

Church History I: Introduction & 1st Century

WHY STUDY CHURCH HISTORY?

Five Reasons (Sinclair Ferguson):

- Records Christ's ongoing work—the Church didn't pause between Acts and Luther
- Biblical command to remember (Deuteronomy 8:2; Psalm 78:2-4)
- Illuminates our beliefs and provides context for evaluating doctrine
- Safeguard against error—there are no new heresies, only old ones
- Provides mentors to follow as they followed Christ (1 Cor. 11:1)

CLASS OVERVIEW

- **Scope:** Centuries 1-13 (Part 1 of series)
- **Focus:** Formation of the "catholic" (universal) tradition
- **Goal:** Create appetite for further study
- **"Catholic tradition":** Ancient church's biblical interpretation and consensus (Protestant position: Scripture alone is authoritative)

THE FIRST CENTURY WORLD

- **Roman Empire:** Polytheistic society; 20% of empire was Jewish; Romans tolerated Jewish monotheism and temple tax to avoid conflict
- **Religious leaders:** Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees were comfortable under Roman rule; not eager for Messiah
- **Prophetic silence:** 400 years until John the Baptist announced the Messiah

JESUS' MINISTRY & MISSION

- **John the Baptist:** Last OT prophet; baptized Jesus; martyred by Herod
- **Three reasons Jesus came:** (1) Save sinners (1 Tim 1:15) (2) Destroy devil's works (1 John 3:8) (3) Build His church (Matt 16:18)
- **Foundation:** Peter's confession: "You are the Christ" (Matt 16:16); Jesus' promise that gates of hell won't prevail; Great Commission to make disciples

EARLY CHURCH GROWTH

- **Pentecost:** Holy Spirit poured out; 3,000 baptized in one day
- **Initially:** Exclusively a "Jesus movement" within Judaism
- **Jewish foundation:** OT essential for understanding Jesus (Prophet, Priest, King); church organization from Judaism (apostles, elders, baptism, Lord's Supper)
- **Cultural divide:** "Hellenists" (Greek-speaking Jews from Diaspora) vs. "Hebrews" (Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews); mutual contempt
- **Central question:** How much Jewish law for Gentile converts?

PERSECUTION & EXPANSION

- **Stephen's martyrdom (AD 34-35):** First major persecution; critical of Jewish tradition; Hellenistic Christians scattered and spread the gospel
- **Result:** Jerusalem church became purely Hebrew; scattered believers first to reach Samaritans and Gentiles
- **Antioch:** First predominantly Gentile church; believers first called "Christians" (Acts 11)
- **Paul's conversion:** Former persecutor; Damascus road encounter (Acts 9)
- **Paul's ministry:** Took Christianity westward to Europe; taught Gentiles don't need circumcision or Jewish law; knew both Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds; supreme NT theologian

THE GRECO-ROMAN CHALLENGE

- **Cultural context:** Sophisticated, proud civilization; generally fair administration and law
- **Christian challenge:** Convince Romans they had something philosophers hadn't already discovered
- **"Ancient vs. New":** Romans believed "old is true, new is suspect"; respected Egyptian/Persian gods and Judaism as oldest religion
- **Christianity's problem:** Appeared new (Jesus died recently)
- **Christian response:** Emphasized fulfillment of ancient Judaism and OT prophecy

LATE FIRST CENTURY PERSECUTION

- **Nero's persecution (AD 64):** Rome fire blamed on Christians; horrific torture (torn by dogs, crucified, human torches)
- **Martyrdoms:** Peter crucified upside-down; Paul beheaded
- **Result:** Christians recognized as distinct from Jews

THE JEWISH WAR (AD 66-73)

- **Zealot uprising:** Nationalist revolt crushed by Rome
- **Devastating result:** 1.1 million Jews killed, 97,000 captured; Jerusalem and temple destroyed
- **Christian response:** Fled to Pella (obeyed Jesus' warning in Luke 21:20-22); Jewish Christians seen as traitors
- **Consequences for Christianity:**
 1. Lost Jerusalem as spiritual home
 2. Accelerated drift from Jewish to Gentile membership
 3. Jewish Christians seen as traitors by other Jews
 4. Formal curse on Christians in Jewish liturgy
 5. Impossible for Jewish Christians to worship in synagogues

CLOSING OF THE FIRST CENTURY

- **Leadership transition:** 12 apostles essentially gone (martyred or distant); only John lived to old age
- **New generation:** Weak and unstable initially, both morally and theologically
- **Emerging threats:** Moral confusion (as in Corinth); theological uncertainty and competition over truth
- **False teaching:** Heretical movements claiming Christ's name; proliferation of competing claims to be the true Church