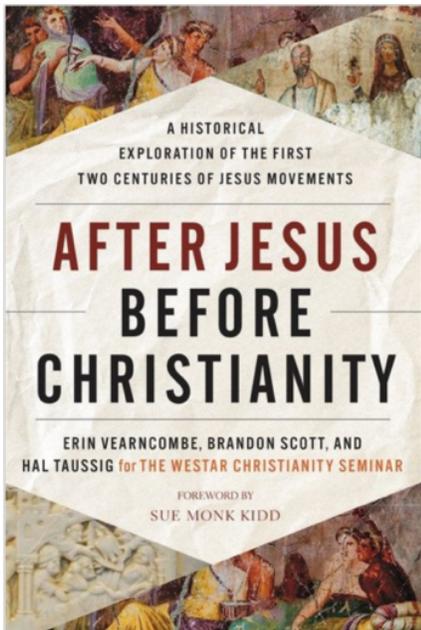




# Experiment & Failure by Bernard Brandon Scott

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## Experimental Diversity

*After Jesus Before Christianity* concludes that early Jesus communities engaged in a great deal of experimentation and that most of those experiments failed. From this conclusion we have a great deal to learn.

When we examine various groups of followers of Jesus

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Anointed in the first two centuries, we find vast diversity, not a unified picture. They referred to Jesus using a variety of titles. Often those titles did not use Jesus' name. Sometimes their writings cast Jesus in a central role; sometimes not. Some groups organized themselves as associations, others as supper-clubs, families, or schools. Groups typically comprised ten to fifteen people. No single name identifies the various groups associated with Jesus lord and master. Some were called brothers and sisters, some slaves, some holy ones, some students or wise ones, some immigrants. Others did not use an identifying name. Despite their diversity, the various names did not include "Adherents of the Anointed (*christianos*)" in the first century and only rarely during the second century. Some groups encouraged experimenting in gender roles and breaking gender boundaries.

All this diversity indicates experimentation, pushing at established boundaries. While not systematic or organized experimentation, they were exploring what it meant to live into a new perspective on the god of Israel's activity. They were making it up as they went along. Those familiar with experimentation expect failure and such was the experience of these Jesus groups.

The tradition stemming from Paul exhibits over a hundred-year period of both experimentation and the reaction to it. Paul proclaimed "You are no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or freeborn, no longer 'male and female'" (Gal 3:28). Paul supported experimentation in boundary breaking as witness his encouraging the unmarried to remain so against a

the author and not implied endorsement from Westar."

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culture that virtually required marriage or his treatment of married partners in reciprocal terms. (See my *The Real Paul*, chapter 11.) But things went too far. One man was having sex with his father's wife (I Cor 5:1).

Later when Paul's letters were edited, a scribe inserted a comment forbidding women to speak in community meetings (I Cor 14:33b–38, see the comments in the *Authentic Letters of Paul*, 112). In the mid second century the Pauline communities were still experimenting in gender roles. Despite its title, in *Acts of Paul and Thecla* the real hero is Thecla. Initially her traditional gender roles are emphasized: daughter, virgin, engaged. As the story develops, she goes on to break all of them, to the point of even dressing in male clothes. First Timothy, which belongs to the same Pauline tradition, rails against all this experimentation (1 Tim 2:9–15).

## Fourth Century

A confluence of factors in the fourth century began to corral the experimentation that characterized early groups of Jesus Anointed followers. The first was the Emperor Constantine's unexpected favoring of the Christian church.

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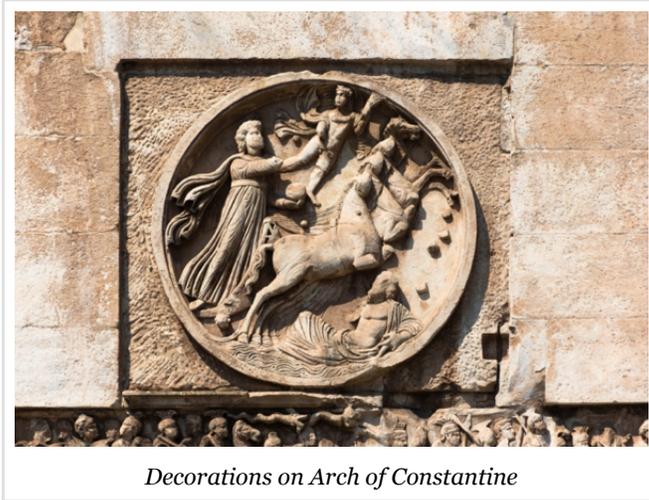
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## Constantine

A run of bad emperors in the third century resulted in the deterioration of the empire's governance and borders. This "crisis of the third century" stressed the Roman Empire so seriously that it came close to collapse. When Diocletian came to power in 284, he tried to stabilize the empire with numerous reforms that changed its shape and character. He divided the empire into western and eastern administrative units, appointing a co-emperor also with the title of Augustus. While he ruled the eastern part of the empire, his co-emperor ruled the western part. Later Diocletian appointed two junior administrators with the title of Caesar. One of those junior emperors was Constantine's father. The four emperors were not coequal. Two were senior emperors, two were junior, and Diocletian presided among them.

Diocletian sought unity as part of his stabilization effort. One aspect of this program of unification was persecution of Christians because they resisted the empire and were a growing presence, especially in the cities of the east. His was the most widespread persecution of this group in the

history of the empire and in later ages became the remembered image, the type of all persecution. After he retired in 305, the only emperor to freely do so, the pace of persecution only marginally slackened.

The four-emperor model did not long survive Diocletian's retirement. Civil war broke out and by 324 Constantine had consolidated total power. Earlier in 313 he and his co-emperor, Licinius, had issued the edict of Milan. This edict had the effect of legalizing all the religions of the empire, restoring the property of individual Christians and the Christian churches confiscated during the persecution of Diocletian.

Following his final defeat of Licinius, Constantine began to openly favor the Christian religion. He did this in two ways. First, he identified himself as a Christian. There is an oddity here. While acknowledging that he was a Christian, Constantine was not baptized until on his deathbed because he feared that in carrying out his duties as emperor he would sin and thus would not go to heaven. Baptism immediately before death would free him of all his sins.

Second, Constantine supported Christianity from the empire's funds, establishing a model for subsequent emperors, as well other elites. He built the first great basilica of St. Peter's in Rome and in Jerusalem the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Constantine also commissioned Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, to produce fifty bibles. We have no evidence of a complete New Testament before this commission, but all modern bibles descend from Eusebius's bibles.

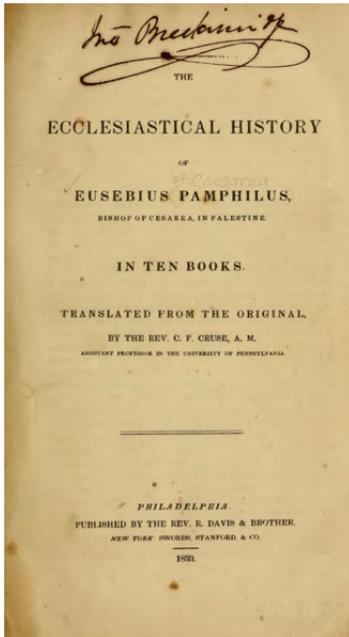
## Council of Nicaea

Like Diocletian, Constantine pursued a policy of unifying his recovering empire. But instead of persecuting Christians, he based the empire's unity on them. He called the Council of Nicaea in 325, what would later be designated the first ecumenical council. Constantine saw the diversity of Christian churches as divisive, as did a number of bishops. He ordered the development of a creed to solve this problem and end the church's division.

The Nicene Creed permanently transformed the church. It shifted the church from praxis, what you do, to belief, what you believe. (See my blogs "[The Trouble with Faith](#)" and "[Faith, Republicans, and Trump](#)".) Christianity ceased being a traditional religion and became a "faith." Creed and belief led to a dogmatic tradition. The church's newfound unity made no reference to the life of Jesus or ethics.

## Master Narrative

Constantine's favoring of the Christian church came as a complete surprise. Diocletian had established an imperial policy of persecution toward the Christian churches; Constantine had in public supported that policy, and Diocletian was Constantine's patron. Thus, Constantine's drastic change of imperial policy was unexpected.



In the fourth century Eusebius created in his *Ecclesiastical History* what became the definitive story of the history of the Christian church from Jesus to Constantine, what we in *After Jesus Before Christianity* call the master narrative. Eusebius constructed his narrative along two tracks. First, he read into or projected the situation of the fourth century back

into the previous centuries and then he interpreted those events as a preparation by god for the now favored position of the gospel and the church.

From the point of view of the fourth century, the following elements stood out to Eusebius. from the list that begins Book 1.

- “The lines of succession from the holy apostles” pasted on to the bishops.
- Heretics “through a passion for innovation” corrupted the pure teaching of Jesus and the apostles.
- “The calamities [i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple] that immediately after their conspiracy against our Saviour overwhelmed the entire Jewish race.”
- Christians were persecuted and martyred.

(from “Chief Matters to be Dealt with,” Book 1.1, *Eccl.Hist.*)

Although these four points summed up Eusebius' experience, he mistakenly assumed they existed from the beginning. As a bishop engaged in ecclesiastical debates culminating in the Council of Nicaea, he saw the episcopacy as primary. The Diocletian persecution had traumatized Eusebius and his contemporaries; he assumed all followers of Jesus had experienced persecution. Eusebius blamed the Jews for Jesus' death and believed god punished them by permitting the destruction of their homeland, foreshadowing the eventual fate of those who persecuted god's church.

Eusebius' description of Constantine's restoration of Christianity casts Constantine as Moses who saved his people from Pharaoh. In Eusebius' narrative, Constantine delivers both the empire and Christian church from a tyranny comparable to that of Pharaoh's oppression of the Hebrew people. Eusebius describes the empire under Constantine in language that recalls the empire of god.

Eusebius' narrative fit the pieces together in a way so convincing that for the next 1,500 years it went unchallenged. For many believers it remains convincing today and represents Christianity's master narrative. It is not history, but myth. Since traditional understandings of "the origins of early Christianity" based on the master narrative celebrate narratives of success, the experimentation and failures of the first two centuries have been ignored.

## **Experiment: To Be Or Not To Be**

Constantine's favor shifted the Christian church from resisting the empire to reshaping itself into a reflection of the

empire. The church increasingly took on imperial trappings, claiming imperial power for its bishops. The temptation to imperial power in the church eventually became irresistible. Believers ever since have sought to use the power of the empire (the state) to enforce their values. In our own time the church's insistence on imperial power to enforce its positions has had a debilitating effect in many democracies. This is evident in the American Roman Catholic Bishops effort to force President Biden to enforce their position on abortion.

The Nicæan Creed shifted Christianity from a religion of praxis to one of faith. Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* ironically made Christianity ahistorical by insisting that the church has always been the same. In this construction, change is impossible, even unimaginable. The church's increasing imperial character, the Nicæan Creed, and Eusebius' master narrative together have served to inhibit any change or development in Christianity. These inhibitors sought to stop experimentation and even argue that there had never been any experimentation, only degradation of the pure original truth by the innovations of the heretics.

Of course, the strategy of inhibiting change did not work. History cannot be stopped. Controversy continued, as witness the continued Councils seeking to settle still more Christological controversies. Monasticism in both the East and the West challenged an increasing imperial episcopacy. But ideologically change became increasingly more difficult and controversial.

The twentieth century saw the death of Christendom.

Christianity lost the support of the state in the West. Instead of being public, religion has become a private affair, a process started by the American Constitution. Science challenged the Christian church's hegemony in explaining reality. Every time religion has challenged science, religion has lost (See my "[God's Shrinking Space](#)"). In retrospect the three inhibitors caused this devastation and prevented modern Christianity from experimenting as it faced a completely new situation beginning with the Enlightenment and the ongoing scientific revolution. Instead of turning its view to the future, an imperial master narrative and a dogmatic creed focus churches on the past, a mythical past.

The experimentation of the first centuries of the Jesus Anointed groups suggests that the true state of religion should be experimentation, even wide-open experimentation. Such experimentation is the only way groups can explore the meaning of life. Without experimentation, which leads to change, failure, and occasionally success, the only alternative is death.

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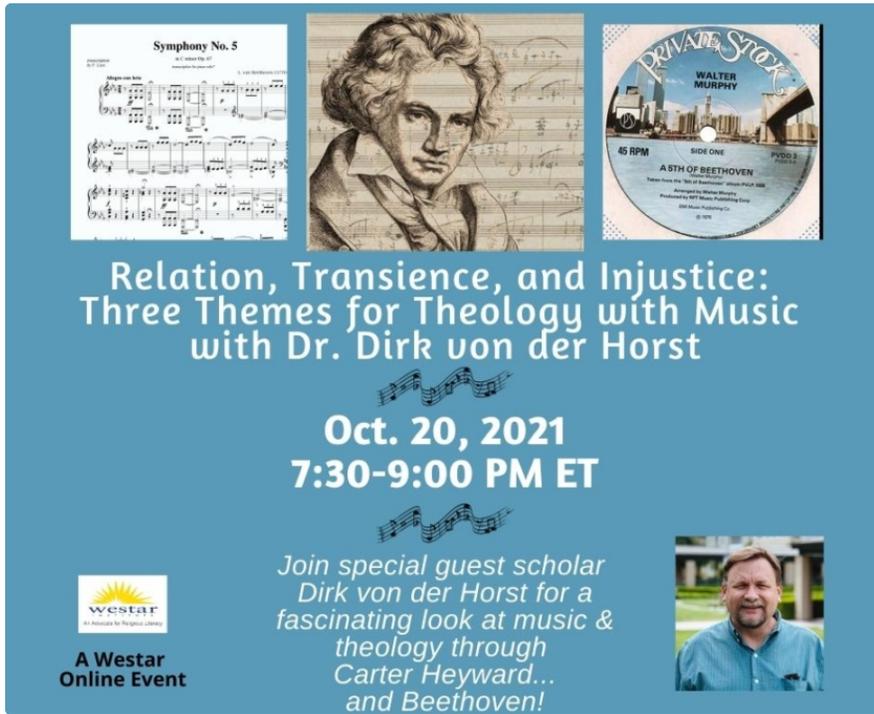


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