

## **KNOW YOUR CHURCH HISTORY (3)**

### **The Early Church (AD70-312) – False Teaching**

#### **A. Introduction**

1. The Early Church is period of church history between two significant events: The Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and the Edict of Milan in AD313.

During this time we see the early church make new disciples of Jesus as ordinary unnamed believers preached the gospel to unbelievers.

We also see how the early church helped believers to obey everything Jesus had commanded as local churches gathered for worship and to celebrate the Lord's Supper, baptised new disciples, instructed them in doctrine, cared for one another, and appointed leaders.

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

The first of these dangers was persecution.

Christians were persecuted both by the Jews and also by the Roman Empire.

But, the Lord preserved His church during this time of severe testing.

3. The other danger that threatened to destroy the church was false teaching.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them." (Matthew 7:15-16)

"For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." (Jude 4)

From the very beginning Christians have had to deal with false teaching.

4. Why was false teaching so dangerous?

It created a crisis of identity for the Christians because these new groups that appeared were claiming that they, not the church, were the true people of God.

It confused the pagans about who the real Christians were and what they believed.

Could it be that where persecution failed, heresy will succeed?

#### **B. What false teaching threatened the early church?**

1. Ebionism – denied the deity of Christ.

The Ebionites denied that Jesus was God in the flesh. They said he was the supreme prophet, the one man who perfectly obeyed God's law, who became the Son of God by adoption at baptism, and who will return as the heavenly Son of Man.

The Ebionites stressed the keeping of the Old Testament law as a way of life.

2. Gnosticism – denied the humanity of Christ.

The Gnostics claimed to possess a secret knowledge (gnosis) of spiritual truth that was not available to ordinary Christians.

The secret knowledge concerned the true way of salvation that Jesus had privately taught to His apostles and had been handed down to them.

Salvation was not rescue from sin and death and reconciliation to God, but escaping from the body that holds us prisoner.

The Gnostics believed that Christ never became flesh. They said Christ was a spirit that temporarily possessed an ordinary human being named Jesus at his baptism, spoke through him, and left him at his crucifixion.

There were a number of different Gnostic groups.

### 3. Marcionism – removed books from Scripture.

Marcion, a prominent gnostic who became the supreme heretic in the eyes of the early church, recognised that some of the texts the early church recognised as God's Word challenged his teaching.

His solution was to create a list of authoritative books (his own Bible), removing any that undermined what he believed.

Only 11 books made his list – an edited version of Luke's Gospel and 10 of the apostle Paul's letters.

### 4. Montanism – added books to Scripture.

During the second century, a group of believers appeared, known as the Montanists, who claimed the Holy Spirit was speaking in a new way to the church directly through them.

They prophesised that the second coming of Christ was near and in the light of this, Christians should embrace a radical self-denial of physical pleasures.

Visions, revelatory dreams, speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances of predictions and other extraordinary religious experiences were a common occurrence amongst the Montanists.

The Montanists accepted the texts the early church recognised as God's Word, but they believed that Scripture was continuing to grow with new revelations being added.

### 5. The early church faced false teaching that attacked two areas of the Christian faith.

Who is Jesus?

The Ebionites were saying that Jesus was not fully God, and the Gnostics were saying that Jesus was not fully man.

"Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No-one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also." (1 John 2:22-23)

What is Scripture?

The Marcionites were removing accepted books from Scripture and the Montanists were adding unacceptable books into Scripture.

"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." (Revelation 22:18-19)

## **C. How did the early church respond to false teaching?**

### 1. Canon – Which writings do we obey?

The word 'canon' means measuring stick. A canonical book is one that measures up to the standard required for it to be considered as being the Word of God.

With the apostles now dead and heretics formulating canons of their own, the early church needed to know which books were God's Word and which books were not.

- a) They needed to know which books contained the message of the Apostles.
- b) They needed to know which books should be read out in the churches.
- c) They needed to know which books contained the truth and could be used to answer error.
- d) They needed to know which books they should die for when possession resulted in martyrdom.

By the time of the early church the Hebrew Scriptures was accepted as God's Word, and apart from Marcion, there was never any debate about this.

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

But of the Christian writings, which should be included as being part of the canon of Scripture?

- a) It had to be written by an apostle or a close friend of an apostle. The people most likely to tell the truth about Jesus were either eyewitnesses who had encountered the risen Jesus personally or close associates of them.
- b) It had to be in agreement with the books already accepted into the canon.
- c) It had to be functioning as Scripture widely within the church already. It was already recognised as God's Word by Christians throughout the world.

Although the official list of books in the New Testament did not appear until the council of Hippo in 393, they were agreed long before then.

Irenaeus (AD180) quoted from most of the New Testament canon. His writings do not refer to Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John and Jude. He clearly recognised that there were only 4 gospels.

*"Matthew also published a gospel in writing among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter & Paul were preaching the gospel and founding the church in Rome. But after their death, Mark, the disciple & interpreter of Peter, also transmitted to us in writing what Peter used to preach. And Luke, Paul's associate, also set down in a book the gospel that Paul used to preach. Later, John, the Lord's disciple – the one who lay on his lap – also set out the gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia Minor." (Irenaeus, Against Heresies)*

*"The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has four pillars, everywhere breathing out incorruption and revivifying men. From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit. As David said, when asking for his coming, 'O sinner upon the cherubim, show yourself'. For the cherubim have four faces, and their faces are images of the activity of the Son of God. For the first living creature, it says, was like a lion, signifying his active and princely and royal character; the second was like an ox, showing his sacrificial and priestly order; the third had the face of a man, indicating very clearly his coming in human guise; and the fourth was like a flying eagle, making plain the giving of the Spirit who broods over the Church. Now the Gospels, in which Christ is enthroned, are like these." (Irenaeus, Against Heresies)*

The Muratorian Canon showed that by the year 200 there existed a list of Christian writings that included the four Gospels; Acts; letters of Paul to seven churches; letters of Paul to Philemon, Titus and Timothy; Jude, 1,2, and 3 John; and the Apocalypse of John. Listed also were some books that would be removed from the final agreed canon.

Origen (250) listed all 27 books in the New Testament, though he admits there are some that are disputed.

Eusebius in Ecclesiastical History (completed 324) classified all the writings into four categories.

i) Homologoumena (recognised):

*"...the holy quaternion of the Gospels, which are followed by the book of the Acts of the Apostles. After this must be reckoned the Epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former Epistle of John, and likewise the Epistle of Peter must be recognised. After these must be put, if it really seems right, the Apocalypse of John..."*

ii) Antilegomena (disputed):

*"Of the disputed books, which are nevertheless familiar to the majority, there are extant the Epistle of James, as it is called; and that of Jude; and the second Epistle of Peter; and those that are called the Second and Third of John..."*

iii) Notha (spurious):

*"...the Acts of Paul, and the Shepherd, as it is called, and the Apocalypse of Peter; and, in addition to these, the extant Epistle of Barnabas, and the Teaching of the Apostles [Didache], as it is called. And, in addition, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem right... And among these some have counted also the Gospel of the Hebrews..."*

iv) Heretical:

*"...such books as the Gospels of Peter, of Thomas, of Matthias, or even of some others besides these, and the Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles."*

Athanasius (367) gave a clear acknowledgement of the New Testament canon.

*"Again, it is not tedious to speak of the books of the New Testament. These are: the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. After these, The Acts of the Apostles, and the seven epistles called Catholic: of James, one; of Peter, two, of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen epistles of Paul the apostle, written in this order: the first, to the Romans; then, two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians, then, to the Philippians; then, to the Colossians; after these, two of the Thessalonians; and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John... But for the sake of greater exactness I add this also, writing under obligation, as it were. There are other books besides these, indeed not received as canonical but having been appointed by our fathers to be read to those just approaching and wishing to be instructed in the word of godliness: Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being merely read; nor is there any place a mention of secret writings." (Athanasius, Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle)*

The early church agreed that the 27 books in the New Testament plus the Old Testament were God's inspired and authoritative Word and were to be obeyed.

## 2. Creed – What must we believe?

Church leaders began to set out short statements that summed up for Christians what the Scriptures taught on major subjects and helped them understand how what they believed differed from the false teaching.

*"The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, "every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess" to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send "spiritual wickednesses," and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together*

*with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies)*

*“Do you believe in God the Father, Ruler of all? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, God’s Son, who was born by the Holy Spirit through the virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and rose again on the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, sat at the Father’s right hand, and will come again to judge the living and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?” (Apostolike Paradosis)*

### 3. Bishops – Who should protect our teaching?

At the start of the second century, the church was responsible for protecting the apostle’s teaching.

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude 3)

After the role of ‘first among equals’ within the eldership evolved into the office of bishop, the next step was for the responsibilities of the bishop to extend from looking after a local church to looking after all the believers within a city and then a whole region.

As bishops became responsible for nurturing God’s children in a region, they began calling one another “popes” (Latin for fathers).

Why did the structure of the church change?

To protect the apostle’s teaching in the face of heresy.

Gnostics and other false teachers often tried to trace their traditions back to an apostle.

In response the bishops showed that in fact it was their beliefs and teaching that could be traced back to the apostles. Often specifically to an apostle who may have lived in or passed through the cities they had responsibility over.

With this, came the idea of apostolic succession, which not only would include holding the faith which the apostles had taught, but also being ordained by bishops who could trace their own ordination back to the apostles.

In addition to this, it soon became normal for Christians to look to the church in Rome (where both Peter and Paul were based at one time) for leadership, in the same way that Roman citizens would look to Rome for direction.

*“With [the Church of Rome], because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree... and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies)*

### 4. Catholic – Who is the true church?

The early church began calling itself the ‘catholic’ church.

Catholic means “universal” or “throughout the world”.

The name expressed the unity of their common faith and distinguished them from the Gnostics and other heretical groups.

## **D. What lessons can we learn for today?**

### 1. False teaching is to be taken seriously.

In the time of the early church, false teaching was not tolerated and local churches and local church leaders joined together to fight against it.

Could it be that one of the reasons that false teaching is so rampant today (i.e. prosperity gospel) is because the church has not been vocal enough in opposing it and has spent too much time in recent years fighting with one another over secondary issues (i.e. baptism)?

2. We must not add or depart from the Bible because when we do the results will ultimately be disastrous.

By creating this hierarchical role of bishop, the early church added to Scripture. Even though it originally was a response to the pastoral need of protecting the apostle's teaching, the long term results have not be good as we see today in both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England.

In more recent years, the liberals have been allowed to get away with ignoring and removing the bits of the Bible they don't like, and the results of this seen today are church leaders and members who actively some of the central doctrines of the Christian faith.