

Church History I

(Early Church to Scholasticism)

Week 1 – Apostolic and Early Church

Introduction: One major problem we face is that we often view our time and our church in isolation. We forget that there is a history that led us to where we are right now. God interacts intentionally with history, moving things along toward His desired purposes. In Isaiah, that is the challenge he makes to the false gods: show me all that happened and why. Even still, we cannot predict all that God will do going forward, but sometimes by looking at the past, we can see the significance of God's previous actions and how they have influenced different things up to our present days.

I. The Background Behind the Birth of the Church

1. The Cultural basis and Societal Features **PTQ**
 - A. There was relative peace (Pax Romana)
 - i. This peace was enforced by the spread of the Roman military and procurators that oversaw different regions.
 - B. A common language (Greek)
 - i. Technically brought about by the Greek culture and language under Alexander the Great, but it had persisted across the Mediterranean world for the past 300 years.
 - C. Some level of social order enabling safe travel.
 - D. Some degrees of religious freedom.
 - E. Increasing network of roads and sea routes.¹
 - F. People were increasingly seeking logical answers and truth.
 - i. The immense impact of the Philosophers helped in some ways drive people into more logical modes of thinking, but in other ways became another potential religious barrier to the Gospel.
 - ii. Large Scale movements in this time included... **PTQ**
 - 1) Stoicism – “The world is beyond our control as individuals. The individual must therefore create his or her own stability by forsaking excesses of both pleasure and sorrow. The Stoic person is unmoved by emotion, reflecting in personal life the conviction that the world is running a preordained course in which all things are already determined...Stoicism called for strict ethical conduct, and if moral codes alone could change the human heart, it might have revolutionized its age” ²
 - 2) Cynicism – “The Cynics gloried in radical personal freedom of act and speech. They were the radical activists of antiquity. Cynics ridiculed those who conformed to accepted social standards, which they reviled.” ³

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, [*Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*](#), ed. Walter A. Elwell, Fourth Edition, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 184.

² Ibid., 187.

³ Ibid.

- 3) Skepticism – “held that knowledge grew out of experience alone, that all experience is unique to the individual, and that therefore no truth exists that is binding on all people.” ⁴
- 4) Epicureans – This philosophical sect, which spread throughout Greece and Rome, persisted for centuries, as evidenced by Paul's encounter with Epicureans in Athens around 300 years after Epicurus' death. Epicureans were empiricists who relied on sense experience for knowledge and focused on ethics and practical matters. Their physical doctrine, based on atomism, posited that the universe consists only of atoms and void, rejecting divine intervention in nature or human affairs. Epicureans sought happiness through the pursuit of pleasure, but this was misunderstood by later interpretations; they actually advocated for moderation, tranquility, and freedom from pain rather than extravagant indulgence.⁵
- iii. Although these philosophies had some things that they helped teach and distinguish about the world, they all fail at giving a fully cohesive worldview of the world we live in.
- iv. Tradition and Religious darkness are also quite hard to be rid of; therefore, even though there were inroads into logical thinking, obviously superstition, pagan worship, and Greek Philosophy still kept many under its thumbs.
 - 1) Few, if any, people were seriously worshipping the gods of doorways, but it didn't stop people from keeping the news of that token deity alive unto the modern day.
 - 2) “There are among the Romans even gods of entrances; Cardea (Hinge-goddess)”⁶
PTQ
- G. The Jews who had been primarily under others' control for the last 6 centuries were in a time of anticipation for the coming promised saviour. **PTQ**
 - i. There was some confusion on who the Messiah would be or even if there would be multiple Messiahs.
 - ii. There were potentially as many as five different messianic forms that the people had to try to understand. ⁷
 - 1) Davidic Messiah – Genesis 49:9-10, 2 Samuel 7:12-14, Psalm 2, Isaiah 11:1-5, etc.
 - 2) Priestly Messiah – Psalm 110:4, Dan 9:25-26
 - 3) Priestly and Royal Messiah – Pentateuchal model of leadership (Moses and Aaron, Joshua and Zerubbabel) Zech. 4:14
 - 4) Prophetic Messiah – Deuteronomy 18:15
 - 5) Heavenly Messiah – Daniel 7:13-14
 - iii. There were several false messiahs around the time of Jesus. (Some are mentioned in Acts 5)

⁴ Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 187.

⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Epicureans,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988) 713.

⁶ Tertullian, “On Idolatry,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 70.

⁷ Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively, and T. J. Lang, *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 189.

2. Roman Emperors of the First Century PTQ

| Years | Names | Events | References |
|-------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|--|
| 30 BC–AD 14 | Augustus | Birth of Christ | Luke 2:1 |
| AD 14–37 | Tiberius | Ministry and death of Christ | Luke 3:1 |
| AD 37–41 | Caligula | | |
| AD 41–54 | Claudius | Famine Expulsion of Jews from Rome | Acts 11:28 Acts 18:2 |
| AD 54–68 | Nero | Trial of Paul Persecution at Rome | Acts 25:10–12; 27:24 2 Timothy 4:16–17; Revelation 13:1–10 |
| AD 68 | Galba | | |
| AD 69 | Otho | | |
| AD 69 | Vitellius | | |
| AD 69–79 | Vespasian | Destruction of Jerusalem | Matthew 24:1–2 |
| AD 79–81 | Titus | | |
| AD 81–96 | Domitian | Persecution (?) | Revelation 6:9; 7:14; 12:11; 20:4 (?) |
| AD 96–98 | Nerva | | |
| AD 98–117 | Trajan | | 8 |

II. The Basis and Initiation of the Church

1. The church was based upon the Truth of the Gospel. **PTQ**
 - A. Jesus, God in flesh, was born as a man to live a perfectly righteous and Holy life.
 - B. He died in our place to pay for our sins.
 - C. He was buried, but rose again after three days, showing his victory over sin and death.
 - i. This is how Christ redeemed to himself a people.

⁸ Elwell and Yarbrough, [*Encountering the New Testament*](#), 184.

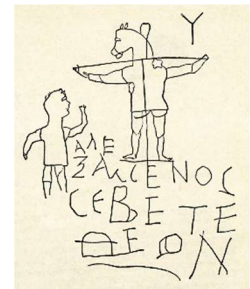
- ii. Jesus' actions act as the head and most important portion of the foundation of the Christian faith.
 - † **1 Peter 2:6-7** – *Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.⁷ Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,*
- D. He is coming again to bring about ultimate justice.
- E. The Christian movement was a call to allegiance to the Triune God alone, in which Jesus Christ came to be the one true Savior and Lord.
 - Bruce Shelley notes, “When the cross was raised, a notice was pinned to it giving the culprit’s name and crime. In Jesus’ case, the Latin INRI: *Jesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews).”⁹
- 2. Once Jesus ascended back into heaven, the church was birthed on the day of Pentecost.
 - A. This came when the Holy Spirit empowered his Apostles and dwelt in the believers.
 - B. The Apostles are often also referenced as the foundation of the church with Christ.
 - † **Ephesians 2:19-20** – *Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;²⁰ And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;*
 - i. Some throughout Church History have paid special attention to Peter and viewed him as the head of the Church.
 - † **Matthew 16:18** – *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. PTQ*
- 3. The Explosion of the Church
 - A. Initially, God’s word is spoken to the Jews only.
 - i. On the day of Pentecost, 3000 people were saved.
 - ii. By Acts 4:4, thousands more had accepted Christ. Regardless of if you think this brought the church to 5,000 or 8,000.
 - iii. This growth was met with great resistance from the Jewish leaders and eventually led to Jewish persecution.
 - 1) From the Religious leaders
 - † **Acts 5:40** – *And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*
 - † **Acts 8:1** – *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.*
 - 2) From the Jewish political leaders
 - † **Acts 12:1-3** – *Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.² And he killed James the brother of John with the*

⁹ Bruce L. Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 7.

sword.³ And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

- 3) These persecutions spread the church through the deacons and lay people and Apostles throughout the empire.
- B. Then the message passed towards the Samaritans and then the Gentiles.
 - i. The Samaritans may have been more readily accepted due to their shared history with the Jewish people.

† Acts 8:14-17 – Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:¹⁵ Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:¹⁶ (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)¹⁷ Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.
 - ii. The Gentiles took a little bit more convincing about their right to be a part of the movement.
 - 1) Nearly an entire chapter exists about Peter having to defend his actions in bringing Gentiles into the fold. (Acts 11)
 - 2) Paul became the Missionary to the Gentiles (Acts 13)
 - 3) This caused great difficulty across the empire because Paul would preach in synagogues and then give the truth to the Gentiles, causing great jealousy and more Gentiles to end up believing than Jews.
 - By AD 56, Paul has to explain to the Jews why God seems to be dealing primarily with the Gentiles and in a minority way with the Jews (Romans 9-11)
 - iii. Some years after 70 AD, with the Destruction of the temple under Emperor Vespasian (Via Titus), there was a "decision to bar Christian Jews from synagogue services," which completed the break between Judaism and Christianity.¹⁰
- C. The church, which began with 120 men in the upper room in Jerusalem, by the end of the century numbered enough to make the Temples all but vacant.¹¹
4. The Oddity of the Christian Religion.
 - A. Claims against Christianity **PTQ**
 - i. Worshipping a Crucified God and savior
 - Graffiti - Alexamenos worships his God
 - ii. Atheism – For disbelieving in the reality of the Roman pantheon of gods.
 - The Romans also looked with scorn on the Christian practice of declining to acknowledge the Roman emperor as a god.¹²
 - iii. Incest – because the Christians called each other brother and sister.
 - iv. Cannibalism – because they routinely eat their Lord and savior.



¹⁰ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 32.

¹¹ George P. Fisher, "The Genuineness of the Fourth Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 21.82 (1864): 249.

¹² William J. Bennett, *Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 11.

- v. Troublemakers – these believers caused a significant loss in finances due to the lack of idolatry
- B. What made Christianity different. **PTQ**
 - i. The roots of the Christian religion were thoroughly Jewish but was not restricted to only Jews. Allowing people to live differently while being one body and one church.
 - ii. Salvation was not “obtained through one’s nature, habits, power of reason, or intelligence, but through the grace of God.”¹³
 - iii. Equality – concern for the lowest stratum of society revealed a valuation of human life that was vastly more empathetic than Greco-Roman notions.¹⁴
 - This also included the common Christian practice of saving abandoned babies. These children would either die from exposure, or more commonly, babies were found and sold into child prostitution.¹⁵
- 5. The Apostles' Past the Scripture **PTQ**

The Twelve Disciples and Paul after the Death of Jesus

| NAME | BIBLICAL INFORMATION | TRADITIONAL INFORMATION |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| SIMON PETER | Preached sermon on day of Pentecost. Healed lame man at temple gate. Withstood persecution of Sanhedrin. Rebuked Ananias and Sapphira and Simon Magus. Raised Dorcas from the dead. Preached the gospel to Cornelius. | Late traditions speak of visits to Britain and Gaul. Was crucified upside down in Rome during Neronian Persecution (AD 64–68). |
| | Miraculously delivered from prison. Rebuked by Paul at Antioch. Wrote two New Testament epistles. | |
| ANDREW | | Is supposed to have preached in Scythia, Asia Minor, and Greece. Was crucified at Patras in Achaia. |
| JAMES, SON OF ZEBEDEE | Was executed by Herod Agrippa I. | |

¹³ Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 41.

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|------------------------|---|---|
| JOHN | <p>Participated in healing of a lame man at the temple.</p> <p>Followed up Philip's work in Samaria.</p> <p>Was exiled late in life to the island of Patmos.</p> <p>Wrote a gospel, three epistles, and Apocalypse.</p> | <p>Ministered at Ephesus.</p> <p>Is said to have rebuked early Gnostic Cerinthus.</p> <p>Died a natural death in Ephesus c. AD 100.</p> |
| PHILIP | | Is said to have been crucified in Hierapolis in Asia Minor. |
| MATTHEW | Wrote the gospel that bears his name. | Conflicting traditions place him in Ethiopia, Parthia, Persia, and Macedonia. |
| THOMAS | | <p>Supposedly preached in Babylon.</p> <p>Strong early tradition tells of his founding churches in India and eventually being martyred there.</p> |
| BARTHOLOMEW | | <p>Is supposed to have accompanied Philip to Hierapolis.</p> <p>Was martyred after ministry in Armenia.</p> |
| JAMES, SON OF ALPHAEUS | | <p>Has been persistently confused with James the brother of Jesus in early church tradition.</p> <p>Possibly ministered in Syria.</p> |
| THADDAEUS | | <p>Has often been confused with Jude the brother of Jesus.</p> <p>Tradition associates his ministry with Edessa (Mesopotamia).</p> |
| SIMON THE ZEALOT | | Various (and dubiously) associated with Persia, Egypt, Carthage, and Britain. |
| JUDAS ISCARIOT | <p>Hanged himself after betraying Jesus.</p> | |
| PAUL | <p>Pharisee who persecuted the church.</p> <p>Converted on road to Damascus.</p> | <p>Thought to have been freed from first Roman imprisonment and traveled to Gaul and Spain.</p> |

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| | Went on three missionary journeys, preaching and founding churches. Arrested and taken to Rome. Wrote thirteen New Testament epistles. | Beheaded in Rome during Neronian persecution (AD 64–68). |
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III. Synopsis: The Years After the Apostles Until the Late 2nd Century

1. Doctrinal difficulties
 - A. Gnosticism
 - i. Valentinus (appx. 100-160)
 - ii. Marcion (A.D. 85-160) **PTQ**
 - iii. (More to be discussed next week)
 - B. Pseudonymous works and apocryphal writings
 - i. Epistle of Barnabas
 - ii. Shepherd of Hermas
 - iii. Didache (Early Christian living)
2. Early Church fathers **PTQ**
 - A. Timothy (Paul's son in the faith) (A.D. 13-93)
 - i. Was the Bishop of Ephesus likely until near his death.
 - B. Clement of Rome (A.D. 35-100)
 - i. The bishop of Rome in the 90's.
 - ii. More infamous works that remain today were his letters to the church at Corinth.
 - C. Ignatius of Antioch (A.D. 35-107)
 - i. Well known for his famous letter to the Romans.
 - ii. The first recorded person to use the term catholic (Universal) regarding the church.¹⁷
 - iii. Said one should obey the bishop as one obeys God¹⁸
 - D. Papias of Hierapolis (A.D. 60-130)
 - i. Dates back to the time when several apostles were still alive.
 - ii. He is possibly a disciple of John and is one of the earliest to quote and accept revelation.
 - iii. His focus was primarily on those who had known the Lord personally in life thus he does not seem to interact with Paul or Luke.
 - E. Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna (A.D. 69-155)
 - i. Known for his tenacity for scripture, but meek and quiet disposition.
 - ii. Suffered brutal martyrdom.
 - F. Justin Martyr (A.D. 103-165)

¹⁶ Robert C. Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 10.

¹⁷ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 36.

¹⁸ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, [*History of the Christian Church*](#) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 145–146.

- i. One of the two greatest apologists of the 2nd century.
 - ii. He wrote well-known writings called his apologies explaining Christian ethics and good citizenship of believers to the emperors.
 - iii. He also wrote his dialogue with Trypho, expressing the Christian superiority over Judaism.
- G. Irenaeus of Lyons (A.D. 140-202)¹⁹
- i. Known for having written against Marcion and Gnostics.
 - ii. Irenaeus seemed to be the first one to note the distinction of the New and Old Testaments.
 - iii. He also taught the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome, seeing as how Paul and Peter allegedly formed it.
 - iv. Irenaeus believed that all legitimate bishops came from a line of apostolic succession.
 - v. Showed immense familiarity with all books of the New Testament except Philemon, 3 John, and Jude.
3. Establishing Features
- A. of Liturgy²⁰ **PTQ**
- i. Churches would meet often in small homes
 - ii. They accepted the Old Testament
 - iii. They included readings in scripture and exposition
 - iv. They sang hymns and psalms
 - v. Christians fasted, shared meals, and were generous to the poor
 - vi. They confessed Christ and participated in baptism services and the Lord's Supper
- B. Of continued clarity
- i. The method for guidance in the early church rested upon the Creed, Canon, and the Episcopates.²¹ **PTQ**
 - ii. The canon, although not completely figured out in the 2nd century, was becoming more generally recognized.
 - iii. In other words, statements of faith, scripture, and church leaders, most particularly bishops, were viewed as purifiers and preservers of the true church.
 - As a special note, the term bishop changed from being understood as a pastor to an overseer of pastors in a general area in the 2nd century.
4. Church squabbles
- A. When should we celebrate Easter? (Quartodeciman controversy) **PTQ**
 - B. Who is in charge?
 - C. Maintaining unity
5. Persecution of the church

¹⁹ Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 37.

²⁰ Joseph Early, *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 17.

²¹ Mark A. Noll, [Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity](#), Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 23.

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