

SUNDAY OF THE FATHERS OF THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

The Church in Ephesus

**May 24, 2015
7th Sunday of Pascha
Revision D**

GOSPEL: John 17:1-13

EPISTLE: Acts 20:16-18, 28-36

Today's Gospel lesson is used in the West also today, the Seventh Sunday after Easter. Today's Epistle lesson is used in some Western Churches on the 8th Sunday after Trinity (July).

The theme of the last five Sundays has been the development of the Early Church. This continues by focusing on what the Twelve Apostles and their successors did to establish their churches on a correct doctrinal foundation. The reading from John 17 speaks of Who Jesus is in relation to the Father. The reading from Acts 20 addresses the Apostle Paul's prophecy that people would come into the church in Ephesus after Paul left and challenge the statements in John 17. The Gospel writer John, the son of Zebedee, spent the latter part of his life in and around Ephesus combating the heretics that Paul warned everyone about. The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council did the same thing later on in the early Fourth Century.

Gospel: John 17:1-13

Most of the major heresies in the history of the Church seem to revolve around Who Jesus is. For example, the Arian heresy dealt with by the First Ecumenical Council claimed that Jesus was not really God but was a lesser being created by God. The Gnostic heresy of the First Century, on the other hand, denied the Incarnation and claimed Jesus was not really a man. Today's Gospel lesson can be used as a theological treatise to answer many of these mistaken beliefs. A brief outline of John 17, where Jesus was speaking to the Father is:

- Glorify the Son (i.e. by crucifixion) that the Son may glorify the Father (v.1)
- The Father gave the Son authority over all flesh (v.2)
- The Son glorified the Father on earth and finished the work He was given to do; i.e. Incarnation, Cross, etc. (v.4)
- The Son will return to the glory He had with the Father before the world was (v.5, 13)
- The Father gave the Son the Twelve (v.6)

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- The Twelve know that:
 - All the Son was given came from the Father (v.7)
 - The Son's Words came from the Father (v.8, 14)
 - The Father sent the Son (v.8)
 - The Twelve are the Father's (v.9)
 - The Son is glorified in them (v.10)
- The Son asked the Father to keep the Twelve as one as the Father and the Son are one (v.11). The oneness in the Church parallels the oneness in the Trinity.
- The Son kept the Twelve in the Father's Name (v.12)
- None of the Twelve were lost except Judas (v.12)
- The World hated the Twelve because they, like the Son, were not of the world (v.14). This aspect of the Christian life was repeated many times by those saints who became known as the Unmercenary Healers.
- As the Father sent (Greek: *apostello*) the Son, so the Son sent (Greek: *apostolos*) the Twelve Apostles (v.18)
- The Father sanctified the Twelve. The Son sanctified Himself that the Twelve might thus be sanctified by the Truth (vv.17,19).

After this, Jesus went on to speak of those who will believe on Him through the word of the Twelve. In Revelation 21:14, John also wrote about his vision of the New Jerusalem where the wall of the city had twelve foundations on which were written the names of the Twelve Apostles. Thus the Twelve Apostles are crucial to the Church; their mission goes back not just to First Century evangelism, but all the way to God the Father in Eternity. If one rejects the Twelve or what they taught, one rejects God the Father.

Contained within the above twelve points from John 17 is enough to fill twelve volumes. Perhaps this is one reason why the Apostle John is referred to as John the Theologian. In John's days (just as today), there was an urgent need for these things that John wrote. For example, in Revelation 2:6 and 2:15, John refers to the Nicolaitans, which were a Gnostic sect started by ex-deacon Nicolas (Acts 6:5), one of the first seven deacons who apostatized. This sect was strong in Ephesus and Pergamos, and perhaps other parts of Asia Minor. Rejecting what the Twelve Apostles taught, ex-deacon Nicolas' sect tolerated idolatry and fornication. To them, only spiritual things mattered. Things relating to the body and to physical things were irrelevant. By rejecting the Twelve, they had lost the connection with God the Father and had cast themselves adrift. This is why a correct understanding of God is important. It's one thing to be pursuing the things of God but to be ignorant of some of its depth. It's something else to know better and deliberately distort the truth or rebel against it. In this regard, Apollos and his twelve disciples didn't know about the Holy Spirit and taught only the baptism of John; but they were willing to be corrected by Aquila, Priscilla and Paul (Acts 18:24-19:7). Ex-deacon Nicholas knew better of the things of God and rebelled against the Truth.

Even the Mosaic Law contained instructions for rejecting heresy. If a false prophet was to advocate something contrary to the Truth, and back up his teaching by miracles, he was still to be rejected (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Thus the Faith tests the miracles and not vice-versa.

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Epistle: Acts 20:16-18, 28-36

In last week's Epistle lesson, we caught a snapshot from the early part of Paul's Second Missionary Journey in about 49 AD. This week, we look at a snapshot from the end of Paul's Third Missionary Journey, or about 57 AD. Traveling with Paul at various times on his Second Missionary Journey were eight members of the original Seventy. At various points of the journey, Paul worked with twelve others of the Seventy plus the Apostle Peter. On his Third Journey, Paul traveled with nine members¹ of the original Seventy and worked with sixteen others² at various locations. Thus the Apostle Paul was very tightly connected to the Twelve and the Seventy.

The setting for the Epistle lesson is in Miletus (Acts 20:17), a few miles South of Ephesus. Paul was hurrying to get back to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost and he knew that chains and tribulations awaited him there (Acts 20:22-23). This was in fact the case and Paul spent the next five years under some form of lock up (in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome) before he was released in 62 or 63 AD. From Miletus, Paul called for the elders (Greek: *presbyteros*) and the bishops (Greek: *episkopos*) from Ephesus to meet him there in Miletus (Acts 20:17, 28).

At this time, there were churches all over the area surrounding Ephesus that had been raised up during the early part of Paul's Third Missionary Journey (Acts 19:8-12). "All who dwelt in Asia" (Acts 19:10) refers to the Roman province of Asia which includes the seven churches listed in Revelation 2-3 (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea) plus Colossae (which Paul wrote to from Rome about five years later). It is quite possible that the elders and bishops from Ephesus refers to the Ephesus area and not just the city itself.

Paul's message to the elders and bishops was as follows:

- Remember my life when I was with you (vv.18-21)
 - I coveted no one's wealth (v.33)
 - My hands provided for my needs and those with me (v.34). This is probably referring to Paul's trade of tent making (Acts 18:2-3)
 - Do as I did; remember to support the weak (v.35)
 - It is more blessed to give than receive (v.35)
- Take heed and shepherd the Church (v.28,31)
- Savage wolves will come in among you (v.29)
- Heretics will rise up from among you (v.30)
- I commend you to God and the Word of His Grace (v.32).

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¹ Timothy, Titus, Gaius, Erastus, Aristarchus, Sosthenes, Tychicus, Trophimus and Luke.

² Cephas, Onesiphorus, Apollos, Epaphras, Archippus, Philemon and Apphia, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Aquila and Priscilla, Epaphroditus, Lucius, Sosipater, Tertius, Quartus, Jason and Agabus.

Following Paul's admonition, there was a very emotional farewell (vv.37-38). John Chrysostom commented on this as follows, "He had comforted them so they would not grieve that he was treated in such a bad way. For my anxiety is not that you should be saved through me as the means, but only that you should be saved: the person as the instrument is immaterial. You do not know the pangs of spiritual childbirth, how overpowering they are, how he who is in travail with this birth would rather be cut into ten thousand pieces, than see one of those to whom he has given birth perishing and undone" (Homily XLIV on Acts 20).

Paul's admonition here is exactly what the Church Fathers had to deal with at the First Ecumenical Council in the early Fourth Century. At this Council, convened at Nicea, about 150 miles from Ephesus, a summary statement of the Faith was agreed upon and is referred to today as the Nicene Creed. [The original Nicene Creed was appended by a series of anathemas on all who taught otherwise. Later at the Council of Chalcedon, the anathemas were removed to make the "Nicene Creed" a totally positive statement of the Faith.]

But the Nicene Creed did not just fall out of the sky. It was based on a much earlier Creed called the Apostles Creed which was drafted between 30 and 31 AD by the Twelve Apostles. In a commentary on the Apostles' Creed by Rufinus of Aquileia (c.345-411 AD), Rufinus gives some insight into how the Apostles' Creed was used in the early Church.³

For example, Rufinus states:

- The Creed was generated by the Twelve prior to leaving Jerusalem on their separate missionary journeys.
- Each of the Twelve contributed one clause of the Creed.
- The intent of the Creed was the establishment of a common faith throughout the world; a simple statement of the Faith.
- The Twelve decreed that the Creed should be standard teaching to new converts. By Rufinus' time (Fourth Century) the Creed was referred to as the Baptismal Creed and was memorized before baptism.
- The Twelve prescribed the Creed as a badge for distinguishing the man who preached the truth about Christ from false apostles.
- The Creed was intentionally not written down (until the Fourth Century) to ensure that it was learned from Apostolic traditions and not from captured texts.

Because the Apostles' Creed was so brief and concise, it was also subject to being twisted by the wolves and the heretics that Paul warned about. The Nicene Creed follows the same outline and covers the same subject as the Apostles' Creed, but expands on it to make it much more difficult to twist. In some Churches today, both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are used. In the Orthodox Church, primarily the Nicene Creed is used since it amplifies the Apostles' Creed.

In Paul's writings, he referred to the household of God as being built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets (Ephesians 2:19-20). Peter referred to the words spoken by the holy

³ For more details, see Schaff & Wace. The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Second Series v.3 pp 541-563

prophets and the commandments of us, the Apostles (2 Peter 3:2). And John referred to the ability of the Ephesians to test false apostles and find them to be liars (Revelation 2:2). All this attests to the existence of a definable metric (the Apostles' Creed) that was in common use.

Next Sunday concludes the seven week series of the development of the Early Church. Today's Gospel and Epistle lesson takes us up to the present where the church has been established on good foundations and can trace its roots to the teaching of the Twelve Apostles. Next Sunday we return to the beginning to consider the establishment of the Church at Pentecost.