

KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (1)

The Early Church (AD70-312) - Growth

A. Introduction

1. What is church history?

"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

The command of making disciples, which Jesus gave to His followers, involved them taking the good news of Jesus to places where it was not known and teaching His followers to obey Him.

Church history is the story of how this has happened.

2. Why bother with church history?

Three great reasons for studying church history:

Instruction – the difficulties and circumstances we face today are not new and we can look to the past to learn from where believers have acted wisely in these situations and where believers have acted foolishly.

"Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you." (Deuteronomy 32:7)

Worship – when we see all God has done through His church it should lead us to praise Him for His faithfulness.

"Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness." (Psalm 150:1-2)

Confidence – Jesus is keeping His promise to build His church.

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:18)

3. The Early Church is a period of church history between two significant events.

The Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Edict of Milan in AD313.

The Fall of Jerusalem separated Christianity from its Jewish roots.

The Edict of Milan, after Constantine became Emperor of the western part of Roman Empire, granted religious freedom to Christians, and was the start of a process that would lead to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Empire.

4. Two things we see happen during the time of the early church:

We see how the early church went about making disciples of all nations.

"Though the learning and power of the Roman Empire was so great, and both were employed to the utmost against Christianity, yet all was in vain. They could neither root it out, nor stop its progress." (Jonathan Edwards)

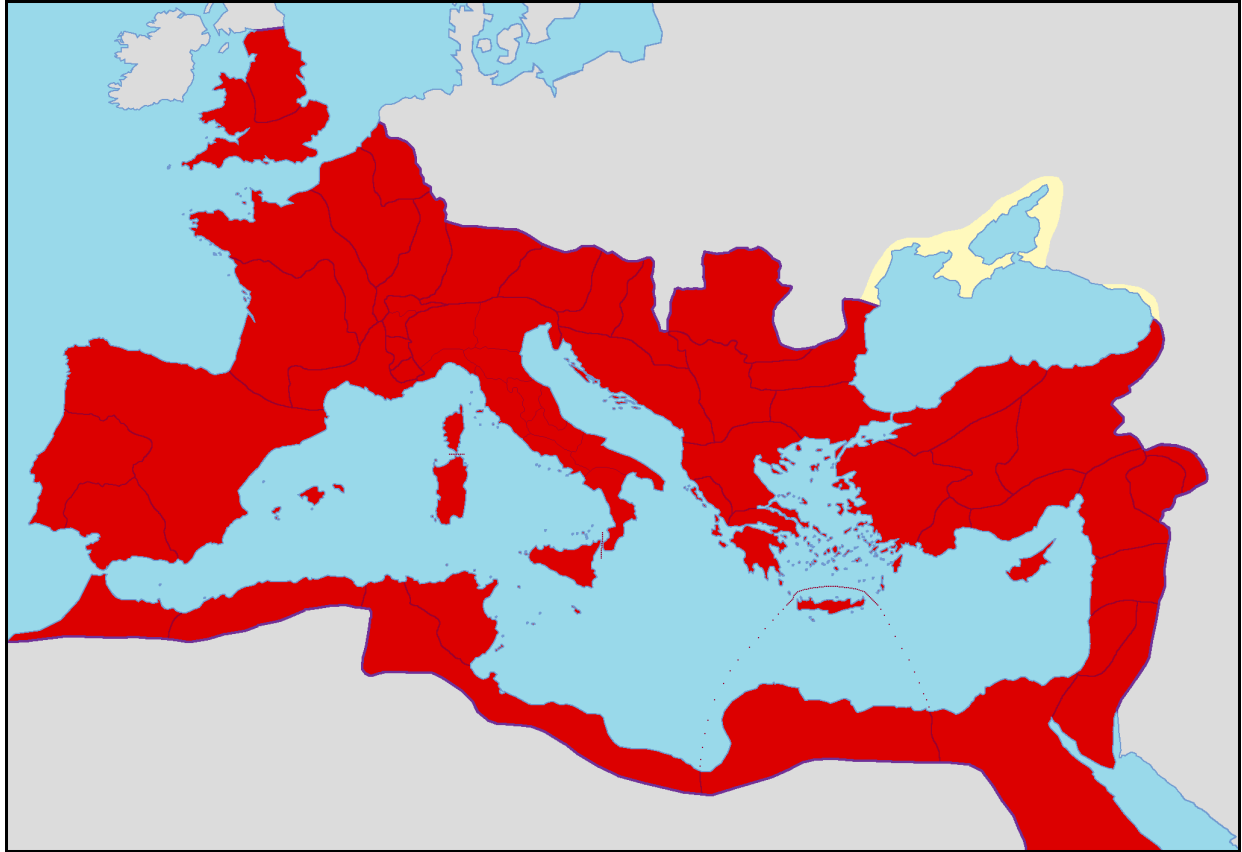
"We have filled all that belongs to you – the cities, the fortresses, the free towns, the very camps, the palace, the senate, the forum. We leave [empty] only the [pagan] temples." (Tertullian)

We also see how the early church sought to obey everything Jesus had commanded.

B. Why did the early church grow?

1. The Roman Empire was beneficial for the spread of the gospel.

The Roman Empire at the time of the early church controlled the whole of the Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.



Pax Romana (peace of Rome) established by Caesar Augustus (27BC to AD14) meant that movement within the Empire was safe.

Roman Roads designed for transporting soldiers made travel easier.

The trade network of the Empire bound together the coastal cities of Europe and where trade went the gospel went.

Greek Language was common throughout the Roman Empire (either as first or second language) so wherever the disciples went, they could communicate with some of the locals.

2. The scattering of Jews throughout the Empire (Diaspora) provided an initial entry point for the gospel.

Sizable Jewish communities could be found in every major city and trading centre. The synagogues in these places provided a base of operations for Christian evangelists.

Many of the scattered Jews did not understand Hebrew, so there was a need for the Old Testament Scriptures to be translated into Greek. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) provided a tool for Christians evangelists to use.

Where these Jewish communities were found, there were also God-fearers (Gentile converts to Judaism who had attached themselves to a local synagogue but had refused to be circumcised). For them, to have a relationship with the God of Israel without having to be circumcised was appealing.

3. The gospel was and still is for all people.

"Because Christians admit that ignorant people are worthy of their God, Christians show that they want and can convert only foolish, dishonourable, stupid people, and only slaves, women, and little children." (Celsus)

Anyone, regardless of race, class, or sex, could become a Christian by repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

4. Christians lived attractive lives.

"Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of these Christians as their charity to strangers, the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor but for ours as well." (Julian the Apostate, Letter to Arsacius)

The lives of Christians who had been transformed by the gospel were attractive.

"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." (1 Peter 2:11-12)

Christians were known and admired for their kindness, hospitality, generosity and morality.

5. Christians offered hope for the future.

The gospel gave clear answers about what happens after death, and promised eternal life.

"This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Timothy 1:9-10)

6. Christians died well.

"We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed." (Tertullian)

The witness of those who were martyred for their faith could not be ignored.

7. Ordinary Christians preached the gospel.

"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." (Acts 8:4)

"Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus." (Acts 11:20)

C. What was the early church like?

1. The snapshot we have of life in the early church, gives us a window into how they went about seeking to obey everything Jesus had command.

"And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:20)

What did they do?

2. They gathered to worship.

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:25)

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.” (Justin Martyr)

These services took place mostly in homes – buildings didn’t appear until the early 200s.

There were two parts to the service:

The first part (Service of the Word) was open to baptised believers, those receiving instruction about the Christian faith, and those simply curious about Christianity.

It included four elements – Scripture Reading, Sermon, Prayer and Singing.

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” (1 Timothy 4:13)

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.” (1 Timothy 2:1)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

The second part (Service of the Table) was only for those who had been baptised – the deacons would ask anyone who had not been baptised to leave.

In some cases this dismissal was marked by a formal closing of the doors that recalled God’s closing of the door on the Ark.

They would then celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)

“Do not let anyone eat or drink of your eucharist except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord. For the statement of the Lord applies here also: Do not give to dogs what is holy.” (Didache)

3. They baptised.

“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

Until the 3rd century only believers were baptised.

Between conversion and baptism was a period of instruction or catechising that took between 2 to 3 years. This was to make sure that the people were actually Christians and not government spies, but also to make sure the people actually understood what they believed.

Baptism was by immersion or pouring.

"Concerning baptism, baptise in this way. After you have spoken all these things, "baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," in running water. If you do not have running water, baptise in other water. If you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you do not have either, pour out water three times on the head "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Before the baptism the one baptising and the one being baptised are to fast, and any others who are able. Command the one being baptised to fast beforehand a day or two." (Didache)

However the early church was unsure about what baptism did. Did it declare that the person's sins had been forgiven because of their faith in Jesus or did it actually forgive sins? This led to people delaying their baptism to just before they died and questions about what was to be done about sins committed after baptism.

4. They were instructed in doctrine.

"Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor." (Galatians 6:6)

Catechesis was feature of the early church.

It was the church's ministry of grounding new believers in the essentials of Christianity and prepared them for baptism.

It was necessary because increasingly those who came to faith in Jesus, came with little knowledge of the Bible.

"The Christian faith must be both well and wisely taught and well and truly learned!" (JI Packer & Gary Parrett)

5. They cared for one another.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2:44-45)

They looked after their persecuted members in prison.

They looked after their needy members – widows, orphans, exceptionally poor, the lame, and elderly.

6. They appointed leaders.

Each local church appointed both elders and deacons to lead them – the early church was made up of local independent churches.

"Therefore appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money, who are true and approved, because they also perform the service of prophets and teachers to you. Do not despise them, for they are worthy of honour alongside prophets and teachers." (Didache)

Elders (presbyters, bishops) provided leadership, teaching and discipline.

"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." (1 Timothy 5:17)

Deacons were responsible for visiting the sick and distributing food, clothing and other necessities of life to the poor members of the congregation.

"So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them." (Acts 6:2-3)

Within the elders, like in the Jewish synagogue, there was a first among equals, who was the official teacher of the church because of their preaching ability.

“Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” (Luke 13:14)

“Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised.” (Acts 18:8)

This role over time evolved into the office of bishop and became a third office, distinct from the elders.

By AD180 this pattern of church leadership – bishop, elders, deacons – was universally accepted by the church.

7. Two dangers threatened to halt the progress of the early church and could have potentially destroyed it.

D. What lessons can we learn for today?

1. Evangelism was doing by ordinary Christians telling the gospel.
2. Church Services were simple: Read the Bible, Preach the Bible, Pray the Bible, Sing the Bible, See the Bible.
3. The importance of teaching and instructing believers.
4. Caring for one another is vital and a witness to the world.
5. Being an independent church is not a new thing – it is a biblical thing.