

Adult Sunday School Class

“Our Christian Heritage” - Lesson 3

In Review

In our first lesson of this series we learned that the apostles' doctrine was established in the New Testament and was received and believed by the early church in the Apostolic Age (the time period when the apostles were alive). On the birthday of the church - the Day of Pentecost - the Apostle Peter stated:

Acts 2:38 (NKJV) Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

This same doctrine was taught and practiced by the Apostle Paul and the other apostles of Jesus Christ.

The Warnings of the Apostles

In the later years of their ministries, the apostles warned the churches that the days ahead would bring deception and a falling away from truth. Listen to their words:

Paul's Warning

2 Timothy 4:3 (NKJV) For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; **4** and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Peter's Warning

2 Peter 2:1 (NLT) But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and even deny the Master who bought them... **2** Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of these teachers, the way of truth will be slandered.

2 Peter 3:15 And remember, our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him— **16** speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction.

17 I am warning you ahead of time, dear friends. Be on guard so that you will not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose your own secure footing. **18** Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

John's Warning

1 John 2:18 (NLT) Dear children, the last hour is here. You have heard that the Antichrist is coming, and already many such antichrists have appeared. From this we know that the last hour has come. **19** These people left our churches, but they never really belonged with us; otherwise they would have stayed with us. When they left, it proved that they did not belong with us.

20 But you are not like that, for the Holy One has given you his Spirit, and all of you know the truth.
21 So I am writing to you not because you don't know the truth but because you know the difference between truth and lies. **22** And who is a liar? Anyone who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Anyone who denies the Father and the Son is an antichrist. **23** Anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father, either. But anyone who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Jude's Warnings

Jude 3 (NLT) Dear friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to his holy people. **4** I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God's marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they have denied our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ . . .

8 . . . these people—who claim authority from their dreams—live immoral lives, defy authority, and scoff at supernatural beings . . . **10** But these people scoff at things they do not understand. Like unthinking animals, they do whatever their instincts tell them, and so they bring about their own destruction . . . **17** But you, my dear friends, must remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ said. **18** They told you that in the last times there would be scoffers whose purpose in life is to satisfy their ungodly desires. **19** These people are the ones who are creating divisions among you. They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them.

20 But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, **21** and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love.

The Post-Apostolic Age

Most of the apostles died as martyrs from 44 to the 70's A.D. John was the last to die, and he died a natural death as an old man in his 90's (in the 90's A.D.). The Post-Apostolic Age is the time period right after the death of John. During this time the Church had been established in the Mediterranean world and beyond. The apostles had devoted their lives to establishing churches of Christian truth and raising up leaders to take the Church into the next generation. We have the New Testament Scriptures which forever establish true Christian doctrine and holy living.

Heresies and A Great "Falling Away"

One teaching of the New Testament is that there would be a "great falling away." Look at the following Scriptures:

Romans 16:17 (NKJV) Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. **18** For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. **8** Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever. **9** Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines . . .

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

2 Thess. 2:3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day* [the return of Jesus Christ] *will not come* unless the falling away comes first . . .

Even in the first century, problems had already begun to develop in the churches - they were not perfect, even with the apostles in charge! In Revelation 2 and 3, letters to seven churches in Asia Minor - messages by Jesus Christ Himself! - show us that there were doctrinal errors in some of the churches already, and the Lord Jesus commanded them to *“repent and do the first works.”*

Revelation 2:1 (NLT) “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus . . .

2 “I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. **3** You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

4 “But I have this complaint against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first! **5** Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. **6** But this is in your favor: You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do . . .

The doctrine of the Nicolaitans was a teaching that a Christian could practice sin and God wouldn’t care. The apostles warned that this kind of teaching would creep into the churches. Christians must live holy lives, staying full of the Spirit of God. Christians must renounce and repent of sin.

12 “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum . . .

14 “But I have a few complaints against you. You tolerate some among you whose teaching is like that of Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. **15** In a similar way, you have some Nicolaitans among you who follow the same teaching. **16** Repent of your sin, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth . . .

Again in this church, the doctrine that allows Christians to practice sin is present in the church. Jesus complained to this church that they tolerated this teaching.

The Message to the Church in Sardis

Revelation 3:1 “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis . . .

“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. **2** Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. **3** Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don’t wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief.

4 “Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. **5** All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine . . .

In the second century (the 100’s) problems accelerated. As each century progressed, we find a continual influx of false doctrines into the church of Jesus

Christ; but there were always at least some who “defended the faith” (Jude 3) and preached sound doctrine in spite of voices to the contrary.

The Second Century

In the Post-Apostolic Age false teachers were already rising up, distorting the doctrine of the apostles. However, we must state that the apostles’ doctrine was dominant - in the majority - in the church world in the second century. Those who brought in other teachings were in the minority to be sure.

The following were writers during this time period, and we can glean some information from them:

Clement of Rome, bishop of Rome in the 90’s.

Clement knew the apostle Peter. In 96 A.D., the church in Corinth suffered a split by men, the likes of whom the apostles had warned the churches. Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians about it. The split had developed when one or two young ministers rose up against older men in the ministry:

“Consequently, we deem it an injustice to eject from the sacred ministry the persons who were appointed either by (the apostles), or later, with the consent of the whole church, by other men of high repute, and have ministered to the flock of Christ faultlessly, humbly, quietly, and unselfishly, and have moreover, over a long period of time, earned the esteem of all. - 1 Clement 44:2

Clement wrote that these young men who had caused the split were of no renown and of no reputation. They were young and foolish and had lifted themselves up against honorable and respected men.

This story is “the tip of the iceberg.” It is a picture of days to come in the churches of Jesus Christ. There would be those who rise up - who are in the minority - who bring division and false doctrine into the church. Unfortunately, there were not always those present in the churches who were ready to denounce them. However, men like Clement of Rome *did* denounce them.

Clement wrote that the split in Corinth had perverted and discouraged many. In this twilight era of the twelve apostles, the struggle was underway for control of the Christian assemblies in the Roman Empire.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. He was burned at the stake at age 86.

Polycarp was noted as a man who fought heresy. As a young man he knew the Apostle John, and was appointed by him to be bishop of Smyrna. He warned the faithful to stay away from “*seducers, false brethren, and such as bear the Name of the Lord but for a mask.*” Polycarp said:

Therefore, let us leave untouched the senseless speculations of the masses, and the false doctrines, and turn to the teaching delivered to us at the beginning.

Polycarp acknowledged Jesus Christ as the one God. He understood that the one God became flesh for our sakes. Polycarp wrote:

. . . and expect him, who is above all time, eternal, invisible, though for our sakes made visible: impalpable [can't touch Him], and impassible [can't be harmed], yet for us subjected to sufferings; enduring all manner of ways for our salvation. Polycarp 1:15.

On the day of his death (as a martyr), Polycarp said, *“Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.”*

Polycarp was burned at the stake and pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman emperor.

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch.

His writings date from about 110. He was a disciple of the apostle John. He died after being sent to Rome (thrown to the lions in the Colosseum).

Ignatius wrote this warning to the Ephesians:

I have heard of certain persons from elsewhere passing through, whose doctrine was bad. These you did not permit to sow seed among you; you stopped your ears, so as not to receive the seed sown by them.

Hermas

He wrote *The Shepherd*, c. 140-145, which was a popular book in its day. He did not hold an office in the church.

Heresies of the Second Century

After the death of the apostles there were certain false teachings that arose, and these groups separated themselves from the mainstream, apostolic church:

Ebionites - these were Jewish Christians who held onto their Jewish culture and identity so much that it affected their understanding of the gospel. Of course, Christianity began among the Jews: all the apostles were Jewish. In Acts 15, we read where the apostles affirmed that there was no need to teach Gentile Christians to keep the law of Moses. The Ebionites refused to accept Paul's letters, and some even said that Jesus was not God manifested in flesh, but merely an anointed man.

Gnostics - originated in paganism as a combination of Eastern religion and Greek philosophy. As the gnostics encountered various religions, they tried to take elements from each so that they would seem sympathetic to each one. They took this approach to Judaism, and then to Christianity. They were *eclectic*, meaning a mixture of this and that, forming new doctrines. Gnostics did not believe that Jesus was come in the flesh, because they rejected all matter as evil.

Marcionites - these followed the teaching developed by a man named Marcion. He taught that there were two deities - the Creator who was evil and who inspired the Old Testament (which Marcion rejected), and the Redeemer who was good and the only God that Christians should worship. Marcion believed that Jesus did not come in the flesh, but in the Spirit. He accepted only some of the New Testament writings. He did teach faith in Jesus Christ and water baptism in the name of Jesus. Marcionites taught strict discipline, even punishment of the body, and they rejected marriage. This is called *asceticism* (the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-mortification, and the like through rigorous self-denial and extreme abstinence).

The Christian Apologists of the Second Century

As we continue on in the second century, we encounter men called “Christian Apologists”, or “Greek Apologists,” because they wrote in Greek, the international language of the day. The Apologists (130 to 180 A.D.) were a group of writers who wrote to explain and defend Christianity to the Roman government in a way that would hopefully cause the Romans to stop persecuting the Christians. There were many misunderstandings and false rumors regarding the Christians, and the apologists wanted to set the record straight (for instance, some thought Christians were cannibals because of their misunderstanding of communion, or some thought Christians were atheists because they didn’t understand why they would not allow the worship of idols).

Though one can see the reason for the apologists - after all, Christians were being martyred in various areas of the Roman Empire, and that was something that they wanted to stop - yet in their efforts to relate to the Roman Empire, they ended up distorting sound doctrine and leading Christianity down the wrong path.

The apologists thought they could add to the Scriptures to make their case to the pagan Romans since the Scriptures meant nothing to the Romans. Therefore, they began to defend themselves against pagan accusations and objections using Greek philosophy, which was common ground of the day. They tried to prove that Christianity is “good philosophy” - the best and truest philosophy. When possible, they used Greek terms and concepts to make their case attractive.

Let it be stated that most of the men that we will study held on to some if not many truths, including water baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and holiness in living. However, the major doctrine that was to be distorted over the second and third centuries was the doctrine of God’s nature and the deity of Jesus Christ.

Let’s meet the most noted apologists of the second century:

Marcianus Aristides - a philosopher in Athens who became a Christian.

Flavius Justinus, or *Justin Martyr* - the most influential of them all. He was born in a Roman colony in Samaria and became a Greek philosopher, then converted to Christianity. He was beheaded in Rome for his faith, hence the name *Martyr*.

Tatian of Syria - a disciple of Justin who eventually joined up with the Gnostics.

Melito - bishop of Sardis

Theophilus - bishop of Antioch

Athenagoras - a philosopher from Athens

The apologists represented only a small portion of the church during this time.

Greek Philosophy Affects the Church

In the Book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a giant statue with a head of gold, chest of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay mixed. The Prophet Daniel, under the inspiration of God, gave him the interpretation of the dream and the message God was giving to the king. There would be four great world empires that would shape the world (five, if you count the last one separately which was a mixture). In the age of the last empire, Jesus Christ would return to earth and rule and reign.



What the Greeks taught was incorporated into the next empire, the Roman Empire (44 B.C. - represented by legs of iron on the statue in the king's dream). When we speak of the Roman world, we are talking about a Greek/Roman world. Even the international language of the Roman world was Greek. Romans believed Greek philosophy and worshiped Greek gods with Roman names. So the Roman world was a world that had been shaped by the Greeks.

What was Greek philosophy? It is important for us to know this, because it affected Christianity in the centuries after the apostles. The Greek philosopher, Plato, taught that there are two worlds: the good, real world of ideas and the imperfect, physical world which reflects the world of ideas. The height of the world of ideas is the one, supreme, perfect God, who is uninvolved with the evil world of physical things and who is *impassible* (meaning, incapable of emotional feeling and incapable of suffering). The world of ideas is "in-between" God and the physical world.

As the church added more and more Gentiles who had been taught Greek philosophy, their concepts entered into the church. For instance, it was difficult for Gentiles to believe the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is the supreme God Himself who came in flesh to suffer and die for the redemption of fallen humanity. Since they believed that God is not a being who cares or loves, and since they believed that He is incapable of suffering or hurting in any way, they couldn't reconcile that God came in human flesh to ransom sinners. As a matter of fact, a little later in time, a derogatory term came to be used of Christians who believed this: *Patripassions*, or people who believed that "the Father suffered." In time, the doctrine of the trinity would come into being to reconcile this belief from Greek philosophy which so dominated the thinkers of the age.

As the Apologists tried to reason with Roman officials who had no regard for Scripture, they used terms of Greek philosophy to convince them. Over time, Greek philosophy wormed its way into Christian thought and doctrine.

The Apologists explained that Jesus Christ is not the supreme God, not the Father, but a second person, the "Logos."