

14. The church history – Part 1

One of my favorite classes during my senior high school period was history classes. I don't know why, but I just liked them. Someone who is wise once said, "History tells us what time we are in; theology tells us who God is."

It is important for the believers of Jesus Christ to know how the church history unfolded in the past. If we choose to ignore the past mistakes and faults, we are bound to make the same ones in the future. That is the precise reason why the Lord included the Old Testament as a part of the Bible.

A. APOSTOLIC CHURCH – A.D. 30-100

1) A.D.

Many of us can readily answer the meaning of 'B.C.' - "Before Christ". But the majority of us would fumble if we were asked to explain what the meaning of A.D. is. It is "Anno Domini" - Latin for "the Year of the Lord". It refers to the number of years since Christ's birth. A sixth-century monk was the first to date history by the life of Christ. But his calculations were off by between one and five years. Jesus may have been four or five years old in A.D. 1.

2) The leaders and members

The Apostolic Church was the community led by the apostles who were former disciples of Jesus. In His "Great Commission," the resurrected Jesus commanded them that His teachings should be spread to all the world.

The first Christians were essentially all Jewish or Jewish converts due to their nationalism which was drilled into their heads since they were kids.

In spite of Jesus' "Great Commission" to them, they were somewhat comfortable with their own people and in their own home setting.

The Book of Acts records the martyrdom of the Christian leaders - Stephen, James and others - pushed them outside of their comfort zone to the world. The name "Christian" was first applied to the disciples in Antioch.

Acts 11:26 When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching great numbers of people. (It was there at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

3) The persecutions by the Romans

In midsummer, A.D. 64, Rome burned. Flames ravaged the city for six days. When the public wanted to take out their anger on Emperor Nero, he quickly blamed an unpopular minority group - the Christians. The persecution against these Christians started.

Christians believed in only one God unlike the polytheistic Romans. Besides, they talked about 'eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus', 'being washed by the blood of Christ', 'the fire that would bring the end of the world', calling one another 'brothers and sisters' - terms used in Egypt to refer to sexual partners. To the unknown Roman people, Christianity was nothing more than cannibalism and incest.

On August 5, A.D. 70, Jerusalem was burned down and all the Jewish revolts were over. The persecution against the Christians started in full swing.

Psalms 116:15 Precious in the sight of the Lord Is the death of His saints.

B. THE POST-APOSTOLIC CHURCH – A.D. 100-325

1) Structure and the episcopacy

In the post-Apostolic church bishops emerged as overseers of urban Christian populations, and a hierarchy clergy gradually took on the form of 'episkopos' which means overseers, bishops, elders and deacons which means servants.

Among these bishops, Polycarp of Smyrna, Clement of Rome, Irenaeus of Lyons and Justin of Caesarea stood head and shoulder above others. These men reportedly knew and studied under the apostles personally and are therefore called Apostolic Fathers.

The early church understood that God gives instructions to one leader and the congregation follows the instructions of God. They'd never adopted congregational voting systems like many contemporary denominations. Democracy shows nothing more than the majority of public opinion, not the truth of God. The recent public opinion from November, 2008 brought the mess we are in to America.

2) Why did the churches grow in spite of the persecutions?

Because the Spirit of God was still working, what else?

I find three main reasons:

- **Christianity provided moral guidelines**

By the mid-100s A.D., the moral depravity of the ancient Roman Empire repulsed not only Jews, Christians, but also even the Roman citizens. It was a literal spiritual cesspool.

- **Christianity offered equality and respect**

In the Roman Empire, women were pretty much sexual objects and reproduction tools for the next generations. And slaves were treated as nothing more than living tools. It is no wonder why many of the early Christians were slaves and women. They found equality and respect in Christianity.

- **Christianity offered a personal relationship with God**

More than moral guidelines, equality and respect, Christianity gave them eternal hope through Jesus Christ who died for their sins and resurrected from the death. Throughout their lives, their Roman gods always demanded sacrifices from them without giving them anything, but this Christian God Jesus sacrificed Himself for them that they may have eternal life in heaven.

3) Early heresies

All the heresies against Christianity come from departing literal interpretation of the interpretation of the Scriptures. Once you start to interpret the Bible in an allegorical manner which means there are other meanings than what the texts say, you can make them say anything you want.

The biggest common denominator of all the cults is denying the deity of Jesus Christ and that He was completely human without sin while He was on the earth.

- **Gnosticism**

The Gnostics believed that everything physical was corrupt. Only spiritual things were pure; since physical side is corrupt, it didn't matter how a person acted. The Gnostics drew heavily from Greek philosophers like Plato. They claimed that they had secret

knowledge of God and brought them to a higher realm than others.

Apostle Paul tells us otherwise:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

- **Docetism**

The people who embraced this heresy believed that Jesus' humanity was merely an illusion, thus denying the incarnation - God becoming human.

A similar concept is adopted by Jehovah's Witness and Mormons. Jehovah's Witness believe that Jesus was merely a physical manifestation of Michael the archangel. Mormons believe that Jesus and satan are spirit brothers. According to Brigham Young who was considered the 2nd prophet of the Mormon Church, God had sexual relations with Mary to make the body of Jesus. NOT!

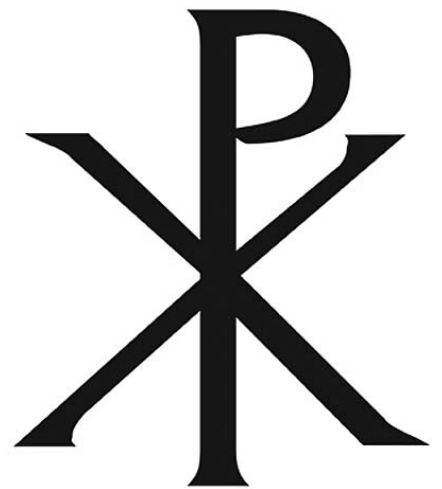
C. THE CHURCH OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE – A.D. 313-476

Galerius, who had previously been one of the leading figures in persecution, in 311 issued an edict which ended the Emperor Diocletian persecution of Christianity. After halting the persecutions of the Christians, Galerius reigned for another 2 years. He was then succeeded by an emperor with distinctively pro-Christian leanings, Constantine the Great.

1) Christianity legalized and endorsed by Constantine the Great

The Emperor Constantine the Great was exposed to Christianity by his mother, Helena. At the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine commanded his troops to adorn their shields with the Christian symbol "XP" - a.k.a. Chiron - in accordance with a vision that he had had the night before. After winning the battle, Constantine was able to claim the emper- orship in the West.

How much Christianity Constantine adopted at this point is difficult to discern. Nonetheless, the accession of Constantine was a turning point for the Christian Church. After his victory, Constantine supported the Church financially, built various basilicas, granted exemption from certain taxes to clergy, promoted Christians to some high ranking offices, and returned property confiscated during the Great Persecution of Diocletian.



In 325, Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea, issued the Nicene Creed, which among other things professed a belief in "One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church."

2) Trinitarian Christianity adopted as the official state religion of Rome

On February 27, 380, the Roman Empire officially adopted Trinitarian Christianity as its state religion. Emperor Theodosius I supported the Trinitarian doctrine as

expounded in the Nicene Creed. He declared that only the followers of Trinitarian Christianity were entitled to be referred to as Catholic Christians, while all others were to be considered to be followers of heresy, which was to be considered illegal.

This new state sponsored Christianity brought two problems:

- o The former Roman pagan priests embraced Christianity for survival without true conversion.
- o Churches grew more rapidly than ever before. Still, not all growth is good. Now if you were a Christian in the Roman Empire, you got special perks. Who wouldn't profess to be a Christian and join the church? More people, more institutional aspect of the church, and the Gospel became diluted.

In God's kingdom, quality matters far more than quantity. It is easy to become caught up in what we can count. We call it 'Nose and Nickel' - "How many people and how much revenue does your church have?" This becomes the focal point of evaluation for a church by many Christians.

Would I like to have a bigger congregation with our own church building? Yes, a thousand times YES. But NOT at the cost of diluting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the depth of the congregation's spiritual condition. Am I saying that all the big churches' congregation have shallow spiritual condition? No, but it is a very clear and present danger to many big and small churches.

What good is it for us to be a big congregation church with a mile wide and an inch deep immature spiritual understanding? I'd rather have you guys to be absolutely in love with the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ and obedient to His Word every day in your life than having thousands of people in our church.

Sometimes growth is good, but growth alone doesn't guarantee that God is being glorified. What matters most isn't always the growth that we are able to count. What matters is whether we're faithful wherever God has placed us.

3) Papacy and primacy

During the fifth century, the western region church leaders of the Roman Empire gained even more political power. As a result, the idea of the pope - the bishop of Rome emerged.

The official Catholic Church position is that Jesus had essentially appointed Peter as the first pope, with universal primacy as bishop of Rome. This is derived from his seeming primacy among the Twelve in New Testament texts on Peter.

Matthew 16:17-19 Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The Greek word that was used for 'Peter' is 'petros' which means 'rock' or 'stone'. But the Greek word 'rock' is 'petra' which means 'boulder'. Jesus was mentioning Himself, not Peter. Thus, Jesus is the Rock of our salvation and He has built His church on Himself.

The Christian Church built its identity on the Apostles as witnesses to Christ, and responsibility for pastoral leadership was not restricted to Peter. The New Testament also does not contain any record of the transmission of Peter's leadership, nor is the transmission of apostolic authority in general very clear.

According to the guidelines of the papacy, Peter would be disqualified. Because he was married. He even had a mother-in-law. Some theologians say that Peter never forgot Jesus healing his mother-in-law. That is why he denied Jesus three times. I think that was a horrible interpretation.

4) Pope Gregory and Purgatory

Influenced by Augustine of Hippo - that is not an animal, rather it was a city where he came from, Pope Gregory started to develop the foundation doctrine of 'purgatory', a place between death and heaven where God supposedly keeps sinners still tormenting them in a gigantic waiting room.

But according to Gregory's concept, these sinners can still come out of the purgatory to heaven by repentance and intercessory prayers by others. There is absolutely no biblical reference you can find anywhere in the Bible regarding purgatory, nor praying someone out of it.

So far, we covered 600 years of the church history.

D. THE THINGS TO REMEMBER AND APPLY

1) The persecutions against the church of Jesus Christ never hurt the church; rather the Lord used it to purify the church.

2) Modern-day Gnosticism is still active to trap the believers of Jesus Christ. We must love, serve and follow our God with all of our hearts, minds, souls and bodies.

3) To God, the depth of a church congregation's spiritual condition is far more important than the size of the church. It should be to us as well.

4) Any doctrine without solid biblical references in context should be ignored immediately.