

# The Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2017 Spring Meeting

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The theme for the spring meeting of the Christianity Seminar was apostolic authority. Papers, by Tony Burke, “Cursing and the Apostle: The Fight for Authority in Early Christianity” and Jason BeDuhn, “The Contested Authority of Paul in the Second Century,” directly address this issue. Robert Miller’s invited presentation, a review of his recent book, *Helping Jesus Fulfill Prophecy*, also coincidentally informed this topic. The Seminar customarily features one noteworthy and highly influential scholar, whose insights into larger questions of Christian formation



Judith Perkins

inform the Seminar’s work. This spring we welcomed, honored, and featured the work of Judith Perkins, Professor of Classics and Humanities (Emerita), Saint Joseph College.

## The Role of Suffering in Christian Identity

Richard Ascough (Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario) started off the conversation with a cogent distillation of Perkins’s 1995 book, *The Suffering Self*, and her 2009 monograph, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*. According to Ascough, Perkins gets at what Christianity becomes first by looking at the roles the body and suffering played in Christian writings, and later by assessing how trans-empire collectives contributed to the formation of Christian identity. The Seminar’s discussions focused mostly on Perkins’s 1995 work on the body and suffering. It debated at some length whether suffering had sufficient scope and traction to define early Christian identity.



Richard Ascough

In *The Suffering Self*, Perkins contends that the second century saw a culture-wide emphasis on the body and suffering, as this theme appears in many of its literary works. Christian martyr narratives, such as the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and the *Acts of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*,

deal with this subject. So, too, do elite Greek romance novels, Aelius Aristides’ *Sacred Tales*, as well as medical discourses, such as Galen’s autobiographical work, *On Prognosis*, for instance.

While Christian martyr texts were not unique in terms of their thematic focus, they deployed the theme of the body and suffering in a unique direction and, in so doing, carved out a distinctive niche for themselves. Indeed, according to Perkins, it was this “discursive focus in the second century on the suffering body [that] contributed to Christianity’s attainment of social power” (Perkins, 3).

The Christian approach to a body in pain was distinctly different from the Stoic denial of it and was seemingly in direct opposition to the elite employment of this theme, as found in the romance novels. In contrast to the novels, in which the protagonists passed through suffering and were “unmarked by the experience” (Perkins, 77), Christian stories tell of martyrs willingly embracing suffering and death.

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In taking such a stance toward the body and suffering, the martyr texts “explicitly challenge and subvert the hierarchical dominance of the elite” (Ascough, 4). The embrace of pain was also a form of empowerment. Perkins comments, “all martyrs’ deaths are depicted as victories, defeats of the opposing powers” (Perkins, 115). As Perkins notes, Christians wanted to be known as those who suffer. By deploying a common empire-wide theme, Christians constructed for themselves “a particular self-understanding: namely, the Christian as sufferer” (Perkins, 23–24).

The Seminar rigorously engaged Perkins’s thesis of Christian self-identification as sufferer. Deborah Saxon, Tony Burke, Jason BeDuhn, and others pushed back against the notion that suffering was the only way in which early Christians identified themselves. According to them, early Christian discourse, exclusive of the martyr texts, displays a diversity of self-identifications. Based on his extensive research on associations, Richard Ascough observed that early Christians, like members of other voluntary groups, would have had more than one self-identity. Moreover, Ascough stressed that the expression “I am a Christian” should be understood as a form not of individual but instead of group identification. He writes, “Through the martyr stories, members of a small group of Christ adherents forged connectivity to, and thus connectivity with, those who had gone, and died, before them” (Ascough, 11).

In terms of the ballot proposals, 68% of scholars along with 21% of associates voted red to the proposition, “Christianity was not ‘special’ or ‘different’ in its discursive

## Christianity Seminar Spring 2017 Ballot Items

### Ballot 1—Judith Perkins and Christian Identity Formation

1. Christians were known by non-adherents for their willingness to embrace death and suffering on behalf of their god.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

2. Christian emphasis on individual suffering reflects a broad political, social, and religious shift in Roman culture in the second century.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Gray**

3. Christians forged a trans-empire self-identity by emphasizing the resurrection (and thus the permanence) of the material body.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Pink**

4. The process of Christian self-identity became an empire-wide response to a cultural shift in the Roman judicial system in which non-elite bodies were rendered vulnerable to extreme punishments and gruesome deaths.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Gray**

5. Although Paul emphasizes his own and Christ's suffering, there is no direct line of thinking from Paul to later Christian self-identification with suffering.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

6. In the second century and beyond, Christ adherents' self-identification with suffering (real or imagined) takes place in a communal identification as "Christian."

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

7. "Christian" is only one of any number of (sometimes competing) self-identities that a particular Christ adherent could claim.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

8. Christianity was not "special" or "different" in its discursive practices of identity formation within the Roman empire, but was part of a broader cultural shift.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

### Ballot 2—The Contested Authority of Paul in the Second Century

1. Paul was a major influence on the Jesus movement in its first hundred years.

Fellows: **Gray**/Associates: **Gray**

2. Paul was a relatively marginal figure in the Jesus movement in its first hundred years.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

3. Other than Marcion, even those writers who cite Paul in the second century are not particularly interested in Paul's ideas.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Red**

4. Paul was more widely remembered as a heroic community founder than as a significant contributor to the ideology of Jesus movements.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

5. The use of Paul among non-Marcionite Christians at the end of the second century presupposes a continuous tradition of wide authority for Paul stretching back to his own time.

Fellows: **Black**/Associates: **Black**

6. A series of traumas for Jewish Christians/Christian Jews culminated in the mid-second century separation of Christian Gentile communities, and the latter's need to resuscitate Paul as a major authority figure.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Pink**

7. A variety of Pauline collections were in circulation in the second century.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

8. One group of second-century Christians domesticated Paul to their own views by "discovering" and adding the Pastoral Epistles to the Pauline collection they adopted.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

### Ballot 3—Cursing and the Apostle

1. Ancient Christian writers, including the writers of the New Testament texts, had no qualms about presenting their founders (including Jesus) or themselves as uttering curses.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

2. Curse stories were considered equally effective for "begetting or confirming belief" as miracle stories.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

3. If the definition of cursing is suitably broadened to include oaths, imprecatory prayers, and woes, then the victims of the curses of Jesus in the New Testament gospels are more plentiful than a fig tree that did not bear fruit.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

4. The "signs and miracles" and "deeds of power" performed by early Christian apostles and evangelists likely included punitive miracles.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Pink**

5. Despite Paul's command to "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Rom 12:14), the apostle was quick to curse his own opponents. Though it is distasteful to modern readers, both practices—cursing and not cursing adversaries—have equal scriptural basis.

Fellows: **Red**/Associates: **Red**

6. Given the widespread belief in the effectiveness of curses and oaths, readers of Mark and Matthew may have seen a causal connection between Peter's betrayal of Jesus and Jesus' death.

Fellows: **Pink**/Associates: **Gray**

practices of identity formation within the Roman empire but was part of a broader cultural shift.” There was also a strong consensus among scholars and associates, influenced no doubt by Asough’s analysis, that “‘Christian’ is only one of any number of (sometimes competing) self-identities that a particular Christ adherent could claim.” No ballot proposal directly addressed the question raised during the follow-up discussion on the extent to which early Christians identified themselves as sufferers. This topic warrants further research.

### Apostolic Authority

With his paper, “The Contested Authority of Paul in the Second Century,” Jason BeDuhn (Northern Arizona University) dove directly and provocatively into the Seminar’s spring 2017 theme on apostolic authority. BeDuhn challenged the assumption that many second-century Christians engaged with Pauline thought. According to him, Marcion (ca 144 CE) and his followers are the only significant Paulinists in the second century; that they preserve half of his collected letters demonstrates their interest in his writings. Non-Marcionite Christian authors display little interest in what Paul had to say; they simply cite him as an authority.

According to BeDuhn, it was only in the mid-second century, due to the crisis of three successive Jewish wars with Rome, that an independent Christianity became a necessity. It was then that groups turned to Paul, not for an engagement with the fuller contents of his letters—something that would have to wait for Augustine in the fourth century—but as an authority figure. It is important to note that BeDuhn dates non-Marcionite authors—such as Clement of Rome, Polycarp, and Ignatius—closer to the mid-second century. Citing a lack of internal and external evidence to the contrary, he would also date the Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy and Titus) and the Acts of the Apostles to that time. Mid-second-century non-Marcionite Christian authors created Pauline makeovers and compiled various collections of his epistles.

As the ballot results indicate, BeDuhn’s assessment of the authority of Paul in the second century was generally accepted. Scholars mostly agreed that other than Marcion, second-century authors do not exhibit an engagement with Pauline thought but instead remembered Paul as a heroic community founder. The strongest scholarly agreement concerned one of the least controversial issues: that multiple collections of Pauline epistles circulated in the second century.



Tony Burke

With his paper, “Cursing and the Apostle: The Fight for Authority in Early Christianity,” Tony Burke (York University, Toronto) argued convincingly that cursing was not only a widespread phenomenon in the world of early Christianity but that it functioned as an effective tool to indicate apostolic authority. Cursing, says Burke, provided an opportunity for people to exercise power in contexts in which they were powerless. Early Christian literature contains an abundance of curse stories, but curses and cursing are prevalent earlier, in the Hebrew Bible as well as in other literature of the early Christian period, such as in Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, compositions from the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic texts, and in Greek epics and plays.

The topic of curses and cursing within Christian literature is underexplored and underemphasized, due in part, Burke posits, to the Christian belief that acts of vengeance belong more to the Old Testament

God than to the New. As an example of this phenomenon, Burke cites the story of Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–21). The fig tree is widely thought to represent Israel and by cursing it, Jesus has been understood to make a symbolic pronouncement upon the fate of the nation. Yet by considering the narrative segment through the lens of cursing and its intended (negative) effects, Burke suggests that Mark’s Jesus may have been issuing a “withering” upon Israel itself. In other words, exegetes have underestimated, have largely ignored, the curse itself and its intended function within the narrative.

There was broad agreement on several of Burke’s ballot proposals. Scholars voted 90% red and 5% pink, with only a single grey vote, that ancient Christian composers, including those of New Testament compositions, “had no qualms about presenting their founders (including Jesus) or themselves as uttering curses.” Scholars also voted 80% red and 20% pink that Paul was quick to curse his opponents, and “though it is distasteful to modern readers, both practices—cursing and not cursing adversaries—have equal scriptural basis.”

### A Return to Portraits

If you are following the work of the Christianity Seminar, you will know from the report in March–April 2017 issue of *The Fourth R* that the Seminar seeks to rewrite a history of early Christianity through portraits of people, authors, issues, or events. Having sampled various models for describing the first two centuries of the Christian era and finding

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Jason BeDuhn



none satisfactory, the Seminar has settled on this short-depiction model. One advantage to portraits is that they resist the all-too-common presumption of an overarching master narrative, into which all material of the time period must somehow fit and cohere, that often characterizes early Christian histories. Instead, portraits lend themselves to diversity and independence of thought and action.

In spring 2017 the Seminar experimented with analyzing the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*APTh*) from multiple angles: from the text itself, from material culture, and from the manuscript tradition. The Seminar’s central focus on a single story allowed it to open up a variety of issues that touch on early Christian history. In collaboration with Carly Daniel-Hughes, Maia Kotrosits presented a brief yet cogent textual analysis of the *APTh* narrative. According to these scholars, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* can be analyzed in at least three different ways, each of which bears on issues that concern early Christianity: (1) the history of sexuality in the ancient world at large, (2) the history of the interpretation of the apostle Paul, and (3) the invention and ascription of content to the term “Christian.”



Maia Kotrosits

With regard to first, the history of sexuality, Kotrosits explained that penetration and immunity from it are dominant themes in the Greek romance novels of the time. Violence and sexuality went hand in hand in the culture. In this tradition, there are stark distinctions between penetrator and penetrated. In *APTh*, however, one sees signs of resistance to these dominant cultural values. While there is sexual violence, Thecla resiliently survives to old age without sexual penetration. Thecla’s life does not fall along the traditional power-defining lines of penetrator and penetrated.

With regard to the second, the history of the interpretation of Paul, *APTh* portrays the apostle as physically unat-

tractive and inattentive to Thecla. Rather than depicting Paul as a prominent authority figure, *APTh* satirizes him. And, with regard to the third category of analysis, the ascription of content to the term “Christian,” *APTh* ascribes a happier connotation to the term than do other works that associate it with suffering.

Brandon Scott brought to the Seminar’s attention a fresco image (fourth–sixth century), depicting Thecla, Paul, and Theokleia, Thecla’s mother. Paul and Theokleia are proportionally of similar size and assume a nearly identical pose and gesture (see the image). The eyes and raised hand of the latter, however, have been scratched out. According to Scott, the fact that someone defaced Theokleia indicates that at least one viewer did not like to see another speaker portrayed as equal to Paul. The Seminar’s discussions quickly turned to the fact that the image was not an accurate reflection of the *APTh* as it is presently known. This suggests that this distinctive image is evidence that the Thecla narrative itself was not fixed but instead circulated in various versions. This notion of various understandings of the story of Thecla was reinforced by Hal Taussig’s paper on the *APTh*’s manuscript tradition.

According to Taussig, the manuscript tradition for the *APTh* is complex and varied. Moreover, there are an abundance of extant manuscripts on this work, including those that date up to the nineteenth century. In some instances, such as in the important Greek fourth-century and the Coptic fifth- or sixth-century manuscripts, the *APTh* appears bearing the title, *The Acts of Paul*. Taussig further pointed out the variation of manuscript titles for Thecla: in some instances the words “holy,” or “saint,” and even the title “martyr,” are ascribed to her. One can conclude from the preservation, proliferation, and variation of manuscripts on the *APTh* that Thecla was not only an important figure in the emergence of early Christianity, but also someone remembered and deployed in a variety of different ways. Thecla will surely be featured in the Christianity Seminar’s volume of portraits. 

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