

Carolyn C. Brock: First Century

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Identity

This talk is about identity – corporate identity. It raises a question that many communities are thinking about these days. Who are we as a community? Particularly who are we when many of the factors that drew us together no longer defines us?

An example. 20 years ago House Church might have said, we are a small group of Christians who try to live close together in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of the city and worship together in homes. Now we aren't small, we live all over the DC and Maryland and we worship in the student lounge of Catholic University. So now who are we?

We have been light about it at times – instead of "house church" is it time to call ourselves the "lounge" church? But we all know that there are deep and difficult questions and issues for us. The changes may happen gradually and we take each next step as it seems reasonable – often a good and healthy sign – and then at some point we look around and see that the path we thought we were on has taken a gradual but definite turn and we are not where we thought we were going. Did we do something wrong? Should we try to go back?

This talk is about how first century believers may experienced the need to continually re-think – "who are we" as they dealt with events and changes they did not expect.

Imagine as you listen that you are among the believers who were the very first to believe in Jesus. Imagine that when Jesus began his public ministry you were very young adults – just old enough to make your own decision about him. And also assume that you lived very long lives and are among the believers near the end of the first century.

Most important fact to remember about our imagined identity is that we are Jews – all of Jesus' very first followers were Jew and their view of the world was the view of their own people.

Remember that, as Jews, we are living under Roman domination and that for almost our entire history as a people we have been either slaves, wandering nomads, fighting a gorilla war for land, fighting a civil war, living in exile, or under foreign domination. There is only one brief time in our entire history when we were "somebody" by the standards of the nations – when we had our own unified kingdom with a king and a land and boundaries and some respect (the Queen of Sheba came to see for herself). This brief time was lasted from David's reign only through the reign of his son Solomon. We long for that time again.

Jesus' public ministry

So when we hear Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God we would most certainly have heard it in this context – stirring our longing for the time when God will reestablish the Throne of David. Then we'll be an independent people without the Romans or Babylonians or any of them telling us what to do or how to live

Our belief in Jesus would be the belief that he is this promised Messiah who will re-establish the Throne of David and become our King. We aren't pacifists, and we probably expect Jesus to lead a revolt that overthrows the Roman empire.

We do understand that Jesus is telling us that this Kingdom

will be different than other kingdom – in this one the last will be first, the poor will be blessed, justice and peace together will prevail.

But it will be a "kingdom" – a nation where we have freedom to live out identity has Jewish people.

So, now, who are we? We are faithful Jews who believe we have found the promised Jewish Messiah. We do hear Jesus' message of love and justice and peace in the Kingdom of God as a message deeply rooted in the prophetic writings of our own people. This is not some new religion but our own Jewish faith challenged and restored and refreshed to its truest expression. We are is Jewish who believe we've found the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

Crucifixion

Completely unanticipated. In fact right down to the very last hours the disciples are arguing about which of them would be the greatest when Jesus comes into his kingdom – who will sit on his right hand?

Death is not at all what they expected.

This is a devastating, public humiliation, grueling form of torture and execution

not only was he not the chosen one of God, he is executed in a form that Jewish law reserves for those who are cursed by God.

he has been executed by the very ones we believed he would overthrow

everything we invested our lives in is gone – and we are left wondering how could we have been so wrong – how could we have been so foolish

We were fools to believe that after all our ancestors have

waited for centuries to see the Messiah, we would ever be the ones to find him.

What would you do then?

Peter says – going back to my old job – I'm going fishing. Two others on the road home – Emmas. You would try to pick up the pieces of your life and move on.

So who are we now? We are fools who allowed our hopes to be raised that there might actually be justice and freedom in our life time for people like us

Resurrection

Then the stirrings of something very strange. Stories from people who claim to have seen Jesus. A growing number of reports claiming that Jesus is not dead but alive. In fact, risen from the dead. As the reports grow and many describe their encounters with Jesus we have to take this seriously.

This is also unexpected. We didn't expect him to die. And we certainly didn't expect him to come back from the dead. Never heard the prophets say anything about any of this.

Scholars believe that a line from Acts may actually be a fragment of one of the earliest Christian creeds: "This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ."

We are now beginning to rethink many things and we see that, yes, this does fit. Remember our God has always been the one who chooses the rejected ones – the slaves are chosen over all the powerful empires. God chooses the poor and the stranger. Moses, certainly an unlikely leader who had to flee the country, was chosen to lead the Exodus. This is not really something new and different it is, after all, part of the core of the faith. The one who was rejected is the one God chooses.

In the light of this we re-think many things. We remember

Jesus' teachings and think about them in a new way – the poor and the lepers who are rejected and cast outside of society, just as Jesus was.

Now who are we? We are Jews (and it never crosses our minds that we might be anything else) We believe that Jesus is still the promised Jewish Messiah and now we wait for him to return. Our people have always waited for the Messiah and now we too wait for him again. We expect him to return right away and when he does he will then establish the kingdom of Israel and reign on the Throne of David.

Begin to collect the stories about Jesus and retell them again and again. Out of those stores comes probably the earliest of the gospels – Mark's gospel, "the good news about the Messiah."
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What is our identity now? Jews waiting for the risen Jewish Messiah who will return and establish the Throne of David.

Jersusal/Persecution

we tell everyone what we've experienced and how we interpret it in the light of Jewish history and others begin to believe. These others join us, not in creating some new and separate religion, but because this is seems so much a part of our history.

Growing numbers of people are believing in Jesus as the Risen Messiah who will return very soon to establish the kingdom

All this is pretty tough on the leaders of our people, who never did like Jesus and they didn't like the kind of Kingdom he talked about – where the last are first and the first are last. As the number of people who believe our report grows and grows in Jerusalem – the authorities become increasingly concerned

The escalation is recorded in the stories Acts: apostles are

first arrested and released, then arrested and held; then whipped; then a young man named Stephen makes an impassioned speech which so angers the authorities that they pick up stones and throw them at him until he dies.

This is very scary – Jesus was killed and now we understand that we might be too. The believers in Jesus begin to move out away from Jerusalem and are scattered throughout Palestine. But as we move out way from the danger, we continue to tell people what we believe and more people in these rural areas and smaller villages of Palestine begin to believe as well.

Palestine Reform movement

Our beliefs become a movement within Judaism – Palestinian reform movement or Jesus Movement as some scholars call it.

Who are we now? Again we are Jews believing in the Jewish Messiah. Divisions about these things are not uncommon and we are convinced that Jesus is the true Messiah, the Christ.

Many diverse views were tolerated within Judaism. Jesus movement of Palestine was only one of many such movements – people who claimed their leader was the Messiah.

Saul, through his own initiative, persecuted believers in some cities and tried to have them thrown in jail but a massive organized persecution was not occurring.

Mainline Judaism was not that concerned. These things come and go.

Characteristics of the movement at this point: Itinerant preachers like Jesus. Entirely Jewish – proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Expecting Jesus to return very soon and establish the kingdom and become their king. Scattered throughout Palestine. Preached in the synagogues as Jesus did. People become disciples of Jesus – the call to "make disciples." Not building communities yet because these believers are still

emerged in the great diverse Jewish community; they are fully a part of Judaism.

Missionary outreach

Movement begins to grow and expand beyond Palestine – into urban areas. New stage of missionary outreach. Missionaries like Paul carry the message of Jesus to urban areas well beyond the Jewish homeland about 50-60 ad.

They preach mostly to Jews but Gentiles come to believe as well

Communities of Jews and Gentiles

they established mixed communities of people who believe in Jesus – house churches

Characteristics: Urban. Formed communities (rather than simply "make disciples"), Women are clearly leaders. Gathering in houses for fellowship, teaching, communion, sharing letters from teachers. Mostly Jewish – probably for a long time Jews were predominant.

Primary identity: those who wait for Jesus the Messiah to return and establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

Ratio of Jews to Gentiles – in most communities probably predominately Jews with the shared history and memories and forms that create a powerful identity as a people.

But possibly as the ratio shifts some communities face difficult disagreements – how Jewish do Gentiles have to be to be fully equal members of the community. Obey the law? to what extent? As the ratio changes (more Gentiles than Jews in some communities) Jews might become anxious and want more clarity.

Major identity crises: who are we now?

Paul's preaching: faith in Christ alone; obedience to the law

is not necessary to our relationship with God; we are God's people by grace through faith. But note that Paul makes his case strongly through Jewish literature – that it has always been by faith as far back as Abraham – that Abraham received the promise by faith. This opens the faith to whole new groups of people who would believe in Jesus but would not go so far as to accept all the requirements of Jewish law.

New identity: who are we? Communities must resolve this among themselves. Issue is still largely internal, although there are clearly major implications for Jews' relationships with other Jews.

Destruction of temple

A terrible event in Jewish history with profound implications for the development of Christianity as well.

Temple was concrete, tangible focus of religious faith. All Jews loved the temple – made pilgrimages or longed to. With its destruction Judaism loses this powerful uniting factor of a specific place.

Similar to House Church – meeting in living rooms was a tangible expression of identity; a focus representing intimacy, informal, participate. As long as worship is in houses, there is not need to articulate these things – they are built into the structure. When that no longer applies, struggle is to articulate in new ways – what is it that really unites us and holds us together as a people?

For Jews it is also a terrible faith crisis – how could God's dwelling place on earth be destroyed by Roman military forces? The Jewish faith must provide an answer to that question.

Jews now must ask this question anew – *who are we?* How could this have happened?

The answer for many is that God must have been displeased –

Jews feel that they have not been obedient enough to the law. This begins a period in Judaism of stronger focus on the Jewish law. The law becomes even more central to Jewish identity – we are people who received God's law and obey it

At the very point at which the people who believe in Jesus are redefining their identity as people who place their faith in Christ alone, Judaism is taking an opposite turn – refusing on the law and making it even more central.

Christians are a problem for two reasons:

Association with Gentiles – violates purity according to the law

Jews now have a whole new fear of the Romans – realize the terrible power of the Roman Empire over their lives. Many become afraid of association with Christians – those who wait for the return of the one executed by the Romans as a traitor.

Separation of "Christians"

Remember who we are – as those who first believed in Jesus on hillsides in the homeland, we still think of ourselves as Jews – the chosen people with the long history of relationship with Yahweh; as part of the community of faith celebrating the Passover every year and waiting for the return of the Messiah; worshipping in the synagogue; obeying the basics of the law as we understood it

As we experience exclusion from the synagogues, the pain would have been terrible. The Gospel of John seems to be written out of this pain: the Pharisees are "The Jews" who persecute Jesus.

Now who are we? This is definitely the beginnings of a new and separate religion

We wait for Jesus' return as the new "people of God."

The letter to the Hebrews: we are the true people of God, and all the history of Judaism now belongs to us; proclaims that this is the fulfillment of what God really intended all along; Temple priesthood no longer needed; Jesus is the high priest who now offers sacrifice for us in heaven

Matthew: replace the Torah with consistent, cohesive teachings ending with the great commission to make disciples among all nations.

Institutional church

The expected return of Jesus does not occur and this poses a new challenge to our identity. We must settle in for the long haul. We must establish institutions and find ways to get along with both the Jews and Romans.

Luke/Acts: story of crucifixion ties all the pieces together – Romans aren't really responsible because the Jews initiated it. Then the Jews repent at Pentecost and believe in Jesus by the thousands. A telling of the story that lessens the conflict, more likely to be able to get along.

Letter to the Hebrews: as people start to "fall away" and lose faith when Jesus does not return and the pain of separation is so great, there is the effort to regain commitment. Strong language about the wrath to come and punishment for those who do not stay the course.

Titus/Timothy, later letters: these letters are addressed to leaders while earlier letters were addressed to whole communities – a clearly defined leadership structure has emerged with responsibility for the "flock." Household codes establish order, get everything fixed and established, orderly conduct will reduce the degree to which Christians are seen as a threat to Romans or as unpredictable and radical.

John: almost doesn't make it in the canon because of its

mystical characteristics. Jesus is not simply remembered but experienced as a living presence among them, an intimacy in their experience of Jesus. John's community doesn't merely wait for Jesus to return but experiences his living presence intimately among them through mystical experience.