

Church History I

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Session Two

“The Beginning of the Church” (2)

Introduction

One of the overarching themes of church history is the way Christ has empowered, protected, and preserved his people throughout the ages. We see countless examples of God raising up bold leaders, courageous missionaries, faithful pastors, and fearless church members – each contributing to the mission of preserving and advancing the gospel. We also see numerous examples of how Christ persevered the church through violent attacks, deadly persecution, destructive heresy, and internal division – making good on his promise that “*the gates of hades shall not prevail against it*” (Matt. 16:18). However, another theme we see throughout church history – and biblical history – is the way God takes what is meant for evil and uses it for good (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28). For the past 2000 years, God has not just empowered and protected the church, but has taken what the enemy has meant for evil against it and ironically used it to grow and strengthen the Christian movement. We see many examples of this principle in the early church.

4. Leadership and Growth

- a. **Disciples and Apostles:** While the early church began with 120 believers gathered in prayer on the day of Pentecost, followed by 3000 responding to the gospel through Peter’s sermon, Jesus selected only twelve “apostles” to be ministry leaders and spiritual authorities over the church(es). The word “apostle” (GK, *apostolos*) means “one who is sent,” indicating that these men had received a divine commissioning from Christ to serve in this role. As apostles, they were given the reins of church leadership, the unique ability to perform miracles, and the authority to write Scripture – each of which Christ used to advance the gospel and expand the church.
 - **Requirements:** According to Acts 1:21-25, there were three requirements to receive apostleship: (1) One had to accompany Jesus throughout his ministry until the end; (2) One had to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ; (3) One had to receive a personal call from Jesus. While the word “apostle” has been used generically to describe anyone sent on mission for Christ, the New Testament office is limited to those who meet the biblical qualifications, thus restricting the apostolic office to the first century.
 - **Replacement:** The original twelve apostles had also been Jesus’ twelve disciples, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord by becoming “*a guide to those who arrested Jesus,*” and ending his own life (Acts 1:16). However, in order that Scripture be fulfilled, the number of apostles needed to be twelve, so the eleven casted lots and God

revealed to them that he has selected “*Matthias*” (Acts 1:20-26). It was no coincidence that the apostolic body had twelve members. In the Old Testament, God established Israel with Abraham’s twelve great-grandsons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel. However, in the new covenant, God would establish his people using the leadership of twelve apostles. The Lord is doing something entirely new through the church.

- **Apostles:** The first apostles were Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon, Judas the son of James, and Matthias. As we read about these men in the Gospels, they were very common and average individuals, some with troubled pasts. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen, Matthew was an unethical tax collector, Simon was a “zealot” (political insurrectionist), etc. These men were not among the super religious, like Pharisees, religious leaders, and scribes. However, Christ took those who were common and troubled and used them to build his church. Such grace and mercy is demonstrated throughout church history, especially among leaders.
- **Saul of Tarsus:** The most unlikely man to become an apostle was a highly credentialed pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. We first learn about him at the stoning of Stephen, as one who was ravaging the church and overseeing the murder of Christians. However, in Acts 9, Saul has a supernatural encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, which led him to becoming a follower of Christ and the greatest missionary in world history. Once again, Christ took someone who meant nothing but evil against his church and transformed him into the greatest evangelist and church planter in history – not to mention the author of 13 New Testament books. While Paul did not walk with Jesus throughout his ministry, he no less saw the resurrected Christ and was personally sent by Jesus to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Therefore, Paul was considered an apostle (1 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; etc.).

5. Internal and External Conflict

- a. **External Conflict:** After seeing 3000 saved and baptized on the day of Pentecost, and the church growing in godliness and fellowship, one would think that nothing could get in the way. However, the same Jewish leaders who were jealous of Jesus’ ministry now turned their anger toward the local church. Acts reports that Peter and John were arrested and imprisoned numerous times, being told to stop proclaiming the name of Jesus. However, such conflict ironically fueled the churches vast growth. Local believers found themselves praying for their leaders, asking God to give them boldness. Peter famously said, “*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:19-20). The Lord gave the apostles a fearless spirit (Acts 4:31), miraculously opening prison doors (Acts 5:19), raising up opposing leaders to stand in their defense (Acts 5:33ff), and converting more and more through their preaching and witness, even Jewish priests! (Acts 6:7). Such persecution would continue throughout the book of Acts, especially as Paul makes his missionary journeys. However, as we will see throughout the rest of church history, persecution is a continued reality for God’s people, but Christ seems to advance the church the most during intense persecution.
- b. **Internal Conflict:** Not long after the church began receiving resistance from the outside, the enemy began targeting the church from the inside.

- **Ananias and Sapphira:** Following Barnabas' generous gift to the church, where he "*sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet*" (Acts 4:37), a married couple inside the church became tempted to do something to receive similar admiration – but without the sacrifice. Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property, but unlike Barnabas, they "*kept back for themselves some of the proceeds,*" while claiming to have given it all to the Lord (Acts 5:1ff). For a moment the people were very impressed, but God was not. The Holy Spirit revealed to Peter that both had sinned, so Peter confronted each of them and the Lord put them to death. They were not only guilty of being dishonest, but had "*lied to the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 5:3), which was a capital offense. Why would the Lord put them to death over something like this? Luke tells us, "*Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things*" (Acts 5:11). In other words, God was letting it be known from the beginning that he would only have a pure church. Such an act of discipline put everyone else on notice that holy living was expected, which in turn allowed the church to continue being filled with the Holy Spirit, leading to unbelievable growth. We will see throughout church history that God doesn't tolerate sin among his people, and will remove churches that intentionally disobey the teaching of Scripture (Rev. 2-3).
- **Hellenist Controversy:** Another internal controversy broke out among two Jewish groups within the church, the "Hebrews" and the "Hellenists." While both of these groups were Jewish, they came from different backgrounds. The "Hebrews" were brought up in Israel, the native homeland of the Jewish people for centuries. These Jews considered themselves to be more authentic and conservative, what we might call "locals." The "Hellenists" (GK. "*Hellas*" means "Greece") were Jews that had Greek backgrounds, raised in other areas where Greek culture dominated. They spoke the Greek language, were educated in Greek philosophy, literature, and science, and felt more cultured and civilized than the "Hebrews." The Hellenistic Jews joined the church after arriving from their homelands during Pentecost. While both considered themselves as members of the same church, a cultural divide kept them from having pure fellowship. Such a divide became visible when some of the Hellenists began complaining and accusing the apostles of "*neglecting*" their widows in "*the daily distribution*" of food and materials (Acts 6:1-3). However, it wasn't really a matter of favoritism as it was ministry capacity. If the apostles were to serve everyone in this growing church, they wouldn't have time to pray and prepare for preaching and teaching. Therefore, God led them to establish what later became known as the deacon ministry (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The church chose "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to serve the church in practical ways. These men included Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus – which were all Greek names, indicating they belonged to the "Hellenist" group. God's solution to this controversy accomplished at least two things: (1) It restored order in the church and set the stage for the deacon ministry, which continues to operate in churches today; (2) These "Hellenist" leaders, who were versed in Greek culture, would be among the first Christian leaders and missionaries to take the gospel outside of Jerusalem to the world. Philip would soon lead the "*Ethiopian Eunuch*" to faith (Acts 8:26ff).

6. Missionary Expansion: Judea, Samaria, and the End of the Earth

- a. **Leaving Jerusalem:** After Stephen was stoned to death, becoming the first “martyr” (Acts 7), Luke writes, “*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles....now those who were scattered went about preaching the word...Philip went down to a city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ*” (Acts 8:1-5). Just as Jesus said in Acts 1:8, the gospel would travel in great power to Judea and Samaria. Churches were planted in Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, Cyrene, among other places, and it was in Antioch that “*the disciples were first called Christians*” (Acts 11:26; In Latin, a plural word ending with *-iani* could describe troops of a particular general, so “Christians” most likely meant “Christ’s men” or “Followers of Christ;” others have claimed it meant “little Christ’s”).
- b. **Gentile Inclusion:** Another major transition came when Peter was on a housetop praying and fell into a trance, where he “*saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth...in it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air...and there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” After giving the typical Jewish response that such meat is “unclean,” God told him three times, “What God has made clean, do not call common*” (Acts 10:9ff). We later see that God was telling Peter to evangelize the Gentiles and include them in the church, and we see Cornelius, a Roman centurion, come to faith in Christ. Following this event, the gospel was on its way to “*the end of the earth,*” as Paul and Barnabas would be sent out by the church at Antioch on what would be known as “Paul’s First Missionary Journey” – the first of at least three journeys (perhaps more), where he would take the gospel around the Mediterranean, reaching Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Italy, and some believe Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28). Paul would plant or assist churches in places like Ephesus, Rome, Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, and Galatia – and he would suffer like no other. Nick Needham writes, “*Next after Jesus himself, Paul has had the greatest historical impact on the life and thought of the Christian Church over the past 2,000 years.*” And while this is certainly true, González is quick to point out that “*the missionary task itself was undertaken, not only by Paul and others, but also by countless and nameless Christians who went from place to place taking with them their faith and their witness...they were merchants, slaves, and others who traveled for various reasons, but whose travel provided the opportunity for the expansion of the Christian message*” (26-27).
- c. **Pax Romana:** Why did God do this incredible work at this point in history? During this era, the Roman Empire was experiencing a time called the “Pax Romana,” which refers to a unique peace that existed throughout the massive empire from 27 B.C. to 180 A.D. During this time: (1) people could travel throughout the empire on incredible roads, without fear of bandits or foreign enemies; (2) the Greek language was spoken everywhere, along with Greek customs and culture; (3) business trade was booming, which meant that people were traveling throughout the region; (4) philosophies and religions were openly discussed and learned. What does all of this mean? In God’s providence, the church began during a time when extensive travel, common language, and religious liberty were the norm, thus enabling the gospel to reach distant places like no time in previous history.

7. Theological Revelation

- a. **New Testament:** As Peter, Paul, and many others were planting churches and evangelizing the masses, the eyewitness accounts of Christ (Gospels) and the letters written to the churches (Epistles) would later become the majority of the New Testament. While some of these letters were written to address major problems in the churches, God has used his revealed teaching to bless churches throughout the centuries. Our church today is a product of this early missionary travel and the teachings of Scripture.