

The First Christian Revival

Radical Discipleship

More Than Conquerors

In all these things we are more than conquerors,
through him that loved us. – *Romans 8:37*
I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. – *Luke 10:18*

EARLY African Christianity produced a revival movement, the first Christian revival movement we know about. Large numbers of men and women, seeking radical discipleship, came to the desert. The desert became a city." [from a talk given by Dr. Andrew Walls, in 2003, at Dallas Theological Seminary]

Last Part of Dr. Walls' Talk: Transcription

.....But Antony did not persist in the Greek education that would have taken him into the cosmopolitan class. He never did learn Greek. Late in life when Greek speakers came to him for advice, he used an interpreter. The only biography of him speaks of his zealous attendance at church, and his careful attention to the reading. This is worth a mention, for we often forget that before the age of printing, even among literate communities, people heard the Scripture read, they did not read it for themselves. The crucial factor in the service, was not the sermon, not the liturgy, but the reading of the Scripture. So it seems to have been for Antony. And so it remains in many societies across Africa today, when a high proportion of the Christian population still hear and respond to Scripture orally, rather than by reading their Bible.

As he listened to the story of the rich young ruler, Antony was convicted more and more, of how far his life fell short of the style of discipleship that the Lord described. His parents died before he was twenty. Antony gave the estate to his village, keeping only a portion; he was responsible for his sister's education. But the readings went on. And one day he heard, "Take no thought for the morrow." And he sold his remaining property, and put his sister in the care of a community of women. It's interesting that this church had, even at this stage, an organized community that looked after the education of girls, and he left to devote his life to prayer, and to seeking conformity with Christ.

He clearly was not the first person to do this. We are told that he began by visiting every holy man he had heard of. But these holy men lived just outside their villages, withdrawn but not detached.

Villagers would come to them, and would seek prayer and advice, and counsel, and go away. Here was someone who was helping to protect the village. Antony spent some time consulting with these various holy men, learning different things, and skills from them, about prayer, about gentleness, about humility, about how to subdue the body, about how to live with as little food as possible, and with as little sleep as possible; above all, how to pray. He is preparing for the great encounter.

For the other great figure in Antony's story, is the devil. The story develops as a power encounter, between Antony and the powers of evil. And the author, as he speaks of this, corrects himself. He says it was the Savior's victory in Antony, that the story is about. The story gives a lively sense of the universe in which African peasants were living: evil spirits led by Satan himself, in a Christian group like this, and their natural habitat, is in the desert, where people do not go. And they live above all in tombs, the last place anyone would choose to live. And Antony is living like earlier holy men, close to the village.

The devil assails Antony with what one might call ordinary temptations. He tries to discourage him, he tries to deter him, with thoughts of his family, and with particular insistence, he tries to seduce him, to sexual pleasure and other indulgences. These stories come in concrete form; the evil powers take female form, and so on. The people watching, do not see the spiritual phenomena, but they hear the noise, and then the evil one tries to frighten him.

Christ's Permanent Victory Over Satan

ANTONY proclaims Christ's victory, and becomes assured that it is now permanent. "From now on I shall have no anxiety about you," he tells the devil. "The Lord is my helper. And I shall look upon my enemies." Spiritual warfare has been the characteristic of Antony's life, ever since he took up the way of discipleship. And it now intensifies.

It is at this stage that Antony develops the innovation; he moves away from the village altogether. He goes to the desert, where the demons actually live. Indeed he makes his home in some tombs, their natural territory. He challenges them on their own ground. And the people in the village know what he is doing. He takes enough food and water for several days, and arranges for water to be brought to him. In the tombs the devil resorts to frontal attack. A host of demons beat and torture him; he is found lying, as if dead, and is carried to the village church. And everyone comes in, just as they would, in any African scene today. He regains consciousness, and insists on being taken back to the tombs. The place fills up with wild beasts, lions, leopards, bears, wolves, scorpions, who attack him. Again his spiritual enemies appear, and in animal form. Antony stays in the tombs, until the demons are conquered. And the devil fights hard, because he is afraid that other Antonys will come, until his territory is occupied.

Notice the effect on the community. The demons of the desert are part of their world view. Antony heals people, village feuds are settled, people who have lost relatives are comforted, Antony's victory has blessed the whole neighborhood. This is not the medieval picture of the emaciated ascetic; Antony is in splendid physical shape, he lived to be 104 years old, and he has achieved the sort of balanced life, for which humanity was created. After a while he settled at a remote fort, deserted. He cultivated a patch of ground, large enough to produce the few vegetables he needed, and the story goes that such was his influence with the animal kingdom, that he persuaded the birds and the beasts to leave his crops alone.

He was not allowed to be alone in the desert. Just as he had visited other holy men, now earnest people visited him, perhaps to seek the prayers of such a holy person, perhaps to get advice. Many stayed to learn more of the life of devotion. One of the early stories of the temptations declared that the devil tried to drive Antony away or destroy him, because he feared that Antony would make the desert his own domain, full of monks, and this is what happened:

Early African Christianity produced a revival movement, the first Christian revival movement we know about. Large numbers of men and women, seeking radical discipleship, came to the desert. Their quest is the life of virtue, to seek perfection. The desert has become a city.

Christianity so far has been a largely urban religion. It was the cities that rang with the praises of Christ. Now the city of the desert is praising Christ. These communities became the power-houses of Coptic Christianity, for centuries. Their members were known as the desert fathers, their sayings were treasured up, and kept in collections, which are available to us today, wonderful pearls of spiritual wisdom.

I wish we had time to think more of Antony, because at first sight the things for which he stands, monasticism, is not part of our tradition. But this comes from a realm of radical discipleship, and of conflict with the spiritual world, and becomes a way of mobilizing Christian energy, in a quite remarkable way. I wish we had time to think of his successor, Pachomius, a former soldier, who organizes these communities, and to reflect on this early African Christianity, that has so much in common with so much of the continent today. It is rural; it is vernacular, it is radical. And it shares the outlook, the world view, of peasant peoples.

These are things which we will find in other parts of our story as we look at other landmarks. Africa over the years of continuous Christian mission, shows so many of the signs that we see in this first period. African Christianity has been innovative, adapting to changing circumstances. It has been the home of radical Christian movements, of revivals. It is marked by a deep sense of the reality of the spirit world, and an assurance of the victory of Christ over all unseen powers. These are evident in the early landmarks of African Christianity. And they will recur as we consider other landmarks.

Meantime, let us note that the Christian faith is indigenous to Africa; it did not come with the white man. Africa has a long Christian history, and a story that will join up with the westward story, and all the others, in the Kingdom of God. [End of talk]. [Applause.]

Last part of talk given at Dallas Theological Seminary, October 5, 2003, by Dr. Andrew Walls, a graduate of the Universities of Aberdeen and Oxford, missionary, and expert in the history of African Christianity.

HISTORICAL Note. The Desert Fathers were Christians who lived mainly in the Scetes desert of Egypt in the third century AD. The most well known was Antony the Great (died

356). So many Christians moved to the desert that Athanasius wrote: “The desert had become a city.” This movement was the first Christian revival. The Desert Fathers had a major influence on the development of Christianity in Africa, in Europe, and in Asia.

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• Bible References: **KJV**