

# CHURCH HISTORY

## 5. THE EARLY CHURCH



### 1. WHEN DID THE CHURCH BEGIN?

#### 1. Abraham.

- This would generally be the view of Reformed churches.
- Romans 4:16 – Abraham is the father of all those who believe.
- God has always only had *one* people, made up of Jews and Gentiles.
- Advantages of this view:
  - Gives great importance to the Old Testament.
  - Shows God's faithfulness throughout time.
- Disadvantages of this view:
  - Places Christians under the Law, which they must divide into three parts (Civil, Ceremonial, Moral) to explain why only the 10 Commandments still apply today and not the rest of the 613 laws.
  - The Bible does seem to make a distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church.

#### 2. With the Incarnation of Jesus.

- This is generally the view of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.
- Without Jesus coming to earth there would be no church.
- Advantages of this view:
  - Places emphasis on the fact that the Church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27).
  - It avoids spiritualising the Church by reading it into Old Testament passages.
- Disadvantages of this view:
  - It is an easy step from 'Without Jesus there would be no Church' to 'Without *Mary* there would be no Jesus'. *Mary* therefore becomes the founder of the Church.
  - It tends to downplay the key role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of the Church.

#### 3. At Pentecost.

- This is the view of many Protestant churches.
- It is the coming of the Holy Spirit that made *witnesses* of Jesus' followers and sent them to the ends of the earth (Luke 12:12, Acts 1:8).
- Advantages of this view:
  - It stresses the *newness* of the New Covenant.
  - It gives the proper place to the role and work of the Holy Spirit in the Church.
  - In this view, Christians are not under the Mosaic Law, but the Law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21).
- Disadvantages of this view:
  - It tends to treat large parts of the Old Testament as irrelevant to its story.
  - There can be an overemphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit.

#### 4. Our view at FBC?

- We agree that there would have been no Church without the Incarnation of Jesus and His perfect sinless life, death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.
- We affirm that Abraham was justified through faith alone and that we who likewise believe are his spiritual children.
- But it was with the Outpouring of God the Holy Spirit that the Church began: Confused, uncertain, in many ways fearful disciples were turned into courageous preachers of the good news who saw thousands come to Christ through the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit, and a world-wide movement was launched (Acts 1:8).

## 2. THE ROMAN EMPIRE



*The three missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul*

- The *pax Romana* ('peace of Rome') established by the rule of Caesar Augustus allowed for safe travel within the vast borders of the Roman Empire.
- One of the keys to this was the Roman road system: They had built roads in order to swiftly move army troops, supplies and intelligence.
- Trade also made travelling easier: It was easy to board a ship travelling between the many port cities within the empire.
- All these factors contributed to the rapid spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

## 3. THE EARLIEST CHURCH

- The events regarding the birth and settling of the Church are recorded in the book of Acts.
- Acts covers events that are spread over about a 30-year period.
- For most of its very early years the Church consisted almost exclusively of Jewish believers. It took about 8 years for the gospel to spread beyond the Jews.

- But didn't the Jews reject Jesus and kill him? Some of them, yes. When doing history, one should always be careful of using blanket phrases such as *the Jews* (or *the Muslims* or *the Christians*):
  - The Jewish Sanhedrin arranged to have Jesus arrested and tried at night to avoid an uprising from the people (remember the crowd who had welcomed him and praised him just a few days earlier?)
  - The events surrounding the crucifixion happened while Jews were preparing their Passover feasts, and most of Jerusalem was probably not present or even aware of what was happening.
  - The crowd who wanted Jesus crucified was most likely a mob stirred up by the religious leaders.
- The early Church borrowed many practices from the Jewish synagogue meetings. In fact, many Jewish Christians still attended synagogue weekly and were tolerated. There was singing, readings from the Scriptures, prayer, preaching, and they often ate together (both communion and fellowship meals) (Acts 2:42).
- The Romans viewed Christianity as an offshoot of Judaism and so Christians were free to practise their religion and they were not required to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods.
- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament:
  - Jews (Acts 2:1-4)
  - Samaritans (Acts 8:12-17)
  - God-fearers – Gentiles who practised the Jewish religion but were not circumcised (Acts 10:44-48)
  - Gentiles (Acts 19:1-6)
- These events took place to show that God no longer shows partiality to a certain people-group, but salvation and membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is open to ALL (Acts 15:1-31). Even the Apostles did not fully understand this at first!
- The Church began as an exclusively Jewish movement, but gentile believers gradually became the majority. Take the Roman Church: When the Emperor Claudius issued a decree banning Jews from Rome in the 40s AD, the Church had a Jewish majority. When the Jews could return about 10 years later, it now had a gentile majority → The background to the Book of Romans.
- Over time, as Jews began to realise that Christianity was not just a passing phase but a real threat to Judaism, the religious leaders began to appeal to the Roman authorities to treat Christianity as a separate religion. This meant that Christians no longer enjoyed the protection that the Jews did.
- The ritual that was required was simple: In public places, usually in the marketplace, you had to take a pinch of incense, throw it on the altar and say *Kaiser kurios* (Caesar is lord). But for Christians, there was only one Lord: Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6, Ephesians 4:5). This led, as we will see, to various bouts of persecution against the Church and made it difficult for Christians to conduct business (Revelation 13:17).
  - This was proof that from the very beginning, Jesus was worshipped as God. If *lord* was simply an honorary title, why did they not want to say that Caesar is lord?
- The Jews revolted against Roman rule in 66 AD. Many had been left jobless after the Temple had been completed in 64 AD and others wanted to establish an independent Israel.
- The revolt culminated in the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.
- These were the darkest days in Israel's history: According to the Jewish historian Josephus, approximately 1.1 million people were killed and another 97,000 were enslaved. Many Jews

had come to Jerusalem from all over the empire to celebrate the Passover (for which attendance was compulsory for all able Jewish males).

- Jesus predicted these events in Matthew 24. His words regarding the Temple are stunningly precise: not one stone would be left upon another (verse 2). During the battle in Jerusalem, a fire broke out that could not be contained, and it spread to the Temple. All the gold furnishings and utensils melted in the heat and ran in between the stones, which were all toppled by the Roman soldiers to plunder every little piece of gold.



- The Western Wall (or Wailing Wall) in Jerusalem is associated with the Temple but was not part of the original Temple complex.
- After the fall of Jerusalem, the divide between Jews and Christians became permanent: Jewish Christians were no longer allowed to attend synagogue, and hostilities between the groups grew.
- Up until that time, the presence of the Apostles had been a source of stability and comfort. Even after some of them had been put to death for their faith, their influence was still keenly felt:
  - The Church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and (New Testament) Prophets (Ephesians 2:19-22). The Apostles and those on whom they laid hands operated in miraculous gifts to authenticate that the message they preached, the Gospel, was of Jesus.
  - It was entrusted to them and their companions to write the inspired New Testament scriptures. These documents, often letters such as those written by Paul for example, were spread around, copied and read in churches across the empire.
  - They battled heresy and false doctrines that quickly began to spring up in and around the Church.
- But the office of Apostle had specific criteria that could not be fulfilled by any after the original Apostles had died (Acts 1:21-22, Galatians 1 & 2), and in time they all did die.

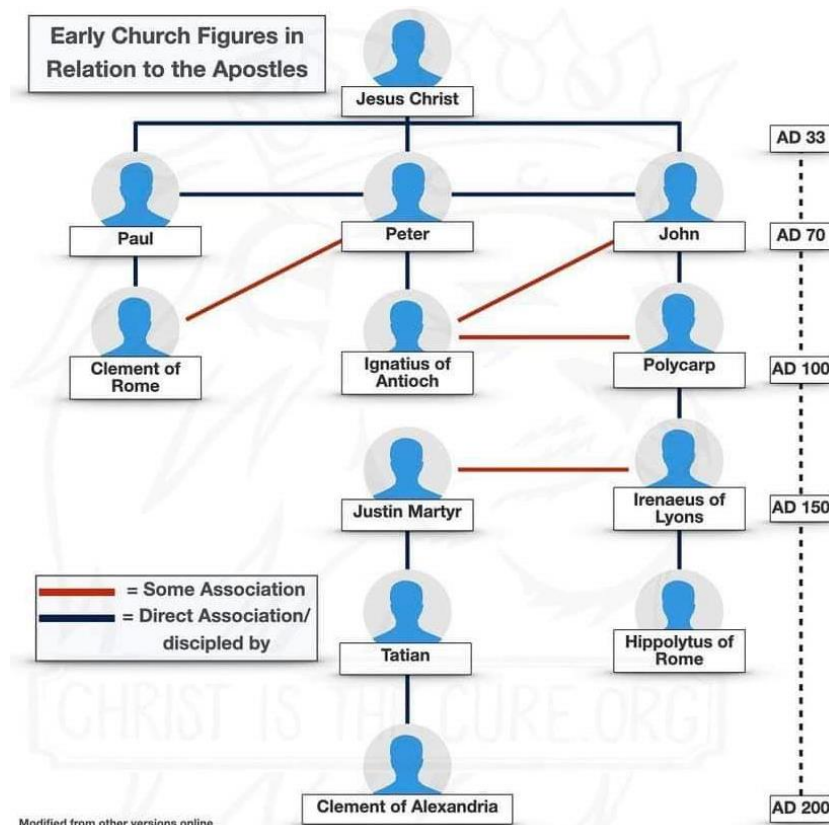
#### 4. THE CHURCH AFTER THE APOSTLES

Every year, at the times of Easter and Christmas, you will hear of controversial documentaries or books being released, arguing that true Christianity has been corrupted and that what the Apostles believed is *totally* different to what we believe today. They will say things like:

- Did you know that the first list of New Testament books that includes all 27 books found in our canon today is only found in a letter written by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in 367 AD?
  - Did you know that there were dozens of gospel accounts that were just thrown out, and only four were taken to be 'Scripture'?
- Don't let sceptics fool you. The books of the Bible were in use from the moment they were first written and distributed. Yes it took time for certain books to gain universal acceptance (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Revelation), and other books to be universally rejected (Shepherd of Hermas, Wisdom of Solomon), but the idea that the canon popped into existence out of nowhere in 367 AD is absurd.
  - Our doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is *not* that the Church decided which books belong in the canon and which didn't (this is the Roman Catholic and Orthodox view), but that God through His Holy Spirit enabled the Church to identify the inspired books from those that weren't.
  - If one looks at the idea that many gospels were thrown out, here are a few examples that show this idea to be false (and there are many more quotes from the Early Church Fathers):
    - Marcion's canon (140's AD). Marcion was a heretic who wanted a bible that only taught what he believed, so he rejected three of the four gospels and only included an edited version of Luke. Wait, what about all the dozens of other gospels?!
    - Tatian's *Diatessaron* (meaning "Out of the four") was an attempt to harmonise the four gospels into one book (160 – 175 AD, the precise date is uncertain). Only four?!
    - "There are four gospels like the four winds" – Irenaeus (180's AD)
    - The *Muratorian* fragment (180's AD) containing the names of 19 of the 27 books of the New Testament, including Luke and John and mentioning two other gospels whose names are missing. Again, what about all the other gospels that were supposedly in wide circulation?
    - There were many books that carried the title "Gospel of...", most famously *Peter*, *Thomas* and more recently *Judas*, but clearly these books were written long after the events of the First Century and were unknown in the Early Church.
    - It is important to understand that even though the Early Church had access to the writings of Scripture there was no Bible yet, and no library where ordinary Christians could go to check the Scriptures to see if their Pastors/Bishops were teaching correct theology and doctrine.
  - It is important, because in the Second Century the Church faced its first major heresy: *Gnosticism*. It was not a Christian heresy per se, rather there were people who tried to adapt Christianity to fit gnostic teaching, the greatest examples being Valentinius and Marcion.
    - Gnosticism was a dualistic religion: Good and Evil are eternally in conflict with one another, with neither being strong enough to completely subdue the other. "Good" is everything *spiritual*. "Evil" is everything *material/physical*. Spirit = good. Matter = evil.
    - Human beings are spirits trapped in an evil, material world, and the only way to escape and once again achieve a purely spiritual state is through enlightenment, learning and coming to understand secret knowledge (*gnosis*).
    - What are the implications for Christianity?
      - Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament is evil, because He created the material world.
      - A higher being, Jesus the Christ, was sent to liberate humanity from the clutches of this evil creator god, by bringing the secret knowledge we need. After all, Jesus said

that *you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free* didn't he (John 8:32)? Plus, Jesus only explained the parables to his disciples so that they alone would have understanding. They could then pass on this secret understanding to those who were worthy.

- Jesus therefore could not have been human, because that would mean he joined himself to evil matter. This was the heresy of *Docetism* (to seem). In other words, Jesus *seemed* to be born, die and rise again but it couldn't have been because he was only a spirit, not flesh.
  - It is ironic that the first major challenge to the church faced was not whether Jesus was God but whether He was a man! Modern men have a problem with Jesus being born of a VIRGIN, the Gnostics had a problem with Jesus being BORN at all.
- Gnosticism is a very important concept to understand because it is alive and well even in our day. How? "I am a woman *trapped* in a man's body". The idea that your body (the material) and who you really are on the inside (the spiritual) are completely unrelated is Gnostic.
  - Marcion was a 'Christian' theologian and evangelist, who, in order to spread this 'Christian Gnosticism', came up with his own version of the Bible. Because he rejected the Old Testament God as evil, he threw out the Old Testament and heavily edited the New Testament to remove any favourable mention of the Jews.
    - He hated the Jews because they worshipped the god of evil in his view.
  - Marcion was excommunicated by the church in 144 AD, but they could not stop him from spreading his message, and this brought much confusion to the average person who did not have a Bible in order to gauge the truth of his message.
- In order to refute Marcion, the Church could not simply appeal to the Scriptures because he did not accept them all. So, the Church chose the most logical way to counter Marcion's teaching: By appealing to *Apostolic succession*.



*Apostolic Succession (credit to christsthecure.org)*

- They made argument for a Catholic or universal Church by showing that their teachers have been taught by someone who had been taught by the apostles and therefore had the true message:
  - Church leaders, such as Irenaeus, were trained by men who knew the Apostles (Polycarp, Ignatius) and so they would be the authorities on what the Apostles themselves taught.
- These men rejected Marcion's teaching because it was clearly not found in the teaching of the Apostles. The Apostle John seemed to argue against an early form of Gnosticism when writing the books of 1 & 2 John.
- It was the best form of argument that the Church had available, and it was a testimony to them that they were ultimately successful in subduing Marcionism.
- As Christians Rose up to defeat the gnostic heresy it also helped them clarify their own beliefs, as heresy often does.
- But. The lines drawn on the above chart are solid, indicating that we can prove these associations, but they are not as clear cut as that. For example, the evidence points to the fact that Polycarp *knew* John, but was he disciplined by him?
- Irenaeus said that one teaching that had been passed down directly from the Apostles was that Jesus was over 50 when he died. That is wrong, no-one believes that today.
- The primary way the teachings of the Apostles were passed on was not through men, who are fallible and can get things wrong, but through the words of the New Testament writings.

- The Roman Catholic Church especially, but also the Orthodox Church to a lesser degree, took this idea of Apostolic succession and rode off into all kinds of directions with it:
- Instead of saying that it served its purpose and that we should now appeal to Scripture above any teachings of men, they expanded the idea to argue that *they* alone hold to the true teachings of the Apostles through an unbroken line of Popes, the successors of Peter.
- This is an abuse of Church history, and shows what a wonderful gift the Bible is that we have today: We don't have to argue about who knew who and to what degree did they influence one another (though that is an interesting topic), we can appeal to the words of the Apostles, and Jesus(!) directly.