

The First Twenty Years of Christianity

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- [0 : 0 0] Can I be heard at the back of the class? Thank you. Let us first of all turn to prayer. May the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.
- And may the thoughts, the ideas, everything that is spoken be in accordance with your will. Amen.
- I have to acknowledge then Janet and Susan and Sheila and Phil and all the wonderful people who assisted in the Tuesday lunchtime Bible studies this spring.
- These thoughts are all original to them and also to acknowledge the book by Bishop Paul Barnett which is called The Birth of Christianity and coincidentally the subtitle which is The First Twenty Years.
- So you see there is some authority for this title. You may think we are going to go through the book of Acts again today because of the title and you will be mistaken because the first twenty years of Christianity present to us a most fascinating period in the life of the church which was not written down until the 60s.
- [1 : 5 4] And if you count twenty years from 33 AD you only get as far as 53. None of Acts was written down by this time.
- What were those poor people doing? They didn't have Bible studies in the sense that we have. Of course they had the Old Testament and those who happened to be in contact with the leaders of the day had the personal witness of Peter and Paul.
- They had very fortunately the presence of the Holy Spirit but they did not have text until apparently 48 AD when the epistle to the Galatians was written.
- So for those of you who thought we were going to go through Acts I'm sorry you may now leave we're going to focus on the two earliest books that appeared in 48 AD in the case of Galatians and in the early 50s probably 51 or 52 in the case of the first letter to the Thessalonians and try to do as is most interestingly done by Paul Barnett to infer what it was that was the characteristic of the gospel and the life of the early church before they had text.
- Now let me just make one disclaimer Paul Barnett in his discussion says let us assume that there are problems in the book of Acts Now in a group like this I realise there are no problems with Acts because we all think it's good and we all have learnt more about it in the course of this weekend and by the end of by Christmas at least we will all be living experts on the book of Acts but but it's what what Paul is doing as a as a an exercise if you like is to say let's put ourselves in the shoes of those early Christians and you will remark to me well of course they they knew of Paul's conversion they heard Stephen's sermon they heard Peter's preaching they heard Paul's preaching did they?
- [4 : 2 7] did they? people living in Troas people living in Rome who became Christians did they have any first hand information about those sermons?

they had second hand or third hand or fourth hand information but they were really in a very tricky spot by comparison with the riches and treasures that we have with respect to what was going on in the first 20 years of the Christian church I might go as far as to suggest that it's one of the biggest miracles recorded in the scriptures if we accept the death resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ the biggest miracle might well be the survival of the early church in those first 20 years it's the most improbable thing from a purely secular perspective that that group of weak well not so weak they were very good fishermen and as Sheila kept telling us they were earning a good wage as fisherfolk and we shouldn't feel too sorry for them but really they were up against the might of the

Roman Empire they were up against all the authorities of the day and very few of them except I suppose Paul himself had the credentials to wage war with the secular society of the day so I'm asking you then for a few moments to suspend your elaborate knowledge of what went on as recorded in Acts not to suggest that you should ignore it permanently but just try to think of what those Christians were doing without the kind of biblical resources that you and I enjoy today so with that in mind I'll just read one verse which you're very familiar with from Acts chapter 2 and verse 42 they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers and awe came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles this might be a characteristic brief summary of the first 20 years of

Christianity and it's noticeable that it does not include Bible studies it includes the apostles teaching it includes prayers it includes the breaking of bread those of us who have just come from communion service and those of you who are just about to go to communion service recognize without undue emphasis on sacramentalism that that is the common denominator the continuity of the church as conscious of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ which we celebrate every week at this place doesn't require emphasis on sacramentalism it simply recognizes that that was the essential food for the church in the first twenty years with the absence of so many of the props that we have today so it seems to me that the mere survival of the church against overwhelming odds is itself a major miracle its phenomenal growth over the first few centuries as well which is so well described by F.F.

Bruce in his book *The Spreading Flame* is something worth immersing ourselves into but apparently the details of this growth were not written down until the 60s the higher critics made a lot of noise about this when they were challenging the authenticity of the scriptures there was a considerable amount of emphasis on the fact that people suffer from delusions and loss of memory and that there was no way they possibly could have remembered the details of all the sermons and the speeches and that really it's very much a creation of the early church and is not something that has objective value well there are many ways of countering that argument we might even start by thinking about what is your own recollection of what happened 20 years ago certainly not conclusive evidence but many of us were around when the

[10:11] Berlin Wall fell which is the same time frame of 20 years that we're looking at between 53 and 33 AD for example but yeah this actually there's material from 15 years so it's even better but the other direction in which one might move is the way in which David suggested yesterday in his presentation that many of these sermons and speeches that are recorded in Acts represent the basic outline of the structure of the argument that was repeatedly put forward by Peter and Paul and by Stephen and that the emphasis on individual words is indeed not essential but further arguments which are important in terms of seeing the connections across the first 20 years are the fact that

Luke was a personal friend of Paul spent considerable time apparently learning from Paul's experience also that Luke declares in his book Luke Acts Luke hyphen Acts is a nice way of referring to the whole book in many places indicates the care with which he examined the evidence talked with the people who were involved and so on but there's clearly something much more at play here than just an analytical examination of the evidence for individual speeches and individual sermons there's a whole integrity in the development of the early church which is quite extraordinary it's quite supernatural the stories of dissension are freely shared and yet out of that dissension comes a remarkable coherence and it's that coherence that is expressed in the earliest documents which I want to just share with you at the moment

I know you're all experts on Galatians and 1st Thessalonians but I had never before read Galatians and 1st Thessalonians with this thought in mind so it's not new research it's something that came to us as a group as we were studying it a new way of looking at the context and I'm sure many of you have done the same but I found it enormously refreshing I found it exciting and well let's try and see if you find it exciting also Galatians I'm not going to spend a lot of time reading the verses but I want to direct your attention to the results of first of all the discussion in Galatians now the evidence seems to be that Galatians was the first of the letters you know I had not anticipated the presence of Dr.

Packer here this morning and so I have to tread very carefully on this but my understanding is that 48 AD is a very probable date in particular because the essence of the letter to the Galatians is this great discussion about getting rid of the old constraints of the requirements of the law as expressed in the Judaic tradition so in other words there was a fight going on as to how many people should be circumcised how many people should eat red meat how many people should be vegetarians and the discussion in Galatians is one that is very powerful in terms of the need for the new freedom in Christ and the need for forgetting these old constraints why is this useful evidence for the date well you will recall especially those who were present yesterday that the council of

Jerusalem in 49 AD made a definitive ruling on the fact that the gospel was for all it was an inclusive gospel so here's Paul in Galatians struggling to make the argument as explicit as possible makes no reference to the council of Jerusalem at which the matter was once and for all settled that's probably a little ambitious it's more definitive however than most of the Anglican synods that we have experienced recently and the issues that Paul addresses in Galatians have to do directly with this conflict more than that more than that and beyond the question of the timing but relevant to the fact that it's the earliest document is the nature of the gospel that is preached in Galatians the details of that gospel because apart from the improbability of the survival of the church in the first twenty years is the improbability of the consistency of the gospel that was being preached it's interesting

[16:02] I think to compare the situation that is happening in China at the present time where there is a huge growth and yet such is the growth that the availability of pastors and the availability of teachers who have some experience is extremely limited so people are going off in all directions as indeed happened in the early period of the twenty years of Christianity but out of all that chaos which is freely shared with us in the Acts of the Apostles emerges a gospel that is in all respects full complete as reflected in both Galatians and 1st Thessalonians so let me just give you that because sometimes one reads these epistles and says oh yes the same old thing the same old gospel we've heard it before and we just don't pay attention to the fact that this is extraordinary that it emerged out of chaos and that the Holy

Spirit was somehow guiding that initial emergence of the church towards this whole and simple and profound gospel so if you don't believe me if you look to Galatians chapter 1 for example verses 12 to 16 Paul who had not known Jesus in life talks about the revelation of the truth that he received in the Damascus vision he talks about the clarity with which he was addressed as one born out of due time as the expression used and he continues by saying in chapter 2 verse 14 that those who are not in step with the gospel that I am preaching is not part of mainstream

Christianity words to that effect he goes on in verses 19 to 21 in chapter 2 of Galatians to elaborate on the substitutionary nature of the sacrifice of Jesus this in the context of the debate over the freedom that is in Christ so apparently he was able to appeal to what was already a tradition by saying there is a mainstream gospel he was able to refer to the fundamental nature of the substitutionary nature of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross he was able to talk about the critical nature of the resurrection I'll come back to that again those of you who were present yesterday will have heard a repetition of the theme of resurrection just as an aside those of you who were at that session

I apologize to those of you who weren't but it was rather interesting because individual tables were given individual sermons and speeches from the Acts to analyze and to produce a summary of and each table had a representative who came forward and gave us a summary of the main points of the sermon and on the whole David let people produce their own summaries but lo and behold if anybody didn't have a resurrection in their answers they were marked down with considerable intensity and of course the theme of resurrection the theme of this being the man who God had appointed occurs in each of these sermons and speeches that were being analyzed so it was a theme that emerged from the well I'm going against my strategy now

I'm not referring to the Acts but it's relevant in the sense that immediately in the first chapter and the second chapter of Galatians you have exactly that emphasis so that even though the argument is about something else in terms of the freedom versus the law the details of the gospel are expressed rather unambiguously secondly in 1st Thessalonians which was written apparently a couple of years after Galatians after the first missionary journey and corresponding with the church of Thessalonica Paul has the following discussion particularly in chapter 1 verses 1 to 10 and chapter 2 verses 1 to 16 he starts off with the

[21 : 37] Trinitarian statement God the Father the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit this Trinitarian statement is straight off the bat in chapter 1 and verse 1 and verses 3 to 5 and then again he appeals to the congregation in Thessalonica to what they know he says look you know what the gospel is you have heard it and it's important that you recognize the permanence of it and the wholeness of it in verses 9 to 10 of chapter 1 of 1 Thessalonians Jesus is identified as the Son of God the resurrection is stated as an undisputed truth and the fact that

Jesus delivers us from the power of sin is made explicit and more particularly that he delivers us from the penalty of sin in chapter 2 he goes on to talk about the nature of the gospel he goes on to talk about the relationship between the gospel and the word of God and he proceeds in chapter 2 verse 12 and onwards to talk about the nature of God's kingdom and what is promised to believers there are repeated references to an inclusive gospel which is for all people whether it's Jew or Gentile or even Welsh people people but it's an astonishing clarity that emerges in these early documents now in a sense this is perhaps not surprising because

Paul had already been preaching actively for a number of years one of the interesting things that Paul Barnett taught us was that Paul's own conversion occurred only one year after the ascension of Jesus I see some of you looking shocked because you know that the account of Paul's conversion is in chapter 9 and it seems like things have been going on for quite a while but the evidence would seem to be that if you add up the various numbers as recorded particularly in Galatians in relation to other evidences from what was going on around that it must have been as early as one year or maybe at most two years after the ascension so Paul himself had been not only disciplining himself by retreating having a long weekend retreat of two years but also he had been actively engaged in preaching the gospel so you might say well that's fine obviously

Paul knew his stuff not he didn't know his stuff he received it directly from the risen Lord but think more carefully about it because the fact that Paul knew his stuff is really not the point this is a whole army of people of all kinds and all shapes and sizes all around the known world who were receiving this gospel for the first time and the possibilities of misunderstanding and of misinterpretation were endless different languages we know of the extraordinary events that happened at Pentecost but we don't hear of similar events subsequently so the activity of the Holy Spirit continued to communicate the details of the gospel through Paul through people who listened to Paul through the converts as they emerged over time now there's another aspect to this whole question of the absence of text during the period before the writing of Galatians and Thessalonians but what I've tried to point out here is that the evidence by 48 AD was that the gospel was clear full and demonstrable but there is another aspect which is very interesting and I think not commonly discussed and that is the way in which the collective memory of the community at that time was a lot sharper than the collective memory of our own community

I don't wish to insult anybody here but I've been recently reading a book called The Empire of Illusion which emphasizes the fact that as a society we have become creatures of spectacle and not of literacy as a result we're losing our memories whereas this community this group of people these groups of people that were receiving the gospel for the first time they joyfully had to use their memories their memories were sharpened by the necessity for maintaining their tradition and so the whole argument that was presented about the lapse of time of 15 or 20 years leading to the suspect evidence that was being recorded 20 or 30 years after the events really falls apart in relation to the way in which people used their memories at the time this is not an argument for the special memories of the

[27 : 54] Christian community but the fact that because people were generally not readers generally an illiterate society they depended very much on their collective memories and so here is the objective evidence from Galatians and 1st Thessalonians but the kind of emotional evidence if you like or perhaps the cultural evidence of the way in which people were reliant upon their memories at that time which reinforced the clarity and the emergence of this clear and complete gospel which hasn't changed over the last 2,000 years I think the astonishing thing to us is that we look at a gospel which is unchanged over 2,000 years which has been communicated through feeble vessels like ourselves and has transformed the world when you think of the implications of the survival of the church in the first 20 years so I find it's exciting

I am grateful to the folks who met on this topic and who shared their insights and I'm grateful to Paul who in some respects I find less comfortable in other aspects less comfortable but in respect the profound contribution of stabilizing communicating the wholeness of the gospel at the very first time in the evolution of the church now there's a whole range of other aspects that filled our time in this study one which I'd like to reflect on is the extraordinary preoccupation of the early Christians with the growth of the church there certainly was no time to put things down on paper there was such an excitement and such a growth we'd read of 2000 3000 being added to the church we just imagine the amount of time that must have been spent in discipling and the academic recorders of events were simply sidelined with all due respect to academics in the audience

I mean who could possibly be sitting down reflecting and writing when all this is going on I mean the urgency of attending to the growth of this exploding church is such that in my view it's very unlikely that written material could have emerged any earlier than the 48 AD or thereabouts A to give perspective B to give the opportunity to sit down and do the writing so that the little verse that we read from Acts chapter 2 about what preoccupied the early church is really an expression of the focus that gave life and made the resurrection of Jesus a reality in that time and it seems to me that this focus on the nature of the

Jesus as the appointed man and the one who rose from the dead or who God raised from the dead is another expression that represents the glue not just the glue but the dynamic of the early church and which guaranteed not only the survival of the church but the enormous growth so the final point here is that the authenticity of the Luke Acts record of the events of the period 33 to 50 AD is in large measure the evidence as given in Galatians and 1st Thessalonians it's the strong endorsement of their authenticity because of the focus that is clear the clarity of the emphasis of the gospel and the fact that

Paul is able to hold that revelation that he received on the road to Damascus in this way in a broader sense of course we all know that the experience of Pentecost was the accelerator and brought the matter to life but we also know that the effects of this giving of the Holy Spirit was such as to produce growth and diversity at the same time and I think it took the stability of the scholarly approach of Paul to actually stabilize that momentum so you had this huge flame that was spreading through the gift of the Holy

[34 : 36] Spirit but the flame as you know can easily go off in so many directions it had to be stabilized and it seems to me that's where Paul was such a remarkable figure so what other explanation for this spectacular rise of Christianity in the first 20 years can be attested is it not the complete preoccupation of the church with worship and prayer and evangelism left no time for the writing of history books and learned tomes they had to follow and these learned tomes started to emerge as Paul wrote his letters and of course it was not until the 60s that Luke Acts was finally written down so I hope that you have some sense of the excitement that was generated in this group because

I think it's so easy to get stale so easy to become repetitive in our faith and to as I say I'm guilty of this more than anyone I'm sure every time we read from the scriptures and we say it's the same old same old well it's incredible that it is the same old same old it's the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church and I also think that the suggestion that was made yesterday that the book of Acts should really be called the book of the Acts of the risen Jesus that the book of the Acts of the risen Jesus is not what is written in your Bible David at one rash moment suggested you should cross out the title as written in your

Bibles and substitute a better title as you may have guessed he was joking nevertheless I find this title the Acts of the risen Jesus very exciting because that really is what explains the dynamic and explains the survival and the cohesion and the integrity of the gospel so finally what does this have to teach us about the church today well it's a pretty dull crowd isn't it that we are today you think of the excitement of what was going on in the first 20 years people were being slaughtered as well so it wasn't all happiness but the dynamic of what was going on was extraordinary so the risk that is being taken in stepping out of line if you like in this church is something that needs to be seen as something that was part of the early church tradition stepping out of line everything that was done in the early church was stepping out of line the number of court appearances was emphasized towards the end of Acts as being something that was part of the life of the early church and in many respects reinforced from outside some of the developments in the church but it seems to be the most important lesson for us today is the sense of the excitement and of the risk taking that must have gone on in every

Christian life in that early church and it also seems to me that the focus which we sometimes get completely out of balance which was worship prayer the breaking of the bread the fellowship and the evangelism some say it's all evangelism some say it's all worship some say we should be going to the Eucharist every day some say it's all about prayer it's not it's all about all of those things and that seems to me an important lesson for us in terms of a balanced Christian community in the 21st century so Mr.

Chairman I conclude my thoughts it's shockingly early but in my view most bottoms can't manage more than 50 minutes that's personal view and I'm happy to see you stretch or depart for other purposes that we can have a discussion they say in the art world that less is more so would you say that their more their seemingly larger spiritual experience perhaps was because they were able to concentrate on less than we have a saturation of information at our hands and perhaps we don't know how to focus on what's good for us but they did have the what the synagogues had the old testament didn't they so there is a gospel there of sorts in terms of prophecy so but would you agree that less is more in that sense of actually living

[41 : 17] Bill's question is would I agree that less is more in those terms very difficult to agree with but yes the suggestion that the early church had fewer obligations elsewhere they were able to focus because that was all that they were about we are about everything in Canada we are global we are local we are regional we are all amateur psychologists emphasis on the amateur we are it's almost like the challenge of the school teacher in our educational system school teacher has been asked to become pastor doctor psychiatrist everything else and is facing an impossible range of challenges so I think yes there's a profound point there Bill that we are just over committed in too many directions well where do we go from there how do we get out of that the email hasn't helped we will all go home and we will cross out 75 150 email messages and we'll still worry about the last 10 or 15 that require more careful examination so how do we how do we get out of this

I'm not in a strong position to advise because I'm flying all over the shop yes Betty it seems to me the idea of church worship prayer breaking of bread fellowship and evangelism they were so well balanced and the Lord says a false balance is an abomination so we all need to keep that perspective in mind I think generally speaking we do have those things that St.

John's churches don't suffer for it well everything you said apart from the self congratulations I agree with that 150% I think we have great danger of seeing ourselves as such a good shape I think that we're certainly doing some risky things and there's certainly wonderful things happening and we wouldn't be here if we didn't think so but really I think we have to be very careful about patting ourselves on the back are we really as balanced as we think I mean I could list a whole lot of things I think we're in bad shape and I was chatting yesterday afternoon in one of the breaks with one of our friends here and we were talking about the absence of mystery in our services and we come into church and it's like a fairground people chatting away it's wonderful that everyone's talking to each other but it's like a fairground and how to sort of change from that to a more serious sober worship

I don't think we're doing well in that front well I remember it's a challenge before I walked into church and there's silence so I'm trying to criticize you but we have a tendency to think we're doing so well Bishop Bishop thank you very much does the real Bishop Bishop Barnett and yourself as you pondered this issue an issue from later times as you know are these people expecting the Lord to return a week Thursday or are they indifferent to that or does anything about that come up in your pond reading well I guess the theme of 1st Thessalonians is very much the return but there's no specific evidence that I'm aware of that would say that

Dr. Packer have you thought on that well this is a point I think on which most Christians err either to the right or to the left I think it was falling off a tight rope there have been Christians who could think of nothing but the prospect of the Lord's return at any time and Christians with that preoccupation have not always been the how can I say it the good citizens the thoughtful contributors to the future even the good planners of their own lives that one would have hoped for then on the other hand there have been the people who stressed the importance of being wise in the

[46 : 55] Bible sense that is making good plans thinking ahead and so on on the supposition that the world will go on essentially the way that it is now and those folk the majority I think have tended to forget that the Lord did say be ready because at a time you're not expecting the Son of Man will come back and the way of wisdom the way of staying upright on the tightrope is to remember that yes we should live as if nothing is going to change in our lifetime but be ready to find that God has other plans I sometimes have expressed it by saying that we should live packed up and ready to go but at the same time laboring to be as much use in the church for the

Lord and indeed use to the wider world as we can be for the Lord's sake as long as he prolongs our life here so this is wise advice for us today it doesn't answer Harvey's question though does it as to the evidence of how they were behaving at that time it seems to me that the evidence direct evidence from 1st Thessalonians is that they were told that it's not their ability to judge or to actually decide why little will be but that the Lord's return is going to happen and the resurrection oh yes that's certainly stressed in 1st Thessalonians recently it comes up as an issue in 1st Thessalonians is surely that some of the Thessalonians anyway thought for some reason that Christians who had already died would somehow not be at the centre of things when the

Lord came back somehow they were going to lose out in the glory that Jesus would bring in and Paul is labouring to say that will not be the case at all when the Lord comes back we shall all be together in whatever glory it is that he brings for his people Paul says that he'll come back with the saints that is we he links himself with the rest of the Christians who are alive he isn't committing himself to a particular expectation but we who are alive and remain we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air where he will be with a crowd of saints that is all those who have died in Christ before his coming he will be bringing them with him and we shall all meet together that's how he expresses it is that an adequate answer to your question more and more there good answer well just sort of going back to the original question

I can imagine that because some of the people who were evangelizing had seen Jesus go that the idea of his return in like manner as we are told would be a much more immediate thing to them that as a generation passed or even as they got farther away from Jerusalem that that might be modified in the way that Dr.

Packer is suggesting that you have to be prepared with your suitcase or backpack whatever to go and maybe even arrive at what we have today I think which is it's a myth Jesus isn't coming back look we've had two thousand years of his time where did this funny idea come from we were certainly people around would think that but the idea of people actually witnesses to his departure being the people who were doing some of that initial preaching must surely have had an impact on their congregations there were just 11 such people weren't there yes please actually following from what Dr.

[51 : 38] Packer just said I've read in a number of places and I'm not a logist so I'm not sure how accurate this is that after Paul's personal revelation he withdrew for several years so in that time were the 11 the only ones who carried the early church because Paul came in then after the fact is that right he came in at several points he had an immediate impact after his conversion and then he spent some time in Arabia he's not known exactly which part of Arabia but it seems to have been the Syrian part southern Syria region and he essentially built up his spiritual resources at that time and then proceeded to preach extensively in the area of Antioch in Syria and in a whole range of other places even before the first missionary journey so he was very busy so there's not much information about those few years it's limited yes one of the most frustrating things about the acts of the risen Jesus book is the gaps which are so tantalizing and

I mean that was to me a shock to find that the conversion of Paul must have been within a year or so of the ascension it just seemed strange but of course the decision as to how these events would have emphasized is something that one believes to be inspired at the same time we can't help wishing that the bits that were missing might have been available to us yes please I know we're not supposed to go in to ask but there was that tantalizing verse that David Shirt put on yesterday when it said something about the numbers read many read the number of the including mainly the priests and I think that the priests who would have heard Jesus preach as well there were many other librarians of Jesus of course and having a mind which is now being converted or bought a self of mind and heart being converted then you would remember what he had said and understand and be able to teach as well so you'd think there's a lot of strong teaching in Jerusalem and around the earth even from these priests converted

I love that because you tend to think of Judaism as being an enemy and in many ways of Christianity but in this case this is the heart of Judaism which has picked up their Lord and Messiah that's very helpful thanks I think we are exhausted this term next week Sheila has chosen a very simple subject called the end of faith and we have Sheila Westbrook next week so we can pick on her and we can pick on Ola and are you ready for that

Sheila? Oh well yes as much as one can ever be very interested in no no