*) “for the name of Christ”; v. 16: “yet if any man suffer as a Christian.” The Roman government in the East was of course perfectly indifferent as to whether a Jew abandoned the synagog. Not so, of course, the leaders of the Jews; they clearly strove to bind up the following of Christ with disloyalty to the emperor at Rome, Christ being an authority superior to all terrestrial rulers. And the secular interpretation of the Messiah name in time seems to have become a sufficient cause and justification of persecution. That is why Peter stressed the political loyalty of the Christian converts, 1 Pet. 2, 13 (I attempt a closer version of my own): “Subject yourselves to every human institution on account of our Lord, be it to the emperor, as having supreme power, or to the proconsuls appointed by him,” etc. This brings us to St. Paul to the Galatians. The persecutions of St. Paul, fairly unbroken until his appeal to the emperor, brought him from Caesarea to Rome, where he arrived in March, 61 A. D.—these persecutions of St. Paul were all caused by the Jews. He reprimands the Galatian Christians for resuming Jewish habits after his departure. The passage which in my opinion must figure large in our present inquiry is found in Gal. 6, 12: “As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh” (*ἐπιπροσώπιον*, assume a specious outward display, *i. e.*, of loyalty, I think), “they constrain you to be circumcised, only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.”

What was the *episcopus* of the primitive Christian Church? Clearly not the “bishop” of later times. The change from paganism to Christianity was a radical step; a new life was demanded, for the change from paganism was a practical and incisive one. The *episcopus* was an overseer, who, among other things, satisfied himself in some orderly way that the old life was abandoned and the new life begun. How such officials were “appointed” we see in Acts 14, 23.

The Christian converts were taught by oral instruction (*κατηχέω*); they were catechumens before baptism. What were they taught? The words and deeds of our Lord as we now have them in the gospels; but this teaching by word of mouth must have been practised from the beginning, before the gospels were written or spread abroad. And so the introductory words of St. Luke, addressed to a gentleman in Antioch, are full of suggestion. Theophilus himself had been a catechumen before he was baptized: “Many had undertaken to arrange in

order the matters which had been accomplished among the Christians just as they handed them down who from the beginning were direct witnesses" (*αὐτόπται*, literally "selfseers," a term used also by Polybius as a requisite of trustworthy and genuine historiography) "and servants" (clearly our Lord's disciples are meant) "of the Word."

Further, what was meant by the "mystery" of the Christian revelation and service? It was essentially, the incarnation of Christ, the unparalleled combination of the human with the divine, without any analogy in all the records or speculation of mankind; and so St. Paul concludes his Epistle to the Romans, sent from Corinth about February, 58 A. D. (Zahn), 16, 25: "and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery," etc. The story of Christ was indeed a "mystery," revealed to the initiated, not at all a mythological legend and rites, such as those of Eleusis, but a narrative of facts, which within a generation after the ascension of Christ were preached from Jerusalem to the Euphrates and also from Jerusalem to the Pillars of Hercules in the West. But there is another passage in St. Paul which is extremely significant and seems to give us a glance into the services of the primitive Church. I refer to 1 Tim. 3, 16. This summary of the Christian faith is now edited by eminent scholars like Nestle and Westcott in six distinct strophes, perhaps to be recited by presbyter and worshiping congregation antiphonically: "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness" (the essential element of Christian faith and worship): "God" (*Θεός*, another reading *ὅς*, "who") "was manifest in the flesh, was justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among Gentiles" (the nations), "was believed on in the world, received up into glory."

There was absolute freedom in the Roman Empire to abstain from, nay, to attack, any provincial form of religion. In the capital the Jupiter religion was by no means an exclusive or dominant thing. The mysteries of Isis and Osiris had countless worshipers in Rome. The Artemis of Ephesus and the silversmiths who made a living from visitors, all this is related in full by Luke in the Acts. This service was really more Asiatic than Greek. We read many details in Acts 19, and it is noteworthy that Paul first taught in a synagogue and then in the school of a Greek *grammaticus*. Paul even counted the Asiarchs as friends. At this point it may be well to cite some of the data which Wood, a British archeologist, ascertained in digging on the site of ancient Ephesus (1863—1875). Pausanias (VII, 2, 6) says the worship of Artemis was much older than the settlement of that coast by the Ionians. The Artemision lay seaward from the city proper. Near to it was the sanctuary of Augustus (the Sebasteion). (At Alexandria there was a temple of Augustus near the chief native sanctuary, the Sarapeion.) More and more in the Mediterranean world the cult of the Roman emperor was overshadowing the local cults. Distin-

guished citizens of Ephesus were honored with the title of neokoros (temple-warden). Every citizen of Ephesus was ranged as a worshiper of Artemis. It seems clear that no Jew or Christian could be a full citizen of Ephesus, because they could not share in the worship of Artemis, with which, as we saw, that of the Roman emperors was curiously bound up.

As for the Olympian mythology, Pliny the Elder, who wrote under Vespasian and before, declared the traditional religion of the Greeks a mass of absurdities. Clearly, the Christians suffered not for abstaining from the traditional temples and altars, but chiefly, I think, for refusing to share in the emperor cult. But let us cite Pliny the Elder, the veritable cyclopedia of erudition at the beginning of the Christian era (see my *From Augustus to Augustine*, 1923, p. 81): "To believe in matrimonial unions indeed among gods, and that in so long an age no one is born of them and that some are always aged and gray, others young men and boys, of swarthy complexion, wearing wings, lame (Vulcan), sprung from eggs (Helena), living and dying on alternate days (Castor and Pollux), is a matter of almost childish craziness. But the extremity of impudence it is that adulterous relations between them should be invented and, by and by, feuds and hatreds and that there should be divinities of theft and crimes. Godlike it is for one mortal to help another, and that is the road to eternal glory; it is by this way that the great men of Rome passed; it is by this now, that with the step of gods strides, with his sons, the greatest ruler of all times, Vespasian Augustus, devoted as he is to the service of the weary world." The following emperors were honored with the epithet *divus*, voted by the Senate: Caesar, Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian, Titus; not so honored were Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Domitian. One could safely scorn the gods, but to abstain from the cult of the deified emperors was another matter. How early the foul charges against the (secret) services of the Christians sprang up or who fostered and spread them I do not know. The fullest exposition of these charges is found in the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, written about 230 A. D. We pause to marvel at the long duration of these terrible charges. "And they who talk of a man who was punished with the severest form of execution" (the cross) "for crime and" (who talk) "of the deadly wood of the cross as an emblem of their religion assign them altars which befit depraved and criminal men, so that they worship what they deserve" (the cross). "Further, the current talk (*fabula*) as to how neophytes are initiated is as awful as it is familiar." (What now follows is perhaps a caricature of the Lord's Supper.) "An infant covered with grain, so as to deceive those who are not apprized, is placed before him who is to be initiated. This infant, by means of a covering of grain, is slain by the neophyte" (who has been invited, as it were, to deal some harmless stabs) "by

unseen and secret wounds. The blood of this" (infant) "— for shame! — they lap with eager thirst; by this victim" (*hostia*) "they are bound in association; through this complicity of crime are they pledged to mutual silence. These rites are more abominable than any form of sacrilege."

We also learn that Cornelius Fronto, who was tutor to the later emperor Marcus Aurelius, charged that they practised indiscriminate sexual profligacy in the dark — I dare not stain this page. Do we wonder that the Christians were bitterly hated? (The King James version [1611] of Jude 12 translates [*ἀγάται*] "feasts of charity"; to-day we would say "love-feasts.")

Mount Vernon, N. Y.

E. G. SIHLER.

(To be concluded.)

Die Gnadenwahl nach Ewigkeit und Zeit.

1.

Kontroversen lassen sich leicht in drei Gruppen einteilen. Die erste Gruppe besteht aus solchen, wo sich der christliche Polemiker vis-à-vis solcher Gegner findet, die trotz aller Belehrung bei ihrem Irrtum verharren und die Schriftlehre durchaus nicht annehmen wollen. Da ist es denn sehr erklärlich, weshalb wüthig zugehauen wird, wie dies Luther besonders in seinen letzten Lehrstreitigkeiten mit den Papisten und Sakramentierern getan hat. Dann gibt es Kontroversen, wobei sich der Gegner im Irrtum verstrickt findet, sich aber aus der Schrift belehren läßt und selbst fleißig weiterforscht, wie es sich mit der Wahrheit verhalten mag. Nach Luthers Lob verneinte zum Beispiel Georg Karg, vielleicht besser bekannt unter seinem latinisierten Namen, Parsimonius, den tätigen Gehorsam Christi (*obedientia activa*) als für die sündige Welt geschehen und behauptete, Christus habe nur durch seinen leidenden Gehorsam (*obedientia passiva*) für uns genuggetan. Karg war nicht Häretiker, wie etwa D. Eck oder auch Zwingli. Selbst ein zeitweiliges festes Bestehen auf seinem Irrtum stempelt ihn nicht als einen Theologen, der seine Vernunft nicht unter den Gehorsam Christi gefangennehmen will. Parsimonius widerrief seinen Irrtum im Jahre 1570 in höchst ehrender Weise und wurde alsbald wieder in sein Amt eingesetzt. Die Verhandlungen der Wittenberger Fakultät über den genannten Streitpunkt waren demgemäß auch höchst mäßig gehalten und erreichten so ihr Ziel auf treffliche Weise.

Schließlich gibt es aber auch eine Kategorie von Kontroversen, wobei, durch allerlei Umstände veranlaßt, redlich meinende Theologen über die Schriftlehre hinausgehen und im Eifer des Gefechts behaupten, was sie selber nicht in *foro veritatis* halten wollen. Den eifrigen und tapferen Vorkämpfer für die Schriftwahrheit, den so treuen Freund der