

Defending the church's truth claims

4. God acted decisively when he raised Jesus up

The universal faith of the first followers of Jesus

The phrases taken from tradition which are embedded in Paul's letters have a significance for an understanding of what the first followers believed, which is not often explicitly attributed to them. This significance becomes apparent when scholars enquire how it was that the phrases became fixed in the tradition.

What happened at a baptism. There is a widespread agreement that the most likely situation in which a fixed formula might have been required in the very early days after the execution of Jesus was the baptism of a convert. We know as a fact that converts were baptised. Before becoming a member of the group a convert, (in the earliest days more probably than not a convert from orthodox Judaism), must have been required to make some unambiguous statement justifying acceptance into the group. That is for us a 'human it must have been'. The early followers were not baptising someone merely in order to enable him or her to join a club, they were sealing him or her for inclusion, as they thought, in a kingdom not of this world and saving them from "the wrath that is coming", or as the New English Bible puts it, "the terror to come". All the more essential to line them up correctly before washing away their sins in baptism and so starting them on their new life. The probability is, therefore, very strong indeed that the formula which Paul includes in his letter to the Romans had its origin in the statement of faith required of converts before they were baptised.

What Paul knew about baptisms. It is probable that Paul himself had his sighting within 3 or 4 years or so of the execution of Jesus. In his letter to the followers of Jesus in Galatia Paul sets out his credentials as a true follower of Jesus in the face of doubts which have been thrown upon them. Of his 'conversion' he writes, "God...was pleased to reveal his son to me" and tells us that, when that happened, "I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once to Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" (Gal. 1 16-20 NRSV).

Nobody knows what was said between Peter and Paul, or what contribution James made. It is possible that Paul confirmed with Cephas (Peter) the wording of the ancient formula used at a baptism with which he was already familiar. For his part it is possible that Peter, once he had satisfied himself that the distinguished persecutor Paul was genuine in his profession of faith in Jesus, took the opportunity to quiz the Pharisee about prophecies in the Jewish scriptures which might help in explaining the significance of Jesus to orthodox Jews in Jerusalem. No one knows affirmatively that either of these things happened. But, on the other

hand, the nature and contents of Paul's surviving letters virtually rule out the possibility that it was ever alleged against him that he had been failing to insist on a proper affirmation of faith before people were baptised out in the sticks.

Paul's correspondence shows that he was engaged in a running battle over certain specific matters with the leaders of the followers in Jerusalem - the questions whether male non-Jewish converts had to be circumcised and whether the strict Jewish food laws applied to non-Jewish followers. We can see from the correspondence that those in Jerusalem 'threw the book' at Paul, making ugly accusations against him, which he sets about refuting in his letter to the Galatians - that he is a liar, that he is not a proper apostle, and so on. But there is no trace of an accusation about any laxity, or impropriety, in what he permitted to take place at baptisms which he attended.

The faith affirmed at a baptism. The baptismal statement which Paul repeats in the two letters mentioned confesses that God has acted decisively to vindicate Jesus at the moment of his resurrection. That was the faith. Think of the implications: nothing about 'in the beginning', or 'before all worlds'; nothing about a virgin conception, nothing untoward at his baptism, nothing at any time before his resurrection; but at the moment of his resurrection.

For whom and for how long was this the faith? The fact that Paul begins by repeating this baptismal statement in his formal letter to the followers in Rome in 57 CE, strongly suggests that that was the faith at least until 57 CE. The formula had 'apostolic' authority and would have been hard to change, if it had ever occurred to any one to wish to change it. Hardly a date in early church history is fixed beyond debate. But scholars are prepared to say roughly when things happened - 'it must have been after this for such and such a reason and before that for these reasons'. Brackets are often enough to put events in an order on which most scholars would agree. Sometimes they narrow things down further and say, for example, that Paul probably died in 62 or 64 CE, that Jesus' brother James probably died in 62 CE, and that Peter probably died in 64 CE. No one disputes that those of the Jewish followers of Jesus who were still alive when Titus destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE were then scattered. There is an old tradition, which may be accurate, that they fled to Pella.

What conclusion may we draw from all this? The overwhelming probability is that at least down to 70 CE every convert understood, and affirmed before being baptised, that in relation to Jesus, who was "descended from David according to the flesh", or, as the NEB puts it, "a man on the human level", God had acted decisively at the moment of his resurrection. For the first followers of Jesus that was the faith.

Converts believed that because the followers who had seen the Lord told them that that was how it was. At the general resurrection they will be a not insignificant company.

When the saints go marching in a reckless person might hope to march beside them - if there's 'space'.

In Part 5, how piety took hold and what the Hebrew equivalent of 'son of God' meant to Paul.