

Church History #1: The Apostolic Church 30 – 100 Anno Domini

RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING CHURCH HISTORY

1. Church History provides a vantage point revealing God's progressive plan of redemption through nations, continents, and people groups.
 - Example: Rather than pursuing the Great Commission, the Medieval Church cloistered itself in monasteries. The monasteries became prime targets for raiding and pillaging by the Vikings. The ensuing enslavement of monks brought Christianity to Scandinavia.
2. Church History provides wisdom, experience, and counsel for contemporary issues.

“The greatest advances in human civilization have come when we recovered what we had lost: when we learned the lessons of history. We cannot say ‘the past is past’ without surrendering the future. The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see.” Winston Churchill

There is great truth in the saying that those who do not know history are destined to repeat its mistakes.

- Reemergence of old heresies and false doctrines.
- Mistakes not to repeat; Regrettable Judgements
 - 4 Black Eyes for Christianity
 - Galileo/Copernicus
 - Crusades
 - Inquisition
 - Religious Wars of Europe (compare with current Sunni vs Shiite conflicts)
 - Antisemitism

- Wisdom for Modern Problems
 - Persecution – Resist, Flee, Compromise
 - Church & State Relations – Hostile, Tolerant, Endorsed
 - Response to Radical Religions – Martyrdom, Military, Mission

3. Church History provides an anchor for our belief system

- Litmus Test of Ages – The true gospel is the same for all ages, peoples, and places (e.g. Prosperity Teaching, Suffering, New Revelation, etc.)
- Enlarges and matures our beliefs and positions (e.g. Church & State/Politics; Faith & Science; Church and Islam)
- Reality Guide to our Experiences – Suffering/Blessing; Patience (e.g. Cathedrals and Monasteries of Europe took generations to complete)

4. Church History provides us an Inheritance

- Apostle John -> Polycarp -> Irenaeus ->
- Word of God in our own language – Martin Luther

“I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”

- Sacrifices to pass on the Word of God; seeds of faith planted by the martyrs and the honor God will bestow on their work – Rev. 6:9ff
- Creeds
- Art, Literature, & Music

Discussion Questions:

1. How does understanding the church’s mistake with Copernicus help you navigate current faith & science issues?
2. How does the realization of Protestants & Catholics killing each other for centuries change your perspective about current Sunni and Shiite conflicts?
3. Considering Europe’s experience and disgust with centuries of Religious Wars in the name of Christ, Church/State corruption, and austere moralistic religion, what strategy would you develop to plant a church in a culture that wholly rejects Christianity as “tried and wanting”?

4. How might your political views develop about Church and State interaction after studying Christendom in Europe?
5. How do you see the Two Pie view prevalent in today's society?
6. Considering faithful Christians in prior centuries and in other lands suffered, starved, and were afflicted, how does that fit with a Prosperity Gospel commonly preached today?
7. What can you do to leave an inheritance for generations to come?

THE CHURCH – BIRTH & CONFLICT

Preparation for the Gospel

1. Culturally & Politically
 - Greek Language and Culture united diverse people groups and regions.
 - Rome united the empire by common rule of law and safe travel.

This period of history is called the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace.

- Citizenship
 - Roads
 - Roman Army
2. Spiritually
 - There was a great moral and spiritual vacuum waiting to be filled in the first century.
 - Roman Conquests created a loss in belief of vanquished gods.
 - Greek Philosophy and polytheism became bankrupt.
 - Roman State Religion had become perfunctory.
 - The Empire uprooted many people from their homelands as slaves or in military service.

BIRTH OF THE CHURCH & CONFLICT

1. Pentecost – the Birth of the Church

Acts 2:41, 42 - Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

2. The First Significant Dispute – Racial Privilege

Acts 6:1-4 - During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers—“Hellenists”—toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. MSG

3. The First Far-Reaching Controversy – Inclusion of Multiethnic Believers into the Covenant People of God

- **The Issue** – Paul and Barnabas planted multi-ethnic communities of new believers throughout Asia Minor and taught these new believers that now they, through their faith in Christ alone, belonged fully to the people of God – known to that point as Israel.
- **The Objection** – God chose Israel for salvation. Only those who belong to the ethnic, covenant people of Israel can be among the righteous. Belonging to Israel necessarily involves circumcision, obedience to the Law of Moses, and most particularly those laws demonstrating Israel’s distinctiveness from the other nations, e.g. food laws, Sabbath, etc. If the Gentiles are to receive the benefits of the covenant, then they need to belong to the people of the covenant and follow the rules of the covenant.
- **The Logic: Circular Reasoning** – A->B, then B->A e.g. All Ravens are black; that bird is black, therefore it is a Raven. The Promise was given to Israel; therefore all who receive the promise must become part of ethnic Israel.

THE FIRST COUNCIL – THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL Acts 15; cf. Gal. 2

1. Paul vs. The Circumcision Group

Acts 15:1-2, Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

2. Moses and the Preeminence of Abraham - The Redemption Narrative

- "...this dynamic narrative of God's saving purpose for all nations through Abraham—is the heart of the gospel as announced by the Scriptures."¹
- "The ingathering of the nations was the very thing Israel existed for in the purpose of God; it was the fulfillment of the bottom line of God's promise to Abraham...to belong to Israel was to be a true child of Abraham, no matter what a person's ethnicity is, for 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise' (Gal. 3:29)"²

3. The Jerusalem Council Conclusions

- The Gospel is all-inclusive by faith in Christ alone
- The apostles admonished unity among the culturally diverse believers by advocating self-restraint from that which is particularly offensive to others.
- This powerful message brought joy and hope to diverse Gentile communities
- Although the apostles' ruling was authoritative, scripturally based, and clearly proclaimed, many continued the Judaizing practices causing upheavals within the fledgling church and even violent riots in the cities.
- Most of Paul's Epistles address unity within the multi-ethnic church and attack the corruption of the gospel by the Judaizers. Paul's juxtaposed themes of Circumcision/Uncircumcision, Jew/Gentile, Flesh/Spirit, Law/Grace are all interwoven with the mission to the Gentiles, the Sufficiency of Faith in Christ, and the conclusions of the Council

Discussion Questions:

1. Considering the Judaizers were strong, upright, good, moral Christians, how should we respond to modern sermons and discipleship groups that mix faith in Christ with adherence to a set of prescribed moral codes or rules?

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 193.

² *ibid*, p. 194.

2. How can we apply the apostles' admonition to abstain from that which is particularly offensive in order to cultivate unity?
3. How do Paul's primary objectives to preserve unity within the church and to defend the purity and truth of the gospel help enlighten understanding about his difficult, recurring topics of Flesh/Spirit, Law/Grace, and Jew/Gentile?

GROWTH, EXPANSION, & PERSECUTION

Acts 2:5-12: *Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? **Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians**—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"*

Main Reasons for Expansion of the Church in the Roman Empire

1. Zeal of Christians

"We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you – cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces, palace, senate forum – we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods."

Tertullian c.200 AD from Carthage

"For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms...It is certainly quite clear that the temples...had been almost deserted, ...the established religious rites, long neglected, ...and that ...sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found." Pliny the Younger to Trajan, *Letters* 10.96-97

2. Doctrine of Immortality
3. Morality of the early Christians

They marry and have children just like everyone else, but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. (Pliny?)

4. Miraculous Powers of the Early Church
5. Unity and Community of the Church

PERSECUTION IN THE FIRST CENTURY

1. Christianity was originally considered a sect of Judaism and protected in the Empire.
2. Fire in Rome 64 AD.
 - Nero blamed Christians to divert suspicion and began a violent persecution.
 - Burned as torches

According to the overwhelming testimony of the Church Fathers, Paul and Peter were both martyred during this persecution. Peter was crucified upside down on the Vatican Hill. Paul, spared the disgrace of crucifixion because of his Roman citizenship, was beheaded on the Ostian Way at Tre Fontane (the Three Fountains).

3. Emperor Domitian (95 AD) required a tax to support the Temple of Jupiter in Rome – Jews refusal led to John's exile due to association of Christians and Jews.
4. Prior to 250 AD persecution was local, sporadic, mob and not policy. Afterwards it became violent and widespread.

SEPARATION OF CHRISTIANITY FROM JUDAISM

1. Destruction of Jerusalem.
 - In 70 AD, the Roman general Titus marched 80,000 troops into Jerusalem, razed it, and destroyed the Temple.
 - The destruction of Jerusalem fully severed Christianity from Judaism. This would eventually expose the Church to the wrath of Roman persecution – religio licita
2. Antisemitism

Lk. 19:41-44, "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

The Church saw the destruction of Jerusalem as God's specific judgment upon Israel for rejecting the Messiah. This would sow the seeds of fierce anti-Semitism in the Church.

Discussion Questions:

1. Considering the horrific effects of antisemitism in the church, how should we respond to the frequent declarations by religious leaders concerning the Judgement of God and its cause?
2. How do the morality, zeal, and unity of the early Christians encourage you?
3. If ever faced with persecution, how would you respond – stay, resist, flee, compromise?