

## ENGAGING THE GREAT CONVERSATION July 2010

History, memory, the past: BORING!!! We live in a time when it is popularly assumed that nothing excitingly, self-legitimizingly authentic ever happened before we came along. Our economy's planned obsolescence assists us in this attitude; you can probably think of examples. Mine is the repetitious behavior of the church whenever it doesn't know what else to do: it undergoes REORGANIZATION. Some people consider reorganization to be analogous to arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Others, though, make careers, not to mention lots and lots of money in this endeavor. Either way, behavior seems to be shaped by the assumption that "the way things were" just isn't good enough anymore. Hence, we dismiss the past, race breathlessly toward some vaguely imagined future, and treat the present as little more than a spring board or stagecoach stop. Which brings me to this month's topic: **other early Christianities.**

For many of us, other early Christianities probably goes back to the kind of church we attended, then left, once upon a time when we were younger. Others of us have some awareness of a split of some kind between (Roman) Catholics and Protestants, of which there are Lutherans and Presbyterians and Methodists, after which things become quickly hazy. Disciples, being post-protestant (historically speaking), tend to feel superior, having left all of the above behind in a spasm of 19th Century supercessionism, rivaling that of the LDS among others. Supercessionism is the theological version of planned obsolescence. That there are currently over 5,000 variations of protestant Christianity, let alone alternative kinds of Catholic ones, including those in the Eastern hemisphere, becomes mind-numbing. Didn't there used to be one church, the right one, from which all the others deviated (like we probably were told in that early church of our own experience, the one we left behind)? Well, probably not. You can get a really fascinating read on this history by taking a look at any of Bart Ehrmann's books or DVDs. He talks about, for example, Lost Christianities and Lost Scriptures, and does so more honestly, though perhaps not quite as entertainingly, as Dan Brown does in The Da Vinci Code.

To continue the practice of entering what matters to us into the Great Conversation, I would like to challenge the idea of there ever having been one right church in the first place, a right church from which others deviated or to which we and they should return. My reason for challenging this idea has to do with *evidence*. There is no evidence supporting the existence once upon a time of a single right church; but there is plenty of evidence of differing, competing churches. For example...

Paul, remember, our earliest writer, fussed continuously in his letters with other kinds of Christianities marked mainly by a denial of Christ crucified. So, early on, there was no orthodoxy, no standardized set of Christian teachings. That was still in the development phase. Centuries would pass before Christian doctrine took on officially recognizable shape.

Paul again said, "we," meaning his perspective, "no longer know Christ after the flesh." Apparently there was historical Jesus research already in progress, which the apostle dismissed as no longer relevant! Later on, when historical Jesus research took its modern form, the issue would be called "Jesus of History or Christ of Faith." You might want to ask yourself where you stand on this matter. But, be careful! Many unexamined assumptions may be challenged, throwing you into one of those crises of faith that could lead you into a more profound spirituality; or might lead you to toss the whole thing!

An example of this, found in some of the other early Christianities, has to do with the nature of Jesus: divine and/or human. Jewish Christians had no trouble with Jesus' humanity. But some Greek encultured Jews and Gentiles (remember, Paul had to recognize that these folks already had their own preconceptions!) took phrases like Paul's "God was in Christ..." as indicating a divine aspect to Jesus. Several separate but related groups called *Gnostics* tried explaining Jesus' nature by claiming that he only *seemed* human, and was really divine. The Nag Hammadi findings, the Gospel of Thomas, and other findings are traces left from these Christian groups no longer with us. But, some of their ideas are, and continue to be the subject of much impassioned Christian thought and behavior today. Consider, for example, partisan attitudes toward or against the "Jesus Seminar" begun by my New Testament professor, Robert Funk, as it pursues the "historical Jesus." What is the nature of *your* Jesus? Human and/or divine? How do you account for what you mean? Who or what authorizes your perspective? More importantly, are you willing to allow other perspectives on Jesus to influence your own? Why, or why not? How solid is the authority by which you take your stand? Does the notion of one right Christianity help, or hinder?