



Debunking Channel 4's conspiracy theory

Anthony McRoy

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The first two programmes of the Channel Four series *Christianity: A History*, screened in January, were odd. Neither presenter – Harold Jacobson and Michael Portillo – professed an active Christian faith, nor were they academic scholars in the fields of New Testament and Church History studies.

The programmes presented two canards often found in anti-Christian polemics (I frequently encounter their use by Islamic polemicists against Christianity) – that Paul was responsible for changing the pristine religion preached by Jesus, and that Constantine completed the process, notably by establishing the canon of Scripture.

Prior tradition

What polemicists ignore is the Apostle's stated use of pre-Pauline tradition. If Paul did divert canonical Christianity from what Jesus and His immediate disciples actually taught, we should not find him utilising early – and thus prior – Christian tradition in his writings, since this would undermine his supposed goal. Yet he does indeed cite such earlier Christian tradition! Various scholars have pointed to 1 Corinthians 15:1-3, where Paul's use of the terms *paredoka* ('tradition') and *parelabon* ('receive') definitely indicate prior tradition. Paul 'delivered' (*paradidymi*) what those who were Christians before him imparted. The employment of terms such as 'received', 'deliver' and 'confess' are indications that Paul is citing early Christian material.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3 ff, we encounter what R.P. Martin in *New Testament Foundations* (Volume 2, p.251) has described as 'telltale marks which stamp it as a creedal formulary. The fourfold "that" (*oti*) introduces each member of the creed (in verses 3, 4, 5). The vocabulary is unusual, containing some rare terms and expressions Paul never employs again'. The verses refer to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ's saving death is also addressed in 1 Corinthians 11:23 in connection with the Lord's Supper, again using the language of tradition – 'received', 'delivered'. So, immediately, we can see that two major Christian doctrines were not invented by Paul, merely passed on by him.

Person of Christ

In regard to the Person of Christ, in Romans 1:3-4 we encounter what scholars of all hues have recognised as a pre-Pauline formula utilising the title Son. Again, Paul uses terminology not found elsewhere (e.g. 'Spirit of holiness'). Note the reference to Jesus being 'a descendant of David according to the flesh', a redundant qualification unless Christ also possessed a higher origin. Similar examples of pre-Pauline Christological formulae are found in Galatians 4:4 and Romans 8:3, which again indicate that Jesus was not simply human.

There is a general scholarly consensus that Philippians 2:5 ff is a pre-Pauline hymn. This hymn climaxes by quoting Isaiah 45:23-25, where the original object of adoration ('every knee will bow') is YHWH [Yahweh], but in the hymn, Jesus is identified with YHWH, such that the universal confession is that Jesus is 'Lord'. Paul simply reproduced an already existing Christian tradition: Christ's eternal Sonship and indeed his deity were not Pauline doctrinal innovations.

'In Christ before me'

A further indication that Paul did not change pristine Christian doctrine is demonstrated by his epistle to the Romans (written circa 57 AD). Paul wrote to a congregation that he did not found, and refers to the Jewish-Christian apostles 'Andronicus and Junias ... outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me' (Romans 16:7). Since it is likely that Paul was converted within a year or so of the Crucifixion-Resurrection event, the two individuals – called 'apostles' – must have been among the earliest

converts to Christianity. The church in Rome was in existence by 49 AD – as demonstrated by the edict of Claudius that year, expelling all Jews from the city, because of riots concerning ‘Chrestus’. Acts 2:10 refers to ‘visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes’ present on the day of Pentecost, so it is probable that this was the origin of the church [in Rome].

As the church at Rome was not of Pauline foundation, its theological beliefs did not originate with that Apostle. Had Paul’s teaching been contrary to the original gospel of Jesus, earlier Christian believers, such as Andronicus and Junias – described as ‘apostles’ no less – would have contested it. Hence, it must be the case that Paul’s doctrine – Jesus’s divinity, his redemptive death and resurrection, the means of salvation (by grace through faith alone on the basis of Jesus’s crucified self-sacrifice) – was indeed the same message preached from the start by the other disciples. We know from the Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, usually dated circa 70-95 AD, that Paul’s message and apostolic standing were endorsed by the Roman Christians.

Canon conspiracy

Regarding Constantine, the usual ‘conspiracy theory’ claim is that he was a pagan who feigned conversion, and, chairing the Council of Nicaea, completed the Hellenisation / paganisation of Christianity and fixed the Canon – note Portillo’s reference to Constantine ordering 50 copies of the Scripture to this end. The claim of ulterior motive for conversion is ridiculous (although I am not necessarily suggesting that Constantine would qualify for membership in a modern evangelical church). In 312, when this happened, Christians constituted at most 10% of the empire’s population. All that Constantine needed to do to gain Christian support was to promise religious toleration, which he did in the Edict of Milan. For a modern parallel, imagine the impact of a Pakistani leader seeking support from his Christian compatriots: he would not have to feign conversion to gain their votes, but merely to promise equal rights.

Contemporary Christians acknowledged that Constantine was a Christian – Lactantius (died circa 320), a tutor to Constantine’s son Crispus,

was convinced of this, and wrote of the Emperor’s miraculous conversion (the Labarum vision). Later, Eusebius of Caesarea, the famous church historian, affirmed both the conversion and Constantine’s Christian piety several times in his writings. It is known that Christian clergy were close to Constantine after his conversion, especially the bishop of Rome. Interestingly, both Athanasius, the scourge of Arianism, and Arius himself acknowledged Constantine’s Christian piety.

The pagans did likewise. When the Roman Senate erected the Arch of Constantine in 315, they ascribed his victory at the Milvian Bridge to the ‘inspiration of divinity’. The Senate, being pagan, might have balked at naming Christ as the author of the victory over Maxentius, and so a more nebulous phrase was employed. Again, Zosimus, the early Byzantine pagan historian, writing about the late fifth and early sixth centuries, bitterly affirmed Constantine’s Christian faith, one of his sources being the work by the pagan sophist Eunapius of Sardis called *The Lives of the Sophists*, written circa 395, which referred to the sophist Sopater trying to ‘wean Constantine away from Christianity by the force of his learned arguments’ and of the Emperor ‘pulling down the most celebrated temples and building Christian churches’. Finally, the later Emperor Julian the Apostate, who knew Constantine, ridiculed Constantine’s Christian allegiance.

Constantine believed himself to be a Christian, as demonstrated by his writings. In his correspondence with both provincial governors and bishops, from 313, he affirms his Christian faith. For example, in a letter to the bishops after the Council of Arles in 314, Constantine addresses them as ‘brothers’; he acknowledges that he previously wandered in ‘darkness’, but that now he was ‘converted to the rule of justice’ through the kindness of Almighty God. In Constantine’s oration ‘To the Assembly of the Saints’, usually dated circa 325, he refers to ‘the Spirit of the Father and the Son’, attacks polytheism and idolatry, satirising the idea that the many gods breed to ‘excess’ and denouncing the sculptor ‘who idolises his own creation, and adores it as an immortal god’. He goes on to refer to ‘Christ ... who is God, and the Son of God’.

Who’s who at Nicaea

As for the Council of Nicaea, in none of the contemporary sources do we encounter the idea that Constantine chaired the synod. It seems that Bishop Ossius of Cordoba chaired the Council, as indicated by Athanasius in *Defence of his Flight (Apologia de Fuga)*, and Socrates, who notes that Ossius's name was first in the list of bishops attending, indicating his chairmanship. Significantly, in the letter sent by the synod to Alexander of Byzantium, the first name in the list of attendees is Ossius, the usual way of indicating the chairman.

Neither for that matter do the sources suggest that Constantine directed the debate. Moreover, it must be remembered that the pro-Arian party was very much a minority, and that its position had been previously condemned by Eastern Church leaders, even before Constantine conquered the East. The outcome – denunciation of Arius – was inevitable on these grounds. Moreover, there was no canonical issue involved: Arius's writings show that he held to the orthodox Canon, and quoted from the canonical Scriptures in support of his position. Hence no discussion ensued at Nicaea about the canon.

As for the 50 copies of the Scriptures which Constantine wrote to Eusebius (circa 333) to order (as emphasised by Portillo in regard to the Canon), this was done to provide Bibles for the churches of the new imperial city Constantinople:

'... great numbers have united themselves to the most holy church in the city which is called by my name. It seems, therefore, highly requisite ... that the number of churches should also be increased... I have thought it expedient to instruct your Prudence to order 50 copies of the sacred Scriptures, the provision and use of which you know to be most needful for the instruction of the Church, to be written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practiced in their art.'

Significantly, Constantine says nothing about the canon, which, as we have seen, was not a matter of dispute between the Arian and orthodox parties (it should be noted that Eusebius had been identified with the Arian party at first). It follows that Constantine had no role in establishing the biblical canon. Whether the claims about Paul and

Constantine are made by atheist or Islamic polemicists – or even by Channel Four television presenters – they are totally invalid. Conspiracy theorists will have to hunt elsewhere.

Dr Anthony McRoy

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