

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 3: Religious and Social Values

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All right, ready to jump back in time with me? Today, we're going all the way back to the first century AD, you know, like the time of Jesus and all that. And it was a world just exploding with all these different religious and philosophical ideas. It really was a wild time to be alive.

Like imagine trying to figure out your place in the universe with all these different belief systems swirling around you. It's kind of like stepping into, I don't know, like a giant spiritual bazaar or maybe even a philosophical battle royale. Uh-huh.

I like that. Yeah, a battle royale of ideas. And luckily for us, we've got a front-row seat, thanks to these lecture notes from Dr. Mathewson.

He really dug deep into the religious landscape of the first century. You know, what always gets me about this period is that it wasn't just this hotbed of spiritual exploration. It was also a time of, like, huge political upheaval.

I mean, you've got the Roman Empire at its peak, right? And their influence is shaping life for people all across these vast territories. Yeah, you can't ignore the political realities when you're trying to understand the religious landscape. So today's mission, should we choose to accept it, is to like map out this incredibly fascinating world.

We're going to uncover all those major religious and philosophical movements, you know, both in the Roman world and within Judaism. It's going to be like a crash course in belief systems 101. Think of it as like a cheat sheet for understanding the world of the earliest Christians.

Exactly. Because Christianity didn't just appear out of thin air, right? It interacted with, challenged, and even drew from all these preexisting beliefs. So if you really want to understand how Christianity developed, you've got to understand this context.

So let's start our adventure right in the heart of the Roman Empire. Picture yourself walking through one of their bustling cities, you know, surrounded by all these massive temples dedicated to gods and goddesses like Artemis, Apollo, Zeus, the whole gang here. This was a polytheistic society, meaning they believed in a whole bunch of different deities, and these gods controlled, well, pretty much everything.

Everything. Yeah. I mean, they had gods for love, war, the harvest, even like the doorway.

It's kind of overwhelming when you think about it. And the Romans were really into it, too. Like they had these huge public festivals and rituals dedicated to all these different gods.

But it wasn't just about those massive temples and public spectacles, right? I mean, religion was woven into everyday life. Like you could literally have a little shrine to a god right in your house. Yeah, exactly.

Imagine having like a little altar to the household gods right there in your kitchen. It was like a spiritual insurance policy. Keep those gods happy.

Keep your house safe. You know how it goes. But alongside all those colorful gods and goddesses, there were also some pretty serious philosophical movements brewing.

Take, for instance, Platonic dualism. Yeah, that's a big one. Platonic dualism basically says that there's this sharp division between, like, the spiritual world and the material world.

And the spiritual world is, you know, all good and pure, while the material world is, well, kind of messed up. So it's kind of like spirit versus matter, good versus bad, right? And this idea had a huge impact on how people viewed, well, pretty much everything. And it makes you wonder, how might this idea have influenced early Christian thought? Now, that's a fascinating question.

I mean, if you believe that the material world is inherently flawed, how does that impact your understanding of Jesus's incarnation? You know, God becoming human. And what about his resurrection? It really makes you think. Yeah, it's a real head scratcher.

All right, let's move on to another big philosophical player, stoicism. Ever heard someone called stoic? Well, the term comes from this ancient philosophy that was all about accepting your fate, keeping your emotions in check, and finding inner peace. Stoicism was huge in the Roman world, and it's kind of interesting how it's making a comeback today, you know? Maybe it's because, like, our world feels so chaotic and unpredictable.

Maybe it's that desire for, like, some sense of control, even when everything feels out of control. I get it. But let's shift gears to something a little bit, shall we say, more rebellious.

Let's talk about cynicism. Oh, yeah. Cynicism.

Think Diogenes, the guy who famously lived in a barrel and, like, rejected all societal norms and material possessions. It was basically a big screw you to the establishment. They basically said, look, happiness comes from rejecting all this worldly stuff.

It's pretty radical stuff. And, you know, some scholars actually argue that Jesus himself had some cynical tendencies. Like, think about his critiques of wealth and hypocrisy or his call to, like, radical simplicity.

It's definitely food for thought. Yeah, it makes you wonder what aspects of Jesus's teachings might have appealed to people who were already, you know, kind of disillusioned with the Roman system and all its excesses. All right.

Now, for something that might surprise you. Magic. Oh, magic.

And I'm not talking about, like, pulling rabbits out of hats. In the first century, magic was about tapping into supernatural powers to influence events. You know, it involved rituals, spells, sometimes even using the names of gods to, like, compel them to do your bidding.

So it wasn't just for entertainment. It was like a serious spiritual practice for people. Absolutely.

Yeah. People genuinely believed in the power of magic. It was a part of their world, you know? So imagine how they might have viewed Jesus's miracles.

Were they seen as divine acts or just really powerful magic tricks? It's a fascinating question. It really makes you wonder how different people would have interpreted those events based on their own beliefs and experiences. Speaking of seeking answers, let's talk about oracles.

You know, like the famous oracle at Delphi. Ah, the oracle at Delphi. Imagine traveling to this sacred site and consulting a priestess who, like, channels the wisdom of the gods.

It must have been an incredible experience. But if you're an early Christian believing in one true God, I mean, how do you reconcile that with consulting an oracle? It seems like those two beliefs might clash a bit, don't you think? Oh, absolutely. And that's the thing about this period, right? There are all these different worldviews bumping up against each other, and people had to figure out how to navigate those tensions.

It makes you realize how challenging it must have been for those early Christians to try to carve out their own identity in this diverse religious landscape. OK, but there's one really big thing we haven't touched on yet. It's like the elephant in the room, or maybe we should say the emperor in the temple.

We're talking about emperor worship, this really interesting mix of politics and religion that was like a hallmark of the Roman Empire. Oh, yeah. It's hard to overstate how important that was.

Like, imagine walking around and seeing the emperor's face on every coin. And it wasn't just coins, right? It was statues, temples, inscriptions. They were everywhere.

Everywhere. And they weren't just praising the emperors for their leadership. I mean, they were using terms like "Lord and Savior to describe them.

Whoa, those are pretty loaded terms, especially for early Christians. Right. And that's exactly the point Dr. Mathewson was making.

Like, think about those same terms- Lord, Savior, even gospel being used in the New Testament. It wasn't a coincidence. So it's almost like early Christians were taking these words that had been used for the emperor and saying, no, no, no, this is the real Lord, the true Savior.

It was a really powerful, almost subversive move. They're basically saying our allegiance is to a higher power, not to this earthly ruler. And that was risky because refusing to participate in emperor worship could get you in big trouble.

Yeah, I bet. It wasn't just a theological debate. It was a political statement and a dangerous one at that.

Okay, so we've talked about the Roman side of things, but now let's shift gears and dive into the Jewish world under Roman rule. Imagine what that must have been like, trying to hold onto your identity as God's chosen people while living under the thumb of this huge empire. It was a constant tension, and it led to, well, some really fascinating responses.

I mean, there wasn't just one way of being Jewish under Roman rule. Different groups grappled with this challenge in different ways, which led to a pretty diverse range of beliefs and practices. Right, like a spectrum of responses.

So let's start with the scribes. These were the scholars, the experts in the law dedicated to studying and interpreting the Torah. They were vital for preserving Jewish tradition, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD.

I mean, think about the meticulous work they did, copying scrolls, debating interpretations, making sure their sacred texts were passed down accurately. It was a huge responsibility. They were like the guardians of the flame, keeping those traditions alive.

All right. Then there are the Pharisees, known for their emphasis on personal purity and strict observance of the law. Dr. Mathewson kind of summed them up with the phrase let's separate, meaning they were really focused on separating themselves from those who didn't follow their rigorous interpretation of the law.

Yeah, it was about living a life that was truly pleasing to God, free from any kind of ritual impurity. And they weren't just some fringe group either. I mean, they held positions of influence, they were respected for their knowledge, and they were very much involved in public life.

But they also had a bit of a reputation for being, well, a bit argumentative, especially with another group, the Sadducees. Now the Sadducees were kind of the opposite, right? They were more pragmatic, more willing to accommodate Roman rule, and they were often associated with the priestly aristocracy. They were definitely more focused on maintaining the status quo, both politically and religiously.

They weren't as interested in all the finer points of the law as the Pharisees were, and they were pretty skeptical of things like, you know, angels and resurrection. So they were like, let's keep things running smoothly; don't rock the boat too much. But they still saw Jesus as a threat.

They did, yeah. I mean, they may not have agreed with the Pharisees on everything, but they both saw Jesus as someone who was disrupting the established order, and that made him dangerous in their eyes. So it was this weird alliance of convenience, right? They joined forces against Jesus, even though they had their own reasons for doing so.

Okay, now let's get to a group that took separation to a whole new level: the Essenes. These folks basically said, forget this whole Roman mess, we're out of here. They formed their own community at Qumran, seeking to live a pure life apart from the corruption of society.

And we know a lot about them because of the Dead Sea Scrolls, this amazing collection of texts they left behind. It gives us this incredible glimpse into their beliefs, their practices, and their hopes for the future. I mean, Dr. Mathewson even mentioned this one ritual they practiced where they'd immerse themselves in water for purification.

Can you imagine the level of commitment that took? It's pretty intense, and it really shows how serious they were about separating themselves from what they saw as the impurity of the world. They were waiting for God to intervene and restore things to the way they should be. All right.

And finally, we have to talk about the most radical response to Roman rule, the Zealots. Yeah. These were the revolutionaries, the let's fight group.

They believed that God would grant them victory if they rose up against the Roman oppressors. They were like the freedom fighters of their time, but, you know, often resorting to violence to achieve their goals. It's a complex issue, and it's fascinating to consider how their fervor might have influenced early Christian views on resistance and submission to authority.

Remember, Paul himself, before his conversion, was a Zealot. Whoa, that's right. And that makes his transformation even more remarkable, right? Going from a revolutionary to a preacher of peace, it really shows the transformative power of his encounter with Christ.

And it reminds us that the early church was made up of people from all sorts of backgrounds, carrying with them the complexities of their time. Exactly. It wasn't some monolithic group all thinking the same way.

It was a diverse movement with people who had wrestled with all these different responses to Roman rule. So we've got this incredibly rich and complex tapestry of beliefs in the first century. But in the midst of all this, Christianity is trying to find its footing, to articulate its unique message and identity.

How did they navigate this challenging environment? What made them stand out? Well, they had to be both clear about their message and adaptable in their approach. They had to explain why their message, centered on the person of Jesus Christ, was different from anything else out there. And they had to do it in a way that made sense to people from all walks of life.

Because it did challenge a lot of the assumptions of that time, right? Like the idea of one God that went against the whole grain of both Roman and Greek culture. Oh, absolutely. I mean, it wasn't just about adding another God to the mix.

It was about claiming that this God was the only true God, the creator of everything. That was a radical statement in a world where people believed different gods controlled different parts of their lives. And then there's Jesus himself, divine yet human, son of God, Messiah.

How did people make sense of that? It was a stumbling block for many, both Jews and Gentiles. For Jews, it raised questions about their understanding of God's unity. For

Gentiles, it might have seemed odd that a God would choose to become human, to suffer and die like one of us.

It's a lot to wrap your head around, even today. And speaking of mind-blowing concepts, let's not forget the resurrection. The idea that someone could conquer death would have been both fascinating and unsettling.

Totally. I mean, people had all sorts of beliefs about the afterlife. Some believed in a shadowy underworld, others in reincarnation.

Some even thought the soul just kind of slept until the end of time. But this idea of a bodily resurrection, of eternal life with God, was something completely different. It challenged everything they thought they knew about life and death.

So how did early Christians even begin to explain this message in such a diverse and often skeptical environment? What was their strategy? They had to be incredibly adaptable. They used logic and reason when talking to philosophers. They told stories and shared personal experiences when appealing to emotions.

They quoted scripture when debating with other Jews. They basically tailored their approach to whoever they were talking to. Dr. Mathewson gave the example of Paul, who could debate with philosophers in Athens one day and then turn around and quote Greek poets to make a point.

He even drew on his own Jewish background when speaking in synagogues. He was a master of connecting with different audiences. Exactly.

He understood that if you want people to listen, you have to speak their language, literally and figuratively. But it wasn't just about words either. Early Christians also lived out their faith in really radical ways.

Yeah, like sharing their possessions, welcoming outsiders, caring for the sick and poor. That must have made a big impression in a world that was pretty harsh and divided. They were putting their beliefs into action, showing what it meant to follow Jesus.

They were creating a counterculture within the Roman Empire, a community based on love, selflessness, and hope. This, of course, made them both appealing and threatening to the powers that be. I mean, on the one hand, they offered something different, something meaningful.

But on the other hand, their refusal to conform to certain social and religious expectations, especially emperor worship, put them in a pretty dangerous position. It's this tension that runs throughout Christian history. How do we stay true to the radical message of the gospel while also engaging constructively with the world around us? It's a question we still grapple with today.

It is. Okay, so let's get back to those different Jewish groups we talked about earlier and see how early Christians interacted with them. Let's start with the scribes, those experts in the law.

Early Christians saw themselves as fulfilling the Jewish scriptures, not abolishing them. They believed Jesus was the key to understanding the Torah. So they often engaged in dialogue and debate with the scribes, using those same scriptures to point to Jesus as the Messiah.

It's like they were saying, "We're all reading from the same book, but we see things a little differently. But that kind of approach sometimes led to conflict, right? Especially with the Pharisees, those sticklers for the rules. Oh, yeah.

Remember, the Pharisees were all about purity and separation. Yeah. And Jesus constantly challenged those boundaries, hanging out with people they considered unclean, reinterpreting the law in radical ways.

Like touching lepers, eating with tax collectors, basically saying that love for God and neighbor trumps all those ritual purity rules. Yeah, he was a real disruptor. Yeah.

And it's no surprise that the Pharisees became some of his most vocal opponents. It wasn't just a theological debate. It was about power, about who gets to interpret the law and define what it means to be faithful.

So where do the Sadducees, those more pragmatic folks, fit into this picture? They were less interested in the theological debates and more concerned with keeping things running smoothly, remember. But they still saw Jesus as a threat, just like the Pharisees did, even though they had different reasons. Yeah.

It's like that old saying, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Okay. What about the Essenes? They were pretty much off the grid in their own community.

Did they even have much contact with early Christians? Probably not directly, given their isolated lifestyle, but their writings, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, give us this amazing glimpse into the wider Jewish world that Christianity emerged from. They shared some beliefs, like the hope for a coming Messiah and a new covenant, but their focus on strict separation set them apart from the early church's mission to reach out to the wider world. So they were on different paths, but both were wrestling with the question of how to live faithfully under Roman rule.

And then there were the Zealots, those fiery revolutionaries. Their whole fight-back mentality must have been a tough one for early Christians to reconcile with Jesus's teachings about peace and nonviolence. Absolutely.

That question- how to respond to injustice and oppression- is something that has challenged Christians throughout history and still does today. And it's even more intriguing when you consider that Paul, the guy who wrote so much of the New Testament, had been a Zealot himself. Exactly.

His story shows how the gospel can completely transform our worldview and how those early Christians came from such diverse backgrounds, each bringing their own perspective and experiences to the table. Man, we've covered some serious ground today. I mean, we've gone from Platonic dualism to Emperor worship, from the Pharisees to the Zealots.

It's like the first century was this giant mixing bowl of beliefs all swirling around and bumping into each other. It makes you realize that Christianity didn't just pop up in some quiet little corner of the world. It was right in the thick of it all, this bustling marketplace of ideas.

And that's super important to keep in mind because that context really shaped how Christianity took shape. Those early Christians had to define themselves against all these other worldviews. Yeah, it wasn't enough to just say, hey, we believe in Jesus.

They had to figure out what made their message different, unique, and then explain it in a way that people could actually grasp. And not just one kind of person, but people from all sorts of backgrounds, all walks of life. Talk about a challenge, right? It's like they were playing this, I don't know, like a multilevel game of chess, trying to anticipate every move and countermove, and all while staying true to their core beliefs.

And with really high stakes. I mean, their allegiance to Jesus as Lord was a direct challenge to Roman authority. And their refusal to worship the emperor.

That was a really dangerous stance to take. It could get you killed, no doubt. It wasn't just some philosophical debate.

It was a life-or-death commitment. It really makes you admire the courage of those early believers. They weren't just talking the talk.

They were walking the walk, even when it meant risking everything. Their story is a powerful reminder that faith isn't just about believing certain things. It's about living those beliefs out, even when it's hard, even when it costs you something.

So what does all this mean for us today? I mean, we may not be living in the Roman Empire, but we're still surrounded by a ton of different beliefs and ideologies pulling us in all sorts of directions. How do we navigate this world faithfully without getting lost in all the noise? That's the million-dollar question, right? And I think the early church gives us some clues. For one thing, we've got to understand the cultural context we're living in.

Like, what are the dominant worldviews out there? What are the values and assumptions that shape how people think? Kind of like doing our own cultural anthropology, right? Trying to see the world through the eyes of someone who doesn't share our faith. Exactly. But it's not enough to just understand.

We have to engage with those different viewpoints thoughtfully and respectfully. It doesn't mean we have to compromise our own beliefs, but it does mean finding ways to communicate them in a way that connects with people where they are. Like Paul did in Athens.

Remember how he quoted those Greek philosophers and poets? He was meeting people on their own turf, building bridges instead of walls. That's the key. We need to be rooted in our own tradition, but also flexible enough to adapt our approach for different audiences.

And we need to be willing to have real conversations, even debates, with people who see things differently. It's not about watering down the message. It's about finding ways to make it relevant and understandable.

So it's about speaking the truth, but doing it with love and understanding. Right. And maybe even more importantly, we've got to live out our faith in a way that's genuine and attractive.

Actions speak louder than words, especially in a world that's often skeptical of religious claims. If our lives show the love, joy, peace, and hope that we talk about, that can be a way more powerful witness than any argument we could make. So it's not just about what we say.

It's about how we live. It's about living out those kingdom values, even when it goes against the grain of the world around us. It's about being salt and light, preserving what's good, challenging what's wrong, and shining the light of Christ into the darkness.

Well, as we wrap up our deep dive into the religious landscape of the first century, I gotta say, I'm feeling both challenged and encouraged. Challenged because, man, this world can feel overwhelming sometimes. But also encouraged because those early Christians faced some serious obstacles, and they not only survived, they thrived.

They spread their message of hope even when it seemed impossible. And their story reminds us that we're not in this alone. We've got the same spirit, the same gospel, the same God.

As they could do in the Roman Empire, surrounded by all that chaos and opposition. Just imagine what we can do today. But it takes courage, wisdom, and a deep faith.

So I'll leave you with this question. What's your part going to be in all of this? How are you going to live out your faith in this crazy, mixed-up world?