

The Church Gains Traction & Faces Persecution From Jesus to 313 Week #1 - June 14

Overview of Class

The plan is to cover church history from the crucifixion of Jesus to modern day Christianity...in ten weeks. In order to do that we need to cover some 200-300 years each week, in 80-85 minutes. That does mean we need to start as close to 6:30 as possible and we will be done at 8:00. I promise to not go one minute over, but we likely won't end one minute early either.

Tonight, from the time of the crucifixion of Jesus (book of Acts) to A.D. 313

I. From Jesus to A.D. 100

Jesus is crucified and resurrected somewhere in the A.D. 30's (Anno Domini - "In the Year of Our Lord")

When Jesus dies, he has 11 disciples/apostles and about 500 other followers.

Pentecost

50 Days after Passover and the crucifixion of Jesus is the feast of Pentecost.

This was an annual feast day in the Jewish calendar. Called the Feast of Weeks or the Festival of First Fruits - first harvest of the year.

The promised Holy Spirit comes and Peter preaches - 3,000 people come to faith in Christ. Peter preaches again and 5,000 people are born again and the Church Age has begun! Almost 2,000 years later now and counting.

The Conversion of Paul

We must mention that the conversion of Saul of Tarsus – Paul – would become one of the most significant events in church history. He would be converted somewhere between A.D. 31-36.

He would become the most prolific theologian in the N.T. He would mentor many of the other pastor's in the early stages of the church (Timothy and Titus) and even confront the Apostle Peter when he went sideways. He would embark on at least three missionary journey's to the Gentile world and he would preach the gospel and plant churches from Israel all the way, likely to Spain.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the conversion of Paul and his influence on Christianity to this very day.

The Jerusalem Counsel

Remember that the vast majority of early Christians, including all of the 12 apostles and Paul were Jews. Paul was even a Pharisee – religious leader, tutored under the leading voice of Judaism of his day.

To be Jewish was your identity, your heritage, your lifestyle and worldview.

To be Jewish impacted every aspect of life, from the things you eat, what is clean and unclean, religious festivals – life was centered around the religious calendar, to your dress, to what happened in the bedroom....it's almost impossible for us as Westerner's to understand how tied together religion and lifestyle was for these N.T. believers.

As Paul was on his missionary journeys and as the gospel was spreading and Gentiles were becoming followers of Jesus, the inevitable question had to come up.

How Jewish do Gentile Christians need to be, to be Christian?

Would be so easy to blend the two together and of course many tried.

This is what Acts 15 is all about and again, marks a huge moment in the trajectory of the church.

How Jewish do Gentile Christians need to be, to be Christian?

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”” Acts 15:1

“But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”” Acts 15:5

Do you see how difficult it would have been for these early believers who were also Jewish to figure this out?

Now we have these Gentiles who eat and dress and think very differently sitting next to us in worship.

The answer to this would potentially forever establish the life and practice of the church and our lives even today.

So, the leaders of the early church meet and no shocker, Peter is the one to lead the discussion:

“The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,” Acts 15:6–8

“and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”” Acts 15:9–11

How Jewish do Gentile Christians need to be, to be Christian?

Answer: Not much.

After Paul and Barnabas had spoken, James, the pastor and leader of the church in Jerusalem comes up to sum up the conversation:

“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.” Acts 15:19-20

Essentially, they said we fully accept the Gentiles as believers into the church, but we do think they should follow a few of the laws of Moses, particularly those that we find most offensive in the dietary laws and those having to do with sexual immorality. “strangers in the land.”

We can't stress this enough how important this was to the future of the church.

The Church & Missions

Paul was also the missionary of the 1st Century. We have recorded his three missionary journeys in the book of Acts where he would take the gospel where it had never been before.

We must remember that Jesus always intended for his message to continue to spread throughout the whole of the world.

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” Matthew 28:18-20

te ethne – all nations - all distinct, linguistic & cultural people groups in the world.

The last words of Jesus before his ascension: ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*** Acts 1:8

This is important to remember because the disciples got this message loud and clear.

In the subsequent years, church history tells us:

Peter – Turkey, was martyred in Rome

Andrew – Turkey, Greece and eventually all the way to Russia

Thomas – Syria and as far East as India

Philip – North Africa

Matthew – Persia and Ethiopia

Bartholomew – India, Armenia, North Africa

John – took Jesus’ words seriously to care for Mary, would later pastor in the area near Ephesus (modern day Turkey) and would be exiled to the island of Patmos.

The Church Expands

The point is – they didn’t all stay home. They did their best to go to the nations.

That example would set the precedent for the subsequent generations and the message of Christianity would spread to most of the known world in the next couple of hundred years.

In fact this is where the term “*catholic*” church would come from.

The term *catholic* means “universal”. When we speak of the catholic church in these early days we mean the *universal* church, not the Roman Catholic Church that we know of today. (RCC, Roman Catholic, Rome...)

Universal Church vs. Local Church

So when did the Catholic Church begin? Who is first? The Catholic Church or the Protestant Church? What’s the real church?

When did the Catholic Church begin? The Roman Catholic Church? Very difficult if not impossible to determine because it doesn’t start as much as evolve over hundreds of years.

Here is the best illustration I could come up with. When did the U.S.A. start? July 4th, 1776. When did Europe start? Define Europe.

Of course they will argue that they started with Peter who was the first Pope. We will disagree. Peter certainly was a leader in the early church but he was by no means THE guy. James seems to be more important than Peter as was Paul.

Whoever was the bishop of Rome was seen to be the default leader of the western church and it was **Leo I** in 440 who becomes the traditional first person to be called Pope as an official title. Even this is fuzzy.

Pope in Latin is *papa* and in Greek is *pappas* – Father. The RCC will point to 44 people before him who were “Popes”, or Father of the Church after the Apostle Peter.

When does it start? Somewhere around 450-500 but continues to evolve for many more hundreds of years until we know it as it is today.

The term “Roman Catholic Church” isn’t used until the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500’s to distinguish the church of Rome from those who were walking away from her doctrines.

(I. Jesus to A.D. 100 slide)

Big Picture: The Church would expand beyond Israel and to the west and come to North Africa & Egypt and even to Iraq and Iran and India.

Cyrene, Carthage and Alexandria all places in North Africa and Egypt become hubs of theology for hundreds of years. Simon of Cyrene?

II. The Age of the Apologist, the Martyr and the Bishop – A.D. 100-300

1. Apologist was a person who “gave a *defense*”.

The leading heresy during this time was something called **Gnosticism**.

Gnosis – knowledge – secret knowledge, hidden knowledge.

Synthesis of Judaism, Greek mythology and Christian influences –

Division between what is spiritual and physical (material world) - spiritual is good and physical world is bad – upper world vs. lower world - led to some advocating asceticism and some advocating indulging in pleasure.

Because of this division - God would never be involved in the things of this world – and would most certainly never become a man – no Incarnation – no deity of Christ.

Salvation was possible through a process of awakening to the more and more secret things of the spiritual realm that weren't readily accessible to everyone else. We are the one's “in the know.”

Gnostic Gospels – The gospel of Thomas , Gospel of Judas, - made famous in The DaVinci Code and the movie, Stigmata.

We see this today don't we? Kabala, the New Age Movement, Theosophy, Rosicrucians, many others draw from this thinking.

Huge problem for the church in the N.T. and especially in the next couple of hundred years. Apologists were busy defending the gospel!

2. The word *martyr* originally meant, “witness.” We’ll see in a few minutes the particular martyrs of the church and how widespread this was and how it would fuel the missions efforts of the church.

3. **Bishops** - The churches would spread and as they grew in number and as there became multiple churches in each city, there often arose men who were called bishops. That is they were called upon to oversee multiple churches in a given locale.

There are a couple of terms in the N.T. that are used synonymously for the leaders in the church. “Elder”, *presbuteros* –and “overseer”, *episcopos*.

In time, these terms would become differentiated for different offices of church leadership. *Presbyter* would become “pastor” or “priest” and *episcopos* would become “bishop”.

There is no Roman Catholic Church yet, these bishops are men who are overseeing multiple churches and speak for them.

By the beginning of the second century we see this taking root in Christianity and it is almost universal by the end of the second century to have bishops overseeing communities of churches.

These men are going to be vitally important as we’ll see next week when the councils are getting together and articulating theology and fighting heresy.

III. Leading Figures from A.D. 100-300

Ignatius (35- 108)

Ignatius is the first real figure to emerge from church history and would become one of its most famous martyrs.

He is the Bishop of Antioch, which by the way, is the first place the followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

In fact, Ignatius is believed to have been the first person to use the term “*catholic*” in reference to the church. “universal” church.

It is believed that the Apostle Peter is the one who established Ignatius as the Bishop in Antioch.

Ignatius and his friend Polycarp, however, are most famous for having been disciples of the Apostle John. You can see how important it is that we have this connection? We have men writing who were friends and disciples of the men who walked with Jesus.

For instance, in a letter he wrote to the church in Ephesus, he would speak of the deity of Christ:

“There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; ..., even Jesus Christ our Lord.”—Letter to the Ephesians, ch. 7

While he was Bishop in Antioch he was arrested during a local persecution there and carted off to Rome.

“May I benefit from the wild beasts prepared for me, and I hope they will make short work of me. I shall even entice them to eat me up at once and not hold off...; and if they are reluctant, I shall force them. Indulge me; I know what is to my good; now I begin to be a disciple. Let nothing of things visible and invisible stand in the way of my reaching Christ. Let fire and cross, packs of wild beasts, the wrenching of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of my whole body, cruel punishments of the devil on me – my only wish is to attain Jesus Christ.”

(Ignatius and wild beast slide)

People that say stuff like that and then follow through with it, are not easily forgotten.

Polycarp (69-155)

Bishop of Smyrna in what is today modern Turkey and was a friend and disciple of the apostle John along with Ignatius.

During one of the persecutions to come to the city he was arrested:

"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 was pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor. On his farewell, he said "I bless you Father for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."

Justin Martyr (100-165)

He was the foremost apologist of the second century. In his early adult years he became a wanderer in search of the truth. He tried Stoic philosophy and the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. One day as he was walking on the beach he met a man named Trypho who directed Justin to the Scriptures as the true philosophy. Justin was converted and would open a school in Rome to teach the Bible.

In about 150, he wrote his *First Apology* which was addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his adopted sons. In it he urged the emperor to examine the charges against the Christians and to free them from liabilities if they were innocent. He would argue that Christians were not atheists or idolaters. The major section of the work is given to trying to give a clear and accurate picture of the person and message of Jesus.

In case you were wondering, he isn't named Justin Martyr for nothing – he was beheaded along with six of his students – Christians have been beheaded in the middle east for a long time!

Irenaeus - (130 - 202)

He was born in Smyrna (modern western Turkey) and was influenced by Polycarp's preaching, who was the Bishop of Smyrna.

Apostle John - Polycarp - Irenaeus.

"I remember how he (Polycarp) spoke of his conversation with John and with others who had seen the Lord; how he repeated their words from memory."

If Justin Martyr was an *apologist*, Irenaeus is most notable for being a *polemicist*. An apologist was someone who fought against forces *outside* of the church. A polemicist was someone who fought against the forces *inside* the church, namely those false teachings that challenged the safety of the true gospel. Irenaeus is most notable for his writings defeating Gnosticism as a viable alternative to true Christianity. His most famous work is entitled *Against Heresies*, fighting Gnosticism.

Tertullian - (160-225)

The "father of Latin theology" and the outstanding apologist of the Western church in the third century. He was born to a Roman centurion on duty in Carthage, Africa. Trained in both Greek and Latin, he would go on to become a proficient lawyer and taught public speaking and practiced law in Rome. It was during this time that he was converted to Christianity. Most famous work: *Apology*

The *Apology* is Tertullian's attempt to show the legal and moral absurdity of the persecution of Christians and argued that they were loyal citizens of the empire. He pointed out that the persecution wasn't

working anyways, as the Christians simply multiply every time the authorities try to come down on them.

His logical Latin mind was devoted to the development of sound theology and to the defeat of all false teaching apposed to Christianity.

He is also said to have been the first person to use the term “New Testament”.

Origen (185-254)

He was student under Clement of Alexandria and the successor to the religious school that Clement founded. Origen’s father was martyred when he was sixteen and he subsequently took over the care for his family of six. According to tradition he wanted to be martyred with his father but his mother hid his clothes so that he had to stay home.

He was a prolific writer who would go on to write some 6,000 which include articles, books, commentaries on books of the Bible, devotionals, sermons, etc.

In spite of having a very wealthy friend who funded his ministry and writing, he lived a simple ascetic life that included fasting for long periods of time, abstaining from wine, restricting his hours of sleep, sleeping on bare boards for a bed, and going barefoot.

Most dramatic for Origen is his taking literally of Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:12 – *“and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”* Matthew 19:12

Yep, he castrated himself out of his zeal to give himself fully to Christ.

Origen would become someone in church history who is synonymous with interpreting the Scriptures allegorically.

“As it was his general practice to allegorize Scripture, it seems unfortunate that in this instance only he should have adopted the literal sense.” Edward Gibbon

Perhaps Origen's greatest contribution to Christian literature is his work entitled *On First Principles* which we have only in its Latin translation. This work is the first Christian treatise of systematic theology.

While there are a lot of good things in this book there are also some errors. Origen taught that Jesus was subordinate to the Father, taught the preexistence of the soul, taught that Christ's death was a ransom to Satan, denied a physical resurrection, denied the existence of a literal hell and believed in universalism – that is that everyone eventually after a time of purgatory will make it to heaven.

As I mentioned a moment ago, Origen is maybe most famous for his **allegorical interpretation** of the bible which would become common for centuries. He certainly didn't invent this method of interpretation but he is most infamous for making it popular.

Allegory means give a word or image "*another sense*" than the obvious meaning.

While there are certainly biblical examples of allegory, Origen took it too far, where virtually everything was said to be what it most naturally meant and a multitude of other things as well.

In 249 Origen was arrested under a new persecution of the church and imprisoned. He was bound in chains, stretched on the rack, and consigned to a dark, dank cell. When the persecution ended he was released, much to his dismay. He wanted to die as a martyr for Christ like his father. But just four years later he would die, likely as a result of the torture that had taken its toll on his body during this imprisonment.

IV. Roman Rule & Persecution

Rome, the superpower of the day was a syncretism of various religions, namely Greek gods combined with the worship of Caesar. As long as you added the worship of Caesar to your religion, you could keep your religion. Of course for most religions were already had a plethora of gods to worship, what was adding one more to keep the peace?

The exception of course were the Jews and Rome had made an exception for them as long as they towed the line with everything else that was asked of them.

In the early days, the Christians were seen as a sect of Judaism and so were largely overlooked by Rome. As time went by, however, the Christians became the target of Roman persecution.

Remember that the Jews largely stayed to themselves and did very little proselytizing. The Christians, however, were a very different breed as they were busy telling everyone they could about Jesus. With the Christian's determination to only worship God and not Caesar, the Romans reacted to stop them.

Why the Christians in particular? Tertullian was quoted as saying, "We have a reputation of living aloof from the crowds."

The word most commonly used in the N.T. to describe Christians? "Saints." The word comes from the Greek word *hagios*, which literally means *holy ones*, or *different*. So a holy thing is different from other things.

Schelly right points out that men always view with suspicion people who are different. "Conformity, not distinctiveness, is the way to a trouble-free life." (pg. 39)

The most distinct thing about the Christians was their rejection of the pagan gods and the subsequent refusal to partake in emperor worship. Pagan religions had rituals to their gods for everything from eating to deals in business. When the Christian refused to partake in these rituals he or she was looked at with suspicion.

"A mason might be involved in building the walls of a heathen temple, a tailor for making robes for a heathen priest, an incense-maker in making incense for the heathen sacrifices. Tertullian even forbade a Christian to be a schoolteacher, because such teaching involved using textbooks that told of the ancient stories of the gods and called for observing the religious festivals of the pagan year.... In short, the early Christian was almost

bound to divorce himself from the social and economic life of his time – if he wanted to be true to his Lord.” (pg. 40)

How is this similar to our challenges today?
(IV. Roman Rule and Persecution slide)

Gladiatorial combats, slavery, views of children and sex in marriage were also areas of contention between the Romans and the Christians.

For hundreds of years it was illegal to be a Christian. Tertullian said, “Public hatred asks but one thing, not the investigation of the crimes charged, but simply the confession of the Christian name.”

Two of the most slanderous charges against early Christians were sexual sins and cannibalism taking place in the worship services. Can you think of where these charges come from?

One other charge against early Christians was the charge of atheism.

The Romans held the view that was and still is so popular today in many cultures, that natural disasters were the result of not pleasing the gods. So, whenever something bad happened, the Christians were the easy targets for the blame.

“If the Tiber floods the city, or if the Nile refuses to rise, or if the sky withholds its rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a pestilence, at once the cry is raised: ‘Christians to the lion.’” Tertullian

(IV. Roman Rule and Persecution slide)

Up until about 249 or 250, persecution of Christianity had been local and sporadic and largely infrequent, usually prompted by local circumstances.

But, as the numbers of Christians would grow so too would the persecution of them.

At the end of the first century there were fewer than ten thousand Christians in the Roman Empire.

By the year 200, that number had jumped to about 200,000.

But, by 250, the number had risen to more than a million, about 2% of the population. Two generations later, by 300, Christians would make up some 10% of the entire population.

Back to 250. By now it's becoming apparent that this movement is not a passing phenomena. The church was attracting people from all walks of life and from all social classes, and its leaders were well educated, cultured, resourceful and articulate.

Under Emperor Decius (249-251) Caesar worship was made a universal mandate in the whole of the Roman Empire. Exception was again made to the Jews but not to the Christians.

On a single day of the year every Roman citizen had to come to the Temple of Caesar, burn incense and say the phrase, "Caesar is Lord." When the citizen had done these he was given a certificate to guarantee that he had done so. After this, the person could go worship whoever he wanted, as long as he did this at least once a year. Obviously, a Christian could not do this and so they were branded as traitors to the State.

Even though Jesus and Paul were so clear on the Christians mandate to honor the State and the Emperor and live as good citizens.

****One issue that would come up in church history is what to do with the Christians that had given in and burned the incense and quoted the phrase in order to get their certificate and stay alive?**

This would be a battleground for the church with some leaders suggesting they have committed the unpardonable sin while others argued for grace and the ability to let them back into the church.

Some took a more middle ground. Some leaders said they would allow entry back into the church by those who had committed apostasy but only after they had been severely tortured. If the person had not been tortured and given in, no go!

Easy for us to say now, but what if your husband or wife or father or mother had just been thrown to the Lions or burned alive for not confessing? This guy gave in, saved his own neck and now says he's sorry and wants back in?

What developed was a doctrine of penance for people to repent of their sins and be brought back into the church.

V. The Saints Come Marching In

It was this in era, the mid-200's when the whole idea of 'saints' being a special class of super-Christians came into existence. The first saints were those men and women who had stood up against the pagan forces and had been martyred for the Faith. Case for good intentions taken too far!

It was Cyprian of Carthage who first mentioned that these 'saints' were given special power from God to dispense to living believers to absolve them of their sins.

Nurse to my mom – “who is your patron saint?”

We will see these themes of penance, special powers given to certain Christians to forgive the sins of others, and the idea of saints, coming back later in the Roman Catholic doctrines of the Treasury of Merit and the practice of indulgences.

Do you see where this is going? The business of forgiveness, the demand for penance, the entrance into the church, is slowly becoming to rest upon the shoulders of men, not God. Going to be a dangerous slide.

VI. A Christian Emperor: Constantine

This first night, we have set the dates from the death of Jesus to 313.

What's so important about 313? Well it all has to do with a Roman Emperor named Constantine

We must mention real fast that just before Constantine comes to power, the Emperor is a man named Diocletian, no friend of Christianity to be sure. It was under Diocletian that he divided the empire into two major divisions one in the west and one in the east. Rome would be administrative center for the western half of the empire and Constantinople would be the capital if you will of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. That would be a prelude of things to come when we see the slit of the church into east and west.

In 306 Constantine came to power and one of his first directives was to stop the widespread persecution restore the right of Christians to worship God.

It was in preparation to fight a battle that history tells us Constantine received his vision of a cross in the sky that affirmed to him that God was on his side and that he was going to win the battle. Tradition tells us that Constantine had his soldiers put this sign on their shields before the battle.

This symbol looked like the **Chi-Rho symbol**, the first two letters of "Christ" in Greek superimposed on each other.

There has been a lot written about the faith of Constantine's mother, Helena and her influence on his faith. We do know that when Constantine was about 40 years old he would publically declare his faith in the God of Christianity. Billy will talk more about him next week.

313 – The Edict of Milan, it was exactly and edict, more of a letter but it did give religious freedoms not only to Christians but others and gave the right of churches to own property.

Constantine would go on to build the **Old St. Paul's Cathedral in Rome and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.**

Slide of tomb

Slide of anointing stone

Summary

So, Christianity has spread rapidly to most of the known world. By 313 there are some one million Christians in the world, making up some 10% of the population in the Roman Empire. They are a force to be reckoned with and now, for now, they are enjoying religious liberties and freedom to worship.

Next week, how will the church fight against the coming heresies and the formulation of the creeds that will unite and divide the church as we know it today.