



**ULBS**

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## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

**The Life of the Primary Church (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> Centuries) – Model for the Correct  
Identification of Christian Teaching in Contemporary Times**

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The present paper, entitled “*The Life of the Early Church (I-IV Centuries). Model for the Correct Identification of Christian Teaching in Contemporary Times*”, is intended to be seen by the reader as a “filter” to help him discern the correct interpretation of the teaching of Christ, over time, but also today, an interpretation that must necessarily have an uninterrupted continuity for two thousand years. This theme will also help any Christian to distinguish between “church traditions,” which in some areas are part of the community’s practical worship, and the true Tradition of the Church that actually supports the interpretation of the teachings of the Christian faith.

Through the approached topic we tried to present to what extent the Christianity presented today, as an offer from several cults, is found in the primary Christianity. No one can say, for example, that the interpretation given by the Orthodox, the Pentecostals, the Baptists to the teachings of the faith is true, if it is not found throughout history in the Church. If the interpretation of a Christian doctrine, although supported by scriptural texts, is not found in the Primary Church, it proves that its interpretation is either wrong or the one who does it has a certain interest.

I consider this topic to be one that largely addresses the issues of faith today. This will help Orthodox believers to have an answer when they are accused by believers of neo-Protestant cults, unknowingly, of certain unbiblical practices and rituals, which are automatically categorized as “idol worship.” The topic answers the questions of the neo-Protestants, but at the same time it comes to strengthen the Orthodox believers in their own faith.

I do not want this paper to be seen as a research to combat neo-Protestant practices and doctrines, but on the contrary, knowing the life of the early Church, we can figure out what the real Tradition of the Church is and thus abandon those “traditions” which have nothing to do with authentic Christian living within the Church, and neo-Protestants who truly seek God will be able to realize that many of their practices are not found in the early Christians, and so they should raise a question mark on the quality of Bible interpretations.

The main purpose we have pursued in dealing with each chapter and subchapter of the present paper is that we have worked very hard to make every idea treated be like the answers we had found since I began to discover the primary writings of the Christians, answers that convinced me of the truth of the Orthodox Church. We cannot blindly believe the current interpretations of the “prophets of modern times,” ignoring the Christian works of the first four centuries. These writings, which were written by people devoted to Christ and His Church,

Christians willing to give up their lives to prove that they truly believe what they are preaching, many of them receiving martyrdom.

Another main goal of this paper is to know the neo-Protestantism within it. To achieve this goal, we interviewed several pastors and neo-Protestant theology teachers, and even the president of the Romanian Baptist Union. Thus I learned that neo-Protestant theology has evolved greatly, especially because of theological schools. We can't blame their faith until we know them. The same thing happens with them when they talk about certain orthodox practices, only from hearsay, without actually knowing the true orthodox teaching.

The first chapter, "The Church and the Roman State in the First Four Centuries," presents the beginning of Christianity, which has as its source the Incarnate God Himself, in the person of the Saviour Jesus Christ. Christianity manages to grow and expand, even if it has to do so in a society dominated by pagans and Jews, who do not want to receive Jesus Christ as the true Messiah. The first communities managed to survive, although persecuted to death, at first by the Jews, and later by the pagan Roman State, which in many cases forbade their existence and implicitly Christianity in general.

The persecution foretold by Jesus Christ is overcome and defeated by the sincere faith of Christians. Most Christians have understood that this life was not important, although they have been promised many reliefs by persecutors if they renounced Christianity, but the real life is the eternal life in the kingdom of God. This faith succeeded in overcoming all persecutors, Christians proving by their earnest perseverance that they are free and that they cannot be constrained by anyone or anything. The sincere faith managed to conquer the simple pagans, but also those who held important public positions, after conversion being able to follow Christ and give up all the riches and honours of society. It is very important to know that under the pressure of the horrors during the persecution, Christianity is developing very much, having as models the holy martyrs, who began to be honoured during this period and given as examples of confession, every year on the date of their death. This is how basilicas built on their graves appeared, so that their sacrifice should remain in the memory of the community.

Although persecuted, the Church continued to pray for the temporary earthly rulers of the State, knowing that their power was allowed by God. The Church did not answer in kind, but often gave an answer through the writings of the apologists, which showed what Christianity really is and that all the accusations against them are unfounded and false. Thus, with the help of these writings, we are able to find out many details about the life and worship of primary Christianity.

Christian art developed during this period, mainly due to the appearance of catacombs. These were specially created to protect the bodies of martyrs and Christians in general, which could be desecrated by pagans. In these underground galleries, Christian iconography has undergone a surprising evolution, having especially a didactic role. All the scenes represented in the Old and New Testaments were intended to convey to the viewer the feeling of repentance, of hope in God's forgiveness, but also the certainty of the coming moment of leaving this world.

The catacombs house the oldest representations of the Saviour Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, the Apostles, etc. Iconographic representations were not worshipped, nor existed a cult of the icons as it is today.

Christianity receives the freedom of expression in public after the issuance of the Edict of Milan (313), through the emperor Emperor Constantine the Great, who with his accession to the throne shows himself open to the Christian religion. Although Christian expression in society receives the right to manifest itself, the spiritual life of Christians no longer rises to the same level as during persecution. Since the fourth century, Christianity has spread more and more, becoming more and more organized administratively and with a much better-expressed theology, thanks to the great hierarchs of this century.

The second chapter, "The Life of the Christian Church in the Primary Period," largely presents the evolution of Christianity both culturally and doctrinally. It is very important to observe this evolution, because this is the only way we can see today the correct interpretation, both of the cult and the Christian doctrine. We cannot speak today of a cult and a doctrine, as being correct, if they are not found in the followers of the apostles from the first centuries of Christianity.

Christianity succeeded in expanding throughout the world through the apostles and their disciples. It is very important to understand that those early Christian communities were organized and led by the followers of the apostles, on the basis of a Christian teaching received by word of mouth and not in writing. Of course, the gospels and epistles of the apostles appeared, but their multiplication at that moment was not as easily possible as in our times, and that is why, the majority of the Christians and their communities were guided by the Christian teachings, which their forerunners received directly from the apostles or their disciples. The epistles of the apostles appeared, not as a brief catechism, but as a response to problems arising in certain Christian communities, problems related to the inaccurate understanding of the Gospel message received or the fact that certain Christian communities no longer followed the teachings received from the apostles. The apostles did not establish Christian communities on the basis of writings that would explain Christianity in all respects. Therefore, only in the

Epistle to the Corinthians we find the problem of the Eucharist, in the Epistle to the Thessalonians we find details of the second coming of the Lord and so on; this does not mean that the other Christian communities did not know about those teachings. This is one of the reasons why it is very important to see how the early Christian communities understood the teachings of the apostles and how they passed them on. We can have this information only if we study the Christian writings after the year 100, which, actually, are not special writings that present Christian worship and doctrine in detail. However, from these, we can largely understand how the cult was organized and how the Christian doctrine was explained at that time. That is why we see the Primary Church as a “filter” that shows us today the right cult and doctrine. In order to understand this mechanism, we must understand that the Christian teaching started from one person, Jesus Christ, and that it was spread throughout the world through the twelve Apostles in different geographic areas. This is where the Primary Church comes in as a “filter.” If a modern-day Christian teaching is found in early Christian writings from different geographic areas, where different apostles activated, it means that the teaching has the same source, Jesus Christ. In this way we can figure out what are the correct interpretations of the teachings contained in the Holy Scripture. If the explanations given today to Bible doctrine are not found in the lives of the early Christians, then this was not the purpose of the message conveyed by the apostles through their writings.

An important detail from this period is that in addition to the persecution that came from outside Christianity, the Church also had to fight with heretics and heresies that arose within it: problems arose largely due to misinterpretations of the Scripture, to which is added the personal pride of the interpreters. The Church having a scriptural model, the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem in the year 50, succeeded in combating and presenting the true Christian teaching, guided by an honest and realistic principle. The biblical interpretation can be considered true if it is found in the Scripture and if it has been preached by the Church, everywhere and always. If the interpretation is found in isolation, only in a certain Christian sect or group, without being found in the universality of the primary Christianity, it can be considered false.

The last chapter, “Neo-Protestantism in the History of Christianity,” presents the appearance and evolution in Christian history of two denominations, Baptist and Pentecostal, in our country. The purpose of this chapter is only to present comparatively details related to the organization, worship, and doctrine of these two Christian groups with those found in early Christianity.

The analysis of this subject does not aim at combating the teachings of these cults, but on the contrary a much more thorough knowledge of them in order to pass them through the

“filter of the primary Church.” Although in their doctrine, Tradition (= worship and doctrine taught in the Primary Church) has no significant value, although it is studied in neo-Protestant theology, it is often cited as an example to combat the teachings of the historical Church. The tradition is not used in the neo-Protestant environment, because it does not support their interpretation given to certain biblical teachings and practices.

Although many of the Orthodox teachings are disputed as unbiblical, they are put into practice by neo-Protestants in another form. They fight the Orthodox sacramental priesthood, upholding the universal priesthood. But in their worship, there are hierarchical levels of leadership (pastor, elder and deacon), offices that cannot be occupied by whosoever, but only by those who receive the hands of the college of regional or local pastors (in the case of lower ranks). Not everyone has the right to perform the Supper, Baptism or other religious services, but only those people consecrated by the laying on of hands. All this proves that the neo-Protestant universal priesthood is in fact the Orthodox sacramental priesthood, explained in other terms.

In addition to the many differences between neo-Protestant and Orthodox doctrine and worship, many missionary and organizational practices are beautiful and good, and can be taken as an example in Orthodoxy, of course preached in the Orthodox spirit.