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Church History

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Summary:

Hugh Nibley assembles statements by non-LDS scholars on the identity of Jesus, the rediscovery of the church, eschatology (the study of last things), authority, revelation, Israel, liturgy, the survival of the church, and the Vatican excavations.

Paper
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CHURCH HISTORY

It All Begins with Jesus

H. Riesenfeld at the Oxford Conference on New Testament studies in 1957 exploded a "bombshell" with the categorical declaration that "the tradition of the sayings and deeds of Jesus must be traced in its beginnings to Jesus himself." Its "Sitz im Leben was neither the mission preaching nor the communal instruction of the primitive Church, but the teaching and purpose of Jesus himself." Aside from the new discoveries which lead to such a conclusion, the reason for it is obvious: "No real student of Judaism of the Hellenistic age . . . would for a moment imagine that authoritative or 'holy' words arose through preaching, or in instruction in the community or in controversy with the surrounding world." (Expos. Times, 69:129).

This pronouncement, coming from such a highly respected authority, is the more significant since for the past 40 years "the opposite view has been held and in some circles has been exalted into the position of an accepted doctrine." (Ibid).

J. Jeremias: The teaching of Jesus was not a product of his time and culture. Far from it, "Of special significance as a defence against a psychological modernizing of Jesus is the rediscovery of the eschatological character of his message. It is clear, then, that Jesus was no Jewish Rabbi, no teacher of wisdom, or prophet" in the conventional sense, but taught "a message which ran counter to all the religiosity of His time, and was in truth the end of Judaism." "Form-Criticism . . . has enabled us to remove a Hellenistic layer which overlaid an earlier Palestinian tradition The study of ancient and modern Palestine . . . has helped us to realize afresh the sharpness of Jesus's opposition to the religiosity of His time. Here, too, lies the main importance of the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls," showing as they do "to what an extent the whole of late Judaism was imbued with a passion to establish a pure Divine community. We can now estimate . . . the emphatic denial with which Jesus met all these attempts." (Ibid., 69:337-38). The Gospel was restored into a world of competing sects and creeds, but is not to be traced to or identified with any of them.

The experts now recognize the validity of the argument of C. S. Lewis: "And when you've grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips. I'm trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really silly thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we mustn't say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He'd be either a lunatic--on the level with the man who says he's a poached egg--or else he'd be the Devil of Hell." (Broadcast Talks, p. 50).

H. W. Gensichen: But the Churches have not been guilty of preaching any such alarming doctrine. This fact is demonstrated in a very significant situation, namely, that after hundreds of years of missionary work in Asia and Africa, the so-called 'young churches,' i.e., the products of missionary labors in various lands of the earth, "have produced no independent theological

thinking whatever." There has been no theological speculation because the converts from the beginning have had nothing to speculate with; they have no real grasp of anything; they have not embraced the Gospel but social attitudes and progressive programs; "they have no independent testimony of their own." (N. Zt. f. syst. Theol., 1:326f).

(Spencer Palmer has shown that in China the Chinese ended up converting the Christian missionaries).

R. A. Bartels: It is now apparent "that the speeches in Acts must all be only short summaries of what was originally spoken . . . clearly the briefest summaries of what would actually in the spoken sermon receive much fuller treatment." (Expos. Times, 73:227). There is a great deal we do not know about the ancient Gospel.

N. Ferre: The 'liberal' interpretation of Jesus was part of a larger picture. "Liberalism was the voice of secular confidence in science, education, and culture. It accommodated its claims to fit human expectations. Certainly it was grounded in man's general experience and best thought. But for this reason it failed to find wings. Theological accommodation is a parasite dependent on its host. It dies with its host. Liberalism is dead, or dying, as secular confidence wanes." (Expos. Times, 70:305).

J. Rowland: The movement from liberalism to literalism began about 1944. Today "in the place which may be regarded as the home of modern science -- the University of Cambridge -- recent statistics show that the most popular religion is a shereley fundamentalist religion." (Hibbert's Jnl., 60, 1961, p. 1).

The Rediscovery of the Church

H. Bornkamm: One of the marks of our time is "the present-day rediscovery of the Church by the Protestants." (Gurndriss d. kg., p. 74).

W. Pauck: "Actually it is impossible to be a Christian believer apart from the social reality of the 'church.' The history of the Christian people proves that there never was a living faith in Christ apart from the 'church.' . . . There is a rediscovery of the 'church' in our time, . . . a re-orientation of contemporary Protestantism. Christians have come to realize that they are a minority. Face to face with this fact, they have been compelled to understand themselves against, like their predecessors of old, as a 'peculiar people.'" (Ch. History, 21:191).

Von Dobschutz: With "the recent trend away from individual religion towards organization religion (Gemeinschaftsreligion) the concept of the Church has now attained a position of great importance in all theological disciplines. Fifty years ago it was generally held that Jesus never had anything to do with the founding of a church . . . that the Christian communities arose spontaneously and only gradually formed themselves together into a Christian Church." (Zt. f. N. T. Wiss., 28:107).

F. C. Grant: "Christianity was not as social revolution disguised as a cult, perhaps a 'mystery religion.' It was a religion, pure and simple; with a cult; with a body of doctrine, a faith, a didache, as well as with a kerygma." (Davies & Daube, Eschatol. Background, p. 114).

The Rediscovery of Eschatology

V. Taylor: "Schweitzer's Quest of the Historical Jesus . . . compelled scholars to revise their understanding of the Kingdom of God as a slowly evolving order of society. . . . Eschatology raises vital issues which the modern student cannot escape. What was the attitude of Jesus to His Parousis . . . ? To what extent was the Jewish hope of the consummation of all things fulfilled in the fact of Christ, so that eschatology was 'realized,' and in what respect is it still the object of Christian expectation?" (Lond. Qt. & Holborn Rev., 1958, p. 83).

H. Steubing: Christian theology up until now has been characterized by "an eschatological gap. . . . Everyone who has tried to get a unified picture of the Christian hope from the Bible has soon found that that is impossible, because the various utterances of the Scriptures on the subject differ from one another to an extraordinary degree." (Zt. f. syst. Theol., 7:461-62).

"The rediscovery of the importance of eschatology within the New Testament has been one of the most outstanding achievements of historic theology. It is also one of the factors which has led to a new understanding of the New Testament Church; we have learned to see the Church as an 'eschatological community' The new covenant is bound up with the old one, and what happened in the Old Testament is a 'type' and prefiguration of the events of the last days." (Davies & Daube, op. cit., p. 422).

N. A. Dahl: ". . . the positive correlation of 'eschatology' and 'protology' held a firm position within the ancient Church. . . . The parallelism between Adam and Christ is carried through even in details. Salvation is conceived not only as a counterpart to the beginning of the world, but still more as a parallel to the primeval times of the people, as a new Exodus; . . . eschatology and creation can be linked up with one another even in this way." (Ibid., pp. 423-25).

E. Percy: "Since the breakthrough of the eschatological interpretation of the concept of the Kingdom of God, the question of the content and the meaning of the message of Jesus has never been settled." (Botschaft Jesu, p. 1).

The Question of Authority

H. Cadbury: Today "the Church is seeking for authority which will have the sanction of history and which thus will render a service towards providing a norm for modern interdenominational unity." (Davies & Daube, p. 316f).

R. Marle: "The New Testament shows us a very well-organized community, with a hierarchy dominated by decisive authority of the Apostles, and not a fluid system. It was the unity of the Early Church under the traveling Apostolate. (Estudes, 302:69).

P. Tillich: All the reformers regarded the Church as 'spirituell.' Then where is authority? In the Bible. But who interprets the Bible? The Witness of the Holy Ghost, according to Luther. For Calvin the Bible conveys its own message; it is the infallible document. "According to Luther no Church organization could possess Divine Authority; for him the calling of ministers is purely a matter of convenience." (N. Zt. f. syst. Theol., 3: 264-71).

A. G. James: One Church is necessary: "To preserve continuity, catholicity and stability in the Church, notably in matters of Christian doctrine, some authority there must be. What is that authority? It is to this fundamental question that all branches of the Church must pay attention, if any kind of reunion is to be sought. Unhappily, so much misunderstanding, prejudice and confusion still exists in all denominations, that something more is needed than argument." (Expos. Times, 70:166). Since "authorization may be withdrawn," no church can prove that it has not been; possession of a "pipeline" back to the Apostles, even a "valid succession, does not necessarily include a group in the Catholic Church. In today's divided Church no group can be said to possess it [authority] in its wholeness," since the record clearly shows that Apostolic succession "is not preserved unimpaired by anyone." Therefore, those who do not have such succession are not necessarily unchurched--there is no one body of Christ today. To form a union among the various groups "the ministers of one would have to receive authorization from those of the other and vice versa if any reunion . . . were to be effected." (Expos. Times, 69, 1957, pp. 228-30).

R. M. Grant: "The ultimate problem [of the survival of true Christianity from ancient times], I suppose, is one of authority: the authority of revelation, the authority of scripture, the authority of the church." Every phase of the documentary record is shaky, including "the study of the Gospels, with its search for the historical Jesus who turns out to be either a deluded apocalyptist or the product of early Christian reinterpretation. . . . Is there a way out? . . . Perhaps somehow one can combine a Catholic feeling for tradition with a Protestant sense of freedom, without either disdain or excessive enthusiasm for the past." (Jnl. of Relig., 39:121-2).

The Question of Revelation

S. V. McCasland: "The return to ideas of inspiration and revelation may be put down as one of the marked trends of our biblical scholarship of the last decade." (Jnl. Bibl. Lit., 73:6).

H. D. McDonald: "The fundamental question of all theological reconstructions is 'What do we mean by revelation?' . . . It is being answered in a way that sounds very different from traditional formulations." (Christianity Today, Jan. 16, 1961, p. 4).

G. W. Bromiley: "The doctrine of inspiration continues to be in many ways the critical issue underlying all other issues in the Church today. . . . The Bible makes it plain that the work of the Holy Spirit does not cease with this moving or inspiring. The work of inspiration ceases. It has been done. The books are written. The authors have finished their work. No new prophetic or

apostolic testimony is to be expected. But since the works are written in the Spirit, they must also be read in the Spirit if they are to accomplish their primary function In other words, the minds and hearts of the readers must be enlightened by the same Spirit by whom the writings themselves were inspired. This enlightenment or illumination is not properly inspiration itself." (Christianity Today, Nov. 23, 1959, 138-39).

H. B. Swete: "The great purpose of Christian prophecy was to bear witness to Jesus Christ. . . . Prophecies therefore, in the sense of specially inspired utterances, gradually ceased in the Church, the place of the prophet being taken partly by the teaching Bishop or presbyter, partly by the testimony which every well-instructed believer bears by work or act to the name of the Lord Jesus." (Anglican Theol. Rev., 44:2).

P. Tillich: "This discourse is based on the proposition that the prophetic tradition of the Church was lost. It is one of the great tragedies in the History of the Christian Church, that this tradition actually and virtually completely perished, that is, as far as the official Church controlled things. . . . For St. Augustine the Millennium is here, everything essential has been achieved . . . in the hierarchy of the Church. With this theory the spirit of Prophecy was expelled from the official Church." (Zt. f. syst. Theol., 3:237). For Luther, "The will of God will always remain uncertain as far as we are concerned." (Ibid., p. 244).

F. W. Young: "In Jesus' day there were no Jewish prophets. For the Jews the return of the prophetic spirit was inextricably related to messianic times. No Jew could use the phrase 'just another prophet' as so many modern scholars do. . . . For the Jews the term 'prophet' had become an eschatological term." (Jnl. Bibl. Lit., 68:297).

W. C. Klein: "If Christianity is, as it were, congenitally prophetic, the prophetic charisma must always have existed in some authentic form among Christians. What is that form today? There were at one time Christian prophets. . . . Manifestly no such order is known to the Church at present." (Anglican Theol. Rev., 44:1). "Today the Pentecostals are emphasizing that the Spirit's gifts are 'for the Church,' rather than being bestowed capriciously on individuals. (Ibid., p. 17). ". . . glossolalia [speaking in tongues] has appeared in the Episcopal Church, of all bodies, and is being promoted by the Blessed Trinity Society of Prayer in Van Nuys, California; . . . pneumatic impulses and movements arise periodically among believers; . . . to banish them is to impoverish a faith to which they inalienably belong." (Ibid.).

A. Ehrhardt: Roman Catholics are also claiming prophecy now! The Church "based the Apostolic succession of her bishops upon the succession of the High Priests of Israel since Aaron, and thus made it her own. In the Creed of Nicaea-Chalcedon the Church claims for herself also the prophet Spirit of ancient Israel. Both these doctrines agree with the rabbinical convictions that in the Synagogue there is neither room for the priesthood nor for prophecy. Of all the inheritance of Israel only one piece has been claimed for the Synagogue, the Law." (Stud. Theol., 9:111).

E. T. Knaus: We need today a "great rhetoric," or a "rhetoric of remembrance," a language that is as big as the heart because it is as old as the people of God. . . . It is true that he has revealed himself to us, but it is also true that even in the revelation he remains hidden. The One we now see only with the eyes of faith . . . in the present age . . . remains for us the Mystery." (Lutheran Quart., 10:295, 301).

G. C. Berkouwer: "We speak rather glibly about the self-evidence of the Gospel; we talk about the sword of the Spirit. But we do not entertain the expectation that something is actually going to happen by the power of the Spirit. . . . Do we still believe in the usefulness of our theological labors?" (Christianity Today, 4:268).

The Rediscovery of Israel

J. Muilenburg: "Thus the question 'Who is Israel?' stands at the frontier where the question is asked 'Who is Jesus?' and the answer of Christians is to be comprehended out of the answer which is given to the former question, 'Who is Israel?'" (Jnl. Bibl. Lit., 77:25).

T. W. Manson: "The deepest instinct of the early Church, as of our Lord himself, was to insist on the continuity of the Christians movement with the previous history of Israel. In Galatians 3:4 "the coming of Christ is seen as part and parcel of a continuous process, beginning with Abraham." (Jnl. Eccles. Hist., 1:1-2).

The Liturgical Problem

G. Moule: "The liturgical revival, which has affected all churches, has led enthusiastic investigators to discover liturgical elements in a great variety of places in the New Testament. There can be very little doubt that Jesus worshipped in the Temple, but it is possible that He deliberately refrained from participation in sacrifice. . . . But the Cleansing of the Temple suggested that he felt no antagonism to the Temple as such, only to the abuse of its original purpose. . . . In the New Testament there is very little trace of any technical name such as 'Eucharist' or 'Holy Communion' . . . though the name 'Lord's Supper' occurs . . . It is likely enough to have been a weekly practice." (Expos. Times, 73:225).

F. Vanden Broucke: (Roman Catholic) "The present liturgical malaise of the western Church began in the Middle Ages" with 1) loss of Latin, 2) "Divorce between two types of Christians--the fervent ones, who considered the monasteries the only environment favorable to the spiritual life," and the others, and 3) "the rise of the lay spirit," with its antihierarchal and anti-sacramental" mentality. (Theol. Digest, 9:131). With the Medieval mystics "the Christian mystery was no longer identical with the Church's worship. . . . Latin separates the people from the clergy more completely today than in the Middle Ages, it has become a major obstacle to the pastoral efficacy of the liturgy . . . under such conditions active participation is nil." (Ibid., pp. 134, 136). "Thus Trent . . . had its shortcomings; a prolongation of the medieval spirit, a quasi-definitive consecration of Latin, pastoral separation of clergy and laity; it also left the way open for a multiplicity of devotions

and excrescences to the sanctoral cycle." It is regrettable that "no one was cool-headed enough to see the good" in the suggestions of Huss and Savonarols.

E. T. Knaus: "The so-called mood type of worship, which thinks only in terms of what man feels, or thinks, or does," is essentially meaningless: "Worship cannot be real if it is a monologue." Ritual "is the use of certain words and phrases; ceremonial is basically the use of particular actions and gestures. Christian worship inevitably requires some kind of ritual, ceremony, and order." These may change, but we must always have them. (Luth. Quart., 10:304, 314).

Did the Church Survive?

H. J. Schoeps: "Weren't they right who say in the progress of the Church on heathen territory, the so-called 'Hellenizing' of Christianity an estrangement from its Palestinian original? Weren't they who went under and were forgotten not after all the true heirs?" (Davies & Daube, Eschatol. Background, p. 123).

S. Brandon: "For many decades, under the aegis of the liberal tradition of scholarship, this task was undertaken with fervent conviction, and great was the knowledge amassed by such methods of research about Primitive Christianity. But in time this process of investigation into Christian Origins has gradually revealed itself to be a journey ever deeper into a morass of conjecture about the imponderables which lie behind or beyond the extant literary documents." (Numen, 2:156).

H. J. Schoeps: The history of the Church is like an onion: we peel off successive layers, "but we can never get to the central kernel. . . . The innermost layers are the most valuable because they are the nearest to the early Jewish-Christianity which the Main Church has smothered with a mantle of silence." (Zt. f. Rel. u. Geistgesch., 9:77).

W. Frend: Thanks to archaeology, "knowledge of both Tradition and Heresy are expanding as never before. At a critical moment in the Church's long history we are able once more to recapture something of the period in which the great traditional doctrines were formulated. . . . In the Mediterranean provinces of the Empire, the Church is revealed from the rudely carved inscriptions, and the rustic buildings and native artistic traditions . . . to have been part of a great popular movement. The statements which we read in the Fathers merely put into articulate form ideas bandied about in the baths or market places." (Antiquity, 34:264).

The Vatican Excavations

W. Frend: "The Vatican excavations (1940-9) were surely one of the boldest efforts ever undertaken to solve a problem of Church history through archaeology." Since the digging had to be directly under the high altar of St. Peter's, "the result was an untidy dig and the consequent difficulty in assessing its results." The evidence to date is "that the place of St. Peter's burial has not been found." (Antiquity, 34:261).

E. Sjoquist: "The decision to undertake a thorough scientific investigation on this religiously vital spot was made by Pope Pius XII. . . . To carry out extensive excavation at a depth of more than 30 feet under the floor of the greatest church in Christendom, to extricate more than a quarter of a million cubic feet of filling earth . . . an almost incredible task." Their verdict: non liquet. "In the center . . . of the Constantinian church there stood a small shrine in the form of a modest aedicula facing a free space in the old cemetery. The aedicula . . . formed a pivot as it were, of the whole basilica. There can be no doubt that it was firmly believed by the Christians in Rome at that time [4th century] that this was the marker" (of Peter's tomb). (Antiquity, 31:15-17).

E. Dinkler: Only great confidence that the digging would prove the Roman case once for all induced Pius XII to permit it; it was a safe thing, since the absence of positive evidence would prove nothing. (Theol. Rundschau, 25:190). The whole operation was carefully controlled by the Roman Church, the official reports being "naturally apologetic in nature." (Ibid., p. 192). There is no evidence for any Christian martyr-cult [such as would have venerated Peter's tomb] in Italy before 250 A. D. (Ibid., p. 222). In ancient time three different places in Rome competed for the honor of being Peter's grave. In the Triclia of the Catacombs of S. Sebastian are 300 graffiti from the late 3rd and 4th centuries acclaiming Peter and Paul: no such graffiti have been found in the St. Peter's excavations. (Ibid., p. 224). Today the problem of where Peter was buried "is further from solution than ever." (Ibid., p. 229). The presence of competing graves of Peter in 3rd century Rome "are not unlikely witnesses of a 'heretical' Church in the city rivaling [and not merely co-existing with] the Vatican-Via-Ostia tradition of the Main Church." (Ibid.). Though the official records of the excavations are in strong conflict, on Dec. 23, 1950, the Pope formally announced that the Grave of St. Peter had been discovered. As to whom the bones in the grave might belong, "that has nothing to do with the historical reality of the grave. The giant dome arches over the exact spot of the grave of the first Bishop of Rome, the first Pope." (Ibid., p. 294). This declaration showed the tendentious nature of the undertaking. (Ibid., p. 295).

Results of the Digging: 1) St. Peter's was not built (as has been heretofore maintained) over the Circus Neronis. 2) It was built over a pagan cemetery of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Soon after 160 A.D. a Red Wall was built to mark off a special area, Place "P." Later in this area an aedicula was erected: "Not a grave but a memorial," (Ibid., p. 313). After 300 A.D. Christian inscriptions first appear in the place--not one of them mentions Peter. J. Carcopino thinks this is conclusive evidence that Peter was not buried here. (Ibid., p. 318). In the late 330 s the aedicula became the orientation point of Constantine's great Church, and the old cemetery around it was completely covered up with the exception of the aedicula. (Ibid., p. 325). At the proper place a little heap of human bones was found, as if unceremoniously shoved into the dirt; they were the bones of a strong man; no skull. "It must be admitted that this cannot possibly have been the original disposition of the bones." (Ibid., p. 309). There was a grave and bones, as expected, why not accept them? Because they are found in 2nd century fill-earth, the grave being 5 feet too high! So "Kirschbaum postulates an upward working of the bones" by the activities of relic-hunters. For this there is no other evidence, however, such as relic-hunters would have left. (Ibid., pp.

314-15). Of course Constantine knew there was a monument and a grave there--he made sure of that before he built his church; but the fact that he thought it was the grave and monument of Peter does not make it so. The evidence strongly refutes the Catholic claim that a continuous cult of Peter existed at the spot from the beginning. (Ibid., p. 318). All the graves around it through the 2nd and 3rd centuries continue pagan, only in the 4th century do we find Christian graves; with them we find many Christian graffiti--but not one of them mentions Peter. (Ibid., p. 312, 322). The grave of "Peter" was deliberately defaced in 160-65 A.D. by the building of a wall that cut right through it. (Ibid., p. 313). The excavators have resorted to desperate speculations trying to explain the "transportation" of Peter's bones and the absence of the head. (Ibid., pp. 332-34). Conclusion: "Accordingly, the excavations under St. Peter's have not brought forth the historical grave of the Apostle Peter." (Ibid., p. 325).

K. Heussi: Even Aland, the most enthusiastic defender of the Peter-at-Rome school, believes "that Peter only came to Rome at a very late date [he did not found the church there!] and was in Rome for only a very short time." (Hist. Ztschr., 186:259). As to the Vatican grave, "how does it happen that an executed Jew was buried in the midst of the Imperial gardens?" (Ibid.). Heussi concludes: "The claim that Peter ever was in Rome is the purest hot air [hangu vollig in der Luft]."

A. Mercati: In 1947, "the New List of the Popes" was issued: Linus 67-76, Anacletus or Cletus 76-88, Clement 88-97, Evaristus 97-105. (Med Stud., 9:71-80). And through all these years, the List of Popes has been the primary proof of the claims of the Roman Church, that list has not been accurate and reliable!

E. Dinkler: The earliest evidence for Christians in the Catacombs is 230 A.D. And these are not Roman Catholic but "heretical" graves. Throughout the 2nd century the catacombs were where the rival church hid out. (Theol. Rundsch., 25:330-31). That was the time when the main Church was persecuting the Novatians severely. The rival church claimed that they had the graves of Peter and Paul in the catacombs, which throughout the 3rd century were "a rival cult center." There were no Christian graves in Rome before 200 A.D. Where did the Christians bury before that? We do not know! Either in pagan cemeteries or in cheap tracts in the fields. (Ibid., p. 322).