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DIVERSITY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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Christianity did not start out as a unified movement. We have to remember that the disciples were probably dispersed at a very early time.... That is, at a time where there was no fixed formulation what the set of Christian beliefs should be. What Christian rituals should be. What they should think about Jesus or what they should tell about Jesus. The sources that we have tell us that Christianity started as a very diverse movement, as the founding of churches... moved into very different cultural and language contexts....



Paul's conversion as an apostle to the gentiles may date as early as three years after Jesus' death. No later than the year 35, but probably already 32 or 33.... He was in Damascus when he was called, according to his own witness. So we have, already, within two years or three or five years, of Jesus' death probably Greek speaking communities outside of Palestine, very early in Antioch, but we have also the founding of communities in Samaria.... We have apparently more isolated Christian communities founded very early in Galilee. Paul's mission carried Christianity all the way over Asia Minor, present Turkey into Macedonia, into Greece, within 20 years. And at the end of that period, Paul already knows that there's a Christian community in Rome which he has not founded.

With this explosive spread of Christian churches, not a very slow moderate growth, getting a few new members every few years, but an explosive spread of this movement, it cannot be expected that everywhere, everybody was doing and believing the same thing, singing the same hymns and reading the same scriptures and telling

the same story. So we have a beginning with great diversity, and the slow process, particularly in the second century, to establish a greater unity among the very diverse churches. Already a process in Paul's churches themselves, because that's why Paul writes letters, because he wants to make sure that these newly converted Christians in Ephesus and Philippi and Thessaloniki and in Corinth have some unanimity in their beliefs. And his work is made even more difficult because once he had left Corinth, some people came to Corinth and told them, "Really Paul has not told you enough of the deep wisdom of the words of Jesus. Those you have to contemplate in order to learn the wisdom that comes from Jesus," and Paul has to write back and say, "Now, I taught you nothing but Christ crucified, not Christ wisdom." So you get a conflict of different traditions also at a very early stage.

WE CAN LEARN FROM THE STRUGGLES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

One interesting problem is simply the experience of diversity. We sometimes think that it's just such a shame that we have so many Christian denominations and so many other religions all in one country. "Wouldn't it be great if we have only one belief and one religion as it was in the time of the early Christians?" No, it wasn't in the time of the early Christians. The early Christians had a hard time to discuss with each other, fight with each other to establish certain patterns and criteria for the organization of community, what was important in the churches. Was it indeed important that churches established mutual responsibility for each other and care for the poor as part of their dossier? This is what they're supposed to do. And that discussion in our church was very helpful twelve years ago, when we discussed whether we should open a shelter for homeless people in the basement of our church.

But the other aspect is the diversity of religious movements. And that in fact early Christianity, by moving into different realms of the different universes of thought and of religion in the Greco-Roman world, adopted a lot of concepts from other religions, lots of them pagan religions, which enriched the early Christian movement tremendously. This probably should encourage us to say that our discourse, not only inner Christian discourse with other

denominations, but also our discourse with other religions, with the Jews, with Moslems, with Buddhists, may in fact, indeed be very fruitful..., rather than staying away from this and saying, "Oh God, now we have even more Muslims in America than we have Jews." Which some people find terrible. But they have to learn to say "maybe that is very good."