

Church History I

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Session Four

“Life in the Early Church”

Introduction

Throughout church history, there has been a deep fascination with getting back to what spiritual life was like in the days of the early church (i.e., AD 33-95). Many have romanticized the earliest days due to a sense of freshness and purity that dominated in the beginning before all the negative influences, false teachings, distortions and divisions came in later generations. While this is understandable, we must be careful about describing the early church in completely idealistic terms. For example, although there is much to admire about the church in Jerusalem, could we say the same about churches in Corinth and Galatia? Were the earliest practices a strict following of biblical teaching, or were some merely based on the culture of the first century, which may no longer be relevant today? Other such questions must be asked. However, there is a major benefit from learning about life and ministry in the early church. After all, while these churches were not perfect, they were still closest in historical proximity to Christ, the apostles, and “apostolic fathers” (church leaders who followed the apostles; AD 95-140). So, what we learn about in these generations should be a good source of wisdom for what Jesus expects of his church throughout all generations – but ultimately, Scripture triumphs over any tradition.

A. Primary Sources

1. **The Letter of Clement** (AD 96) – Clement served as an elder (presbyter) in the early church and later became the Bishop of Rome (AD ~88-97). It’s believed that he was ordained by the Apostle Peter, although he wouldn’t have succeeded Peter directly in leadership. He is best known for a letter he sent to the church at Corinth, where he was trying to settle a dispute between the older and younger generations, giving us a great understanding of church order in the first century. He taught that rebellion against faithful church leaders was rebellion against Christ.
2. **The Letters of Ignatius** (AD 110) – Ignatius served as the Bishop of Antioch near the beginning of the second century. While journeying to Rome after being arrested, he wrote seven letters sent to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, Smyrna, Rome, and a personal letter to Polycarp. In these letters, he highly urged the supreme importance of unity and purity in the local church.
3. **The Didache** (AD 100) – The *Didache* (pron. “did-a-kee”) is an anonymous work named after the Greek word for “teaching,” and it is the oldest surviving church handbook or manual. The title is a shortened form of the full title, “*The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations.*” While many church fathers, such as Athanasius of Alexandria, considered it to be a valuable guide to Christian ministry, it was not deemed as inspired or

authoritative, and should not be included in the New Testament canon. It is divided into two sections: Part One concerns doctrinal teachings in the church, contrasting “*The Way of Life*” and “*The Way of Death*,” and Part Two discusses practical issues, such as baptism, prayer, fasting, the Lord’s Supper, church leadership, and how to handle visiting prophets.

4. **The Letter of Barnabas** (AD 120) – This letter was written as an essay on how to interpret the Old Testament in a Christian way. Some have noted its anti-Jewish nature and tone, criticizing the Jews for misunderstanding the Old Testament and failing to believe. It reveals that by the beginning of the second century, most Christians understood “the Jews” as nothing more than those who had crucified Christ and continued to reject him – “*a lost, blind people*” (Needham, 66). This letter produced years of hostility from Christians toward Jews.
5. **The Shepherd of Hermas** (AD 100-140) – Most believe this letter was written from Rome by a Christian prophet named Hermas. He claimed to have received a series of revelations from two heavenly figures, an older woman and an angel dressed as a shepherd. The letter’s main emphasis was the moral purity of the church in light of Christ’s return.
6. **The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians** (AD 110) – Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey). His letter to the Philippians has been noted as the best source from the apostolic fathers for what typical life was like in the churches.
7. **The Letter to Diognetus** (AD 100-150) – This letter is totally anonymous, and no one knows who Diognetus was. However, it was written to show the falsehood of Paganism and Judaism, and the superior teaching of Christianity. According to Needham, “*many readers have found it to be the most notable and beautiful of all Christian writings from this earliest period*” (67).

B. Practices and Teachings

1. Church Structure

- a. **Issue:** Following the deaths of the apostles, the early church debated the same question that believers continue to wrestle today – “*Who should lead the church?*” The answer to this question is still not fully settled, as there are many Christian denominations and churches that continue to disagree. However, we do have examples of how church order was understood in some of the earliest writings following the New Testament.
- b. **Order:** Following the apostolic age (AD 90-100), it was widely accepted that the church had two primary offices – (1) Bishop/Elder/Pastor and (2) Deacon.

“As [the apostles] were preaching throughout countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits of their labors, having first proven them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe. This was not a new thing, since indeed many ages before it had been written concerning bishops and deacons. In a certain passage, the Scripture says, ‘I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.’” – **First Clement**, Chapter 42

- **Bishop/Elder/Pastor:** While three different words are used in the New Testament for “bishop” (*episkopos*), “elder” (*presbuteros*), and “pastor” (*poimainō*), these titles appear to be interchangeable, describing the same role within the church. In the *Letter of Clement*, “bishop” (overseer) and “elder” (presbyter) are used identically. Each church had a plurality of male leaders, who were responsible for the overall leadership of the church, which included leading worship services, preaching and teaching, administering church discipline, ordaining pastors and deacons, performing baptisms, and serving communion.
 - **Deacon:** While very little was written about the roles of deacons in the early church, there is evidence that deacons were spiritual leaders who were responsible for taking care of important practical needs – visiting the sick, distributing food, clothing, and other necessities of life to the less fortunate members of the congregation, and assisting the bishop/elders/pastors in the worship service, primarily in the Lord’s Supper, where they distributed the bread and wine (Needham, 70). This role remained true to the decision presented in Acts 6, which may have been the creation of the deacon ministry.
 - **Congregation:** It should not be overlooked that the congregations had a role in church order. Clement later writes that future bishops/elders/pastors should be “*appointed by [current bishops/elders/pastors], or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church*” (*First Clement*, Chapter 44; cf. Acts 6:5). Therefore, it appears that the early churches were led by bishops/elders/pastors, served by deacons, and approved by congregations.
- c. **Debate:** However, there appears to be a slight discrepancy found in the writings of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch. In his “*Letter to Smyrna*,” he describes a single “bishop” as the primary leader of the church, followed by a body of “presbyters” (elders), which assist him in leading and caring for the spiritual needs of the congregation. Ignatius writes, “*Shun divisions as the beginning of evil. Follow your bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow your presbyters as the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would respect God’s commandment. Let no-one do anything in the church apart from the bishop...where the bishop is present, there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Church*” (Letter to Smyrna). In the *Letter to the Trallians*, Ignatius writes, “*Be subject to the bishop as to the Lord, for ‘he watches for your souls, as one that shall give an account to God’... It is therefore necessary, whatever you do, to do nothing without the bishop. And be subject to the presbytery, as to the apostles of Jesus Christ, who is our hope, in whom, if we live, we shall be found in him.*” So, the model of leadership he presents is a body of elders, with one elder being elevated to the highest authority, which he calls the “bishop.” However, many have understood this designation to be more practical than theological.
- **Bishop/Elders:** Most likely, the elders designated one among them to the role of “bishop,” who would preside over them as a “first among equals” (chairman of the board, etc.). Some believe this model was adopted from Judaism, where a body of Jewish elders was led by one senior elder, known as “president” or “ruler of the synagogue” (cf. Acts 18:8). As the church advanced through the centuries, it’s believed that even though all

elders/presbyters were technically “bishops,” the title “bishop” was only given to this lead elder/presbyter. In the fourth century, the church father Jerome explains that bishops and elders/presbyters were originally the same office, as noted in the New Testament. However, in an effort to maintain good order in the church, the need arose for one person to take the lead, to preside over the others.

- **Jerome:** In his “*Letter to Evangelus*,” Jerome writes, “*The apostle [Paul] teaches clearly that presbyters and bishops are identical... When in later times one presbyter was selected as president over the rest, this was to guard against schism and to prevent each individual from splitting Christ’s church by attaching it to himself. Even at Alexandria...the presbyters always chose one of their own number as bishop, elected by themselves and set in a higher position, as an army elects a general, or as deacons set apart a fellow deacon whom they know to be a faithful worker, calling him archdeacon*” (Letter 146).
- **Limited Authority:** But while every local church had its own bishop, no single bishop had authority over any other church. In his *Letter to the Trallians*, Ignatius never claimed apostolic authority, but rather made clear, “*I do not issue orders like an apostle*” (Chapter 3). He believed that authority rested with the bishop of each church, which is an important development in terms of the autonomy of the local church.

2. Church Teaching

- a. **Foundation:** According to Needham, “*In the age of the apostolic fathers, the Church had an extremely narrow, conservative, traditional attitude towards doctrine. Christians teachers tended simply to repeat what the New Testament says*” (71). Such teaching was important to not only instruct and encourage the congregation, but to guard the truth against false doctrine.
- b. **Practice:** The central element of the Christian worship service was the reading and preaching of the Word, the exposition of the Scriptures, which was delivered by the bishops/elders/pastors. However, the worship service wasn’t the only occasion for teaching. The churches would offer classes (catechumens), evangelistic lessons in public, and one-on-one discipleship sessions. Many sermons were transcribed for those who couldn’t be present, and other sermons were repeated by preachers in various places. It wasn’t uncommon for pastors to invite itinerate preachers to preach in their churches.

3. Church Worship

- a. **Typical Worship Service:** Worship services were held on Sundays (“The Lord’s Day”) and lasted for up to three hours, with people normally standing the whole time. When people would pray, they would spread out their arms with palms turned upwards, keeping their eyes open, looking upwards to heaven. The sermon would be given by the bishop from a sitting posture.

“On the day called Sabbath there is a meeting of all believers who live in the town or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read for as long as time will permit. When the reader is finished, the president in a sermon urges and invites the people to base their lives on these noble things. Then we all stand up and offer prayers. When our prayer is concluded, bread and wine and water are brought; and the president offers up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the people assent with Amen. Then follows the distribution of the things over which thanks have been offered, and the partaking of them by all; and the deacons take them to those who are absent... We hold our common assembly on Sunday because it is the first day of the week, on which God put to flight darkness and chaos and made the world; and on the same day, Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead” (Justin Martyr, First Apology)

- **Part One: Service of the Word** – (1) Opening greeting by the bishop and a response by the congregation; (2) An Old Testament passage was read or chanted by a deacon; (3) Singing was not a part of every congregation’s worship (noticeably absent from Justin Martyr’s account), but where it was practiced, a psalm or hymn was sung or chanted, usually by an elder, and the congregation would often respond with an “Amen” or “Alleluia,” or a scripted response, or a chorus. Musical instruments didn’t appear until many centuries later, mainly because they were closely associated with Jewish or pagan worship; (4) A New Testament passage selected from Acts to Revelation would be read or chanted; (5) A second psalm or hymn; (6) A New Testament passage from one of the four Gospels would be read; (7) A sermon would be given by the bishop, who applied the passage to everyday life; (8) Everyone was dismissed except for baptized believers.
- **Part Two: The Eucharist** – (1) This part would begin with the bishop announcing a topic for prayer. The congregation would then pray silently. The bishop could conclude with a spoken prayer. Then the bishop would announce another topic, and the cycle would continue for a while; (2) Communion would begin with a greeting by the bishop, followed by a “kiss of peace” – men to men, women to women. Then each church member presented a flask of wine and a small loaf of bread, in which the deacons received and gathered into one cup and serving tray. The bishop would offer prayer, followed by the elders and deacons breaking the loaves, then serving the bread and wine to the congregation. As each member would come up to receive the bread and wine, a gospel reminder and blessing would be said over each; (3) Finally, a benediction was offered by a deacon, and everyone departed in peace.

4. Church Witness

- a. **Holiness:** While members of the early church lived in pagan communities, they were very disciplined to not engage with cultural practices. Christians would not take part in state occasions, holidays, or social practices. Believers avoided public entertainment, such as the circus, theatre, and gladiatorial events, mainly because severe violence, ungodliness, and sexual immorality were viewed as entertaining. Christians even avoided Roman hospitals because pagan priests were employed to pray over patients. Believers also rejected the widespread Roman practices of abortion, infanticide, and divorce. These positions led to massive persecution, but also a life of obedience unto Christ.