

II: The Christian Story

In this chapter Huston Smith describes Christianity's Great Tradition: its first millennium before it split into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches (and later the hundreds of Protestant denominations). The first part will cover Jesus and the New Testament community. The second part will cover the later history of the church and the development of the key doctrines.

The Historical Jesus

Christianity is founded on actual historical events, the most important of which is the life of a Jewish carpenter. Biographical details of Jesus' life are meager. Born during the reign of Herod the Great (a few years B.C.) and grew up in or near Nazareth. "Hidden years" between 12 and about 30 years of age. Baptised by the apocalyptic prophet John. Teaching-healing career lasted 1 to 3 years focused largely in Galilee. Some Jewish leaders became upset at him and Roman power became suspicious of him that led to his crucifixion on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Jesus was a charismatic wonder-worker who stood in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who mediated between the everyday world and the Spirit world. Look at (a) the Spirit world, to which Jesus was exceptionally connected and which powered his ministry; (b) his deployment of his Spirit-derived powers in the alleviation of human suffering; and (c) the new social order he felt commissioned to effect.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me"

Jesus' life and work only makes sense if we consider the Spirit of God that empowered him. Judaism is the story of a sustained and demanding dialogue of a chosen people with "an unseen order" called "Spirit" (from "breath"). Jews sensed the Spirit as intensely alive and included in the spirit world angels, archangels, and demons. The center was Yahweh, whom they envisioned personally. Spirit was distinct and superior to the physical world, earth, but the two were not spatially separated and were in continuous interaction.

Spirit could be known and often took the initiative and announced itself (Moses on Mt Sinai, still small voice to Elijah, lions' roars to other prophets, events of Exodus, etc.). Human could take the initiative in contacting the Spirit via fasting and solitude. Early Jews "soaked" themselves in the Spirit during these vigils and received power from the Spirit. Jesus stood in that tradition of Spirit-filled mediators. John's baptismal initiation of Jesus opened Jesus' "third" or spiritual eye. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus consolidated the Spirit that had entered him and he decisively faced down Satan's temptations to use his Spirit power for his own personal ends.

"By the Spirit of God I Cast Out Demons"

Science no longer discounts invisible realities; even empty space has great amount of energy. Charismatic people of the Bible were infused with the Spirit—"filled with the power of the Spirit". That enabled healings, exorcisms, power over nature. Jesus had such power in abundance. Jesus was a miraculous healer and exorcist and people flocked to him.

What made Jesus outlive his time and place was the way he used the Spirit that coursed through him not just to heal individuals but to heal humanity, beginning with his own people.

"Thy Kingdom Come, on Earth"

Existing responses of Jews to the Roman occupation:

1. *Sadducees*: wealthy class accommodated themselves to Hellenistic culture and Roman rule.
2. *Essenes*: dropped out of the world because they considered the world too corrupt. They devoted themselves to disciplined piety apart from the world as a way to renew Judaism.
3. *Pharisees*: remained within society and sought to renew Judaism through strict adherence to the Mosaic law, especially the holiness code.
4. *Zealots*: felt that needed change required armed force. Sporadic revolts ended in the catastrophic revolt of AD 66-70 and the second destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus' fifth option: Jesus wanted change, remained in the world, and extolled peacemaking, even love of enemies. Difference between Jesus and Pharisees was one of emphasis only. Pharisees emphasized Yahweh's holiness and Jesus emphasized Yahweh's compassion.

Pharisees grounded themselves in the majestic holiness of Yahweh. Jews were to be a people of holiness in order that the world could be hallowed. Present occupation of Jews by the Romans was a result of a lax observance of the holiness code. Jesus subscribed to much of this too except where it drew lines between people. The holiness code was used to create barriers between people that he saw as an affront to the God who spreads his mantle over his children universally (God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous"). Compassion prompted Jesus to challenge the social boundaries and to advocate an alternative vision of the human community.

Deeply Jewish but in sharp tension with Judaism. No other religion has encouraged as much internal criticism as Judaism. Diversity has kept Judaism vibrant. Jesus saw that the holiness code had been needed to lift the Jews to a purity that made them in effect a chosen people but the social divisions had compromised God's impartial, all-encompassing love for everyone.

After Jesus' arrest and execution, the future of the "Jesus people" lay with the wider world. God's revelation to the Jews was too important to be confined to a single ethnic group. The mission of Jesus and his followers had been to crack the shell of Judaism in which Revelation was encased and release that Revelation to a ready and waiting world. Jewish presence still needed in the world to be a witness of a nation of priests.

Questions

1. How does Jesus' life and work makes sense only if we consider the Spirit of God that empowered him?
2. How do the stories of Jesus' miraculous healings mesh with our modern sensibilities? How did Jesus use the miracles?

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3. How was Jesus' response to the Roman occupation different than the other Jewish groups of his day?
4. Smith says that the difference between the Pharisees and Jesus was one of emphasis only. What does he mean? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
5. What does Smith mean when he says that Jesus was deeply Jewish but in sharp tension with Judaism? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

The Christ of Faith

Move from Jesus' life to the Christ whom his followers came to believe was God in human form (from pre-Easter Jesus to post-Easter Jesus). If the Gospels disclose little in the way of historical facts, they are transparent regarding Jesus' impact on his disciples. This impact derived from what he did, what he said, and who he was.

"He Went About Doing Good"

Jesus worked a lot of miracles but never to force belief in him. The miracles were a demonstration of the power of faith. Other miracle workers at the time of Jesus. Peter said that Jesus "went about doing good", helping people of all types. People came to think that if divine goodness were to manifest itself in human form, this is how it would behave. Jesus healed, helped people understand how to live, and gave people knowledge of the right direction. People bonded with Jesus, meeting them at their level and their need for companionship.

"Never Spoke Man Thus"

Not only what Jesus did but also what he said. Individually, all of the Jesus' teachings can be found in the Torah or its commentaries but as a whole they are urgent, vivid and have a complete absence of second-rate material that makes them refreshingly new. Jesus' language was simple but heart-stopping eloquent and passionate and extravagant. Jesus' startling analogies can be explained only by the strength of his passion for truth and his determination to shock his listeners into realizing that they were settling for far, far less.

A second feature of Jesus' language was its invitational style. He invited people to see things differently, confident that if they did so their behavior would change. Jesus worked with people's imagination more than their reason or their will. He used the concrete particulars of the people's lives. Jesus located the authority for his teachings not in himself or in God-as-removed but in his hearers' own heart. In their hearts, their deepest selves, people knew his teachings were true.

People were astonished: "This man speaks with authority" and "Never spoke man thus!" Jesus presented a scheme of values so counter to the usual as to shake us to our core: Don't resist evil but to turn the other cheek; love our enemies; sun rises on just and the unjust alike; outcasts and harlots will enter the kingdom of God before the perfunctorily righteous; gate to salvation is narrow; be carefree as the birds and flowers; it is more difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle; etc. Either there was something mad about this man, or our hearts are still too small for his message.

Jesus focused people on the two most important facts about life: God's overwhelming love of humanity, and the need for people to accept that love and let it flow through them. If the infinity of God's love pierces to the core of a being, only one

response is possible—unobstructed gratitude for the wonders of God's grace. We love others and do good to others because God did the same for us many times over. Jesus' command that we love unreservedly may seem unrealistic but that is because we do not allow ourselves to experience the constant, unstinted love that flows from God to us. We need to respond to others not in proportion to what we see as their due but in proportion to their need. The cost to us personally should count for nothing.

The Beatitudes are a paradoxical happiness: bad things not eliminated but transmuted by God's all-permeating love and weakness that does not covet worldly strength (meekness) has the strength to inherit the earth.

Jesus prayed a lot. Prayer brought things into his human nature that were not there before. When Jesus prayed all night, and during the day, he placed himself in the presence of his Father who so loved the world that God transformed Jesus into his incarnation.

While Jesus used familial terms to speak of God's love for us, Jesus came down hard on the difference between *God's* family and the *human* family. Some very "hard sayings" about dividing a family apart, hating one's human family relatives to be Jesus' disciple, letting the dead bury the dead, etc. Jesus was dead set against the absolute, dictatorial, coercive power of the Roman culture's human father. His mission was to replace the human father with the heavenly Father and his family. Jesus' brothers and sisters were those who do God's will, not the human relatives by blood.

What led Jesus' disciples to the conclusion that he was divine was not his actions or his words, but what Jesus *was*, his level of being.

"We Have Seen His Glory"

The most impressive thing about the teachings of Jesus is not that he taught them but that he lived them. Jesus' entire life was one of humility, self-giving, and love that sought not its own. His concern was not what people thought of him but what they thought of God—God's nature and God's will for their lives. He always pointed to God, not himself. Free of pride, he lived a life uncluttered by deceit or guile.

Drawn to him not only by his charisma and his healing powers but by the compassion that flowed from him, people surrounded him, flocked about him, and followed him. He ignored social barriers. He knew people needed to belong. He loved children and he hated injustice. Above all he hated hypocrisy, because it hid people from themselves and precluded the authenticity he sought to build into relationships. Here was a man in whom the human ego had all but disappeared. His thoughts and feelings were his own but his ego-boundaries were perforated so he could "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who mourn."

Jesus emptied himself not only of self-consciousness but also of divinity. Released from self-consciousness, Jesus' self expanded to let in the world in the way a downstream river swells when the dam gates are opened. He was free because he was his own master—independent, self-reliant, authentic, and autonomous. Jesus wiped away all smudges of ego to allow God's light to shine through, to attune his will perfectly to God's will. The incoming light of God is not God himself: God the Father remains distinct from God the Son; the "two natures" of Christ are not to be melded together.

Questions

1. How did Jesus use his miraculous power?

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2. How did Jesus meet people's need for companionship?
3. How did Jesus use language and what style did he use to show people the truth of his message?
4. What two most important facts about life did Jesus' teach people about?
5. What are some "hard sayings" of Jesus?
6. What convinced people that Jesus was divine?
7. What does it mean to say that "Jesus emptied himself"? Why did he do that?

Holy Week

The last week of Jesus' life is so significant that the Gospels devote a significant proportion of their text to the time between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. The last quarter of Matthew, the last third of Mark, the last fifth, and the last almost half of John are devoted to this week. As the last Passover season Jesus was to experience approached, he "steadfastly set his face toward Jerusalem"—an absolute determination he needed to face what he knew was in store for him.

Palm Sunday

Shortly after Jesus entered Jerusalem, a procession spontaneously formed with Jesus riding on a donkey and onlookers cheering him on and waving palm fronds with which they line the path before him. The kind of salvation the onlookers were hoping for didn't happen (but a salvation of much more permanent kind did happen).

Maundy Thursday

On the day before the Passover, Jesus and his disciples had their last meal together. Jesus washed his disciples' feet as an example of humility they should show to each other. He commanded them to love one another. If his injunction had stopped there it would not have been new, but when he added "as I have loved you"—totally, completely, unreservedly—it *was* new, and the day entered the church calendar as Maundy Thursday, from the Latin *mondeo*, "I command." Jesus asked his disciples to repeat the meal after he was gone "in remembrance of me." "Remembrance" is laden with symbolism, for to re-member is to reassemble parts that have been sundered. We re-member Jesus in reenacting his Last Supper.

The Night on the Mount of Olives

After supper, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives to pray. His disciples kept vigil with him while he went alone into the Garden of Gethsemane. There he prayed an anguished prayer that if possible "this cup" (his death on behalf of us all) might pass from him. He was deep in the valley of the shadow of death, in a dark night of the soul, a virtual hell with its sense that God had died. Jesus' human nature required that he traverse a great void on the way to his resurrection. However, it was only God as object (the God he was praying to), not God as subject (the incarnated God that he was) that had deserted him, for to his supplication that the cup be spared him, he added, "Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."

The Crucifixion

In the Passover season Jerusalem was a powder keg. The city was abuzz with clashing arguments as to the best way of dealing with the Roman oppression. The

Romans were on heightened alert and Jesus was high on their list of potential troublemakers. In the dead of night, Pilate's soldiers took Jesus from the Garden of Gethsemane and the next day Pilate put him on trial. As a warning to the Jerusalem population, Pilate would crucify several political suspects and lawbreakers on the day of preparation for the Passover.

Earliest accounts of Jesus' trial were written about 40 years after the event took place and the Gospel accounts are filtered through the suffering that Christians had endured to win their independence from Judaism. The Gospels shift the responsibility for Jesus' execution from Rome to the Jews (were "the Jews" the crowd or the chief priests or both depends on the particular gospel). The Gospels were also written after the disastrous rebellion of 67-70 led to the destruction of the Second Temple. In asking for Barabbas' release instead of Jesus, the Gospels say that "the Jews" had brought the Temple down on their own heads. Placing the Gospels in their historical context and seeing them as a reaction to the persecution Christians were suffering from "the Jews" when the Gospels were written—as severe as their persecution of the Jews would be when they got the upper hand—is the only way to fold the Gospels into Christian revelation.

Huston Smith conflates the four Gospels into a single narrative of Jesus' crucifixion and his last words on the cross. When it was determined that Jesus had died in the mid-afternoon (was it on the Passover or the day after the Passover?), his body was placed in a cavelike sepulcher that Joseph of Arimathea offered (usually the bodies were left to rot on the cross or thrown onto the ground for the scavenger animals).

Jesus' followers were bewildered and in despair. Jesus' crucifixion was a fearful, death-dealing finale. They had expected a great new day for the people of God, but the miracle they had expected had not come. Now it was too late.

Questions

1. What sort of salvation were the Jewish people wanting from him as he entered Jerusalem?
2. What was so significant about Jesus' actions at his last meal with the disciples? What was so significant about his command to the disciples at that meal?
3. How does the story of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane make you feel about Jesus?
4. How might the events going on at the time the Gospels were actually written affect their re-telling of Jesus' trial and crucifixion?

The End and the Beginning

We do not know exactly what happened after Jesus was entombed, but we do know that within a short time Jesus' followers were preaching the gospel of their risen Lord. Modern, science-based culture dismisses their reports, but we should be careful as some very intelligent people like John Polkinghorne (world-class physicist, now Anglican priest) and N.T. Wright (noted New Testament scholar) both argue that the tomb really was empty and there is no reason to think that Jesus' body was stolen. There's a parallel account in Buddhism of a large stone in front of a cave being rolled away.

Jesus appears to have been resurrected—not resuscitated, since his body was now different than it was before his crucifixion. His body was visible and Jesus ate food when

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he was hungry and his body could be touched, but it could also pass through locked doors. These mysterious differences persuaded the disciples that their Master had entered a new mode of being. Thenceforth, his people would be Jesus' body, doing what he would do if he still had physical hands and feet.

Questions

1. How do you feel about the resurrection story? Is it an essential part of your Christian faith? How so or how not?
2. How do we participate in the resurrection?

The Ascension and Pentecost

Forty days after he died, Jesus ascended into heaven and forty days after that, God sent the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised in the event we know as Pentecost. Jesus' followers were gathered to join in the thanksgiving festival in which the first fruits of the harvest were offered to Yahweh when they felt the Holy Spirit like the rush of a violent wind. They were given the ability to converse with others who spoke in different languages. This was a sign that Jesus' message was to be carried to the entire world.

Expansion began quickly and non-Jews (Gentiles) were welcomed into the community (after a bit of debate, but Peter led the apostles to reach out). Why did people respond to their message?

Questions

1. How did the disciples view their Spirit-given ability to speak in other languages?

The Good News

Jesus' resurrection was not about the fate of a worthy man. It concerned the status of goodness in the universe, offering evidence that goodness has power—indeed, ultimate power. Jesus was goodness incarnate, and in his resurrection his goodness triumphed. The resurrection reversed the cosmic position in which the cross had placed Jesus' goodness. The compassion the disciples had encountered in Jesus was powerful—victorious over everything.

This conviction transformed a dozen or so disconsolate followers of a slain and discredited leader into one of the most dynamic forces in human history. They and those that followed them spread their message of Good News with such fervor that in Jesus' very generation it took root in every major city of the region. What was the Good News?

It wasn't Jesus' ethical teachings, nor anything Jesus taught (Paul never refers to Jesus' teachings). It wasn't even the way Jesus had embodied his teachings that was the Good News. Use the fish symbol. Greek letters for the word "fish" are also the first letters of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior". Hearers of the disciples' message were impressed by what they saw as much as by what they heard. They saw lives that had been transformed. Here were people who seemed to be making a success of the enterprise everyone would like to succeed at—life itself.

Two qualities: (a) Mutual regard for each other with total absence of social barriers; discipleship of equals. (b) Happiness. It was impossible to be sad in Jesus' company. These early Christians were "radiant" despite their lack of power and constant persecution. The joy of these early Christians *was* unspeakable. They sang, not routinely

but from the irrepressible overflow of their direct experience. Life was not challenges to be met; it was glory discerned. What produced this love and joy?

Three intolerable burdens had suddenly and dramatically been lifted: (a) Fear, including fear of death. Jesus' counsel, "Fear not, for I am with you," had gotten through to them. (b) Guilt. We know that we not only behave less well toward others than our conscience dictates, we also fail ourselves by leaving talents undeveloped and letting opportunities slip by. As a result, we have a hard time living with ourselves. Early Christians felt released from this guilt. (c) Ego, self-centeredness. Early Christians were released from the cramping confines of ego. They knew that the human curse is to love and sometimes to love well, but never to love *well enough*. How did Christians get free of these burdens and what did Jesus have to do with it?

Only the power of love makes this possible. Locked in every human being is a store of love that partakes of the Divine—the *imago Dei*, the image of God within us. Love's bombardment unlocks and activates that store of love. Love takes root in children only when it comes to them. Love is an answering phenomenon. It is literally, a response. Early Christians were changed by feeling certain that they were totally loved, vividly and personally by one who united all power and all goodness.

When the first Christians felt God's love, it was a love that could not be stopped. A new kind of love, Christian love was born. It gave, not prudentially in order to receive, but because giving was its nature. Paul's words in the thirteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians list the attributes of Jesus Christ. They describe the divine love that Christians would reflect toward others once they experienced Christ's love for them.

Questions

1. Jesus' resurrection wasn't about the fate of one man but of what?
2. Why did hearers of the disciples' message respond to them? What was it about disciples' message and actions that affected their hearers so deeply?
3. What two qualities did the early Christians have that drew more followers?
4. What three burdens were lifted from the early Christians? Are any of these burdens still a part of your life?
5. How did Christians get free of these burdens and what did Jesus have to do with it? Does it still apply to us today? How so or how not?

The Mystical Body of Christ

The first Christians did not feel that they were alone. They believed that Jesus was in their midst as a concrete, energizing power. They called themselves an *ekklesia*, from the Greek meaning a self-governing assembly, but not just a self-help society powered by human will for good. Human members constituted the Christian *ekklesia*, but it was powered by Christ's (God's) presence within it.

The early church understood Christ's statement "I am the vine, you are the branches" as a metaphor for how the Holy Spirit, flowing from the resurrected Christ into his followers, like sap flows through the vine to the branches. As sap brings life and fruit to the branches and leaves, Christ's followers were empowered with the love that bore good works as its fruit. Paul adapted this image by using the human body instead of a vine to symbolize the church. All parts are animated by a single source. The church was the Mystical Body of Christ. "Mystical" means a supernatural and mysterious *reality*.

Christ was the head of this body and the Holy Spirit was its soul. Individual Christians were its cells.

The aim of early Christian worship was to say those words and to do those things that kept the Mystical Body alive, while at the same time opening individual cells (souls) to its inflowing vitality. To the degree that members were in Christian health, the pulse of the Holy Spirit coursed through them. Christians were bound to each other and to Christ. The church today has a double aspect. Insofar as it consists of Christ and the Holy Spirit dwelling in people and suffusing them with grace and love, it is flawless. Insofar as it consists of fallible human members, it always falls short of its possibility. The church's mistakes are due to its human fabric.

Is there salvation apart from the Body of Christ? Historical circumstances must be taken into consideration when reading categorical withholdings of salvation from outsiders. Who are the outsiders from whom salvation is being withheld? How lofty is their faith, how advanced their moral standards? Even in the first millennium there were differences of opinion on this point. Today there is a wide spectrum of beliefs from liberal Protestants who see the claim of "outside the church there is no salvation" as religious imperialism to the fundamentalists who insist that none but those who are knowingly (no infant baptism!) and formally Christians will be saved. In between are those who draw a distinction between the church visible (formally members of an earthly institution) and the church invisible (those who abide by "natural law, the commands of which are written by God in every human heart, and being ready to obey him, live honorably and uprightly).

Questions

1. How are we a part of the Mystical Body of Christ? What does it mean to be a part of that body?
2. What are the two aspects of the church that Smith talks about?
3. Where do you fall in the spectrum of beliefs on whether or not there is salvation apart from the Body of Christ? Why?

Saul of Tarsus

If Christ founded Christianity, Paul founded the Christian church. Its seeds had been sown in the analogies of the vine and its branches and the Mystical Body of Christ, but Paul gave those understandings institutional shaped, a visible structure. If Jesus had not been followed by Paul, the Sermon on the Mount would have evaporated in a generation or two; but as it is, we still hear and heed it. Comparably, if the Buddha had not instituted the *sangha*, his monastic community, his teachings too would have vanished from the face of the earth.

Paul began as Saul, a zealous Jewish leader whose passion was to stamp out the Christ heresy. Leading a group to Damascus on a mission to hunt down as many Christians as he could he was knocked down to the ground by a blinding light. Only Saul heard the voice of Jesus saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Blinded for three days, he managed to locate a Christian household and was baptized.

Saul's physical blindness sharpened the vision of what was disclosed to his inner, spiritual eye. Saul saw that he was heir to the "throne mysticism" of the Jews. In his conversion experience Saul had a vision of being taken to a "third heaven" and seeing Jesus, clothed in dazzling white, seated on the throne. Re-named Paul, his dedication to

eliminating social barriers came straight from Jesus. Not a spell-binding evangelist, Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit to reach people in way that was very persuasive. He also kept tabs on the churches he founded, revisiting them as necessary.

From his ministry to the churches emerged a very original and impressive theology. His personal experience convinced him that it was impossible for anyone to obtain the peace and joy we need with our own feeble resources. Only the love of God could save us.

Paul was also a great poet. His discourses sift out the superfluous without omitting anything of importance; they help us comprehend the incomprehensible; and they exude intelligence and ecstasy combined. Without intelligence he would have perished in duels with the church's opponents and without ecstasy his words would not have reached their distinctive heights and would have remained simply good poetry. Paul's sayings permeate the thoughts of Christians almost as much as the sayings of Jesus. Paul's masterpiece is the 13th chapter of his first letter to the Christians, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,..."

Truth is the *whole*. The Gospels provide four accounts of Jesus that complement one another. With Matthew we see that Jesus was dyed-in-the-world Jew. With Mark we see how uniquely Jesus played out his Jewishness. Luke throws a priestly mantle over Jesus' individuality. Finally, there is John, who without denying any of the other Gospels, also tells us of Jesus' cosmic stature and station; he is the world's beginning and its end. Jesus is the vessel into which God pours himself completely and descends to the lowest depths of creation, where God gathers everything back into God and fulfills it at the end of time.

The second part of this chapter will deal with the church and doctrines that arose after the time of the New Testament community.

Questions

1. How did Paul found the institutional church? How was his ministry so vital to the growing church then and today?
2. What new theology emerged from Paul's experiences? How it apply to us today?
3. In what ways was Paul a great poet? What two things did he combine in his writings?
4. Why do we need to have four Gospels rather than a single definitive one?