

The First  
Five Hundred Years  
of the Christian  
Church

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To those who have gone before

# INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

*The recording of history is to tell the story of the human family. —John Briggs*

*Consciousness of the past alone can make us understand the present. —Herbert Luethy*

Charles Schultz of Peanuts fame has a cartoon in which he portrays Lucy working busily on a term paper on the subject of church history: “I will begin at the beginning. Pastor Bill Smith was born in 1930.” Charlie Brown looks over her shoulder and exclaims, “Don’t be so silly! It begins with Pastor Smith’s father!”

Most people know that the history of the church goes back more than a few generations. Most could point to the events in the book of Acts as formative for the church, but the years between the first century and the present are largely a blank for most people. Even most Christians would be hard-pressed to give more than a very sketchy outline of this history of the church. If you were to go into your average Protestant church and ask the man sitting in the pew to name five of the church fathers, you might receive a list that was quite similar to Lucy’s.

I want to suggest that it is not merely convenient, but necessary for the church today to be familiar with its history. The words of the Psalmist are instructional in this regard:

*12 Walk about Zion and go around her;  
Count her towers;  
13 Consider her ramparts;  
Go through her palaces,  
That you may tell it to the next generation.  
14 For such is God,  
Our God forever and ever;  
He will guide us until death. (Psalm 48:12-14).*

The writer calls men to spend time reflecting upon the city of God.

This is to be more than a mere study of ancient architecture. It is a call to remember the works of God and how He has worked in the lives of people. It is for this same reason that we study the history of the church. Such a study will reveal to us how God has worked in history to bring about a people of His own. The church is the body of Christ. It is His prized possession, His temple, His holy people. As such, He finds it the most important thing in the universe. If He does, then we should, too.

## **THE CHURCH AND HISTORY**

The church is a product of history. If you want to understand the church as it exists today, you must understand its history. Why is there a state church in some parts of the world? If you go to Germany, you will find such a state church. In some parts of the country that state church is the Roman Catholic Church. In other parts of the country that state church is the Lutheran Church. How did this happen?

Why are there so many different denomination? Not only are there Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians, but each of these is subdivided and splintered into further groupings. Why did this take place? The answer will be found in the past history of the church.

The Bible maintains as one of its central truths that God has worked in history. He did not create the worlds and then go off on a long vacation. He has intervened in history. All of history is a fulfillment of the plan of God. This means that the Christian has more of a reason than any other to study history, for he alone believes that history is really the outworking of the plan of God and that history is “His story.” The Christian alone believes that history is not merely a meaningless tangle of events, but that there is a purpose and a goal to history.

What is history? It is nothing less than the strategy of God in the lives of men. If we are to know how God is working today, we will be assisted by seeing how He has worked in the past. A study of church history will accomplish the following:

- It will set forth for us the development of biblical doctrines. Why do we believe in the Trinity? Why do we approach the Bible grammatically and historically instead of allegorically? The answers will be seen in a study of church history.
- This study will enable us to correct our errors in and about the church. It has been said that those who are ignorant of the mistakes

of history are doomed to repeat them. We can learn from the past mistakes of others. I love the bumper sticker that says, “Learn from the mistakes of others; you can’t possibly live long enough to make them all yourself.”

- A study of church history will enable us to see today’s church in a more complete way. As you see the bigger picture, you will come to understand that you are a part of something that has been around for a very long time.

The story of the church is both a new and an old story. It is an old story, going back 2000 years to Jesus and His apostles and, before that, another 2000 years to Abraham, and before that, an unknown amount of time to a garden in a land called Eden.

At the same time, the story of the church is not only old, it is also a new story, for it has yet to be completed. We are a part of a continuing saga. Our names are a part of that saga. There is coming a day when our names will be read in the book of the Lamb.

It can truly be claimed that Christianity has become the most widespread of all faiths. That does not mean it will always be the most dominant. There have been times when it has nearly been overshadowed by various forms of paganism. And yet, it continues to survive and to make its impact felt throughout the world. It is no mistake that our chronology is measured by B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini, the year of our Lord). Though recent scholarship has sought to change the meanings of these references to refer to “before the common era” (B.C.E.) and the “common era” (C.E.), they can not evade the simple fact that it is Christianity that marks the delineation between the era of the past versus that of the present.

## **A BRIEF OUTLINE OF CHURCH HISTORY**

Apostolic Church	33-100	From the Pentecost Incident (33 A.D.) The death of the Apostle John (100 A.D.)
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Persecuted Church	100-313	The death of the Apostle John (100 A.D.) The edict of Constantine (313 A.D.)
Imperial Church	313-476	The edict of Constantine (313 A.D.) The Fall of Rome (476 A.D.)
Medieval Church	476-1453	The Fall of Rome (476 A.D.) The Fall of Constantinople (1453 A.D.)
Reformed Church	1453-1648	The Fall of Constantinople (1453 A.D.) End of the Thirty Years War (1648 A.D.)
Modern Church	1648 - Present	End of the Thirty Years War (1648 A.D.) The Present

## **WHAT IS THE CHURCH?**

We can look at the church in two primary ways. We can look at it from God's point of view or we can look at it from man's point of view. God sees the church as the collection of all believers. We call this the "invisible church." It is obvious that we cannot study the church from God's point of view since we do not have God's complete perspective. Our study of the church will necessarily be a study of the visible church—the organized church.

Within the organized church there have been both Christians and non-Christians. Jesus Himself pointed out that this would be the case when He told the parable of the wheat and the tares. He said they would grow up together until the day of the harvest. But there is coming a day when they will be separated. When that day comes, you make certain that you are on the right side.



# THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

*“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18).*

This is the first mention of the “church” in the New Testament. Jesus spoke these words to Peter and to the rest of the disciples during a private interview in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. I have been to that location. It was a place of idol worship and of pagan temples. There was a temple to the pagan god of Pan located there by a cave which the Jews of the day had dubbed, “The Gates of Hell.” I don’t know for certain that Jesus is referring to that particular place of pagan worship, but His words apply equally to all sorts of paganism, both ancient and modern. The words of Jesus are prophetic and foundational. I want to focus particularly in the statement: *I will build My church.*

## 1. The Source of the Church.

Jesus says, “I am the One who will build My church.” He does not say, “I and My apostles,” or, “Peter and I,” or even, “I and certain pastors.” The building of the church is claimed to be the work of Christ. He is the one who elects the church. He is the one who calls the church. He is the one who saves the church. He is the one who redeems and justifies and sanctifies the church.

That is not to say that people are uninvolved in the process. Nor am I denying the proper utilization of church growth and missionary planning and strategy. These play the same role that cultivation play in agricultural pursuits. They can and should be utilized, but with the recognition that it is Christ who ultimately builds His church.

## 2. The Tense of the Building of the Church.

Notice the tense in which this promise is given. It looks to the future. Jesus says, “I WILL build My church.” It has been concluded by some that, at the time He was speaking, He had not yet begun to build His church.

There is some truth to such thinking. It is not that the Lord had not begun to gather His people into an organized assembly. There is a sense in which the people of God had been a “called out assembly” since the very earliest days of the Old Testament. But there would now be a change. There would now be a new foundation. There would now be a new rock upon which the church would be built. It was the rock announced by Peter’s great confession. It was the bedrock of truth embodied in that confession that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Son of God.

There is a teaching that maintains God has two separate groups of people in Israel and the church and that they have nothing to do with one another. By contrast, the Bible teaches that when God saved the Gentiles, He did not start a new group of people. Instead, He made the two groups into one.

*For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14).*

God now has a single group of people who are His chosen ones. They are called the Church. They are made up of all who have come to Jesus Christ in faith.

### 3. The Process of Building the Church.

The word “build” suggests a process that is drawn out over an extended period of time. The entire church did not come into existence in a single instant of time. It has been in the process of construction for some two thousand years. It is not yet finished. The process will continue until Christ returns.

*...in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:21-22).*

Not only did Christ begin the process of building His church,

but He is also still involved in that same process. If the church is growing today, it is because Christ is building it. If people are being saved, it is because He is drawing them. If believers are growing and becoming more like Christ, it is because He is doing a work in their lives.

4. The Ownership of the Church.

Jesus indicates His ownership of the church when He says, “I will build MY church.” It is His church. This signifies possession. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. It is His because He bought it and paid for it. It is the church *which He purchased with His own blood* (Acts 20:28). We should not think of the church as belonging exclusively to any one religious individual or group. It is God’s church.

5. The Nature of the Church.

Jesus says, “I will build My CHURCH.” The word “church” is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). It is a compound word made up from the joining of two Greek words together:

- Ek (ἐκ): “Out.”
- Kaleo (καλεῶ): “To call.”

The resulting compound refers to a “called out assembly.” It refers to a select group of people who have been called out of a larger group. This is exactly what the church is. It is made up of God’s people who have been called out of the world to be a part of something unique and special.

## **PREPARATION FOR THE CHURCH**

*But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law (Galatians 4:4).*

We read in this passage that the birth of Christ took place *when the fullness of the time came*. The world was prepared by God for the arrival of

Jesus and for the beginning of the church. It was no accident that Jesus was born at that time in history. Neither was it any accident that the world was in a state of readiness for the coming of the church.

1. The Political Setting.

Rome ruled the ancient world in the early days of the church. The rule of Rome, particularly at this point in history, brought a number of factors that aided the sudden growth of the church.

- Pax Romana.

This period of Rome's history is known as the Pax Romana—the Roman Peace. It saw one of the greatest periods of peace and prosperity that the world had ever known up to that time. The Roman legions had conquered all enemies and the threat of their might was generally enough to keep the peace within the empire.

- Roman roads.

We have a saying today that “all roads lead to Rome.” This quip looks back to the series of roads that were maintained by Rome that drew the empire together and unified it. This made travel throughout the empire much easier.

- The sea was cleared of pirates.

Piracy had been such an issue in the past that the Roman senate had commissioned Pompey the Great in 67 B.C. to deal with the problem. He had accomplished this task and the Mediterranean had become a Roman lake.

- Roman legions policed the land.

Travel throughout the ancient world was generally a hazardous affair as bands of robbers would ambush those foolish enough to attempt to travel without an armed escort. The threat of robbery, though not entirely extinguished, was reduced by the presence of Roman legions and the capture

and execution of thousands of robbers.

2. The Religious Setting.

Christianity was born in the land of Palestine. All the early Christians were Jewish. It is impossible to understand early Christianity without first understanding the Jewish cradle from which it sprung.

- The Temple.

Since the days of Solomon, the center for Jewish worship had been the temple in Jerusalem. It was here that the morning and evening sacrifices were offered. It was here that the priesthood came daily to serve. It was here that the yearly atonement was made for the sins of the nation. The temple represented the throne of God and the presence of God upon earth.

- The Synagogue.

During the dispersion of the Jews to Babylon in 586 B.C. and the Babylonian captivity that followed, the religious form of the Jews underwent a dramatic change. The temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. The place where God's people came to meet the Lord was in ruins. These Jews began to meet together each Sabbath to study the Scriptures, to pray, and to worship. This gathering became known as the synagogue. Even after the temple was rebuilt, Jews continued these weekly meetings.

In addition to the synagogue, a number of schools and academies arose, both in Jerusalem as well as in foreign lands. These schools of religion contributed to the establishment of Jewish thinking and resulted in the presence of many Gentiles who, while not going so far as to be circumcised and convert to Judaism, were nevertheless characterized as "God-fearers." Furthermore, a system of public education had been instituted in Israel during the century before the birth of Christ so that literacy among the

Jews was at an all-time high.<sup>1</sup>

- The Messianic hope.

The Jews of the first century were bound together by a common hope. It was the hope of a messiah.

*“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD,  
“When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch;  
And He will reign as king and act wisely  
And do justice and righteousness in the land.  
6 In His days Judah will be saved,  
And Israel will dwell securely;  
And this is His name by which He will be called,  
‘The LORD our righteousness.’” (Jeremiah 23:5-6).*

The Jews looked forward to a day when God would raise up for them a king who would be a descendant of David. The thinking was that this king would lead them to victory over the hated Romans and would restore their nation’s independence.

- The Septuagint.

With the conquests of Alexander the Great (333-323 B.C.), the Greek language had become the dominant language of the ancient world. Even in Rome where Latin was the official language, Greek was regularly utilized.

Two hundred years before the birth of the church, the Old Testament had been translated into Greek. Tradition had it that this translation was the work of seventy Jewish translators and so the translation had come to be known as the Septuagint — “the seventy.” This meant that Gentiles were now able to read those Scriptures in the common language.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Atkinson points out that during the reign of Salome Alexandra, “children were required to attend school, a decree that presumably included young girls” (Biblical Archaeology Review, July/Aug 2008; Pg 65).

## **THE PENTECOST INCIDENT**

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4).*

The incident that marked the birth of the church was no natural event. No council came together and voted to organize the founding of the church. No mission board planned a church-planting process in Jerusalem. True to His promise, it was the Lord who gave birth to the church.

This event took place at the Feast of Pentecost, one of the main Jewish feasts in Jerusalem. Jews would have been gathered from all over the world to celebrate this festival, all but ignoring the tiny band of followers of a recently crucified carpenter. Suddenly, in the midst of the crowded city, something amazing happened. What took place can only be explained in terms of the supernatural.

There was a great sound and there was fire. It was as though the past events of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai were repeating themselves. Then the followers of Jesus began to speak in other languages, relating the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. Jews gathered from all over the known world began to hear this message in their hometown dialects. As a result of this preaching, three thousand people were baptized.

## **THE JERUSALEM CHURCH**

*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. (Acts 2:42-45).*

The first church was a thriving, dynamic group. They had no organization, not committee meetings, no building program, no mission outreach. What they did have was unity. Their adopted lifestyle was a practical outworking of the Sermon on the Mount.

1. The Membership.

It is suggested in verse 41 that the method by which members were received into the church was baptism. We read that *those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls*. This early membership was limited to three groups of people.

- Hebrews.
- Hellenists—Greek speaking Jews.
- Proselytes to Judaism.

There were no Gentiles in this first church. The membership was limited to Jews. The idea of “Gentiles for Jesus” was still a thing of the future.

2. The Leaders.

The leadership of this early church lay in the hands of the twelve apostles. These men had all been followers of Jesus during His earthly ministry. Now they were passing on His teachings to the new church in Jerusalem. In addition to the apostles, Acts 1 makes mention of the brothers of Jesus (Acts 1:14) and James in particular eventually comes to the forefront as one of the leaders within the church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 1 Corinthians 15:7).

3. The Doctrines of the Early Church.

The earliest church did not have an established doctrinal statement. They had not yet developed an extensive list of creeds. These things would come later. There were four major teachings that were held by the early Jerusalem church.

- The Messiahship of Jesus.
- The Death of Jesus.
- The Resurrection of Jesus.



- The Return of Jesus.

Each of these points are seen in the preaching described in the first half of the book of Acts. They were the skeletal structure upon which all other teachings would be placed.

#### 4. The Persecutions.

The initial persecutions against the early church were conducted exclusively by the Jewish religious leaders. These involved beatings, imprisonment, and eventually martyrdom. Stephen, one of the earliest deacons of the church, was the first to meet his death in this way. These early persecutions led to a scattering of the church. *And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (Acts 8:1).* Though it was intended to destroy the fledgling church, it had exactly the opposite effect.

If there had been one lack in the early church, it was that of a missionary outreach. The leadership had seen no reason to take the gospel message to other countries and, until the flaring of persecution, Christianity remained a relatively small cult located within the confines of Palestine.

As the persecutions against the church intensified, Christians fled the area and took with them the message of the gospel. The one man who did the most to initiate this sending forth of Christians to other countries was to be a young anti-Christian names Saul of Tarsus.

# THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

“... These men who have upset the world have come here also”  
(Acts 17:6).

In the early years of the church, the community of believers was confined to the immediate area in and around Jerusalem. Although the church grew and prospered, there was no effort expended to reach out to other countries with the gospel. Then something took place that was to change all of that. That something was the scattering of the church.

## **THE CHURCH PERSECUTED**

There had been persecutions of early Christians almost since the beginning, but they had been sporadic and aimed more against the leadership of the church. Peter and John had been arrested, threatened, and beaten for preaching the gospel. But now, a young Jewish Pharisee names Saul of Tarsus instituted an intense persecution of all who followed the teachings of Jesus. He began a reign of terror in Jerusalem that came to a head in the martyrdom of Stephen.

*And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. (Acts 8:1b).*

As the believers were scattered out over the land, they took with them the message of the gospel. That message began to take root in Judea and Samaria and the surrounding districts.

When Saul had driven the Christians in Jerusalem either from the city or into hiding, he turned his attention outward, planning to carry out his campaign

of persecution to the regional capital of Damascus. It was while he was en route to Damascus that God struck him down, calling him to be a disciple of Christ. And so, the man who had been Christianity's greatest enemy became its greatest missionary.

## **GENTILES COME TO CHRIST**

Up to this time, the preaching of the message of the cross had been limited to a segregated audience. Only Jews had been targeted with the message. After all, it was reasoned, Jesus was a Jewish Messiah who had come to offer a kingdom to the Jews. It was not perceived as being of any concern to the Gentiles. Two events conspired to change this.

### 1. The Conversion of Cornelius.

God directed the Apostle Peter to go to the house of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius to preach to him and to his family the message of the cross. Peter had to be told three times, but he eventually obeyed and the house of Cornelius turned to Christ. The evidence of the divine sanction of this conversion was the giving of the Holy Spirit, a repetition of the Pentecost event with Gentile believers as the subject.

This was especially significant because it was the first instance that a Gentile was recognized to be saved without first proselytizing to Judaism. So important was this event that the book of Acts devotes two entire chapters to describe the historicity of the event and then Peter's narration of that same event.

### 2. The Greeks at Antioch.

The message of the gospel continued to spread up the Mediterranean coast until it finally came to Antioch. This was one of the major cities in the eastern Mediterranean and, as such, it was primarily a Greek city, though it also boasted a Jewish section.

*So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men of Cyprus*

*and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-21).*

Even though Cornelius and his family had come to the Lord, the preaching of the gospel continued to be generally confined to the Jews. This changed when Christians reached Antioch. For the first time, the gospel was preached en masse to the Greeks. To everyone's surprise, a great many Greeks believed the message and turned to the Lord in faith.

This caused such consternation in the church that Barnabas was sent by the Jerusalem church to Antioch to oversee the situation. He made a detour to recruit Saul and they spent a year together, ministering at the new church at Antioch (Acts 11:19-28). It was here that the believers were first given the designation "Christian."

## **PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY**

After a year of ministry and growth, the elders of the church at Antioch were directed by the Holy Spirit to commission Saul and Barnabas to a missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). Accordingly, Saul and Barnabas traveled to the island of Cyprus and from there to Perga on the coast of Anatolia. The rigors of the trip proved too much for John Mark and he deserted them, returning to Jerusalem (Acts 13:4-13). It was during this period that the book of Acts begins to refer to Saul by his Latin designation, Paul. This was evidently a conscious decision on the part of the missionaries to assist in their dealings with the Roman authorities, one of whom held a hearing on the legality of Christianity in Cyprus.

Over the following weeks, Paul and Barnabas moved inland into Anatolia, visiting the towns of Antioch (a different town by the same name as the one in Syria), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. They preached the gospel in each city, leading people to the Lord and organizing churches in each area. They faced persecution, but they endured and, when they left the area, there were churches planted in the hinterland of the Anatolian plateau. They returned to their home base of Antioch just in time to find a new issue that had arisen.

## **THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL**

About this time, a great debate began to sweep through the churches. It concerned the relationship of the Mosaic Law to Christianity. Jewish teachers rose up who insisted that a man must be circumcised and proselyte to Judaism in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). Accordingly, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to attend a council of churches in order to settle this matter.

At Jerusalem, it was agreed that Gentiles are saved by faith and apart from the works of the law. Several Jewish delegates were chosen to be sent back with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to make certain this message was understood. Among these representatives was a prophet named Silas.

## **PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY**

When Paul and Barnabas began to make plans for a second missionary journey, they found themselves disagreeing over whether to take John Mark along with them. John Mark had accompanied them on their first trip, but had deserted them when the hardships of the journey proved too difficult. The argument between Paul and Barnabas grew so divisive that they finally parted company and Paul set out with Silas.

Instead of going by sea as they had the first time, Paul and Silas traveled through Tarsus and Cilicia, coming finally to Lystra. Here they were joined by a young Christian named Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). Making their way westward, they traveled through Phrygia and Galatia, being led by the Holy Spirit in a vision to come at last to Troas on the Aegean Sea.

From here, they took a boat to Macedonia, landing at Neopolis and coming at last to the city of Philippi where the first church was founded through a woman's Bible study and the conversion of a jailer. This marked the entry of the Christian church into Europe and was the first step in the evangelism of that continent.

In the following months, they moved on, starting churches in Thessalonica and Berea. Then Paul sent Silas and Timothy back to check on the welfare of these new churches while he went south to Athens, where he preached a sermon on the Areopagus. From there, he moved to Corinth.

In Corinth, Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish transplants from Rome who were in the same tent-making occupation. He spent two years here, planting a church and preaching and teaching.

After a long time, Paul determined to return to Jerusalem, taking Aquila and Priscilla with him. The trip took him through Ephesus and he stopped here for a short time to preach to the Jews. Though he was asked to stay, he continued on to Jerusalem, leaving Aquila and Priscilla to continue the work that he had started. Thus, Paul came by ship to Caesarea, stopping briefly at Jerusalem before returning to Antioch, the point of his original debarkation (Acts 18:22). In this second mission trip, Paul and Silas had taken the gospel to Greece and had established a church there.

## **THE THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY**

After some time of recuperation and ministry, Paul left Antioch and once again made his way westward, visiting the church in Galatia and Phrygia, until at last he came to Ephesus (Acts 18:23). He remained at Ephesus for two years, preaching at first in the synagogue and then at the School of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-10).

At the end of that time, Paul traveled to Greece and then returned back across the Hellespont to Troas. From here, he made his way down the coast, coming at last to Miletus. He sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus, and when they had come, he warned them of false teachers and commended them to the work of their ministry (Acts 20:17-38). Paul and his party now took ship and sailed to Cos, Rhodes, Tyre, Ptolemais, and finally Caesarea. From here they came by land at last to Jerusalem.

## **PAUL'S ARREST AND IMPRISONMENT**

Paul had not been in Jerusalem long when a mob attempted to kill him. The ensuing riot was broken up by the Roman garrison and Paul was arrested. The Roman commander was not sure what he should do with Paul and so, he initially allowed him to be tried by the Jewish Sanhedrin. The trial erupted into such an uproar that the commander interrupted the proceedings and escorted Paul back to the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem.

When the Roman commander learned of a Jewish plot to assassinate Paul, he sent the prisoner with an armed escort to the governor's palace at Caesarea. Paul's case was heard before the governor, Felix. This trial was tabled and Paul remained under house arrest for the next two years at Caesarea.

A second hearing took place when Felix was replaced by a new

governor and Paul was found innocent of any wrong-doing, but since he had appealed to Caesar, it was determined that he should be sent to Rome to stand trial. He was placed aboard a ship bound for Rome. The trip was detoured rather abruptly by a shipwreck, but ultimately Paul arrived in Rome where he remained under house arrest for two years. Eusebius relates the church tradition that Paul was released following his initial trial before Nero:

There is evidence that, having then been brought to trial, the apostle again set out on the ministry of preaching, and having appeared a second time in the same city found fulfillment in his martyrdom (1988:97).

It is commonly thought that Paul traveled during this period to Spain, preaching the gospel there as he had planned in Romans 15:28. After this, he returned to Rome where he was again arrested. This time he was convicted and beheaded.

## **THE MINISTRY OF THE OTHER APOSTLES**

Paul was not the only apostle who traveled to other countries with the gospel. Perhaps being inspired by his example, most of the other apostles are reputed to have moved out from Jerusalem, taking the message of Christ to other land.

- Peter eventually traveled to Rome where he was crucified upside down.
- John remained in Jerusalem for many years, but ultimately made his way to Ephesus where he served until being banished to the nearby island of Patmos.
- Philip is said to have ministered in Asia Minor, being crucified in Hierapolis.
- Andrew is said to have traveled to Scythia and to northern Greece before being martyred at Patras in Greece.
- Thomas supposedly took Christianity to the east to India.
- John Mark is viewed by the Coptic church of Egypt as its founder.

By the end of the first century, there were Christians to be found in almost every community throughout the known world. The prophecy of Jesus had been fulfilled that He made prior to His ascension:

## *The Spread of Christianity*

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*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. (Acts 1:8).*



# THE CHURCH AT THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY

**64 - 100**

*They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor.* (Anonymous Letter to Diognetus, 150).

The end of the first century saw a saturation of Christianity to all of the major cities of the ancient world. There are give characteristics about Christianity that attracted people to its ranks.

## 1. Christianity Was the Most Inclusive Group in the Roman World.

This was an era of status and class consciousness. Society ran from the royal and the elitist down to the peon and the slave, yet the Christian faith was open to all. Their doors were open to anyone, no matter what color, race, or social status.

- Its members cared for the poor and the imprisoned.
- There was mutual help among the congregations. The book of Acts tells of offerings from churches in one locale being collected for the welfare of Christians in other areas.
- The unity of the saints brought a person friends and family no matter where one traveled.

## 2. Christianity Held an Uncompromising Adherence to its Convictions.

Christianity was not like the belief in the Greek or Roman gods toward which many gave only a lip service. There was a great

sacrifice involved for those who would follow Christ. This dissuaded those who were halfhearted in their allegiance.

3. Christianity Promised Moral Victory and it Worked.

The Christian faith was not merely another philosophy to be discussed and dissected. It was a way of life and it resulted in changed lives on the part of its adherents.

4. The Consistency of the Martyrs.

In all their sufferings and persecutions, the Christians refused to renounce their faith in Christ. Their bravery and steadfastness in the face of certain death was striking.

5. Christianity Answered the Needs of a Searching World.

The paganism of the first century world had been seen to lack any real foundation on which to base the lives of its adherents. It was unable to meet the needs of the world.

- The need for immortality.
- The need for belonging that was met in its unique bond of fellowship.
- The need for intellectual satisfaction.

## **THE FIRST IMPERIAL PERSECUTION**

The earliest persecutions of Christianity had been at the hands of the Jews. These were mostly illegal in nature and without the sanction of the Roman authorities. Even the stoning of Stephen at the hands of the Sanhedrin took place while the local Roman governor was absent and apparently apart from his consent. This changed in the days of Nero.

In 64 A.D. a great fire broke out in the city of Rome. The Emperor Nero was away at the time, but when he returned, a rumor began to spread that he had mounted his private stage overlooking the city and sung of the destruction of Troy. When the people began to suspect that Nero might have had a hand in starting the fire, he tried to turn their suspicions away by accusing the Christians.

*But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. (Tacitus, Annals).*

The reference to “Christus” is evidently a misunderstanding on the part of the secular historian of the nature of the title “Christ” that was given to Jesus of Nazareth. Tacitus goes on to describe some of the tortures that were devised against the Christians:

*Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. (Tacitus, Annals).*

Among those who were put to death during this persecution were the apostles Peter and Paul. The excesses of Nero eventually grew too much even for the bloodthirsty Romans and rebellion finally broke out in the empire. Nero fled the city and committed suicide in 68 A.D.

## **THE JEWISH REBELLION**

Meanwhile, in A.D. 66 a revolt erupted in Jerusalem that spread throughout the whole area of Palestine. The Jews were initially victorious and the Roman garrison at Jerusalem was overthrown. Cestius Gallus, the Roman governor of Syria marched against Israel with the 12th Legion. He fought his way into Jerusalem, but was stopped before the walls of the Temple. For a week he made repeated attacks until the defenders were on the point of surrender. At the last moment and for no apparent reason, he pulled back and

retreated from the city. As he began to withdraw, the Jews counterattacked, inflicting enormous losses. The 12th Legion lost its eagle and its siege equipment.

This loss turned the revolt into a full-scale war for independence. The Jews were ecstatic. They set up their own government in Jerusalem, organized the country into seven military districts, and minted their own silver coins. Only one group saw these events through different eyes. The Jewish Christians in Judea remembered the warning of Jesus.

*But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand. <sup>21</sup> Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city, <sup>22</sup> because these are days of vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled. (Luke 21:20-22).*

The Christians remembered these words and they began to pack up and move out of Judea. Eusebius relates a tradition how that *the members of the Jerusalem church, by means of an oracle given by revelation to acceptable persons there, were ordered to leave the city before the war began and settle in a town in Peraea called Pella* (1988:111).

Learning about the defeat of the 12th Legion, Nero commissioned his top general with the task of subduing the rebels. His name was Titus Flavius Vespasianus. We know him as Vespasian. Together with his son, Titus, they converged on Israel with three Roman legions, ravaging the country and setting siege to Jerusalem. Vespasian returned to Rome after the death of Nero to be acclaimed the new emperor and Titus was left to capture Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The city was destroyed and the temple burned to the ground.

A small band of Jewish zealots managed to hold out in the desert fortress of Masada for several more years, but they were ultimately overwhelmed. Rather than surrender, 960 survivors committed suicide.

## **THE SECOND IMPERIAL PERSECUTION**

Vespasian was followed by his son Titus whose short reign ended upon his death in A.D. 81. Domitian, the younger brother of Titus was now made emperor. He took for himself the title, “Master and God,” demanding that people worship him. When the Christians refused, they were charged

with treason. Little is known of this persecution, though Irenaeus tells us that it was during this time that the Apostle John was banished to Patmos where he received his revelation.

By this time, the writings that make up our New Testament had been completed, though they were still not collected into a single volume at this time. Instead, they circulated through the churches as individual books of Christian thought.

# THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

**95 - 170**

*Therefore it is right and proper, brethren, that we should be obedient unto God, rather than follow those who in arrogance and unruliness have set themselves up as leaders in abominable jealousy. (Clement to the Corinthians 14).*

Following the death of the apostles, the early church had a tendency to look to those who had been personally acquainted with the apostles to be the new leaders of the early church. These men later came to be known as the Apostolic Fathers. It is important to understand that they did not call themselves by this title. They viewed themselves as rather ordinary people who had an extraordinary God and Savior.

## CLEMENT OF ROME

Clement was the third bishop of the church at Rome. Paul refers to a co-worker named Clement in Philippians 4:3, though it is not certain that this refers to the same man. Some early traditions relate that he was further disciplined by the Apostle Peter.

The only writing that we have by Clement is an epistle to the church at Corinth. This is commonly dated at the end of the first century. The epistle deals with the problems and disputes within that church.

1. Concerning Inspiration: *You have studied the Holy Scriptures, which are true and are of the Holy Spirit. You know that nothing unjust or fraudulent is written in them (Corinthians 45:1).*
2. Concerning Unity: *Do we not have one God, one Christ, and one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And is there not one calling in Christ? (Corinthians 46:7).*

*Shameful, beloved, extremely shameful, and unworthy of your*

*training in Christ, is the report that on account of one or two persons the well-established and ancient church of the Corinthians is in revolt against the presbyters (Corinthians 47:6).*

3. Concerning Church Leadership: *Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. 2 For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned, and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. 3 As for these, then, who were appointed by them, or who were afterwards appointed by other illustrious men with the consent of the whole church, and who have ministered to the flock of Christ without blame, humbly, peaceably, and with with dignity, and who have for many years received the commendations of all, we consider it unjust that they be removed from the ministry (Corinthians 44:1-3).*
4. Concerning the Resurrection: *Let us consider, beloved, how the Master is continually proving to us that there will be a future resurrection, of which He has made the Lord Jesus Christ the firstling, by raising Him from the dead (Corinthians 21:1).*

It will be noted that, for the most part, these are the same problems with which Paul dealt in his two epistles to the Corinthians. It can also be observed that Clement describes a succession of doctrine from the apostles rather than a succession of leadership. He makes no appeal to a centralized papal authority. This would not begin to develop until much later.

## **IGNATIUS (Died 110 A.D.)**

Ignatius was the third bishop at the church at Antioch. He had heard the teaching of the Apostle John. He was arrested and taken to Rome where he was executed for his faith in A.D. 110, fulfilling his motto, “The closer the sword, the closer the Lord.” He actively embraced his martyrdom and urged his friends not to plead for leniency on his behalf. Much of what we know of Ignatius comes from seven letters he wrote during his journey to Rome as he was on his way to his execution.

- The church at Ephesus
- The church at Magnesia

- The church at Tralles
- The church at Rome
- The church at Philadelphi
- The church at Smyrna
- A private epistle to Polycarp

Ignatius taught that there should be one “bishop” or “overseer” in charge of each congregation and that everyone within the church should take care to follow the teachings of that bishop.

*We must look upon the bishop as the Lord Himself (Ephesians 6:1).*

*It becomes you not to presume on the youth of the bishop, but to show him all reverence in consideration of the authority of God the Father; just as even the holy presbyters, so I have heard, do not take advantage of his outwardly youthful appearance, but yield to him in their godly prudence: yet, not to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, the Bishop of all. (Magnesians 3:1).*

*Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest (Magnesians 6:1).*

*Let that be a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints (Smyrna 8:1).*

*Nor is it permitted without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate the agape (Smyrna 8:10).*

From these references, it is evident that Ignatius held to a three-fold hierarchy in the area of leadership within the church. This hierarchy can be outlined as follows:

- The Bishop (Overseer)
- The Presbyters (Elders)
- The Deacons



At the same time, we should not that Ignatius makes no mention of a hierarchy that supercedes that of a local church. There is no hint of a pope or even a district bishop within his writings. Ignatius also speaks with reference to the Jewish religion and its distinction from the beliefs of the church.

*It is absurd to have Jesus Christ on the lips and at the same time to practice Judaism. Christianity did not base its faith on Judaism, but Judaism on Christianity (Magnesians 10:3).*

## **POLYCARP (69-155)**

Living from 69 to 155, Polycarp had sat under the teaching of the Apostle John. He went on to become the bishop of Smyrna. The only writing that we have by Polycarp is a letter he wrote to the Philippians in which he calls for continuing faithfulness from the church and gives a warning to those who would deny a future resurrection and judgment:

*Whosoever shall prevert the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts and say that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, that man is the first-born of Satan. (Epistle of Polycarp 7).*

We have a letter that was written by believers at Smyrna in 156 that relates the account of Polycarp's martyrdom. The account tells of the arrest of the aged disciple and how he invited the arresting soldiers to sit and eat with him while he spent his last hour in prayer.

He was taken into the stadium of Smyrna to stand before the proconsul. Although it was the Sabbath day, the Jewish community joined with the rest of the city to view the spectacle. The following description was given in a letter from the church of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium:

*At length, when he was brought up, there was a great tumult, for they heard that Polycarp had been apprehended. When then he was brought before him, the proconsul enquired whether he was the man. And on his confessing that he was, he tried to persuade him to a denial, saying, "Have respect to your age," and other things in accordance therewith as it was their habit to say; "Swear by the genius*

*of Caesar; repent and say, 'Away with the atheists.'"* (Letter of the Smyrnaeans; Lightfoot 1978:112).

One of the charges leveled against the Christians of that day was one of athiesm. They were called atheists because they denied the existence of all of the myriads of gods that were worshiped by paganism. Polycarp turned and faced the crowd, directing his words to them and called out, "Away with the atheists!" Throughout all of this, Polycarp refused to deny the Christian faith and, when the proconsul offered to release him on the one condition that he deny Christ, he replied:

*"Forescore and six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"* (Lightfoot 1978:112).

Polycarp was sentenced to be burnt at the stake and was immediately led to a post around which heaps of wood and hay were quickly stacked. When the guards prepared to nail him to the stake, he replied:

*"Leave me as I am; for He that has granted me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the pile unmoved, even without the security which you seek from the nails"* (Lightfoot 1978:113).

Thus, instead of nailing him to the stake, the officials merely tied him. And so, the elder of the church was burned alive, becoming one of the many martyrs who died for the faith.

## **PAPIAS (Died 130 A.D.)**

Papias was the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor. He died around 130 A.D. and thus was a contemporary and friend of Polycarp. He made it a point of seeking out and interviewing people who had known the apostles. Ignatius states that papias had met the Apostle John. Eusebius describes him as "a man of little intelligence," probably because some of his doctrinal beliefs did not line up with those held by Eusebius.

Papias wrote a five volume work called, "Explanations of the Sayings of our Lord." Unfortunately, we possess only fragments of this work, made up mostly of quotations from Eusebius.

## **JUSTIN THE MARTYR (100-165)**

Justin was born in Palestine. During his early life, he was successively a Stoic, a Peripatetic, a Pythagorean, and a Platonist. Upon becoming a Christian, he became one of the foremost apologists of the early church. Of his many books, only three have survived, along with a few fragments of other works.

- First Apology to Antonius Pius
- Second Apology to the Roman Senate
- Dialogue with Trypho the Jew

These writings of Justin give to us a vivid picture of life in the early church and we gain from them an insight into its worship and work:

*We who value above all else the acquisition of wealth and property now direct all that we have to a common fund, which is shared with every needy person (First Apology 14).*

*On the day which is dedicated to the sun, all those who live in the cities or who dwell in the countryside gather in a common meeting, and for as long as there is time the Memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read (First Apology 67).*

*Having concluded the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Then there is brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of water and of watered wine (First Apology 65).*

In his Dialogue with Trypho, Justin shows himself to be premillennial in his eschatology, although he grudgingly admits that there are Christians who do not share this view. He mentions that he is looking to a future rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and a regathering of the Jews to that city from which they had been banished. This would be followed by an earthly millennium.<sup>2</sup> Tradition has it that Justin was martyred in Rome during the

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<sup>2</sup> We should not make the mistake of thinking that Justin or any other of the church fathers endorsed the modern Dispensational form of Premillennialism with its two different future returns of Christ.

reign of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

## **IRENÆUS (140-202)**

One of the students of Polycarp was Irenaeus. He was born in Asia Minor and studied under Polycarp in Smyrna. After traveling west to Gaul, he went on to become the bishop of Lyons.

His name meant “peacemaker” and, living up to that designation, he is known for trying to make peace between various factions within the church. At the same time, he stood up for the truth by vigorously defending the faith against the attacks of Gnosticism. To this end, he wrote a five-volume set entitled *Against Heresies* that exposed Gnosticism. Another of his works was *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, consisting of an apologetic demonstrating that Christianity is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

In reaction to the Gnostic claim that the “true gospel” had been hidden by the apostles and could only be discovered by following the teachings of Gnosticism, Irenaeus made some significant claims for the care in which the Apostolic teachings had been handed down.

*But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the succession of all the churches, we shall confound all those who... assemble other than where is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, that church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. For with this church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition.*

*The blessed apostles, having founded and built up the church, they handed over the offices of the episcopate to Linus. Paul makes mention of this Linus in the Epistle to Timothy. To him succeeded Anencletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was chosen for he episcopate. He had seen the blessed apostles and was acquainted with them. It might be said that he still heard the echoes of the preaching of the apostles, and had their*

*traditions before his eyes (Against Heresies 3:3:2-3).*

## HERMAS

Hermas lived near the end of the second century. He was the brother of Pious I, bishop of Rome. He had been a slave and then had been freed. He became a farmer in Italy, but lost his farm as a result of business failings. It is reported that his children turned to apostasy and betrayed him to be persecuted. The only writing we have from him is a lengthy work known as *The Shepherd of Hermas*. It is divided into three volumes:

- The Visions
- The Mandates
- The Parables

Much of this work is highly symbolic as Hermas relates visions that he claims to have received from the Lord. There is no single complete Greek text of this book, but the Latin version has come down to us in complete form.

1. His Teaching with reference to Creation: *Believe first of all that God is one, that He created all things and set them in order, and brought out of non-existence into existence everything that is, and that He contains all things while He Himself is uncontained (Mandates 1:1).*
2. His Teaching with reference to Divorce and Remarriage.

*I said to the shepherd, "Sir, permit me to ask you a few questions."*

*"Speak," he said.*

*"Sir," said I, "if someone have a wife faithful to the Lord, and he discovers her in some adultery, does the husband sin if he cohabits with her?"*

*"So long as he is ignorant," he said, "he does not sin; but if the husband knows her sin, and the wife does not repent, but continues in her fornication, and the husband cohabits with her, he makes himself a partaker to her sin and an accomplice in her adultery."*

*"What then, sir," said I, "shall the husband do, if the wife continue in this disposition?"*

*“Let him divorce her,” he said, “and let the husband remain single. But if he divorce his wife and marry another, he too commits adultery.” (Mandate 4:1:4-7).*

3. His Teaching with reference to Repentance.

*One who has received remission of sins ought never sin again, but live in purity (Mandate 4:3:1:2).*

*...if a man be tempted by the devil and sin, he has one repentance. But if he sin and repent repeatedly, repentance is of little value to such a man, and with difficulty will he live (Mandate 4:3:1:6).*

## **THE DIDACHE OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES**

The word *didache* is Greek for “teachings.” It was a series of lessons designed for new Christians. Its author is unknown. It is dated at around 100 A.D.

*There are two ways, one of life and one of death: and great is the difference between the two ways (Didache 1:1).*

*You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not seduce boys. You shall not commit fornication. You shall not steal. You shall not practice magic. You shall not use potions. You shall not procure abortion, nor destroy a newborn child (Didache 2:2).*

*In regard to baptism, baptize thus: After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, pour water three times on the head, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Didache 7:1-3).*

*Do not let your fasts be with the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday; but you shall fast on Wednesday and Friday (Didache 8:1).*

*On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure (Didache 14:1).*

Notice in this last citation that the Lord's Supper is described in terms of a sacrifice. This is in contrast to the New Testament that views the death of Christ as a one-for-all sacrifice that never needs to be repeated.

The Didache is significant primarily for its view of the liturgical aspects of the early church. It was used to teach new Christians how to worship and how to act both in and out of the meeting of the church.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS**

### 1. A Picture of the Early Church.

The picture that we have of the early church is fresh and exciting. It is a portrait of a church that is growing at geometric proportions despite the antagonism of a society bent on its destruction. By the year 200, the church had permeated the Roman Empire including Britain.

### 2. Quotes from the Scriptures.

The Apostolic Fathers quote heavily from both the Old Testament as well as from the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. Their use indicates their view of the great authority of all these writings. They saw the Scriptures as their guide to life. It was their rule of faith and practice.

### 3. The Question of Doctrines of Grace.

Did the Apostolic Fathers teach a salvation that was by grace through faith? It has been claimed by some that they did not. However, I would suggest that what we have in their writings is merely an undeveloped theology. They do not teach about the grace of God as explicitly as we might prefer, but grace is implicit in most of their writings.

We should not expect them to have a level of theological

expertise as is seen in the leaders of the Reformation. They were contending with different problems from that of the Reformation.

<b>The Apostolic Fathers</b>	<b>The Reformers</b>
Faced a world steeped in polytheism and pagan worship	Dealt with those who agreed on the reliability of the Scriptures, who held to the deity of Christ, and who were monotheistic.
Their concerns were directed toward the paganism of their day	Their concerns were largely directed toward those who were a part of the Roman Catholic church

There is a lesson here. It is that we need to be speaking to the issues of today. If we do not, then we are not being faithful to the truth. It matters not how eloquently we may speak. If we do not speak at the very point where today's battle is raging, then we have taken ourselves out of the battle and can no longer be considered to be contending for the faith that was once delivered to the saints.

At the same time, there is evidence that the Apostolic Fathers did indeed have an understanding of the grace of God as it relates to salvation. Clement bears this testimony: *And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever* (Clement to the Corinthians 32).

In conclusion, we should note that we have only a small portion of the Christian writings from that early period. If our entire New Testament were made up of only the epistle of James, we would be hard-pressed to speak of a New Testament theology of grace. At the same time, we ought to strive to capture some of the freshness and zeal and devotion of those early church leaders.



# DOCTRINE AND HERESY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

**100 - 300**

*At first the church's convictions over some point of doctrine were implicit rather than explicit. They were not carefully defined... Then some new teaching arose. The church reflected on the matter, comparing the new teaching with the Bible. As over against the new teaching, it set forth the true biblical teaching. So a great doctrine was clearly stated in some great Christian creed. (J. G. Machen 151).*

What do we mean when we speak of doctrine? In the context of Christianity, doctrine is that body of truth that makes up the teachings of the Bible. With reference to the church, it is therefore that body of authoritative dogma established and accepted by the church.

But having said that, we need to add that we do not obtain our doctrine from the church. Rather, we obtain it from the Lord and specifically, from His revealed revelation contained in the Scriptures. This was the basis of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers said, “We shall not accept doctrine from the church that is at odds with the Bible. We shall go to the Bible itself for the formation of our doctrine.” The theological term that was coined to describe this stance was *sola scriptura* — “only Scripture” as our rule of faith and practice.

At this point you might be thinking, “Why do we need doctrine, anyway? Isn't it enough to merely have the Bible and to say that we believe that?” While such a stance sounds very appealing, it simply is not practical.

Everyone has their own doctrines and everyone has their own beliefs. You can ask anyone what they think about God, and you will get as your answer some sort of system of doctrine. What theologians seek to do is to take that system, organize it, and make certain that it conforms to the Biblical teaching. Therefore we can say that doctrine is a distillation and refinement of the teachings of the Bible into an organized and systematic format.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

The Apostolic Fathers lived in an age in which the church doctrine was in its infancy. It was a time when doctrinal distinctives were somewhat blurred. People who came to Christ in faith did not recognize all the distinctions between justification versus sanctification versus redemption. They only knew that they had come to recognize Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

If you think about it, that is probably the way you came to Christ. You were not aware of all the doctrinal distinctives at that time. You only knew that you had a need and that Jesus had come to fill that need. It wasn't until much later that you recognized that you had been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ and had been adopted into the family of God and that you had become a co-heir of Christ. Just as a baby grows in the area of self-awareness, so you grew and developed in your spiritual self-awareness.

It was with much the same attitude that Christianity flourished during the early days of the church. As you read the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, you will be hard pressed to see all the doctrinal distinctives that we study today. What we do not realize is that we enjoy nearly 2000 years of doctrinal development and refinement.

<b>Century</b>	<b>Area of Doctrinal Development</b>
3rd & 4th Centuries	Christological & Trinitarian Doctrines
5th Century	Anthropology—the study of man
11th & 12th Centuries	Objective Soteriology. By “objective,” I mean that theologians were looking at God’s work in the area of salvation
16th Century	Subjective Soteriology: Man’s work in the area of salvation

These stages of doctrinal development were often brought on in the face of conflicting views. Indeed, it was often the advent of heresies within the church that forced the church to develop and to explain these doctrines.

This brings us to an interesting point. If you have never felt the urge to study doctrine, it is probably an indication that you have never really been active in sharing your faith with others. When you share your faith with others and they ask you questions about your faith that you cannot answer,

it will drive you to study doctrine. In the same way, it was as the church faced doctrinal controversy that it was motivated to study and develop a system of doctrine. Thus, doctrine was systematized in the face of heresy.

What do we mean when we speak of heresy? Properly speaking, a heresy is that which divides. If we take this meaning, then some heresies might be proper. There are times when division is necessary. Martin Luther and John Calvin were branded as heretics because they were dividing from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. It is not that they were rebellious toward the church, it is that they sought to follow God rather than men.

Cornelius Van Til, professor of apologetics at Westminster Seminary, used to say to his students, "Have your own heresies, but make them biblical." What he meant by this is that it is okay to disagree with the teachings of the church, as long as you are not disagreeing with the Bible. This is important. Our standard of faith is not the church. It is not the Westminster Confession or the Apostles' Creed. It is the Bible.

At the same time, I ought not to depart from the teachings of the church without great care, examination, study, and prayer. Robert Williams, one of my mentors from years past, used to say, "Even pygmies can see great things from the shoulders of giants." We can and should learn from scholars of the past and present. But it is still the Bible itself that is our final authority.

## **THE JUDIAZER CONTROVERSY**

The first doctrinal controversy in the early church revolved around the relationship that Christianity had to Judaism. The membership of the early church was exclusively Jewish. Jesus had been Jewish. His disciples were all Jews. The church began in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judea. It was not until Peter had a heavenly vision and was thereby led to share the gospel with a household of Gentiles that the issue of Gentile Christians even arose. The only reason they were recognized is because, at their reception of the gospel, the Holy Spirit came upon them in a visible way and they spoke in tongues. It was in the face of this heavenly evidence that Peter grudgingly admitted that Gentiles could be baptized and become a part of the church.

This may have resolved the issue for Peter, but it continued to be the feeling of most early Christians that, for a Gentile to become a Christian, he must first convert to Judaism and be circumcised. Accordingly, the first church council met in Jerusalem to settle this matter. The story is told in

Acts 15.

*Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. (Acts 15:1-4).*

Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to represent the Gentile church at Antioch. They were confronted by those who insisted that salvation could not be obtained apart from full conformity to the covenant including circumcision. In Galatians 2, Paul tells what took place behind the scene of this council.

*Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. 2 It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. 3 But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. (Galatians 2:1-3).*

The conclusion of the council was that Gentiles could come to Christ in the same way that Jews came — through faith and apart from the deeds of the law.

## **THE GNOSTICS**

The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word for “knowledge” (γνῶσις — *gnosis*). The Gnostics claimed to have a special knowledge that went beyond that which was taught in the Bible or held by the church. This

special knowledge came only to those who were initiated into the “deeper truths.”

Gnosticism entailed a combination of Greek dualism, Christianity, and Judaism. As such, there was not a specific Gnostic religion or statement of faith. Rather, it was a broad movement that took on a variety of forms. While full-blown Gnosticism did not make its appearance until the second century, one can see evidences in the New Testament of what we could call “pre-Gnostic thinking.”

1. The General Beliefs of Gnosticism.

Gnosticism taught that the material world is alien to the supreme God and to goodness. They reasons that a good God could not create an evil world. Therefore, they reasoned that the creation of the present world was not the work of the supreme God, but that of an inferior being. Gnosticism held to two gods. There was a good god and a bad god.

<b>The Good God</b>	<b>The Bad God</b>
Represented by light	Represented by darkness
Realm of spirit	Realm of matter
The God of the New Testament	The God of the Old Testament

It was commonly taught that the supreme God originally created aeons (spirit beings) in order to have fellowship with Himself. One of these aeons, out of jealousy, tried to create something himself. He created the world. Therefore the present world is seen as being naturally evil.

2. Valentinus and Creation.

Valentinus, one of the Gnostic teachers, stated that God had initially created twelve aeons. The last of these aeons as Sophia (“wisdom”). She was very unstable and fell into outer darkness and there spontaneously conceived, giving birth to a premature infant who created the universe. He did so, out of contention toward his mother, by using the solidification of his mother’s emotions. Her

tears became the ocean, her mucus became the land, and her anger became the stars. What followed was a battle between him and his mother for the human race.

As one listens to this fanciful mythology, it echoes from the ancient Babylonian creation myths. There are also elements of such mythology that one can find in present-day Mormonism. The Mormons teach that the God of the Bible is a lesser being who has a greater who created Him. This is in strong contrast to the teaching of the Bible where the Lord Himself says, "*Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me*" (Isaiah 43:10).

3. Basilides and his Doctrine of Ex Nihilio.

Basilides taught that originally there was nothing. Then a non-existent God produced a non-existent seed out of nothing. From this non-existent seed came everything that exists today. In this way, something came from nothing. Before you say how silly that sounds, we ought to remember that it is essentially the same view of the evolutionary materialist today.

4. Marcion.

The most notorious of the Gnostics was Marcion. Polycarp called him "the firstborn of Satan." He was a wealthy shipowner. He had come to Rome from Pontus in northeastern Asia Minor. He was excommunicated from the church in 144. He went on to organize and develop his own churches. Whereas most of the Gnostic movement was rather unorganized, Marcion had a well-defined doctrine.

Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was evil. He referred to the God of the Old Testament as the Demiurge. The Demiurge had written the Old Testament and therefore the Old Testament Scriptures were not inspired and could be rejected.

Marcion reasoned that the Demiurge was not omniscient, since He had asked Adam where he was. He had been forced to go down to Sodom to see what men were doing there. He was not moral, since He had loved David who was a man of blood and a murderous sinner. Marcion pointed out what he perceived as contradictions in the Old Testament, such as the prohibition against graven images, followed by the commands for Moses to make a bronze serpent and the images of cherubim in the temple.

If the Old Testament was not inspired, then if followed that

Jesus was not a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Marcion maintained that Jesus was a good teacher, but that He had been misunderstood by His disciples. The mission of Jesus was to bring deliverance from the Demiurge. However, those who were loyal to the Demiurge took Jesus and crucified Him.

In addition to rejecting the Old Testament, Marcion edited the New Testament. He kept ten of the Pauline epistles (minus 2nd Timothy and Titus) and an edited version of Luke's gospel.

*Marcion, who mutilates [the gospel] of Luke, is proved a blasphemer of the only existing God, by those parts which are still retained. Those who separate Jesus from the Christ, saying that Christ remained unsubjected to suffering and that it was Jesus who suffered, would be able to correct their errors if they would make use of the gospel of Mark and read it with a love of truth. (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3:11:7).*

The fact that Marcion published a canon of Scripture motivated the church to respond. If his published list of accepted books was incorrect, which books were to be considered authoritative?

Because of his emphasis on a God of love, Marcion attracted a great many followers. He taught that it was not necessary to call men to a change of life. They only needed to believe in God to be saved. Because of the dualistic nature of the universe, he reasoned that man's body can do whatever it wants, as long as his mind serves Christ.

5. Valentinus and Scripture.

In contrast with Marcion, Valentinus did not want to do away with the entire Old Testament. He said that some parts were inspired, other parts were inserted by Moses, and other parts were inserted by Jewish elders as their own interpretation of God's actions. He said that Christ has secretly taught this same view to His disciples who then passed it on to the few who were initiated.

6. Gnostic Views of Christ.

Because they held that spirit and matter are separate and distinct, the Gnostics rejected the idea that God had become flesh. They approached the incarnation of Christ in several different ways.

- One view said that Christ was a part of the aeons that had been created by God. It held that He was the chief of the aeons.
- Another view was that Jesus was merely a good man. Just before His baptism, the Spirit of Christ descended upon Him. That Spirit was with Him throughout His ministry, but it left Him just prior to the crucifixion.

7. New Testament Teachings against Gnosticism.

We have already noted that Gnosticism seems to have been evident in its incipient form in the first century. This is seen in a description of some of the false teachings combated by the New Testament.

*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. 9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form (Colossians 2:8-9).*

*Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. (Colossians 2:18-19).*

These Gnostic teachings continued to grow and develop with the early growth of the church. There were two practical reactions to the Gnostic teachings:

- Extreme asceticism: If the body is evil and the spirit is good, then it was reasoned that one should try to subdue everything



connected with the body so that the spirit can grow and develop.

- Extreme lasciviousness: Another line of thinking said that, since one's true life is within the realm of the spirit, it is permissible to fill whatever desires one might have with reference to the body.

Various segments of Gnostic teachings have been repackaged and have found their way into a number of modern cults and philosophies such as Mormonism and the New Age Movement.

## **THE DOCETIC HERESY**

One of the sects of Gnosticism was Docetism. The name is derived from the Greek word *δοκεω* (*dokeo*), meaning "to seem." Docetism dealt with the issue of appearance versus reality. It stated that Christ's appearance on earth was not real and that His bodily appearance was only a hallucination. John's epistles seem to reflect a rebuke against this teaching:

*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3).*

Notice that John wishes to stress the point that Jesus came in the flesh. This seems rather obvious to our way of thinking, but that is because we are not versed in Docetism. Why is it so important to believe that Jesus came in the flesh? There are two reasons.

First of all, if Jesus did not come in the flesh, then He could not take upon Himself our sins upon His own body. He could not die for us if He were not flesh, because God cannot die. Furthermore, if Jesus is not fully man in human flesh, then He is not qualified to be a mediator between God and man.

Finally, it is important because the fact that Jesus came in the flesh means that He has first gone through the same problems and struggles and temptations though which we also go. If He did not come in the flesh, then He really does not understand and empathize with our problems.

## EBIONISM

The Greek term *Ebionaioi* (Εβιοναῖοι) is a transliteration of the Hebrew Ebyonim (אֲבוֹנִים), meaning “poor ones.” The Ebionites were the opposite of the Docetics. They held that Jesus was a man who was born just like any other man, but who was adopted into God’s family and thus given the title of “Son of God.”

The Ebionites also taught that Jewish Christians should continue to keep the Jewish law. Some included Gentiles in this mandate as well. As such, they were something of a renewal of the Judaizers whom Paul confronted in his epistle to the Galatians. Irenaeus, in his book *Against Heresies*, noted that the Ebionites recognized only the Gospel of Matthew out of the New Testament writings.

## MONTANISM

Montanus was the great theological charismatic of his day. Appearing in the area of Phrygia in 172, he was joined by two women named Prisca and Maximilla who were claimed by Montanus to have the gift of prophecy. These two women were presented as the mouthpieces of the Paraclete.

Prisca claimed that Christ had appeared to her in female form.
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Montanus claimed to introduce a new dispensation of the Spirit that was superior to that which had begun at Pentecost. He claimed to have a new and better revelation than that which was given to the apostles. This teachings said that the Holy Spirit had only been given partially at Pentecost; the rest could only be given through Montanus.

- He called Christians to a strict asceticism, urging them to abandon marital relations, to commit themselves to fasting, to speak in tongues, and to embrace martyrdom.
- He taught that Christians who fell from grace could not be recovered.
- The priesthood of all believers was stressed, setting Montanists in opposition to the established leaders of the church and undermining their authority.

- The Montanists opposed art of any kind.
- Montanus also stressed the imminent return of Jesus Christ, though he was not unique in this area.
- The later followers of Montanus baptized their converts in the name of the Father, the Son, and Montanus.

Tertullian joined the ranks of the Montanists and was summarily excommunicated in 240. Because of his influence, the Montanist movement continued to have some influence in North Africa after it had disappeared from its birthplace in Phrygia. Montanism has as its modern day counterpart the Charismatic movement. The movement is exciting and fresh, yet it poses some serious problems.

Is God continuing to give new revelation to the church today? Are we to regard as our authority the Scriptures, or someone who claims to be prophesying in the spirit?

## **MANICHAISM**

Rather than thinking of Manichaeism as a mere heresy within the church, it is perhaps more proper to think of it as a separate religion. It was founded by the Persian teacher Mani (215-277). He combined aspects of Gnosticism with certain apocryphal writings such as the book of Enoch and his own writings, adding elements of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. Augustine was originally a follower of Manichaeism before converting to Christianity. The teachings of this heresy were as follows:

- Maintained that the apostles had corrupted the teachings of Jesus and that Mani was correcting them.
- Viewed God through the lens of dualism. God is made up of both good and evil, light and darkness.
- The material is bad; the spiritual is good. Therefore the human soul is good while the human body is bad.
- Taught that Christ's body was merely an illusion.

## **MONARCHIANISM**

The designation Monarchian come from the joining of the two Greek words *mono* (“only”) and *archos* (“ruler”). It is a teaching that stressed the unity of God to the point of denying the Trinity. This teaching was known by several different names.

1. Sabellianism: Names after a priest named Sabellius (220), one of the chief leaders of this movement. He used the sun as an example in that the sun has light, power, and a circular form, but is still one. He reasoned that God merely presents Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that these are different faces He wears to the world. Sabellius was opposed by Tertullian.
2. Modalism: This name points to the idea that God is one person who expresses Himself in three different modes. Thus, He might be called the Father when He is expressing Himself in one way, or He might be called the Son when He is expressing Himself in another way, or the Spirit in another way.
3. Patripassianism: Taken from the two Latin words *pater* (“father”) and *passus* (“to suffer”). It points out the aspect that this view has the Father suffering on the cross.

## **THE RESULT OF THE HERESIES**

The coming of these heresies within the early church produced both negative as well as positive results:

1. Negative Results.

The heresies had a tendency to split churches and to divide the efforts of Christians. As a result, the secular world often received a confusing picture of what Christianity was all about and this further hindered the growth and development of the church. It can be argued that the Islam religion, at least in part, grew out of a heretical view of God that was espoused by heretics who had been banished from the Roman Empire.

2. Positive Results.

One of the positive results of the heresies with which the church had to deal was that the church was forced to define its doctrines. The motivating factor behind the formation of the early creeds of the church was the setting forth of sound doctrine in contrast to the heretical teachings that were being promulgated.

# MINISTRY OF THE APOLOGISTS

**150 - 250**

*So we are called atheists. Well, we do indeed proclaim ourselves atheists in respect to those whom you call gods, but not in regard to the Most True God. (Justin Martyr, First Apology).*

What do we mean when we speak of an apologist? The word sounds as though it refers to someone who goes around apologizing for things that were done wrong. But this is not the case. The word is found in the Greek text of Peter's first epistle.

*But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a **defense** to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15).*

The word translated "defense" is taken from the Greek word *apologia* (ἀπολογία). It is a compound word made up of the joining of *apo* ("from") with *logos* ("word") and describes the action of explaining or making a verbal defense. It is a legal word, referring to the statements of a defending attorney or of a man who himself is on trial (Acts 22:1; 2 Timothy 4:16).

As used by Peter in the passage cited above, the apostle calls Christians to have reasons why they believe as they do. This is important. We do not believe just because someone told us to. We do not believe merely because belief is good and everyone ought to believe in something. We believe because we have reasons to believe. Our faith is based upon evidence.

In the same way, the apologists of the early church set forth the reasons for their faith. In doing so, they spoke out against the errors of their

day. Some of those errors included:

- Judaism
- Paganism
- Greek philosophy
- Polytheistic religions

But the apologists did not stop at defense. They took Christianity and they put it into an offensive mode. Paul describes such a mode when he said: *We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).*

## **THE STRATEGY OF THE APOLOGISTS**

1. Their Offensive Strategy: In speaking of the offensive strategy of the apologists, I do not mean to imply that there was an offensiveness to their demeanor, but that they were proactive in showing the claims of Christ and how those claims brought to nought every other competing religion or philosophy.
  - They taught that the Greek philosophy of a Logos, a universal principle that governs all the universe, was taken from the true Logos, Jesus.
  - They turned to the Old Testament prophecies to show the Jews of the truth that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Scriptures.
  - They sought to win legal recognition for Christians. To this end, they demonstrated to the Roman authorities that Christians are peaceful and obedient to those authorities and not deserving of persecution.
  - They wrote to comfort Christians who were in the midst of persecution, reminding them of the true nature of their faith.
2. Their Defensive Strategy: A number of charges had been leveled against Christianity and the apologists answered these charges.

- Christians were accused of atheism because they did not worship a visible image of any god.
- It was thought that Christians practiced cannibalism in their meetings because they spoke of eating the body and blood of their Lord.
- Charges of immorality were made, possibly because of the “holy kiss” and the agape feasts.
- Christians were charged with treason and anti-social behavior because they would often retire from political and social life, since these areas normally involved participation in pagan rites and the worship of false gods.

## **PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUNDS OF THE APOLOGISTS**

There was a tendency among the apologists to write from a higher philosophical realm than that which we observe in the Apostolic Fathers. The apologists gave great allegiance to the ability of philosophy to discover truth. Clement and Origen, both who came from the Alexandrian School, are examples of this. They do not make a distinction between natural versus supernatural revelation. It all comes from God.

Justin Martyr went so far as to indicate in his writings that he believed Plato to have read the book of Deuteronomy. While it was argued by some of the early Christian writers that there was nothing good to be found within the writings of the Greek philosophers, the apologists took a different tact. By bringing Christianity within the framework of the philosophies, they were able to gain a hearing from people who had been brought up in those philosophies.

There is a lesson here. It is that we ought to speak to where people are in their thinking if we expect them to respond to the truth of the gospel. This is the way Jesus worked. He spoke one way to Nicodemus, but His approach to the woman at the well was very different. In both cases, He proclaimed truth, but the terms in which that truth was dressed differed depending upon His audience.



## QUADRATUS

One of the earliest apologists was Quadratus of Athens. He lived in the early second century. When Rome was considering a fresh persecution of the church, Quadratus wrote an apologetic treatise to the Emperor Hadrian. We have only a fragment of this treatise saved by Eusebius:

*The works of the Savior were ever present, for they were true. Those who were cured and those who were raised from the dead were seen not only while being cured and while being raised. They were ever present, not only while our Savior dwelt among us, but also for a considerable time after He had departed. In fact, some of them have survived to our own time.* (History of the Church 4:3).

The last sentence indicates that Quadratus himself had been contemporary with some who had been cured and even raised from the dead by Jesus. It was an effective apology. How do you argue with a corpse that is still walking around?

## JUSTIN THE MARTYR (100-165)

We have already looked at Justin as one of the Apostolic Fathers. Born in Palestine in the region of ancient Shechem, he was in his early life, a Stoic, then a Peripatetic, a Pythagorean, and a Platonist. Upon becoming a Christian, he became one of the foremost apologists in the church. Of his many works, only three have survived:

- Apology to Antonius Pius
- Apology to the Roman Senate
- Dialogue with Trypho the Jew

Justin wrote eloquently and at length on the issues that impacted Christians of his day. Eusebeus makes reference to other works such as *Discourse to the Greeks* in which he discusses the Greek religion and *On the Sovereignty of God* in which he cites secular philosophers while defending the biblical teachings of Christianity.

1. Regarding the Charge that Christians were Atheists: *So we are*

*called atheists. Well, we do indeed proclaim ourselves atheists in respect to those whom you call gods, but not in regard to the Most True God (First Apology).*

2. Regarding the Deity of Christ: *For this they accuse us of madness, saying that we attribute to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, Creator of all things: but they are ignorant of the mystery which lies therein (First Apology 13).*
3. Regarding the Resurrection: *Because you have never seen a dead person rise, you disbelieve. But just as in the beginning you would not have believed that from a little drop such persons might be produced, and yet you see them so produced, so now in the same way realize that it is not impossible for human bodies, after they have been resolved and, like seeds, dissolved into earth, to rise again in God's appointed time and put on incorruption (First Apology 18).*
4. Regarding Fulfilled Prophecy: *We are convinced of the truth of all that He taught us, because whatever He foretold would happen is actually happening. This is the work of God: He tells of a thing before it happens, afterwards showing that it happens as it was foretold (First Apology 16).*

## **IRENÆUS (140-202)**

Irenaeus had been one of the students of Polycarp, having been born in Asia Minor and studying in Smyrna. After traveling to Gaul, he went on to become the Bishop of Lyons. He stood for the truth by vigorously defending the faith against the attacks of the Gnostics. His writings include the following:

- *Against Heresies*: Five books exposing Gnosticism.
- *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*: An apologetic demonstrating that Christianity is a fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures.
- *How God is not the Cause of Evil*: While this work is described by other authors, there are no surviving copies today.

In reaction to the Gnostic claim that the true gospel was found only in the teachings of Gnosticism, Irenaeus had this to say:

*The true gnosis is the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient organization of the church, throughout the whole world, and the manifestation of the body of Christ according to the succession of bishops, by which successions the bishops have handed down the church which is found everywhere; and the very complete tradition of the Scriptures, which have come down to us by being guarded against falsification, and which are received without addition or deletion. (Against Heresies 4:33:8).*

In his critique of Gnosticism, Irenaeus makes reference to a Gospel of Judas that portrayed Judas in a more positive light. In modern times, a Gospel of Judas was supposedly found in Egypt in the 1970's and sold on the black market, making its way to Geneva in the early 1980's. It does not claim to have been written by Judas, but rather by later Gnostics.

## **TERTULLIAN (160-250)**

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born into a pagan family in Carthage. His early training was in the field of law. When he was converted to Christianity, he became a defender of the faith. His writings can be catalogued into three distinct periods:

His Catholic Period	197-206	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Apology</li><li>• The Testimony of the Soul</li><li>• The Demurrer against the Heretics</li><li>• Against the Jews</li><li>• Against Hermogenes</li></ul>
His Semi-Montanist Period	206-212	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Veiling of Virgins</li><li>• Against Marcion</li><li>• The Flesh of Christ</li><li>• The Resurrection of the Dead</li><li>• The Crown (deals with a Christian in military service)</li></ul>

His Montanist Period	212-220	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Against Praxeas</li><li>• Monogamy</li><li>• Modesty</li></ul>
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Tertullian lived in an age when Christianity had spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. He paints this vivid picture of the thriving church:

*We are but of yesterday, and already we have filled your world: cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces, the camp itself, tribes, companies, the palace, the senate, the forum. We have left you nothing but your temples only!* (Apology 37:4).

In his treatise against Marcion, he gives an example of his legal wit as he attacks the common Gnostic view that Christ did not have a mortal body:

*Having taken bread and having distributed it to His disciples, He made it His own body by saying, "This is My Body"—that is, the "figure of My body." A figure, however, there could not have been, unless there was in truth a body. Some empty thing, which is a phantasm, were not able to satisfy a figure. Or, if he pretended that bread were His Body, because in truth He lacked a body, then He must have given bread for us. It would support the vanity of Marcion, had bread been crucified! By why call His body bread, and not rather a pumpkin, which Marcion had in place of a brain.* (Against Marcion 4:40:3).

Tertullian was the most advanced Trinitarian of his day, giving the church a theological vocabulary that was borrowed from Roman law.

## **HIPPOLYTUS (170-236)**

Hippolytus was a teacher in the church at Rome. He came into violent conflict with Pope Callistus over the issue of the readmission of sinners into the church. He also spoke out strongly against the practice of abortion:

*For this reason women who were reputed to be believers began to take drugs to render themselves sterile, and to bind themselves tightly so as to expel what was being conceived... See what great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by teaching adultery and murder at the same time! (Refutation of All Heresies 9:12).*

As a presbyter in the church at Rome, Hippolytus made a break with the established hierarchy of the church. This schism did not end until after Hippolytus and the Pope had been exiled to Sardinia by the Roman Emperor Maximin Thrax where they both remained until their deaths. Writing against the Greek philosophers who did not hold to a bodily resurrection, Hippolytus shows himself to be an apologist and a defender of the faith:

*It dare not be said of God that in one thing he is able and another unable. We believe, therefore, that the body too is resurrected. For even if it becomes corrupt, it is not utterly destroyed. The earth receives its remains and preserves them; and they become like seed, wrapped up in the richer part of the earth, to spring up and bloom. (Against the Greeks).*

## **ORIGEN (185-254)**

Origen was born in Alexandria, Egypt. He was the son of Christian parents and his father was martyred for his faith while he was still a teenager. Origen wanted to follow his father in martyrdom but was prevented when his mother hid his clothes. Origen became the director of the school of Alexandria. It is said that he had himself castrated in order to follow Matthew 19:12 in a completely literal manner. He was later given the nickname Origen Adamantius, "Origen the unbreakable."

Origen's name, <i>Ὠριγενής</i> , means "born of Horus."
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He traveled to Rome in 212 where he met Hippolytus, but he seems to have been disillusioned by the moral laxity that he found among Christians there and he soon returned to Alexandria. He left Alexandria again in 215 when a popular uprising in the city resulted in all schools being closed. Origen traveled to Caesarea on the coast of Palestine. It was here that he preached from the pulpit at the request from the local bishop. When Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, learned of this, he rebuked Origen

because he was not ordained to preach.

Fifteen years later, when Origen was again traveling through Caesarea, he was again asked to preach. In order to circumnavigate the previous problem, the bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem ordained him to the priesthood. Demetrius was furious and had Origen removed from his school, excommunicated from the church, and banished from Alexandria.

Origen moved to Caesarea where he was accepted by the church. He began his own school there and spent the rest of his life in Palestine. He would teach twice a week and, later in his life, this was accelerated to classes each day. It is estimated that he wrote between 2000 to 6000 books during his lifetime. Among them was the Hexapla, a study of some of the various translations of the Old Testament.

One of his most famous is his apologetic eight-volume treatise *Against Celsus*. Written to combat the pagan philosopher Celsus, this work is a classic in apologetics as it sets forth why we believe in the God who is there. Like many others of the apologists, Origen sought to express his Christianity in terms of Plato's philosophical ideas:

*How much more effective it is — and how better than all those invented explanations — that when we are convinced by what we see in the excellent orderliness of the world, we then worship its Maker as the one Author of one effect, which, since it is entirely in harmony with itself, cannot, therefore, have been the work of many makers.*  
(Against Celsus 1:23).

During the Roman persecutions under Emperor Decius, Origen was imprisoned and tortured, but refused to recant his faith in Christ. He was eventually released, but he never fully recovered from those injuries and he died two years later.

# PERSECUTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

**64 - 313**

*Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent... The more we are hewn down by you, the more numerous do we become. The blood of Christians is seed. (Tertullian, Apology 50:13).*

Persecution is nothing new to the church or unusual to its existence. Throughout most of the history of the church, it has suffered persecution. This should come as no surprise. Jesus Himself promised that His people would suffer persecution.

*Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. (John 15:20).*

One of the signs by which we can determine that we really belong to Christ is to look and to see if the world wishes to persecute us. Speaking in the same vein, Paul wrote these words to Timothy:

*Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, <sup>11</sup> persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me! <sup>12</sup> Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:10-12).*

Christ was our proto-type. Because men hated Him, they will also hate His followers. Because they persecuted Him, then will also seek to persecute those who preach what He preached. Because they put Him to

death, they will also seek to put His people to death. Tradition tells us that all of the apostles with the exception of John were martyred for their faith. Concerning John, Tertullian has this to say:

*The Apostle John, after being immersed in boiling oil and suffering no hurt, was exiled to an island. (Tertullian, Demurrer Against the Heretics).*

The first of the martyrs was Stephen. His trial and subsequent death are described in Acts 6-8. That event sparked off the first persecution of the church.

*And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. (Acts 8:1b).*

As believers scattered out over the land, they took with them the message of the gospel. That message began to take root in Judea and Samaria and the surrounding districts. Thus, the persecutions had exactly the opposite effect of what was desired by those instituting them. Instead of doing away with Christianity, the persecutions managed to spread its flame throughout the ancient world. The Jewish persecutions continued as best they were able, although they were hindered by the fact that the Jews had no sovereign state of their own and were unable to legally put anyone to death.

Finally, in 52 A.D., a case was brought before Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia. The case revolved around the preaching ministry of the Apostle Paul in the city of Corinth. He was accused of persuading men to worship God in a way that was contrary to the Jewish law (Acts 18:13). Gallio refused to hear the case, thus establishing Christianity as a legal sect within the district of Achaia for the next 15 years.

## **THE ROMAN PERSECUTION**

Although the church was granted a short reprieve in Gallio's decision, she was on an inevitable collision course with Rome. What was it that made Rome's persecution of the church so inevitable? It was because Christians were in opposition to nearly every part of Roman life.

- Roman schools taught pagan religion.



- Roman cemeteries offered up prayers to false idols.
- Roman marketplaces sold food that had been offered to Roman gods.
- The Roman military personnel were required to swear oaths to the emperor, worshipping him.
- Tertullian said that attendance at the Roman circus and theater was the equivalent to sacrificing to false gods.

Rome prided itself on its religious tolerance. They brought all sorts of gods and goddesses into its pantheon. However, Christianity was viewed as dangerous because of its universal and exclusive claims. It would have been acceptable if Christians had agreed to worship Christ as one god among many. But they taught that He was the only true God and that all of the others were false.

1. Nero's Persecution: 64-68 A.D.

A great fire broke out in Rome in 64 A.D. Nero was away from the city at the time, but when he returned, it was rumored that he had mounted his private stage overlooking the flames and sung of the destruction of Troy. People began to suspect that he had ordered the setting of the fire.

In order to dray these suspicions away from himself, Nero accused the Christians of having set the fire. He further charged them with treason and atheism because they did not worship any visible gods. He seemed to delight in fiendish forms of persecution and torture:

- Many were crucified.
- Some were sewn up in animal skins and then large dogs were set on them so that they were torn to pieces.
- Women were tied to mad bulls and dragged to death.
- Christians were tied to stakes and burned alive to light Nero's garden parties.

2. Domitian: 81-96.

Domitian was the younger brother of Titus, the general who had captured and burned Jerusalem. He became emperor upon the death of his brother. He quickly incurred the hatred of the Senate. Tertullian relates this tradition regarding a persecution under Domitian:

*Domitian, too, a man of Nero's type in cruelty, tried his hand at persecution; but as he had something of the human in him, he soon put an end to what he had begun, even restoring again those whom he had banished (Apology 5).*

It is normally thought to have been during this persecution that the Apostle John was banished to the Island of Patmos.

3. Trajan: 98-117.

We have a rather lengthy correspondence from Pliny, the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor to the Emperor Trajan over his policy in the persecution of Christians:

*It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.*

*Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.*

*Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshiped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.*

*They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition. (Pliny, Letters).*

He goes on to observe that, as a result of these persecutions, he was beginning to see better attendance at the local pagan temples which had been almost emptied by the rising swell of Christianity. We have the answering letter of the Emperor Trajan:

*You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age. (Letter of Trajan to Pliny).*

Trajan's instructions to Pliny seem to have defined the attitude of Rome toward Christianity for the next hundred years. One of the martyrs during the persecutions under Trajan was that of Ignatius.

4. Hadrian: 117-138.

Hadrian was of Spanish descent. He had been a relative of Trajan's and was adopted by him as the emperor lay on his deathbed. Hadrian continued the policies of his predecessor, but added a wrinkle — those who brought false witness against Christians were themselves to be punished. This limited the number of charges made against Christians and therefore lowered the level of persecution against Christians.

On the other hand, Hadrian was not so constrained in his treatment of the Jews. He forbade circumcision and he had pagan idols brought into the city of Jerusalem, ordering that a temple to Jupiter be constructed on the site of the original temple.

As a result of these activities, the Jews organized a revolt under the leadership of Bar-Kochba whose name meant "son of the star," a title derived from the prophecy of Numbers 24:17 that speaks of a star coming from Jacob. He was later dubbed Bar-Cosiba, meaning "son of falsehood." Bar Kochba ordered all Christians who would not join his revolt to be executed.

Hadrian's legions descended upon Palestine in 135 and, after

a desperate resistance, more than half a million Jews were slaughtered. After this time, all Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem on pain of death.

5. Marcus Aurelius: 161-180.

Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher. As such, he was intolerant of Christianity. Not content with the casual persecution of his predecessors, he instituted a spy system that was designed to locate evidence against suspected Christians. Justin Martyr was put to death during this persecution.

6. Septimus Severus: 193-211.

Septimus Severus was of Punic descent. He seems to have been more oriental in his thinking and therefore less concerned with maintaining the old state religion. However, in the year 202 he published an edict under which conversion to Christianity was forbidden. Irenaeus was martyred during this persecution.

7. Maximus the Thracian: 235-236.

Maximus came to the throne on the heels of an assassination cope. He was the first of the “barracks emperors” and never actually set foot in Rome.

His predecessor, Alexander Severus (222-235), while not himself a Christian, had admired the Christians and had even gone so far as to place statues of Abraham and Christ in his personal chapel, along with the rest of his pagan gods. He had evidently been strongly influenced by his mother, Julia Mamaea, who had been a follower of Origen.

Upon taking the throne, Maximus set about putting to death all who had supported his predecessor. This included Christians. All Christian clergy were ordered to be executed. Hippolytus was among those who were put to death.

8. Decius: 249-251.

Emperor Marcus Julius Philippus, known also as Philip the Arabian (244-249), was thought by Eusebius to have been a

Christian, receiving letters from Origen. What is known for certain is that he was quite tolerant of Christianity.

Decius came to the throne by force of arms, defeating Philip in battle. Because Philip had been friendly with the Christians, those same Christians were now looked upon with suspicion. At the same time, Decius was eager to return

Rome to her former paganism. This would require the extermination of Christianity and Decius entered into it with a vengeance. This was the first empire-wide persecution.

Decius demanded that all members of the Roman Empire offer up incense to the emperor, saying, "Caesar is Lord." Those who refused were to be put to death and their lands confiscated. Many nominal Christians, under threat of torture and death, sacrificed to the gods. Others obtained a forged certificate indicating they had done so.

Scholars have studied Roman coins and have found a striking similarity between the praises Christians offered in worship of Christ and the adulation Roman citizens directed to the reigning emperor. (Shelley, 1995:44).

9. Valerian: 253-260.

Rising to power from the ranks of the Roman Senate, Valerian was initially mild toward the Christians. Then in 258 he passed an edict in which Christians were prohibited from assembling together. Church leaders were executed and had their property confiscated. Cyprian was martyred and Origen was arrested and tortured during this persecution.

10. Diocletian: 284-311.

Thought Diocletian was the son of a slave, He rose through the ranks of power to become the Emperor of Rome. Seeking to restore the vigor of the Empire, he appointed three co-regents:

- Maximian.
- Galerius.
- Constantius Chlorus (the father of Constantine the Great).

Diocletian initially followed a policy of toleration for all religious groups. Both his wife, his daughter, and most of the officers

of the court were Christians. But in 303, he issued a number of edicts that were to devastate the church.

- Churches were destroyed and their properties confiscated.
- All copies of the Bible were to be collected and burned.
- All civil rights of Christians were suspended.
- All Christians holding public office were deposed.
- Sacrifices to pagan gods were required.
- It is said that Diocletian ordered that all food in every marketplace be sprinkled with sacrificial wine so that Christians must either partake of food offered to idols or else starve.

These persecutions took place mostly in the eastern part of the empire and Maximian and Constantius did not enforce the edict in the western territories over which they ruled.

## **RESULTS OF THE PERSECUTIONS**

One of the most prominent results of the persecutions was that the church was purified. Persecution had a tendency to separate the wheat from the chaff. Only those who were truly committed to the cause of Christ remained. Thus, the willingness of those who remained to give their lives for the faith resulted in a stronger and more unshakable faith.

Another result of persecution was the recognition of the canon of Scripture. As the Roman authorities commanded Christians to turn over their Bibles, the question came to the forefront of what did the Bible consist. Would you give your life to protect Matthew, Mark, and Luke? What about the Gospel of Thomas? The persecutions were one of several factors in helping Christians to think seriously about their canon of scripture.

# SIN, DISCIPLINE, AND CHURCH UNITY

**150 - 450**

*For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, <sup>27</sup> but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27).*

The early church fathers read these verses and took them to mean that if a person committed too grievous a sin, they could not return to repentance. Tertullian was among those who taught that, while there is the possibility of a second chance, there is not a third:

*Although the gate of repentance has already been closed and barred by baptism, still, God permits it to stand open a little. In the vestibule He has stationed a second repentance, which He makes available to those who knock — but only once, because it is already the second time, and never more, because further were in vain. (Tertullian, Treatise on Repentance 7:10).*

Does this mean Christians were expected to be completely without sin? I do not believe so. Origen made it clear that, at least in his own thinking, repentance was always available for the “common sins.”

*In regard to serious crimes a place for repentance is conceded only once. Those, however, which are common, and into which we frequently fall, always admit repentance, and are forgiven without cease. (Origen, Homilies of Leviticus 15:2).*

There was a distinct division made between “common sins” versus “serious crimes.” Origen went on to teach that, in the case of these “serious



crimes,” there was only one repentance available — that is, if you came to Christ and became a Christian, you could no longer be forgiven for any future breaches. What were these “serious crimes” for which there was to be only one initial repentance granted?

- Adultery.
- Murder.
- Apostasy or heresy.

Origen taught that anyone committing these sins was to be removed from the church and that such a one could never be forgiven.

## **THE PROBLEM OF LAPSING UNDER PERSECUTION**

The persecutions under Emperor Decian were worse than anything the church had seen up to this time. All people were required, under pain of death, to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods and particularly to the genius of the emperor. The way Christians dealt with this threat divided them into three camps:

- **The Faithful:** These were the Christians who refused to deny their faith and worship the emperor. They were persecuted, thrown into prison, their homes and lands confiscated, and often put to death.
- **The Libellatici:** These were Christians who hired or bribed someone else to go and conduct the sacrifice in their place. They were then given a certificate of sacrifice, indicating that they had made the sacrifice and sparing them from persecution.
- **The Sacrificati:** These were the people who, upon the threat of persecution, actually went and performed the required sacrifice.

The first group had remained faithful. The sin of the Libellatici involved deception and lying. The sin of the Sacrificati was in the denial of Christ and the worship of pagan gods. It is thought that most people within the metropolitan congregations lapsed in one way or the other.

Once the persecutions had subsided with the death of Decian, the question was brought before the church as to what their attitude should be with these people who had lapsed in one way or another. There were three

opposing views:

1. Those who granted forgiveness.

There were many leaders within the church who were ready to bring both the Libellatici as well as the Sacrificati back into the church and allow them once again to partake of the Lord's Supper. Among those who were ready to make such allowances was Cornelius who was made bishop of Rome after Fabian, the previous bishop, had been martyred.

2. Novatian.

Novatian was a Roman priest who had been nominated to the position of bishop, of Rome but who had lost the election to Cornelius. Novatian opposed the return of any of the lapsed believers. He held that there could be no repentance from such serious sin.

Novatian split off from the church and set up a rival congregation. He was excommunicated from the church and is said to have eventually martyred at the hands of Emperor Valerian, but his followers continued to set up congregations in Carthage and in the east. They called themselves Kathari ("pure ones") to set themselves apart from the rest of the church which they considered to be spiritually polluted. Those who joined the Novatian Church went through a rebaptism.

3. Cyprian of Carthage.

Holding to a more moderate view between the two extremes was Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage. While demanding a very exacting system of penance and probation upon those who had lapsed, he did propose to eventually allow them to return to the church:

*Do not suppose, dearest brother, that for the future either the courage of the brethren will be lessened, or that martyrdom will fail, because repentance is made easier for the lapsed and because a hope of peace is offered to the penitent. (Cyprian, Letter to Antonianus, Bishop in Numidia).*

Cyprian allowed forgiveness for the Libellatici after careful and thorough interrogation. The Sacrificati could only be readmitted to the church when they were on their deathbeds.

## **THE COUNCIL OF NICEA: 325**

The issue was finally resolved in the Council of Nicea. This council, the first ecumenical council of the church, had been ordered by the Christian Emperor Constantine. There were a number of issues discussed, but at this point we will confine ourselves to the one at hand.

The Fifth Canon stated that a lapsed member could stand with the hearers in the church for a period of two years. People regularly stood to hear the sermon while the preacher spoke *ex cathedra*, “from the seat.” After the period of two years, such a member was permitted to also kneel within the church for a period of seven years. Finally, he would be permitted for two more years to attend, but not partake of the Lord’s Supper. This would involve a total of eleven years of penance before a lapsed member could be permitted back into the church.

How should we evaluate such a decision? What is the standard that we should seek for the church today? On the one hand, the Lord calls for His church to be holy and faithful. He also tells us to remove wickedness from our midst.

*Reject a factious man after a first and second warning (Titus 3:10).*

*...I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5:11).*

On the other hand, we worship a forgiving God. Jesus did not throw Peter out of the church for eleven years when he denied Him. We are instructed in the Scriptures to receive back the repentant brother, especially when he has shown fruits of such repentance.

*Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Galatians 6:1).*

Speaking in the same vein, Paul exhorted the Corinthian believers to restore the man whom they had previously excommunicated:

*Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, 7 so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).*

Paul had written in his first epistle to the Corinthians for them to remove this man from the church (1 Corinthians 5). The church had responded by excommunicating him. But when the man, in repentance, turned from his sin and sought restoration, Paul urged the church to restore him lest he be further tempted.

This sets forth a principle regarding church discipline. Biblical church discipline is always directed toward the goal of restoration. It seeks to bring the sinner back into fellowship with the Father and with the rest of the body of Christ.

## **THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY**

Under the Diocletian persecution, an edict had been issued making it illegal to own a copy of the Scriptures. Those church leaders who gave up their copies of the Scriptures to the magistrates to be burned were called *Traditori* because they had been guilty of *traditio* (Latin for “handing over”). This brought about an issue that was very similar to that of the lapsed Christians.

Donatus, bishop of Carthage, insisted that these church leaders had invalidated their calling and had committed apostasy. In opposition to the stance of Donatus was Augustine.

<b>Donatus</b>	<b>Augustine</b>
Declared guilty clergy to have an invalid ordination	Allowed clergy to repent and to continue in their office
Guilty priests must be rebaptized	Repentance is sufficient

People who had been baptized by the guilty priest must also be rebaptized	The office of the minister does not make the sacrament efficacious.
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Augustine opposed the Donatists for two reasons:

- Schisms: The Donatists were destroying the unity of the church. Augustine taught that the church should try to live together, even when disagreements arose, lest the wheat be uprooted with the tares.
- The Validity of the Priesthood: In regard to the contention that, if their priesthood was invalid, then baptisms and marriages performed by them were also invalid, Augustine taught that the office of the priesthood is God's holy office, in spite of the weakness of the man who holds it.

Constantine attempted to mediate this issue through edicts and church councils, but he failed. One of the more famous quotes of this period was made by Donatus when, in response to the Emperor's involvement in the issue, asked, "What has the Emperor to do with the church?" The controversy itself was to continue for a hundred years. Donatism was finally condemned by the Council of Carthage in 411.

# THE CANON

## **A Rule of Faith and Creed**

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away (Luke 21:33).*

If you were a Christian in the early church, how would you know how to live and what to believe? There were three specific ways in which the faith of the early church was maintained:

- The *Episkopi* (bishops) and the *Presbuteroi* (elders).
- The Rule of Faith: This involved the distillation of the teachings of the Scriptures into creeds.
- The Establishment of the Canon of Scripture.

The Greek architects had an instrument that they used to measure various distances as they were designing and constructing a building. It was a straight rod with marks set into its side, much like our modern rulers. It had to be unbendable and it had to be dependable as to its straightness. It was called a *kanon* (κανών). From this came the idea of a body of truth or a rule of faith. This same word is used by Paul:

*And those who will walk by this RULE, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. (Galatians 6:16).*

When we talk about canonizing someone, we speak of recognizing their authority. The Roman Church uses this term to confer sainthood. When the church speaks of “canon law” it refers to the infallible criteria by how things are to be measured.

Similarly, when we speak of the Canon of Scripture, we are speaking of that collection of writings which constitute the authoritative and final norm or standard of faith and practice. This means that we think of the Word of God as the measuring stick for our beliefs and for our lives. We use it to check our doctrine and our daily lifestyle.

*Thy word is a lamp to my feet,*

*And a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).*

How do we decide how we ought to live? By the instructions of the Word of God. Like a lamp to a darkened path, it shows the way in which we ought to walk if we are to avoid the pitfalls of life.

## **CANONICITY DEFINED**

Canonicity is the process by which the books of the Bible were gathered and collected so that they came to be regarded as the standard and norm for Christians. This means that canonicity refers to the church's recognition of the authority of the inspired writings.

People often think of the canon as an authoritative list of documents when it is more correctly seen as a list of authoritative documents.

We must make an important distinction here. Canonicity does not make a book into the word of God. Rather, canonicity is the process of recognizing that a book is the word of God.

The Existence  
of the Canon

Does not  
equal

The Recognition of  
the Canon

The church did not create the canon. The canon created and still creates the church. The origin of the canon is not the same as its reception by the church.

The sixty six books that make up our Bible are only a very small part of the many ancient documents that were written in ancient times and which have come down to us today. How do we know that the books that we have are the Word of God? And how do we know that other books of antiquity are not also the Word of God?

The answer is that only those books which were inspired by God, that is, which were God-breathed; only those books should be considered as canonical. This is the sole criteria for determining whether or not a book is to be considered a part of the Canon of Scriptures.

However, that brings us to the next question: How do I know if a book is inspired by God? This is the problem of canonicity.

- How are we to determine if we have the right books in the Bible?
- What about the Apocrypha?

- Are there certain books in our Bible which should not be there?
- Are we missing some books?
- Are there certain signs for which we can look that indicate that a book is inspired?

## THE PROCESS OF RECOGNITION

One must remember that the church was born with a completed canon in her hands. The earliest church already recognized the Old Testament as their Scriptures. It was not until more than ten years after the church had begun that the first of the New Testament books began to be written.

The New Testament books were written between 40-95 A.D. (some scholars think that it might have been completed prior to 70 A.D.). There were several different types of writing.

- Historical format (the Gospels and Acts).
- Letters to the churches and to individuals.
- the Apocalyptic format of Revelation.

What were the recognized standards for canonicity? How did the early church come to recognize which books were authoritative? There were several aspects that informed such recognition:

### 1. Apostolic Authorship.

Every book of the New Testament was either written by an apostle or by someone who had apostolic sanction.

- Mark was given his information by Peter.
- Luke was a disciple of Paul.

The apostles themselves were given their authority from Jesus, both to teach and to preach in His name. Their authority was a delegated authority. They were authorized representatives. They had authority, identifying them fully with the One who had commissioned them. They had a “power of attorney” with Christ. By contrast, the early church fathers recognized that they themselves did not have this kind of authority.



*"The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was sent from God, so then the apostles are sent from Christ." (Clement of Rome, 95 A.D.).*

*"I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments to you. They were apostles. I am but a condemned man." (Ignatius, 117 A.D.).*

The testimony of all of the early church fathers is that the apostles were given their authority from Jesus Christ. Therefore, their writings were considered to be authoritative.

2. Consistency.

It was recognized by early Christians that all of the books of the New Testament were consistent with previous revelation. That is, when certain writings were seen to contradict prior Scriptures, it was obvious that they were not to be considered a part of the Canon.

3. Reception by the Churches.

The books and letters that make up our New Testament were accepted early on by the churches as being authoritative. Such early church leaders as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp all recognized the New Testament to be the inspired word of God.

*For neither can I now anyone like me match the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul. When he was with you, face to face with the men of that time, he expounded the word of truth accurately and authoritatively; and when he was absent he wrote letters to you, the study of which will enable you to build yourselves up in the faith which was given to you (Polycarp, Epistle to the Philipppians 3:1).*

*We have learned the plan of our salvation from none other than those through whom the gospel came down to us. Indeed, they first preached the gospel, and afterwards, by the will of God, they handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the*

*foundation and pillar of our faith (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3:1:1).*

*To put it briefly, Clement has given in the Sketches abridged accounts of all the canonical Scriptures, and he does not omit the disputed books — I mean Jude and the rest of the Catholic Epistles, and Barnabas and the so-called Apocalypse of Peter. The Epistle to the Hebrews, moreover, he attributes to Paul, and says that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language, and that Luke translated it carefully and gave it out to the Greeks (Eusebius, History of the Church 6:14).*

What were the factors led to the recognition of the New Testament Canon? There were several:

- Heretics influenced the New Testament church to formalize an official canon. Marcion published his own limited canon and thereby had a catalytic effect that drove the church to account for what it already had and accepted.
- The presence of other Christian writings.

Marcion's canon...

- Edited version of Luke.
- 13 of Paul's epistles.
- Tried to rid the church of Jewish influences.

Another factor that led to the recognition of a canon was the writing of many Christian books and letters. As Christianity grew and spread, believers began to write books and letters, outlining their beliefs and urging others to good works. We have letters which were written by many of the church fathers. The question arose as to whether they were to consider these new writings to be on par with the books of the New Testament.

- The coming of intense persecution.

The Roman emperor Diocletian (303 A.D.) passed a law that made it illegal to possess a Bible. This brought to light the

question, "What books am I willing to die for? Will I die for the Gospel According to Thomas? What about Paul's Epistle to the Romans?"

All of these aspects — the rise of heretics, the existence of other Christian documents, and the persecutions against Christianity — had the result of bringing about a church council that publicly recognized the New Testament canon.

4. Church Councils.

In 363 the Council of Laodicea asked that only canonical books be read from the pulpit. They listed all of the books of our New Testament except Revelation.

The Easter letter of Athanasius (written in 367) points to the accepting of all 27 books of the New Testament.

In 397 a church synod was held at Carthage that asserted and published its recognition of the New Testament canon (including Revelation). This synod decreed that nothing else should be read from the pulpit.

It is important to point out that these councils did not make the books canonical. They merely recognized what had already been the prevailing consensus among Christians for the previous 300 years.

5. Criteria used by the early church.

The early church used the following criteria in determining the canonicity of the New Testament books.

- Apostleship or association with the Apostles.

Not all of the writers of the New Testament were apostles, but all were written by people who were associated with the Apostles.

- Mark
- Luke
- Acts
- Hebrews
- James
- Jude

Hebrews was only accepted after Paul was adopted as the author, if not of the actual text, then at least of the ideas contained therein. However, some of the New Testament books do not have apostles as authors. This led to a questioning of some of those books.

- Conformity to apostolic teaching.
- Antiquity.

Only the earliest documents of the church have been included. Those written after the days of the apostles were not considered canonical.

- Public reading.

*I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. (1 Thessalonians 5:27).*

Paul commanded that his epistle be read in the church. The problem with this is that the same instructions were given in Colossians 4:16 about a letter that Paul wrote to Laodicea, a letter which is not a part of the canon (see also 1 Corinthians 5:9).

- Acceptance by the church.

Some epistles were not popular everywhere (like 2 Peter). Others took a greater amount of time before they were copied and circulated.

## 5. Books that were Questioned.

There were some books that, although penned by apostles or with those closely associated with the apostles, that were initially questioned. By 180 A.D. a total of 20 out of 27 of the New Testament documents were widely accepted as canonical. Only 7 were not.

- James was questioned because it seems to contradict the teaching of justification by faith.

- 2 Peter and Hebrews were questioned because there was no certain identification of the authors.
- 2 John and 3 John were questioned because they seemed to be too short.
- Revelation was called into question because it was filled with symbolism and allegories and difficult for many to understand.

## HERMENEUTICS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Having determined which books of the Scriptures were to be considered authoritative, the next question before the church was how they were to be interpreted. This question deals with the issue of hermeneutics, the science of interpretation.

The Western Church tended to use the grammatical/historical method of interpretation. This is seen in the writings of Irenaeus. By contrast, the Eastern Church, while recognizing some validity to this method, relied more heavily on an allegorical method of interpretation in which the student of the Scriptures seeks to find some hidden meaning beyond the plain narrative.

<b>Western Church</b>	<b>Eastern Church</b>
Grammatical/historical approach to interpretation	Allegorical approach to interpretation
Represented by Irenaeus & Chrysostom	Represented by Origen and Augustine

One of the most famous allegorical writings of our time is *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is evident as we read this book that we are meant to find a meaning that is beyond the plain narrative. In a similar vein, Origen taught that the grammatical/historical method was to be used only by spiritual babies. As a Christian grew in the word, he was to begin seeing all of the allegories of the Scripture.

*Moreover, it is of ecclesiastical teaching that the Scriptures were written through the Spirit of God, and that they have not only that meaning which is quite apparent, but*

*also another which escapes most. For the words which are written are the forms of certain mysteries, and the images of divine things* (Origen: The Fundamental Doctrines 1, Preface 8).

An example of this method is found in Augustine's treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan in which he makes the following identifications:

<b>Element in the Parable</b>	<b>What it is said to Represent</b>
The traveler	Adam
Jerusalem	The heavenly state of his fall
Jericho	Adam's mortality
The thieves	The devil and his angels
The injuries of the man	Man's lost condition
The priest and Levite	The Old Testament
The Samaritan	Christ
The Inn	The church

Such a treatment ignores the historical context of the teaching of Jesus in which He gave the parable. We ought first to interpret the parable in the light of that context and only then should we look for an application that is true to that interpretation.

## **CREEDS OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

When I was a lot younger, I belonged to an independent church that had a plaque upon the wall that said:

No Creed but Christ, No Book but the Bible
---

It was a very appealing idea, but it was not really true. When you asked around, you found that there really was a creed. If it was not in the form of a written doctrinal statement, then it was found in unwritten form.

The word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning, “I believe.” A creed is simply a statement of beliefs. One of the earliest New Testament creeds is found in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians:

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).*

The creed began as a very simple statement of Christian belief. It would be taught to the new convert and he would recite it as he was being baptized into the faith. Creeds continued to grow and develop throughout the church.

One of the early creeds of the church came to be known as the Symbol of the Apostles. We know it today as the Apostles’ Creed and we have found extant copies going back to the 4th century, indicating it was already a tradition of long standing.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
the Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:  
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended into hell. <sup>3</sup>  
The third day He arose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,  
from where He shall come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,

---

<sup>3</sup> This phrase is not in the very earliest copy of the Apostles’ Creed, though it still has an early tradition.

and life everlasting.

Amen.



# WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH

*On the appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak to recite a hymn to Christ as God, and bind themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft, and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it; after which it was their custom to depart, and then meet again to partake of food. (Pliny, Letters 10:96).*

This description, given by a pagan governor, reflects to a great degree the character of the early church. There was a great seriousness of purpose. They had a martyr mentality, a readiness to give their lives for their faith. They took their Christianity very seriously. They had a hunger for the word of God.

The church, as it existed in that day, was far removed from the country club mentality or the social meeting that characterizes too many churches of today's western world. These people were bound together with ties that could not even be broken in death. They had an expectancy of Christ's coming and they wanted to be found faithful to Him.

## THE PLACE OF MEETING

The early church did not have nicely painted and air conditioned buildings with soft pews for soft Christians. At the same time, they did pay attention to the areas in which they met for worship.

### 1. The Temple.

A careful reading of the book of Acts suggests that the meeting place for the early church was the outer courts of the temple. Under the marble colonnades of Solomon's Porch, the early Christians were able to gather together for worship and to discuss the

Scriptures and pray.

*Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart (Acts 2:46).*

*...and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico (Acts 5:12).*

It is important to see that these early Christians did not see themselves divorced from the worship in the temple. Thus in Acts 3 we see Peter and John going to the temple at the third hour because that was the hour of prayer. They continued to involve themselves in the temple sacrifices and the temple worship.

2. House Churches.

While a good portion of their worship as well as their evangelism took place within the temple, we can imagine that an equal portion of that worship took place as they ate their meals together, sharing all things in common. This would take place within the homes of various members. We have already noted Acts 2:46 as it speaks of these early Christians “continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house.” When we come to Acts 12:12, we see that many had gathered together in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Likewise, Paul makes mention of the church that was in the house of Prisca and Aquila in Romans 16:3-5. A church also met within the home of Philemon (Philemon 1:2).

3. The Synagogue.

The idea of the synagogue had sprung up among Jewish communities after the Babylonian Captivity. Scattered about the ancient world were such places of worship. Throughout Paul’s ministry, we can see that his regular practice was to enter the local synagogue of any given city to bring the gospel to the Jews of that city (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-2; 17:10; 18:4; 18:19; 19:8).

Not only did the church leave its mark on the synagogue, but the

synagogue also left its mark on the church. One only needs to examine the two organizations to see their commonality.

- A central meeting place.
- An emphasis on preaching from the Scriptures.
- The centrality of prayer.
- The office of elder.

#### 4. Dedicated Church Structures.

We can find examples of very early meetings along river banks (Acts 16:13), in the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17:19), and even for two years in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). We have already noted the propensity for meetings that took place within the homes of believers.

By the second century, the larger churches were beginning to own buildings that were dedicated to meeting together for worship. The locations for these could be quite varied. In the town of Sardis in Asia Minor, the church stood alongside a much larger pagan temple.

After Constantine's conversion to Christianity, the church saw a new type of building known as the basilica. The word is taken from the Greek word for "kingdom" and it suggests the idea that this was the place where one could experience the kingdom of God on earth. The architects of these later structures took to heart the words of Paul in Ephesians 2:21 where he describes the church as having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. They instituted a practice of having one of the bones of an apostle placed under the foundation stones of these basilicas.

## **ART IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

The Jews did not generally allow art that portrayed images of animals or people, either in the form of mosaics, wall paintings, or statues, whether in their synagogues or in their homes. They reasoned that such might be considered to be a graven image and an infraction of the law. The first Christians seem to have held to a similar practice. However, as more Gentiles came into the church, it was inevitable that they should also bring with them their art.

One of the earliest church buildings known to us today is located in

a place known as Dura-Europas (“Fort Europos) in modern-day Syria. It had a baptistry and walls painted with frescos of the Good Shepherd and of Jesus and Peter walking on the water.

The art that has been found in the early Christian catacombs shows images from either the parables or from the Psalms. The picture of a “good shepherd” echoes both to the Psalms as well as to the words of Jesus. As time went on, we can find paintings of the baptism of Jesus, the Lord’s Supper, and Daniel in the lion’s den. This last was an especially significant story for Christians who were literally being thrown to the lions.

We can also find examples of where Christians took pagan art and adapted it to their own use. Thus a wall fresco of the Roman god Pan might become the Good Shepherd. In 315 a Spanish church council legislated against art within the church lest the paintings begin to be worshiped as pagan idols. However, this did not take place throughout the rest of the empire.

## **THE DAY OF WORSHIP**

It was the practice of Christians to gather together on one special day. For most Christians, this took place on the first day of the week.

*And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen (Justin Martyr, First Apology 67).*

Justin goes on to point out the reason that this particular day is set aside for worship among the Christians:

*But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose*

*from the dead* (Justin Martyr, First Apology 67).

At the same time, there seems to be evidence that there were at least some Jewish Christians who continued to observe the Sabbath as their day of worship.

## **THE ORDER OF WORSHIP**

We know from some of the descriptions we have already cited that the early church service had a certain structural outline that was used as an order of their worship.

### 1. Singing of Hymns.

In the early days of the church, the believers would sing hymns and songs. However, when heresies such as Arianism swept through the church, they brought the singing of certain heretic hymns. As a result, the Council of Laodicia forbade the singing of any hymns by the laity. It was not revived until the Protestant Reformation.

### 2. Reading and Preaching from the Scriptures.

The Scriptures from which the early church read was what we term today the Old Testament. They are the same books which Judaism looks to as their Holy Scriptures. Most churches utilized the Greek Septuagint because of the simple expedient that most people could not read Hebrew. As they came to be distributed among the churches, the four gospels and the epistles also began to be read throughout the churches. They would sometimes read also from the epistles of Clement and from the Didache, much as a Sunday school class today might read from a Sunday school quarterly.

The congregation would stand to hear the reading of the word and would remain standing throughout the sermon. By contrast, the preacher would sit in order to preach *ex cathedra*, “from the seat.”

### 3. Prayer.

By the middle of the second century there were common litany prayers. Examples of these are seen in the writings of Clement and in the Didache. To these prayers would be added the singing of

Psalms and hymns of worship.

4. The Liturgy of the Upper Room.

This was a reference to the Lord's Supper. The church would take measures to exclude from this portion of the service any people who were not Christians. Once all onlookers had been removed, the believers would partake of the "kiss of peace." Men would kiss men and women would kiss women. This was a symbol of their reconciliation. If any had a quarrel with his neighbor, this was a time for it to be resolved.

Just prior to the bringing in of the elements, there would be a collection of gifts taken for the poor. Next would come the offertory. This had nothing to do with collecting money; it was the offering of the Lord's Supper. The bread and the wine were referred to as the "Eucharist." This is a compound word made of the joining of the Greek words *eu* ("good") and *charis* ("grace"). The bread was broken and the cup was filled with wine diluted with water. The deacons would dispense these elements to the congregation.

The church allowed children to partake of the cup, but not of the bread. By contrast, when deacons took the elements of the Eucharist to the sick and bedridden, they would only take the bread and not the cup.

5. Baptism.

John McManners points out that "before about 400 AD it was common for baptism to be deferred until near the end of life because of the formidable nature of the penances and discipline required after the confession of post-baptismal sin" (2002:67).

Baptism was normally a part of the worship service. In the early days of the church, it was held outside, but this quickly changed as churches began to meet in buildings that had indoor sources of water.

*And concerning baptism, baptize this way:  
After reviewing all of this teaching, baptize in the  
Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in living  
(running) water. <sup>2</sup> But if living water is not available,  
then baptize into other water; and cold is preferred,  
but if not available in warm. <sup>3</sup> But if neither is*

*available, pour water three times upon the head in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 4 But before the baptism, let the overseer fast, and also the one being baptized, and all others who are able; Be sure to instruct the one being baptized to fast one or two days before. (Didache 7:1-7, Lewis).*

After his baptism, the new Christian was to be dressed in a white robe to signify his new purity. This was the rite of initiation into the church. Only after he had completed a class of instruction (a catechism) could he be baptized. This class could last anywhere from several months to three years, depending upon the standards of that particular church.

Later in the history of the church, they began to anoint the new convert with oil on the lips, the nose, and the mouth. To this was added a verbal renunciation of the devil. In the fifth and sixth centuries, there was added to this renunciation the practice of spitting upon the ground.

# LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH

*I will set up their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith* (Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians 42).

The study of leadership within the early church is a particularly relevant study for Christians today when the church faces a crisis in leadership. Church government structures have traditionally followed one of three models:

Congregational	This is the system by which the entire congregation of the church is vested with authority and makes all major decisions.
Presbyterian	This is a representative form of government in which leaders are elected who then rule and make decisions.
Episcopal	This is a hierarchial system of government that has an ascending order of clergy (presbyters, bishop, pope).

The question that naturally arises is whether there is one particular system of church government that is to be preferred and whether the Bible itself mandates one particular model. To answer this question, we turn first to the apostolic church and then to the post-apostolic church.

## LEADERSHIP IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

*For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body* (Ephesians 5:23; see also Colossians 1:18).



The leader of the Apostolic Church was said to be Jesus Christ. He was described by the New Testament writers as the head, the chief shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), the High Priest (Hebrews 2:17; 9:11), the author of salvation and of faith (Hebrews 2:10; 12:2). It is from Christ that all other leadership in the church is derived.

1. The Ministry of the Apostles.

The term “apostle” describes one who is sent out with authority. Jesus had many disciples, but He appointed twelve apostles. These apostles had a foundational ministry in the early church.

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone (Ephesians 2:19-20).*

Their ministry was one of establishing the church throughout the world. This included the establishment and appointment of leaders within the local churches. When Paul and Barnabas instituted churches in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they went through those cities and appointed elders for those churches (Acts 13:23). In the same way, Paul instructs Titus to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5).

2. Apostolic Leadership in the Jerusalem Church.

Just as the church began in Jerusalem with a very small group and then gradually grew and developed, so also the leadership structure within the church had its period of growth and development. In the first days following the Pentecost incident, the leadership of the church was vested in the apostles.

*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. (Acts 2:42-43).*

Although Peter had acted as a spokesman on the day of Pentecost, there is no indication that he now held any high office than that of the other apostles. They collectively served as the overseers of the Jerusalem church. Indeed, when Peter called for a new apostle to be selected to fill the ranks that Judas Iscariot had vacated, he used the term *episkope* (“overseer”) as quoted in the Septuagint to describe the need for that office to be filled.

*For it is written in the book of Psalms, “Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no man dwell in it”; and, “His OFFICE let another man take.” (Acts 1:20).*

By the use of this title, it is evident that the apostles were the initial overseers of the Jerusalem church. This same title of *episkope* later came to be rendered “bishop.”

### 3. The Appointment of Deacons.

The next step in the formation of leadership within the apostolic church came to pass within the context of a crisis situation. The crisis involved the need for equal care for the widows of the church:

*Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. (Acts 6:1).*

As the church in Jerusalem continued to grow, two groups emerged. The first was made up of the native Hebrews who had been born and raised in Palestine. They spoke Aramaic and Hebrew. The second group was known as the Hellenists. Although they were Jewish, they spoke Greek because they had been born in foreign lands. With these widely different backgrounds, there was bound to be friction. It came to a head over the issue of the care of their widows.

It has become a common practice for the church to take care of the widows since these women were unable to provide for themselves. The problem that now arose was that of a perceived

partiality. The Hellenistic widows were not receiving the same level of care. This problem was brought before the twelve apostles.

*So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> The statement found approval with the whole congregation (Acts 6:2-5a).*

It was the plan of the apostles to delegate this task of service of tables to others who met certain spiritual qualifications. It is noteworthy to mention that the phrase "to serve tables" is translated from the Greek *diakonein trapezais* (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις) and contains the very word from which we derive our English term "deacon."

Although it was the apostles who originated and submitted this plan, it was ratified by the entire congregation prior to its implementation. At the same time, it is clearly the apostles who would "put in charge of this task" these deacons who were selected. Thus, the government of the church at this early stage was neither congregational nor a hierarchy, but rather a combination of both.

#### 4. Elders within the Jerusalem Church.

The next step in the formation of leadership within the Jerusalem church was the selection of elders. We are not told how this took place, and by the time we read of elders in Jerusalem, local churches had already arisen as far away as Antioch. It was this church at Antioch that determined to send money to assist the believers who were in need in the regions in and around Jerusalem.

*And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the ELDERS. (Acts 11:29-30).*

This contribution was entrusted to the elders at the church in Jerusalem. This may have included the apostles who were still within the city, but they are all referred to as “the elders” (*tous presbuterous*). It would seem from this reference that other men had been recognized and were now acting in the position of elders alongside the apostles.

This does not mean that these men had also received the office or gift of apostleship. The fact that these two offices remained separate and distinct is seen when they are mentioned together in Acts 15.

*And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the APOSTLES and ELDERS concerning this issue (Acts 15:2).*

The juxtaposition of the two offices of apostle and elder indicate that, for a time, they both continued to exist side by side.

5. Elders within the Gentile Churches.

The leadership within the Gentile churches followed the same pattern as that of the Jerusalem assembly. The book of Acts records the missionary journey of Paul and how he and Barnabas appointed elders in the new churches they had planted.

*When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23).*

The wording is such that we can clearly see within each church the institution of a plurality of leadership in the form of selected elders. Paul followed this same pattern years later when he commissioned his co-worker, Titus, to appoint elders for the churches of Crete.

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you (Titus 1:5).*

Clement also bears witness of the part that the apostles had in initially ordaining leaders within the church.

*The apostles... appointed their earliest converts, testing them by the spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers (Clement, Letter to the Corinthians 42).*

We are not told specifically how these elders were chosen, whether the qualifications were outlined and the congregation had a part in choosing the qualified men, or whether the apostle or apostolic representative merely chose those whom he deemed to be qualified. All we know is that the entire procedure was conducted under the auspices of apostolic authority.

#### 6. Technical Terms for Church Offices.

There are several terms that were implemented in the New Testament and which have been carried into tradition to denote the various offices within the church:

- **Elder:** We have already observed the term elder (*presbuteros*). When used in a literal sense, it refers to one who is aged in years — an old man. But it can also be used in a figurative sense to refer to one who holds a particular office. It was used by the Spartans as a political title without regard to the holder's age.
- **Overseer:** The term “overseer” (*episkopos*) is rendered “bishop” in the King James Version. It seems to emphasize the function of spiritual oversight exercised by the leaders of the church.
- **Pastor:** The term is translated from the Greek *poimen* (ποιμήν), meaning “shepherd.” When used in a literal sense, it describes one who takes care of sheep, such as those who were outside Bethlehem at the birth of Christ (Luke 2:8-10). When used metaphorically, it speaks of a leader, a shepherd of people. In this sense, it is used in the New Testament most often of Jesus (John 10:1-16; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4). Only once is this term used in a metaphoric sense to

describe a leader in the church other than Jesus: *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as PASTORS and teachers* (Ephesians 4:11). In this context, the word “pastor” does not refer to an office or even to a leader within the church, but rather to a spiritual gift that God has given to certain men.

- Deacon: Our English “deacon” is a transliteration of the Greek *diakonos* (διακονος). It is a general term for one who serves — a servant. It was foreign to secular Greek thought that such a service would ever be voluntarily provided by a free man, so it was usually assumed that someone described by this term would be a slave.

*Diakonos* is used in the New Testament of a servant in the normal secular sense (Matthew 22:13; John 2:5, 9) and in a general sense to describe those who are involved in the work of the ministry and who are therefore the servants of God. In this way, it is used of Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:2 and 1 Timothy 4:6) and of Paul (1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23-25). It is also used to describe a specific office within the church (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

The designations of elder and overseer are used in the New Testament in a way that demonstrates they were two names for the same office. This is clearly seen when Paul sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus: *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church* (Acts 20:17). While speaking to these elders, he refers to them as overseers who have been given the task of shepherding the flock of God:

*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you OVERSEERS, to SHEPHERD the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:28).*

Another example of the dual nature of this office of elder/overseer is seen in Paul’s instructions to Titus as he orders that he is to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). As he continues his

instructions and begins to list the necessary qualifications for these elders, he explains that “the OVERSEER must be above reproach as God’s steward” (Titus 1:7). There is no indication in this passage that Paul has shifted gears to speak of a different office.

From these passages, we can conclude that the elder and overseer are different designations for the same office and that the shepherd/pastor refers to at least one possible function of that office. By contrast, we have a clear distinction between this office and that of deacon.

<b>Greek Term</b>	<b>Literal Meaning</b>	<b>Emphasis</b>
<i>Presbuteros</i> (πρεσβυτερος)	Elder / Old man	Emphasizes his office
<i>Episkopos</i> (ἐπισκοπος)	Bishop / Overseer	Emphasizes his function of spiritual oversight
<i>Poimen</i> (ποιμην)	Pastor / Shepherd	Described as a spiritual gift
<i>Diakonos</i> (διάκονος)	Deacon / Servant	Emphasizes function (physical oversight)

It can be seen from all of the passages cited that the model for each of these offices and functions involve a plurality of leadership. It is not that they lacked a single leader as the head of the church, but rather that they viewed that role as belonging to Jesus Christ.

## **THE POST APOSTOLIC CHURCH**

We have seen ample evidence to demonstrate that the apostolic churches functioned under a plurality of elders. This was the established pattern for all churches. This pattern began to gradually change after the close of the first century.

1. The Witness of the Didache.

The Didache, that book known by the title of *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, makes mention of the election of leaders within the church.

*Appoint for yourselves therefore BISHOPS and DEACONS worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money, true and approved; for unto you they also perform the service of the prophets and teachers. Therefore despise them not; for they are your honorable men along with the prophets and teachers (Didache 15).*

No mention here is made of the office of presbyter. This suggests that, at least at this time, the bishop and elder were considered to be the same office. Furthermore, both bishops and deacons are described in the plural. The implication is that a plurality of leadership is in view.

2. The Witness of Clement.

Clement of Rome mentions the offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon, but does so in a way that is not entirely clear whether he understands the office of bishop and presbyter as two titles for a single office, or whether he sees them as two distinct offices.

*And our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the BISHOP'S office (Clement. Corinthians 44).*

*For it will be no light sin for us, if we thrust out those who have offered the gifts of the BISHOP'S office unblamably and holy. Blessed are those PRESBYTERS who have gone before, seeing that their departure was fruitful and ripe (Clement. Corinthians 44).*

*Shameful, beloved, extremely shameful, and unworthy of your training in Christ, is the report that on account of one or two persons the will-established*



*and ancient church of the Corinthians is in revolt against the PRESBYTERS (Clement. Corinthians 47).*

Notice throughout this epistle that the problem within the church at Corinth concerned a revolt against the presbyters (plural) and involved the office of the bishop (singular).

3. The Witness of Ignatius.

Ignatius clearly taught that there should be one “bishop” in charge of each congregation and that everyone within the church should follow the teachings of that bishop.

*...we must look upon the BISHOP as the Lord Himself (Ignatius, Ephesians 6).*

*It becomes you not to presume on the youth of the BISHOP, but to show him all reverence in consideration of the authority of God the Father; just as even the holy PRESBYTERS, so I have heard, do not take advantage of his outwardly youthful appearance, but yield to him in their godly prudence: yet, not to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, the Bishop of all (Ignatius, Magnesians 3).*

*Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the BISHOP presiding in the place of God and with the PRESBYTERS in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest (Ignatius, Magnesians 6).*

*Let that be a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the BISHOP, or by one whom he appoints (Ignatius, Smyrna 8).*

*Nor is it permitted without the BISHOP either to baptize or to celebrate the agape (Ignatius, Smyrna 8).*

From these various citations, it is evident that Ignatius held to a threefold hierarchy in the area of leadership in the church. This hierarchy can be outlined as follows:

Our English word “priest” is a contraction of *Presbuteros*.

- The Bishop (Overseer)
- The Presbyters (Elders)
- The Deacons

At the same time, we should note that Ignatius does not set forth a hierarchy that supersedes that of a local church. He makes no mention of a pope or even of district bishops whose oversight is over a number of regional churches.

4. The Witness of Justin Martyr.

In his description of the worship of the early church, Justin makes mention of an office that he calls “the president” (προεστωτι — *proestoti*), literally, the “one set in first place.”

*Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the PRESIDENT of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water (Justin, Apology 65:3).*

This may have been something of a superintendent of the service and, as such, might not have been a regular office of the church.

5. The Witness of Irenaeus.

Irenaeus speaks of “the succession of bishops” of the church at Rome in a way that indicates the singularity of that office.

*The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the EPISCOPATE. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the*

*BISHOPRIC* (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:3:3).

We have noted that, from the days of the apostles, the office of Bishop/overseer was considered to be synonymous with that of the elder/presbyter. But by the early second century, this had changed to divide these into two separate offices. What brought about this change? I want to suggest several factors:

- The tendency to look to leadership.

There is within men a natural tendency to look to a single man for leadership. Even when we study the so-called democracy of Athens, we are inclined to look for those men who rose to prominence and to see them as the figureheads of history. So also, this tendency is seen in any local group. Put a group of people into a room together and eventually one will emerge as the leader. Leaders lead; they cannot help themselves.

- The need for unity in crisis.

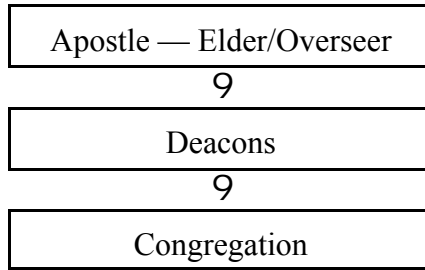
Faced with the double threats of persecutions from without and heresy from within, there was a need for churches to be unified. It has always been easier to be unified when one man is the leader. Thus, the motivation behind certain men taking to themselves the office of bishop as a separate and distinct office was not usually born out of a desire to lord it over the other leaders within the church. Instead, there was a sincere desire to see the church unified against all common enemies.

## **CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND THE SYNAGOGUE**

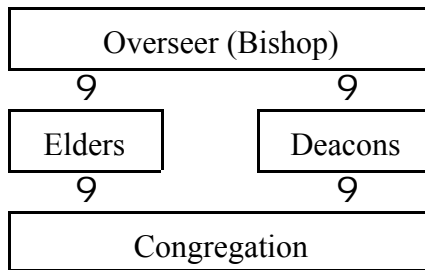
It has been suggested that the hierarchy of leadership practiced in the early church was simply an extension of the pattern found in the synagogue. If that were the case, then we could be persuaded that the New Testament pattern is not binding upon us today and that we are free to choose whatever best fits today's cultural patterns.

But is this the case? Was the pattern of church leadership merely a convenient copy of that which pre-existed in the Jewish synagogue? A

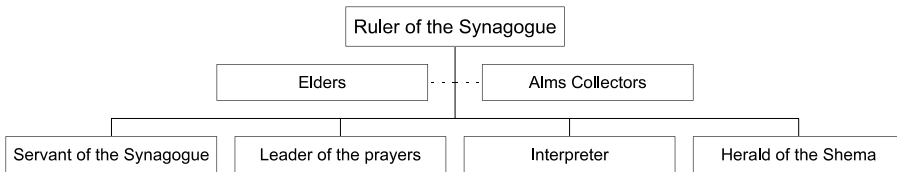
comparison shows some distinct differences. We have already pointed out the flow of leadership within the apostolic congregation:



The organization of the post-apostolic church was only slightly more involved as it separated the office of elder from that of overseer.



In contrast to these simple patterns, we have the rather complex organization of the Jewish synagogue:



At the top of the hierarchy of the synagogue was the Ruler of the Synagogue — the *archi-sunagogos*. He served as the president of the synagogue, delegating the various parts of worship to the other members. He was also in charge of the physical building. Indeed, he often was the one who had financed its building and upkeep. Thus we find both similarities as well as differences between the leadership structure of the synagogue and the church.

## THE PROMINENCE OF THE PATRIARCHS

*Although bishops have a common dignity, they are not all of the same rank. Even among the most blessed apostles, though they were alike in honor, there was a certain distinction of power (Pope Leo I, Letter to Anastasius 14).*

As the church continued to grow and develop, certain regional bishops began to increase in power and influence. In theory, all bishops were equal, but some tended to be more equal than others. This came about for two reasons.

- As churches within the major cities grew and developed, they would send out local missionaries into the surrounding areas. The leaders of these mission churches would naturally look back to the bishop of the mother church for leadership.
- Certain specific churches rose to prominence because of their historic status as foundational churches to Christendom.

There were five particular churches that eventually became known as the patriarchal churches and the bishops of these churches became known as patriarchs.

### 1. Rome.

The church at Rome enjoyed particular prominence because of the tradition that Peter had been its first bishop. It did not hurt Rome's status that it was the seat of the Roman Empire and that it was centrally located within that empire.

### 2. Jerusalem.

Although it shrunk to a relatively small size following the destruction of the city by Titus in A.D. 70, the church at Jerusalem continued to hold a high prestige due to it being the mother church of all Christianity.

### 3. Antioch.

The church at Antioch enjoyed the prestige of being the first

major Gentile church. It was here that the followers of Jesus had first been called Christians. An important theological school was eventually stated here.

4. Alexandria.

An old tradition held that Mark had been involved in the founding of this church. Because it was the center of some of the highest universities in the ancient world, among them the theological school of Origen, its church was given a place of honor among the early churches.

5. Constantinople.

This was the early name of modern day Istanbul. When the Christian Emperor Constantine built this city and made it his new capital, the church here became one of high influence. By the fifth century, these five patriarchs had each accumulated a large number of churches under their regional oversight.

Antioch	Alexandria	Constantinople	Jerusalem	Rome
15 provinces	9 provinces	28 provinces	4 provinces	67 provinces

## **THE PAPACY**

The title of Pope comes from the Latin *papias* meaning “father.” The title was not initially limited to the leader of the church at Rome. Instances can be found where this title was used of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in 250, Alexander of Alexandria (320), and even of an unknown bishop named Lawrence. At the same time, the bishop of the church of Rome was thought to hold a preeminent position, being the heir to the seat that had once been held by the apostle Peter.

*We exhort you in every respect, honorable brother, to heed obediently what has been written by the most blessed Pope of the city of Rome; for Blessed Peter, who lives and presides in his own see, provides the truth of faith to those who seek it. For we, by reason of our pursuit of peace and faith, cannot try cases on the faith without the consent of the*

*bishop of the city of Rome* (Peter Crysologue, Letter to Eutyches, 449 A.D.).

Irenaeus speaks of “the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul” (Against Heresies 3:3).

Leo I, holding the office of Pope in Rome from 440 to 461, insisted that Christ had set forth the preeminence of the Seat at Rome by establishing Peter as the rock on which the church was to be built. He maintained that Peter had passed his leadership on through the bishops of the church at Rome.

*Although bishops have a common dignity, they are not all of the same rank. Even among the most blessed apostles, though they were alike in honor, there was a certain distinction of power. All were equal in being chosen, but it was given to one to be preeminent over the others. From this formality there arose also a distinction among bishops, and by a great arrangement it was provided that no one should arrogate everything to himself, but in individual provinces there should be individual bishops whose opinion among their brothers should be first; and again, certain others, established in larger cities, were to accept a greater responsibility. Through them the care of the universal church would converge in the one See of Peter, and nothing should ever be at odds with this head* (Pope Leo I, Letter to Athanasius, Bishop of Thessalonica 14).

# CONSTANTINE, ARIUS, AND ATHANASIUS

**300 - 373**

*In this sign conquer.*

The church in its early childhood grew and developed and spread throughout the Roman world. But there eventually came a time when the character of the church was greatly changed and when it assumed a leadership role in the Roman Empire. This would prove to begin an entirely new era for the church.

## **DIOCLETIAN**

Diocletian came to the throne of the Roman Empire in 284. He was a soldier who had risen through the ranks to become a calvary commander. When Emperor Carus was struck by lightning and died, the legions acclaimed Diocletian as the new emperor. He saw the Roman Empire in a state of decline with general unrest everywhere and he took some very deliberate steps to bring it to an end.

### 1. Abolishment of Constitutional Rule.

Since the days of Augustus, the Roman emperors had maintained an illusion that decision-making was equally in the hands of the emperor and the Senate. Diocletian abandoned all pretense and had a golden crown fashioned for himself, demanding that all who came into his presence prostrate themselves after the manner of the kings of the east.

Having established his position, he began a reorganization of the military, increasing its size and building up strong fortifications on the frontier. This called for higher taxes and that necessarily led



to an escalating inflation that Domitian tried unsuccessfully to curb by mandating fixed prices.

2. Persecution of the Church.

In 303, Diocletian instituted a persecution of the Christians because of their refusal to accept his position as a god. Christians were deprived of citizenship and all churches and Christian books were ordered to be destroyed. Christian leaders were imprisoned and forced under pain of torture to sacrifice to the gods.

3. Division of the Empire.

Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two administrative sections, splitting it into east and west. He maintained his rule over the eastern empire from Asia Minor while one of his officers named Maximian ruled Italy and the west. He eventually set up a tetrarchy, a rule of four Caesars, including himself.

- Diocletian: Greece, Anatolia, Mesopotamia
- Galerius: Syria, Palestine, Egypt
- Maximian: Italy, Spain, Africa
- Constantius: Gaul, Britain

This structure was to have a lasting impact upon both the empire and, later on, the church.

4. Retirement.

In 305, both Diocletian and Maximian retired from office. Maximian's retirement was forced by Diocletian who himself determined to spend his later years raising tomatoes. The intention was that two more Caesars should take their places and, in time, turn the government over to their successors. It took less than a year for this arrangement to break down. By the year 311 there were four rival emperors contending for power.

- Galerius and his nephew, Maximinus.
- Licinius
- Maxentius, son of the retired Maximian
- Constantine, son of Constantius.

## **EDICT OF TOLERATION**

In the year 311 and a mere five days before his death, Galerius, the emperor of the eastern portion of the empire, signed an edict of toleration:

*Christians may again exist and rebuild the houses in which they used to meet, on condition that they do nothing contrary to public order.* (Quoted from Eusebius, History of the Church 8:17:5).

This reversal on the part of Galerius is striking because he had been the moving force in the persecution of the church, urging Diocletian to go beyond that which he had originally intended.

## **THE RIVAL EMPERORS**

The growing power struggle between the four would-be emperors came to a head with the death of Galerius in 311.

- Maximinus took over the eastern empire.
- Licinius took Greece.
- Maxentius took Rome.
- Constantine continued to hold Britain and Gaul.

### **1. The Battle for the Milvian Bridge**

Constantine moved against Maxentius, invading Italy in 312 and defeating him at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Maxentius was killed in the battle, leaving Constantine in charge of the entire western empire.

Constantine maintained that, on the way to this decisive battle, he had seen a sign in the sun: a Greek “X” superimposed with a Greek “P” (our letter R). He took this symbol to refer to Christ since it was the two letters of the word “Christos,” and he heard a voice saying, “In this sign conquer.” Constantine had this symbol of Christianity, known as the “Labarum,” placed on the shield of all his soldiers who were about to go into battle.

2. The Edict of Milan.

Following Constantine's victory, Licinius met with him and formed a truce. One of the results of this meeting was that the Edict of Toleration was broadened. Although commonly known as Constantine's "Edict of Toleration," the resulting document was actually set forth by Licinius in Nicomedia and, rather than being an edict, was actually a rescript; that is, it merely restated and expanded on the Edict of Toleration.

3. The Victory of Licinius.

In 313 Licinius attacked and defeated Maximinus, thereby securing for himself the entire eastern empire. The next ten years saw a strained relation between Licinius and Constantine, especially when Licinius departed from his earlier stance and began to persecute Christians. In 324 Constantine swept into the eastern empire, defeating Licinius.

## **THE REFORMS OF CONSTANTINE**

There were two phases in which Christianity, once a hated and persecuted religion among the Romans, rose to prominence under Constantine.

- First, Christianity was made equal to the other Roman religions in 313.
- Then in 323 Christianity was given a favored status above the other Roman religions.

1. Christians Exempted from Pagan Rituals.

The first step of the equality of Christians was in exempting them from required participation in pagan rituals. This was accompanied by a number of other legal reforms.

- The tax on celibacy was abolished.
- Jews were forbidden to persecute or put to death those from their race who converted to Christianity.
- The kidnaping of children and child abuse were given heavy

penalties.

2. Christianity was Awarded Favored Status.

Following the defeat of Licinius, Constantine became even more friendly with the church as he was seen as the savior of the Christians. He became personal friends with such highly placed church leaders as Eusebius of Caesarea and Hosius. Eusebius went so far as to write a highly euphemistic “Life of Constantine.”

Bishops were given the legal right to judge civil cases based upon an understanding of 1 Corinthians 6. Sunday was made into a public holiday. Constantine re-issued his Edict of Toleration, but this time it was aimed at Christians who were required to tolerate and not persecute pagans.

3. The Building of Constantinople.

Constantine ordered that a new capital city should be built on the Bosphorus. The city was built on the site of a previous Greek colony named Byzantium, but this new city would be far larger. The city was completed in 330 and named Constantinopolis (“city of Constantine”). It included a statue of the sun god with Constantine’s features.

4. Baptism and Death.

Like many in that day, Constantine had postponed his baptism, expressing a desire to eventually be baptized in the Jordan River. He became sick in the spring of 337 and received baptism at the hands of Eusebius, the Arian Bishop of Nicomedia, the city in which he had fallen ill. He died five days later.

## **RESULTS OF CONSTANTINE’S POLICIES**

Constantine had a two-fold effect upon Christianity and the church. On the one hand, he brought a freedom from persecution so that the gospel could be proclaimed unhindered throughout the Roman world. On the other hand, as it became popular to be a Christian, the church began to be filled with those who had an insincere faith.

<b>Before Constantine</b>	<b>After Constantine</b>
There was a purity within the church.	There was a lessening of the purity of the church
There were long periods of catechism training prior to receiving baptism.	There was a lessening of any required training to become a Christian.
Christians were known for their very strict lifestyle.	There was a loosening of the standards.
A martyr mentality was to be found among the pious.	A monastic mentality began to emerge among the pious.

It was not long before Christians were sitting in judgment of other religions and persecuting them. And yet, we must not make the mistake of thinking that Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. That would not take place until 381 under the reign of Emperor Theodosius.

## **ARIUS: 250-336**

Arius was born in Libya. He was a student of Lucian of Antioch who followed the teachings of Paul of Somosata. This involved a belief in Monarchianism, the teaching that God is one in terms of His person and being. There were two prominent views that had already been labeled as heresy by the church.

<b>Adoptionists</b>	<b>Docetism</b>
Taught that Christ was adopted by God (this was the Ebion heresy).	Taught that God only appeared to reveal Himself in the form of Christ (Sabellian heresy).

Arius followed the Adoptionist teachings. He taught that Christ was a created being who had been fashioned by the Father before the world began.

*God was not always a Father, but there was a time*

*when God was not a Father. The Word of God was not always, but originated from things that were not; for God that is, has made him that was not, of that which was not; wherefore there was a time when He was not; for the Son is a creature and a work. Neither is He like in essence to the Father; neither is He the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is He His true Wisdom; but He is one of the things made and created, and is called the Word and Wisdom by an abuse of terms, since He Himself originated by the proper Word of God, and by the Wisdom that is in God, by which God has made not only all other things but Him also (Deposition of Arius, Alexander of Alexandria, Section 2).*

Arius taught that, because God is self-existent, the Son, who is not self-existent, cannot be God, The Son must therefore be deemed a creature who has been created by God.

Arius became a deacon in the church at Alexandria. He was excommunicated in 307 for criticizing the church in its actions against heretics. He managed to get himself reinstated and was ordained as a priest in 311. He was placed in charge of the church of Baucalis, under the authority of Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria.

Arius accused Alexander of preaching Sabellianism because he had said that “God is always and the Son is always.” Alexander called a synod in Alexandria and had Arius deposed from office.

Arius traveled to Nicomedia where he found in Eusebius, the bishop of that city. Letters flew back and forth as the controversy continued to grow. Finally, the Emperor Constantine stepped in, urging Alexander and Arius to resolve their differences. When this did not succeed, Constantine ordered that the entire church should be called together for a council and the Empire would pay the expenses.

## **THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA: 325**

The council met at Nicaea on the shores of the Bosphorus, 45 miles from Constantinople. It has been called the First Ecumenical Council, but the title is misleading, since out of 300 bishops in attendance, only five were from the west. In addition to the bishops, there were hundreds of lesser clergy and laymen. They were polarized into three groups:

Arius and His Party	This included Eusebius of Nicomedia and those who held to the teachings of Arius.
Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria	This party included a former student of Alexander's named Athanasius who was a deacon in the church at Alexandria.
The Undecided Majority	The majority of people attending the council were undecided in the key issues. Among this groups was Eusebius of Caesarea who was inclined to favor the Arians because he felt that Alexander's position was too close to Sabellianism.

Athanasius attended the council as a non-voting member, but he played a significant role in the proceedings. He has already written two books entitled *The Incarnation* and *Against the Heathen*. In rebuttal to the teaching of Arius that Christ is different from the Father, Athanasius pointed out that the names, titles, attributes, and work that is ascribed in the Bible to the Father is also ascribed to the Son. There were a number of issues that came before the council for discussion:

1. The Deity of Christ.

As we have already noted, the first and foremost issue was over the question of the deity of Christ. Arius contended that Christ was the Son of God, but still a created being. He said that if Christ were considered to be God, then there would be more than one God and that would be polytheism. Alexander and Athanasius, on the other hand, maintained that Christ was one in substance with the Father.

2. The Date of Easter.

There had been a difference of opinion regarding which date should be used for the observance of Easter. Some wanted to celebrate it on a Sunday while others wanted to celebrate it on the 14th of Nisan, no matter what day of the week in which it happened to fall. It was ultimately determined to celebrate it on the Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox.

3. The Lapsed Bishops.

During the persecutions in the days of Diocletian, a number of bishops had surrendered copies of the Bible to be burned. These bishops were now under the threat of being removed from their churches. Likewise, it was argued that people who had been baptized by these lapsed bishops were in need of being rebaptized.

4. The Celibacy of the Clergy.

It was already commonplace for leaders within the church to remain celibate. Some of the church fathers wanted to pass a law that would mandate this for all clergy. This was defeated and the council did not require celibacy at this time.

Eusebius of Caesarea, in an effort to find some middle ground between the parties of Arius and Athanasius, brought a confession that indicated Christ was of one substance with the Father. His draft was taken and re-edited by the council until it reached a final form. The following creed was henceforth adopted:

*We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on the earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became man, suffered, and rose on the third day, ascended into the heavens, and is coming to judge living and dead. And in the Holy Spirit. And those that say "There was when he was not," and, "Before he was begotten he was not," and that, "He came into being from what-is-not," or those that allege, that the son of God is "Of another substance or essence" or "created," or "changeable" or "alterable," these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.*

The teachings of Arius were thus proclaimed to be heretical. This original Nicene Creed would later be embellished into the form that we know today.