



Mixology and Theology

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Week Fifteen: Old Vine Zinfandel and Early Church Theology (Deeper Dive)

Mixology: Old Vine Zinfandel Wines

Since I used the Old Fashioned cocktail for the first round of early church theology, it seems like Old Vine Zinfandel is the right drink of choice for round two. Not technically a cocktail or any kind of mixology, but who cares. Here's some interesting info on these wines from this web page:

<https://winefolly.com/deep-dive/why-old-vine-wines-are-so-special/>

How Old Do Vines Need To Be To Make Good Wine?

Here's a brief lowdown on the lifecycle of a grapevine: After you plant, it takes about three years for a grapevine to produce fruit. A vine reaches "adulthood" around seven or eight years. A "mature" grapevine is said to be anywhere from 12–25 years old. "Old vines" are usually more than 25 years, and preferably more than 50 years old! What's interesting is that over the lifecycle of a grapevine there are some noted changes that give aging vineyards unique qualities:



They produce concentrated fruit : Old vines tend to lose productivity with age. Many believe that this increases the concentration of the fruit and yields more concentrated wine.

Their roots run deep: This sounds nice but it also means that vines pull their nutrients and water sources from far below the surface. For this reason, older vines don't suffer as much vintage variation and tend to be more draught/flood tolerant.

Ripeness isn't a problem: The real issue with ripening fruit (especially with red wines) is the tannins. Unripe tannins can taste green and astringent. Producers note older vines tend to achieve physiological ripeness more consistently.

They take care of themselves: Caretakers of elderly vineyards tend to not need to do as much futzing (as long as the vines are healthy). Still, one must be very careful not to damage the vine!

The problem with old vines (if you can call it that) is reduced production. Less production means less money for a grape grower.

Theology: Early Church Theology (Deeper Dive)

To clarify again what I mean by early church theology: the period prior to the Edict of Milan in 313 when Constantine made Christianity a legal religion, which was quickly followed by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. This is the beginning of the unification of church theology and practice. Prior to this, the church was a diverse body in theology and practice made up of peoples of diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds, all of which shaped their forms of Christianity.

We might distinguish the period of the New Testament from the early church that came after it. However, there is no neat, clean line to draw here. The New Testament writings date between the early 50's through around 110 AD. Other Christian writings exist from that period but were not included in the NT. The church in this period didn't know it was writing the New Testament, and the canon of the New Testament (the list of official books) wasn't formalized until the early 4th century. However, widespread common usage of the Gospels and some of Paul's letters was well established by the mid 2nd century.

Diversity in the New Testament and the Early Church

Since there was widespread usage of the Gospels and many of Paul's letters throughout the early church by the mid 2nd century, we can see that the early church embraced the diversity present in the New Testament. Around 160 AD Tatian wrote a harmony of the four Gospels called the Diatessaron, combining the four into one, eliminating duplicate sections, and adding some verses from other sources. The early church generally rejected this approach in favor of preserving the four Gospels as four separate, diverse witnesses to the story of Jesus.

It is remarkable to compare the four Gospels and Paul's letters for their theology. There is significant diversity even as they all speak to the one faith centered in Jesus. In David Rhoads' book *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels*, he offers this way of comparing them.

	The Two Ways	The Human Condition	Vision for Human Life	The Transformation
Paul	Justification by works of the Law or by Grace	Life under Law	Life in response to Grace	Grace as the means to righteousness
Mark	Saving one's life out of fear or losing one's life for others	Fearful saving of self	The courage to live for others	New life, sight, and empowerment in the face of death
Matthew	The Law interpreted by the Pharisees or by Jesus	Blind hypocrisy	Righteous integrity	A relationship with Jesus of blessing and forgiveness
Luke	Society with mercy or society without mercy	Society without mercy is oppression	Society with mercy	Human repentance, divine forgiveness, and the power of the Spirit
John	Not knowing God or knowing God	Not knowing God is death	Knowing God is eternal life	Union with Jesus made possible by his death and the presence of the Spirit

Many early Christian writings reflect the great diversity of the church:

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>

Justin Martyr. First Apology. ~155 AD

By the mid 2nd century, Christianity was well-known, if misunderstood, throughout parts of the Roman Empire. Some Christian writers began writing apologetics, or defenses of the faith. This was done in the face of Christian martyrdom in the Empire, and as a witness in a world a many religious alternatives.

Justin was well-versed in the philosophies of his day and wrote his Apologies to the Emperor Antoninus to show the morality of Christianity and to try to stop Christian persecution. We can glean from his apology some basic Christian theology in the early church. We can also wonder how he framed his theology in order to appeal to the Emperor.

What sober-minded man, then, will not acknowledge that we are not atheists, worshipping as we do the Maker of this universe, and declaring, as we have been taught, that He has no need of streams of blood and libations and incense; whom we praise to the utmost of our power by the exercise of prayer and thanksgiving for all things wherewith we are supplied, as we have been taught that the only honor that is worthy of Him is not to consume by fire what He has brought into being for our sustenance, but to use it for ourselves and those who need... Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judaea, in the times of Tiberius Caesar; and that we reasonably worship Him, having learned that He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third...

Baptismal Identity and Community in Christ

Much of the early church's theology can be seen in baptismal and eucharistic practices, and in the sense of community in Christ. It is clear that entrance into the church was taken with great seriousness, often after a long period of instruction and preparation (catechumenate). Baptism was strongly connected to the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ. As such it was often preferred to be celebrated at Easter. It was seen as a change in identity, granting of a new life, a new beginning not simply as the old person in the old life, but as a person with a new identity within the community of Christ with an entirely new life to live.

Overall, Jensen discerns "five core motifs (4)" that encapsulate the early Christian understanding of baptism. First, baptism cleansed from sin and sickness, "washing away external impurities and internal ones (50)." Second, baptism symbolized entrance into the community of saints, the church. In baptism, Christians became part of an "exclusive group that functioned like a family and provided them with spiritual nurture and support (90)." Third, baptism conveyed the gift of the Spirit and his illuminating and sanctifying roles. Fourth, in being baptized, the new Christian experienced death (to self) and rebirth. Finally, baptism proclaimed the eschatological hope for restoration in the new creation. (Summary of Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions. By Robin M. Jensen. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012. from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2013/10/5997/>)

Eucharist and Agape Feasts

The church's celebration of the eucharist was early on connected more to the resurrection of Jesus than the death of Jesus. Note that Sunday was the primary day of the Lord's Supper, and still is. This is the day of resurrection, rather than Thursday or Friday, commemorating Jesus' death.

The Didache, the early church writing from around 100 AD, includes this instruction for the eucharist (Thanksgiving Meal):

Chapter 9. The Eucharist. Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks this way. First, concerning the cup:

We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever..

And concerning the broken bread:

We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever..

But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs."

Chapter 10. Prayer after Communion. But after you are filled, give thanks this way:

We thank Thee, holy Father, for Thy holy name which You didst cause to tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality, which You modest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Thou, Master almighty, didst create all things for Thy name's sake; You gavest food and drink to men for enjoyment, that they might give thanks to Thee; but to us You didst freely give spiritual food and drink and life eternal through Thy Servant. Before all things we thank Thee that You are mighty; to Thee be the glory for ever. Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Thy love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Thy kingdom which Thou have prepared for it; for Thine is the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come, and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God (Son) of David! If any one is holy, let him come; if any one is not so, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen.

But permit the prophets to make Thanksgiving as much as they desire.

The emphasis in the meal is on thanksgiving for participation in eternal life. It is also a meal of fellowship, extended to all at the table and beyond to all the body of Christ, that is, the church. This is in contrast with the Pauline tradition of connecting the eucharist to the Last Supper and Jesus' death.

Dominic Crossan argues that table fellowship was the primary characteristic of the early church, meaning the community of the church was willing to break social barriers and norms and create a table gathering of people from all classes, reflecting Jesus' own table fellowship, and in contrast to a world divided by wealth and privilege.

The Third Way

In the book of Acts, the Christian movement is repeatedly called The Way. This seems to have been the church's earliest self-designation, meaning the way of Jesus.

In the *Epistle to Diognetus* (~130 AD) an unknown Christian writer speaks about the Christian movement, distinguishing it from Roman religion of the empire (the first way), complete identification with the empire) ,

and from Judaism (the second way, living in a separate community from the empire).

The following is from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/resilient-faith-gerald-sittser/>

In Resilient Faith: How the Early Christian 'Third Way' Changed the World, Gerald Sittser—professor of theology at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington—shows how the early church emerged in the Roman world with a distinctive identity in Christ. The phrase “new race” or “third race” comes from a second-century letter written to a Roman official named Diognetus. Christians became the “Third Way” after “First Way” Rome and “Second Way” Judaism. Christ’s followers blended into Roman society seamlessly when it came to language, clothing, food, and commerce. But when life involved worship, sexuality, family life, caring for the poor, and proclaiming the gospel, they “functioned as if they were a nation within a nation, culturally assimilated yet distinct at the same time.”

The Roman way was an all-encompassing civil religion, tolerant, pluralistic, and syncretistic. As Sittser observes, “Rome’s religion was Rome itself.” It absorbed new religions into its pantheon, while maintaining absolute subservience to Rome and strict allegiance to the divine status of the emperor. Rome “had the most trouble with the religions that demanded exclusive commitment to one God and to one way of life. Most religions of this kind, especially Christianity, were considered by definition anti-Roman.”

Sittser recounts a conversation he had with a Kenyan pastor in Nairobi. The pastor asked why Christians in America refer to themselves as “American Christians,” suspecting more to the identification than a person who happened to be an American. The title “American Christian” seemed “heretical to him because it tempted Americans to confuse the two identities, and thus to import American culture (e.g., wealth) to other parts of the world, always ‘in the name of Christ.’”

The conversation highlights an explicit connection between first-century Rome and post-Christendom America. Indeed, Sittser’s description of ancient Rome fits America today. I believe the scholar-historian is the best person to bridge these two worlds and show us the “Third Way”—how to live for Christ in America without being “American Christians.” We must become bilingual interpreters of history, taking what we know of the early Christian “Third Way” and applying it to “Third Way” Christ-followers today.

We can see that the early church lived with a distinctive identity, but not one removed from the world. It was a distinctive identity of being deeply embedded in the world living love of neighbor as the public expression of the faith and meaning of Jesus Christ, embedded in the world for the world’s sake, but not becoming the world, inviting others out of the old world and into the new world happening right in their very midst.

Even if they didn’t say it in explicit terms, the church embodied its theology in the first few centuries by forming an alternative community that included all races, nationalities, social classes, and languages. It emphasized caring for the least and vulnerable people in society. It gave generously to those in need. It lived with uncrushable hope in the promised kingdom begun in Jesus Christ coming to its fullest expression in the future. What kind of theology does it take to be that kind of people?

We can see one historic example of this in how Christians responded to plagues:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-lessons-church-history/>