

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 1 - Introduction

Uninteresting History

The maker of history as record must seek to be as artistic as possible in his presentation of the facts. Modern historians have not stressed an interesting presentation of history...Thus students often see history as an uninteresting recital of unrelated data. (E. Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries; p. 20)

"History"

"The English word for history came from the Greek word *historia*...It originally meant to learn by inquiry or investigation. The word was used by Paul in Galatians 1:18 to describe his interview with Peter in Jerusalem." (E. Cairns: p.17)

History is Boring

Most people do not have fond memories of history class - World History; Western Civilization; American History. What use are dry facts and dates of events long past? How does the date of the Magna Carta help me? Who cares who was the greatest of the Caesars? Why do I have to memorize all the presidents?

It is true that many history courses are dry and irrelevant. But it is often the fault of the teacher who does not relate past events to the present.

You may have hated history in school but you study history and benefit from it. Politicians talk about history News is history in the making. Almost every field of study or profession requires some understanding of history.

But for Christians, history is extremely important. The truth is, whether you recognize it or not, Christians are avid students of history. If you are reading your Bible daily, you are studying history daily. The backbone of all the Bible is historical narrative. The first 17 books of the Bible (Genesis to Esther) are historical narrative. Many sections of the prophets are history. In fact, you cannot fully understand the prophets without an understanding of Old Testament history.

Also, Matthew to Acts is history (including biography, which is just a specific kind of history). Overall, the Bible is a record of the creator God in history.

Our past is always a key to understanding our present, and what our future may be (both individually and corporately)

Church History

Church history is one way of looking at the past, from the 1st century to today. If we are Christians we benefit by knowing our religious past and how the present religious circumstance came to be.

By looking into the church's past we will learn so much that will give insight into current religious beliefs and doctrines. (That will aid in recognizing and refuting false doctrine, and in teaching others the gospel.) We will be inspired by many great figures. We will see how history does repeat itself. Church history truly illustrates the old dictum: "Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it."

When I teach prospects, one of the lessons is a review of church history from the 1st century to now. They show great interest in the

Archaeology as History

History is defined as the study of past human events...Archeology is a source of history concerned with the study of past human physical and cultural remains (fossil and artifacts) recovered from the earth by archeological exaction.



Floor of 5th century church near the Sea of Galilee containing ceramic depictions of 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus performed the miracle of feeding the 5000 nearby.

study because they want to know why there are so many different churches and, even, which one is right.

We know the Bible is divinely recorded history; all else is strictly records by fallible man. But the uninspired historical record is of tremendous value in teaching us lessons of the past. Scripture itself tell us the study of history is important and helpful. Moses and other Old Testament writers constantly reminded Israel of events in their past and taught from them. Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:6,11 also do the same. Peter wanted to “stir up” the sincere minds of the faithful by calling on them to remember former events and teachings (2 Peter 1:12-21; 3:1,2)

Sources of Religious History

Since the days of Herodotus (484-425 BC), often called the father of history, there have been those who recorded events, wrote about famous people and left behind records for posterity. But we learn history from many sources.

We learn about the past from archaeology, uncovered legal and government records, literature, art - anything from the past contributes to understanding of those times.

Church History is one continuous thread. Often one church’s practices are explained by the church from which they separated or from which it descended. Almost every ancient false doctrine is repeated centuries, even millennium later in a different guise. That is even true in the Lord’s church.

Intent of This Class

We plan to take a very practical approach. We will emphasize historical lessons of particular value to us as the Lord’s church today. This will not be a cold dry presentation of facts. We will meet fascinating individuals, study momentous events, learn the influence of Christendom on secular history (the two are inseparable), and see the same false doctrines and mistakes made over and over again. All this will inform us to our benefit as we serve God in the 21st century.

We will begin with biblical record of the beginning of the church. Then we will move into the secular record to see where men have gone, right or wrong.

We will see that the Lord’s church did not disappear after the 2nd century, and only reappear in America in the 19th century. We will find traces of the kingdom in many times and places.

This is long journey but, I hope, a fascinating one. I ask you to buckle your seat belts and brace yourself. We are in for a wild ride.

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 2

In the Fulness of Times

What was it like living in the 1st Century?

"The world has peace thanks to the Romans. Even the Christians can walk without fear on the roads and travel whithersoever they please." - Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, mid 2nd century

Roman Empire



It was a Roman World

The Mediterranean coast and its extensions were under one universal rule. It was an exceptional time that help set the stage for the spread of the gospel. Understanding those times will help us understand what happened to the church in the first three centuries and why. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of first century Jews and other Roman citizens and try to think like them.

Pax Romana (Roman Peace) - From approximately 27 BC to 180 AD. Periods of peace would also be enjoyed into the 2nd century. Romans lived in relative peace during a time of stability and growth. As its borders expanded it reached a maximum of 70 million people - a third of the world's population at the time. Such universal peace and rule created an environment that would greatly benefit the spreading of the gospel. It provided:

1. *Free movement* about the Mediterranean world.
2. *An excellent system of roads* throughout the empire.
3. *Roman conquests lessened belief in national gods* who had not protected them. This led to the rise of the *mystery religions* that filled the spiritual and emotional void. Even Romans came to have a diminished belief in their pagan gods. Philosophers had also undermined the belief in the traditional gods.
4. *A common language* was needed for the empire. By the time of the rise of the empire, Latin and Greek were already spoken widely. Greek had been spread by Alexander the Great beginning in the late 4th century BC. Thus, the common language became the Greek of the common (*koine*) man. Even the Old Testament had been translated into Greek by the time of Christ - the Septuagint, translated in Alexandria, Egypt.

All these things contributed to conditions that greatly aided in the spread of the gospel.

Division in Judaism

At the time of Jesus' ministry the evidence of underlying hostility is to be found in the writings produced by the various sects...In the New Testament Sadducees, Herodians, and Pharisees are mentioned.



Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth

Synagogues

"The earliest archaeological evidence for the existence of very early synagogues comes from Egypt, where stone synagogue dedication inscriptions dating from the 3rd century BCE prove that synagogues existed by that date."

<http://www.pohick.org/sts/egypt.html>

The Jews Contribution to the "fulness of times"

We understand the obvious tie between God's covenant people and the beginning of Christianity. One begets the other. The New Testament message is clearly anchored in the Old Testament scriptures. Judaism separated itself as a religion that was based upon real historical people and events. It is the Jews who insisted history had *meaning* and gave *purpose* to a past that effected the present and the future. That was unique in the ancient world. And God's intent had been for the nation to be the foundation of the church. They were to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah and lead the way in the spread of the gospel. Their failure resulted in their becoming both a blessing and a curse in the church's spread.

The Dispersion

Jews had been spread throughout the world as early as the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC. The consequent fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians (586 BC) also spread the Hebrew nation. This produced several positive results, one of the greatest was the knowledge of Jahweh as the one true God. In addition, the Jews showed the world the value of an ethical life. The Law of Moses presented a stark contrast to the prevailing ethical systems of the day. The dispersion also led to the creation of one of the greatest institutions of Judaism - the *synagogue*. The inability of most of the Jewish dispersion to return to the Jerusalem temple to worship led to the organization of local groups. They met on the sabbath to worship and to read and discuss the Law of Moses. This perpetuated the teaching of the Old Testament. It would also become familiar among many Gentiles. Many synagogues the apostle Paul would later visit had non-Jewish believers and friends.

Thus comes the "fulness of times" - Galatians

The Greek and Roman world as well as the heritage of Judaism set the stage for the wildfire spread of the message of Jesus. It is not hard to see why God chose that time in history for the advent of the Messiah and the beginning of the Gospel Age.

-
- ♦ "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.*" - Mark 1:15
 - ♦ "...who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony *given at the proper time.*" - 1 Timothy 2:6
 - ♦ "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*" - Galatians 4:4

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 3

Pentecost

"Pentecost has primary importance to all who are concerned with the nature and purpose of the Church, particularly its mandate to preach the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world as a witness to all nations." (ISBE: "Pentecost")



Peter on Pentecost

The Diaspora

"...Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." -Acts 2:10

It Begins

Church History begins with the New Testament. It is our primary and almost exclusive source of information about its beginnings. Our understanding of the nature of the early church is found there. The beginnings of Christianity are not obscure. The life and teaching of Jesus was at the epicenter of events in Judea (Acts 26:26; etc). Jesus' miracle-filled public ministry (see Acts 2:22) resulted in "multitudes" following Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. His presence in Jerusalem during his final Passover caused such a stir, it only heightened the Roman's constant fear of a Jewish uprising. The Jewish hierarchy shared that fear and it is they who initiate the arrest of Jesus and his subsequent trial and death. But rather than ending Jesus' movement, it only sets the stage for the climactic event of Jesus' work - his resurrection from the grave on the 3rd day.

Pentecost - 30 AD

Pentecost follows Passover by 50 days. Many of the Diaspora (foreign Jews) who came for Passover stayed until Pentecost before returning home. For seven weeks Jerusalem's population was not only swollen by Jews from all over the world, their conversations most certainly included the events of Jesus and the miracles surrounding his death and resurrection (at his death - earthquake, darkness at noon, the great veil of the temple torn; at his resurrection - dead saints resurrected and walking in the city and seen by many, the reports of the disciples of having seen Jesus alive again).

When the miraculous events of Pentecost begin, and the crowds are drawn to the 12, the gospel message is not only heard but believed. I would speculate that, among faithful humble Jews, there would be those who immediately understood the fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies, even beyond those quoted by Peter in Acts 2. (The Pentecost feast itself is prophetic of the day's events.) The historical link between Old Testament prophecy and Jesus of Nazareth was clear and their response was immediate. Within weeks thousands of Jews have declared their allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah.

The events of Pentecost, 30 AD, become the springboard for the religious movement of Jesus of Nazareth. Eventually, it will far outgrow

***Ekklesia* - Church**

Jesus used the term to describe Israelites assembling under the Old Law for a specific purpose (Matt. 18:17); Stephen used it to refer to the Israelite nation in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). The Jews would have understood the implications of the term.

Early Church Organization

"There is a general recognition among historians that the early church was congregational – independent local congregations. However, many see it as a weakness to be overcome or as just a beginning point that will be effectively changed over time. They do not see it as a reason for its early success" (S. Patton; "The Many Faces of Church Organization" Florida College Lecture; 2018)

its Jewish ancestry and become the religion that will spread into "all the world" in one generation (Matthew 24:14; Colossians 1:6,23).

What Is Established on Pentecost?

The nature of this movement is established from the beginning. Jesus used the term "church" to describe it (Matt. 16:18). Before Pentecost the church is spoken of in the future tense and, afterward, in the present. The King James Version used the word (Gk.; *ekklesia*) in Acts 2:47 but most Greek translators recognize it is not in the text. Subsequent translations do not use the term. However, the concept is clearly there.

A Greek "*ekklesia*" basically means a group or an assembly, whether a gathering is planned or by chance. Jesus has declared his plan to establish his "group." "*Ekklesia*" is subsequently used in Acts to describe local groups of believers (Acts 5:11; 13:1; 18:22) The nature of this group is defined by terms used to describe it in the New Testament.

This early church is recognized by many distinguished historians as having no universal organization. Philip Schaff, the venerable church historian, writes at length about the congregational nature of the first century church and role of a local eldership. (P. Schaff. History of the Apostolic Church, Ch. 3; p. 552). He further points out concerning bishops/presbyters: "They appear always as a plurality or as a college in one and the same congregations, even in smaller cities, as Philippi. (P. Schaff. History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1; p. 493). Even a historian as liberal as Philip Johnson recognized this "limited" form of organization. Writing about the chances of survival of what he calls the Pauline gospel he points out: "It stood a good chance of surviving and spreading. But it had no organization behind it. Paul did not believe in such a thing. He believed in the Spirit, working through him and others." (P. Johnson. History of Christianity; p. 44). This early group of disciples is clearly deeply committed. They are also extremely evangelistic (Acts 8:4 and the rest of Acts.)

Apostolic Authority

From the beginning the teaching of the apostles was seen as the guiding force and foundation of belief (Acts 2:42). Jesus had prepared them for this role in his last meal with them before his death. (John 13-16). There they are promised specific guidance by the Holy Spirit that would give them miraculous ability for revelation of God's will. He would guide them into all truth (16:13) and enable them to remember everything Jesus had done and had taught them (14:26; 15:27). They would also be enabled to declare things to come (16:13). This process of divine revelation to the apostles is further explained by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2. Their apostolic teaching was confirmed by the signs that followed (Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:3,4). That they are eyewitnesses of Jesus, only added to the legitimacy of their teaching. It follows that the nature and organization of the New Testament church is determined by apostolic teaching and would define the

Church Buildings?

"Unless claims for recent discoveries of early Christian meeting places are confirmed, the earliest building certainly devoted to Christian use is at Dura Europos on the Euphrates River in eastern Roman Syria. It was a house that



Dura Europa Church Ruins

came into Christian possession and was remodeled in the 240s. Two rooms were combined to form the assembly room, and another room became a baptistery—the only room decorated with pictures. Dura was destroyed by the Sassanian Persians in 256" Everett Ferguson, Christianity Today: March 2020

"These early believers did not have church buildings to meet in. They met mostly in homes. The first church buildings did not start to appear until the early 200s." Christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/a-look-at-the-early-church-11629559.html

nature of Jesus' "group."

As we continue this study, we will seek to follow that specific group, wherever we can find it in the historical records, as well as trace the path of the rest of Christendom as false teachings arise and departures occur.

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 4



Emperor Trajan Decius
(249-251). Empire-wide
persecutor of Christians

False Teachers

"But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction."

- 2 Peter 2:1

Problems Arise in the Early Church

The early church explodes upon the scene, spreading throughout the Roman Empire and beyond within decades. Yet it will survive only by facing and overcoming major problems. These begin almost from its inception. Two main challenges dominate - persecution and false doctrine. Both will play major roles in shaping the church ahead.

Persecution

"Yes, all who would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

- 2 Timothy 3:12

Persecution was a reality for the church from the very beginning. Often persecution is imagined as an empire wide curse without pause. In reality it was not continuous nor empire wide. Most were localized in specific cities or regions. (Ex.; Jewish persecutions are localized in Acts to specific cities or regions.) Empire wide persecution is rare. Persecutions were not continuous either. From A.D. 30 to A.D. 311, a period in which 54 emperors ruled the Empire, only about a dozen took the trouble to harass Christians. But this does not minimize the fierce opposition Christians faced, many being martyred for their beliefs. These sufferings would effect how the church would be viewed and, even contribute to its amazing growth.

Tertullian, a 2nd century defender of the faith, famously wrote: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." This paradoxical statement accurately encapsulates what was happening. The movement grew and its size contributed to its persecution, which, in turn, contributed to its growth.

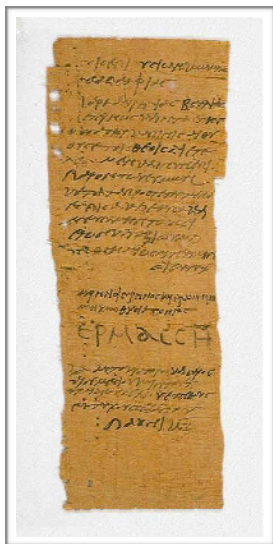
Jewish Persecution

The first persecution began within weeks of the establishment of the church. Although the disciples originally had "favor with all the people" Jewish leadership in Jerusalem quickly viewed the growing church as a threat and perversion of truth. The apostles were beaten and told never speak Jesus' name again. Following Stephen's stoning, fierce opposition began throughout Judea and Samaria. It is led by men like Saul of Tarsus. Jewish opposition will continue for decades, spreading throughout the empire. Local communities of Jews would

Christianity recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire

"The consequent council at Constantinople in 381 was backed by Constantine "for its declaration that the statement of Nicaea was the one, lawful religion." Doctrinal power was now vested in the Councils (a form that will reappear later in church history) and the power of the clerical order was also in place." (S. Patton; "The Many Faces of Church Organization" Florida College Lecture; 2018)

.....



A Roman *libellus* issued during the reign of Decius. They were certificates indicating the bearer had offered sacrifice to the emperor.

persecute Christians as their influence grew. We see this in Paul's journeys in Acts (ex. Ephesus; Acts 19). Judaizing teachers will also trouble churches in the 1st century.

Roman persecution

Christianity was mostly tolerated as long as it was thought of as a Jewish sect. When required emperor worship began, things changed. Emperor worship was more about keeping the empire united politically than creating a universal religion. It was a declaration of fealty to Rome. Unity was of great importance to Roman leadership and they saw worship of Caesar as a uniting force.

Refusal to honor Caesar led to even more charges against Christians, mostly from misunderstandings about their beliefs. Christians' exclusivity, especially, about Jahweh and salvation, caused major problems.

Probably the earliest, and most well known is the infamous persecution under Nero, who ruled from AD 64-68. Even it was apparently localized to Rome and the surrounding provinces. The greatest empire-wide persecution came under Decius in AD 250 and lasted about 18 months.

Roman persecution comes to an end with the Edict of Toleration in 311 AD, (issued by the eastern emperor Galerius), And the edict of Milan (by Constantine in AD 313). Finally, the dedication of the Christians, and a recognition they were actually very good people, led to tolerance and eventual acceptance.

The eventual declaration of Christianity as the official religion in 381 of the empire will change everything.

False Doctrine

From the beginning, the church fought opposition from converted Jews because they believed the Law of Moses must still be practiced. This is pretty understandable. But separation of Judaism from Christianity takes a long time. Acts 15 did not magically fix everything. Paul deals with Judaizing teachers throughout his life.

Gentile influences

Christians leaving paganism often had difficulty leaving their old lifestyle and beliefs. Paul's battle against these influences is evident in his letters. 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, discuss breaking from immorality extensively. Also separation from idols temples and banquets. There were even Christians lacking full understanding there is one God (1 Corinthians 9:7).

Gnostic philosophy did not help this situation. Gnostic ideas creep in and become a major problem. Gnosticism is an early influence early on Christianity. It's ideas had been around for a long before Christianity and its total separation of spiritual and material realms was appealing because it allowed about any lifestyle one wanted to live. We can see the apostle John especially deal with its ideas, though Paul does, too.

Gnosticism

It is difficult to define briefly its far reaching ideas but it basically teaches humans are divine souls trapped in the ordinary physical (or material) world - a world made by an imperfect spirit or lower divine being. This imperfect spirit is thought to be the same as the God of Abraham. ... Some gnostics believe Jesus was sent by the supreme being to bring *gnosis* (*secret knowledge*) to the earth through which one comes to find salvation.

Greek philosophy also becomes a major problem. As Christianity's influence grows, many want it to be accepted in the more elite, educated society. Thus, we find attempts to combine Greek philosophy with Christianity. Northern Africa was a major source of these ideas. They were already present in a large Jewish community in Alexandria, a great center of learning. The large Christian community that developed was also so influenced. Of course, Athens and the Greek peninsula were sources of the same ideas..

Greek philosophy will effect Christianity for a long time as we will see interpretation turn away from a more literal view of scripture to allegorizing everything.

False Teaching Changes Many Things

The battle against false teaching will inadvertently, have a great influence on the organization of the church. Great men arose to battle these false teachers. All the churches looked to them for the true doctrine. These men came to be viewed as *the* defenders of the faith. Their influence was great. As all the churches looked to them. they helped lead to consolidation of Christendom. In the next lesson we will look at some of the most influential men of the 2nd-3rd centuries - the Apostolic Fathers.

Conclusion

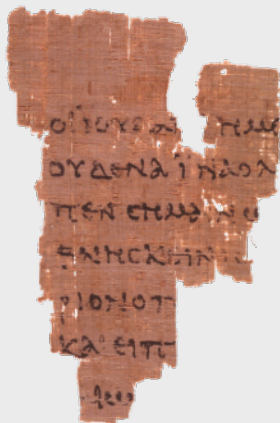
One century of Christianity finds significant changes occurring among the Lord's people. The apostolic warnings about falling away and false prophets were not meant to be applied only to distant centuries. They also taught it was coming soon and already among them. Also, and regrettably, persecution had caused many to compromise their faith. The stage is set for dramatic changes in the church.

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 5

John Ryland Papyrus 52



This papyrus fragment is from a copy of the gospel of John. It is confidently dated to the early 2nd century, within 50 years of John's death. The front contains a portion of John 18:31-33 and the back verses 37,38.

It shows his gospel was already valued enough to be copied and distributed.

The Church from 100-300 AD

As the apostolic age comes to an end, the New Testament reaches completion and acceptance by the church. Canons (lists of accepted writings) appear as early as 125 AD. Authority turns from the direct teaching by apostles and prophets to the written word.

The second and third centuries are the least documented in church history. It is a situation reflective of much of ancient history - so many conclusions based on a paucity of sources. What we can see is how the church changed during that time by comparing the before and after material.

The Apostolic Fathers

This period is mostly documented in the writings of Christians from that time. Extant writings come from the pens of men who are now called the Apostolic Fathers. They give us insight into beliefs and events. They are amazing men, many who were martyred. It is worth getting to know them. We learn of their continued commitment to the authority of the inspired writings of the apostolic age. I have included some mini biographies of the most prominent of these men.

But first we need to look at one very significant change during this time.

The Change in Church Organization

The real impetus for an organization larger than the local congregation arose from the need to fight false doctrine. Philip Johnson sees the splintered nature of the church by the mid 3rd century as a major problem. Gnosticism, Marcionism and other false doctrines were widespread by the mid 100s. Great men fought against such heresies and were quite successful. As a result, it appears the early church began to see combating false doctrine, and uniting the church in that fight, as its primary role. John W. Kennedy in his book, The Torch of the Testimony, makes a compelling argument that this change of emphasis becomes a uniting force in binding the universal church together. When the church later began to fracture over Arianism, Emperor Constantine intervened to try to unite the factions within the church on doctrine. By his time, the

***Ignatius - the first
reference to the
authority of a single
bishop in a church***

"See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop....Whatsoever [the bishop] shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid." (St. Ignatius: Letter to the Smyrnaeans; Ch 8)

Ignatius was martyred in AD 107

larger organization of the church is well developed and leads to the uniting the churches into one Catholic (universal) organization. This is far removed from what is found in the apostolic age. It is interesting that noble efforts to combat false doctrine contributed to a major negative development in the church. The change dramatically effects the church to this very day.

We can see minor changes in organization at the local level taking place by the start of the 2nd century. The earliest reference to the office of bishop separate from other elders appears in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch in the early 2nd century. One of the elders in the local church came to be a leader among them, and was called the bishop. Ignatius implied the office was above the rest of the elders in a local church. Ignatius served in such an office. In one of his letters to the Magnesians he urged them to be obedient to their bishop. Thus, he was not the only presiding bishop in a church.

Was the view of the presiding bishop the norm in his day? It was not universal. Ignatius himself wrote of Christians who acted independently of the monarchical bishop. In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp (a contemporary of Ignatius) did not speak of a bishop in addition to the presbyters. Of course, neither did the apostle Paul (Phil.1:1). There may have been another reason why Ignatius spoke so strongly of the power of the bishop.

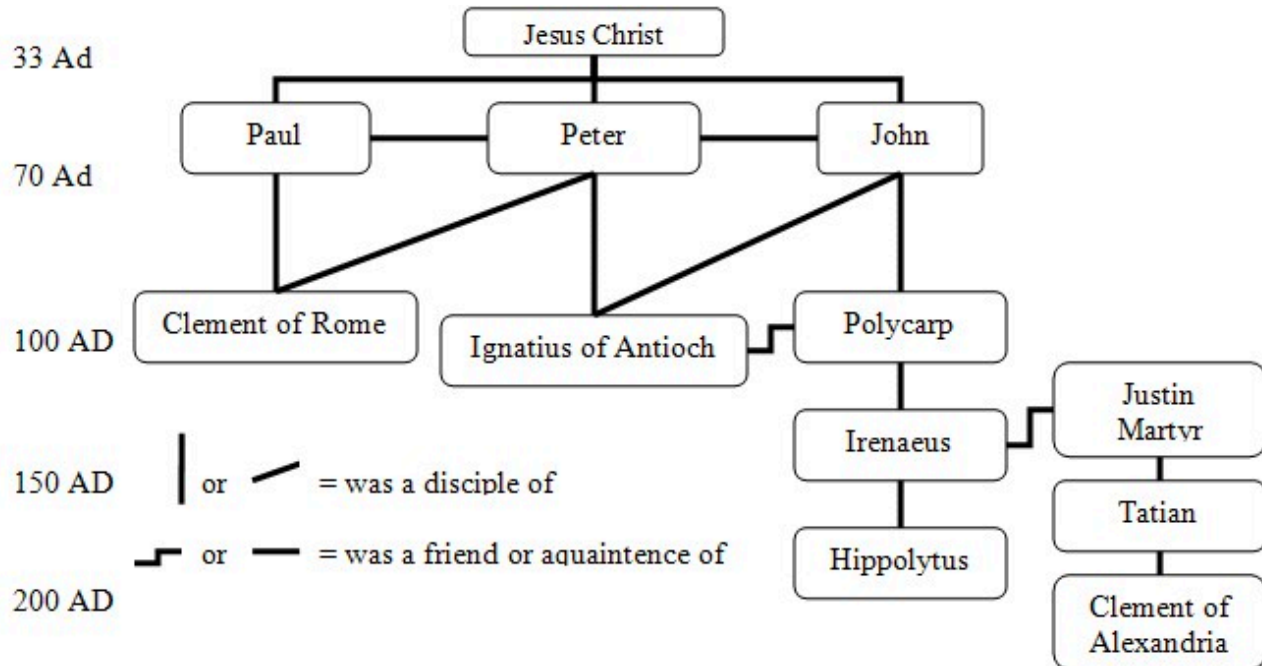
Commentators have frequently pointed out Ignatius had to deal with a lot of conflict in his own church at Antioch. As an unpopular bishop, he certainly had a vested interest in writing about the bishop's authority. In any event, Schoedel writes, "a threat to Ignatius' authority by some Antiochene Christians evidently played a significant role in determining what Ignatius was to do and to say."

But by the end of the second century the separate office of a presiding bishop in a local church is generally accepted.

Changes in the church are almost always gradual. One generation cannot necessarily see where a minor change will lead. It took a century for churches to begin to develop closer ties and accept regional leadership. It was another century before an emperor's initiative accomplished universal organization. A declaration of one man as head of the universal Catholic Church will not occur for yet another 225 years.

There is a great lesson in this. Small changes can lead to wholesale departures from the faith. It is always important to give full and final authority to what the Bible says, not to what it doesn't say.

Apostolic Fathers



The chart above lists ties between some of the apostles and some of the apostolic fathers. Some are described in this lesson.

The Apostolic Fathers

These are men who lived from the late 1st century to the time of Constantine. They are part of a larger group historians refer to as the Church Fathers whose time extends for another two centuries. The apostolic fathers are known to us by their writings, and by works and letters quoted by later authors. Below are mini biographies of eight significant ones.

(This is taken from Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up by David Bercot; available as a Kindle book. I have condensed and slightly edited it.)

-Polycarp (69-156)—Disciple of the Apostle John. Polycarp, whose death was described earlier, was a model of faith and devotion to congregations in Asia. He was a personal companion and disciple of the Apostle John, who evidently appointed him overseer or bishop of the congregation at Smyrna. It may be noteworthy that Smyrna is one of two congregations of which John had no condemnation in Revelation.

-Irenaeus (120-205)—The Crucial Human Link to the Apostles. One of Polycarp's personal disciples was Irenaeus (ear reh NAY us), who moved to Gaul (France) to serve as a missionary. When the overseer of the congregation in Lyons, France, was killed during persecution, Irenaeus was named as his successor. The entire early church spoke well of Irenaeus, and he lived past 200 A.D. As a pupil of Polycarp, who was a companion of the Apostle John, Irenaeus served as an important human link to the age of the apostles.

-Justin (110-165)—Philosopher Turned Evangelist. During Polycarp's lifetime, a young philosopher named Justin embarked on a spiritual journey to find truth. One day, he was walking to his accustomed place of meditation in a secluded field overlooking the Mediterranean. Suddenly, he noticed an

.....

old man walking at a distance behind him. Wanting to be left alone, he turned and stared with annoyance at the elderly man. However, the old man, who turned out to be a Christian, struck up a conversation and learned that Justin was a philosopher. The old man then began to ask some soul-searching questions, helping Justin to see the deficiency of human philosophy. As Justin later reminisced, “When the old man had spoken these and many other things, he left, encouraging me to think about what he had said. I’ve never seen him since, but immediately a flame was kindled in my soul. I was overwhelmed by a love for the prophets and the friends of Christ. After pondering over the things the old man had said, I realized that Christianity was the only true and worthwhile philosophy.” After becoming a Christian, Justin continued to wear his philosopher’s robe to symbolize that he had found the one true philosophy. In fact, he became an evangelist to pagan philosophers and devoted his life to helping educated Romans understand the meaning of Christianity. His written defenses to the Romans are the oldest complete Christian apologies still in existence. Justin proved to be a gifted evangelist, converting many Romans—learned and unlearned alike. In the end, a group of philosophers plotting against his life had him arrested. Choosing to die rather than to denounce Christ, Justin was executed in about 165. After his death, he became known as Justin the Martyr.

- **Clement of Alexandria** (150-200)—Instructor of New Believers. Another philosopher who found Christianity while on a spiritual journey for truth was Clement. After realizing the inadequacy of human philosophy, he turned to Christianity. After his conversion, he journeyed throughout the Roman Empire, learning the precepts of Christianity firsthand from the oldest, most respected Christian teachers of his age. His writings, which are dated about 190, reflect the composite wisdom of his instructors, and they have inspired many Christians throughout the centuries. Clement eventually settled in Alexandria, Egypt. He was made an elder (presbyter) in that congregation and placed in charge of training new Christians. He is generally referred to as “Clement of Alexandria” to distinguish him from another Clement, who was an overseer of the church of Rome during the last years of the Apostle John.

-**Origen** (185-255)—A Brilliant Mind Devoted to God. Among Clement’s students in Alexandria was a gifted teenager named Origen, who had been reared in a Christian home. When Origen was 17, a severe persecution broke out in Alexandria, and his father was imprisoned. Origen wrote his father in prison and encouraged him to remain faithful and not to renounce Christ out of fatherly concern for his family. After a date was set for his father’s trial, Origen decided to appear at the trial by his father’s side and die with him. However, on the night before the trial, while Origen was asleep, his mother hid all of his clothes, preventing him from leaving the house the next morning in time for the trial. Although he was only 17, Origen distinguished himself in the church of Alexandria by the loving care he gave to his fellow Christians during the fierce persecution raging at the time. The angry mobs noticed his acts of mercy, and he barely survived the persecution with his own life. Origen had learned grammar and Greek literature from his father, and he began giving private lessons in those subjects to support his younger brothers and sisters. He was so unusually brilliant that many pagan parents sent their sons to be instructed by Origen, and many of these youths became Christians as a result of Origen’s witnessing to them. Meanwhile, Clement, the teacher in charge of training new Christians, had put his life at risk. To the pagan officials he was a marked man. So he was forced to escape to another city to continue his Christian ministry. In an unusual move, the elders of Alexandria appointed Origen, only 18 at the time, to take Clement’s

place as head of the training school. They chose wisely, and Origen poured his very soul into the task. He quit his short-lived profession as an instructor of grammar and literature, and he sold all of his Greek literary books on credit to another man. He subsisted in poverty off of the small monthly installment payments he received from the sale of his Greek literary books. He refused to accept any payment for his services as a Christian teacher. After teaching new Christian believers all day, he would study the Scriptures far into the night. Before long, Origen became one of the most respected Christian teachers of his age. Eventually, some of his friends asked him to give a series of lectures on the Bible, discussing each book of the Bible, passage by passage. His friends paid scribes to take down his words, and these became the first set of Bible commentaries ever written by a Christian. Origen didn't intend for his commentaries to be taken as dogmatic pronouncements, since he frequently went off on tangents and personal surmises. Throughout the commentaries, he displayed an amiable, flexible disposition, frequently ending a discussion by saying, "Well, that's the best I can do with that passage. Maybe someone with more insight has a better explanation." Sometimes in his speculations, Origen expressed some unorthodox views that were not representative of early Christian thought. Despite his erroneous speculations, Origen possessed one of the most brilliant minds of his day—among Christians and non-Christians alike. He even carried on personal correspondence with one of the Roman emperors. But his fame also attracted the attention of the enemies of Christianity, and several times he was forced to move to new towns in order to escape persecution. Nevertheless, he managed to live until he was 70, when he was finally caught and tortured. No amount of torture could make him deny Jesus, and his tormentors finally gave up in exasperation. However, Origen eventually died from inhumane treatment.

-Tertullian (140-230)—Apologist to the Romans. To Western Christians, Tertullian is perhaps the most familiar of all the early Christian writers. He was a leader in the North African church of Carthage, the place where he eventually settled. Tertullian was one of the most gifted apologists of the early church, and he was one of the few early church elders who wrote in Latin, rather than in Greek. Tertullian is remembered for several memorable sayings, such as "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Tertullian penned his writings during a span of about twenty years, from 190 to 210. In addition to his apologetic works, Tertullian wrote several short letters or essays, reassuring Christians in prison and exhorting Christians in general to maintain their separation from the world. He also wrote several defenses of orthodoxy against the heretics of his day. Later in his life, Tertullian was heavily influenced by the Montanist sect, which sect was orthodox in theology but which expected its members to follow man-made ascetic commands. Fortunately, at least half of Tertullian's writings were penned before he adopted the Montanists' views. Furthermore, since this group was orthodox in its theology, even Tertullian's Montanistic works are generally representative of early Christian thought.

-Cyprian (200-258)—The Rich Man Who Gave All to Christ. A few decades after Tertullian penned his works, a wealthy Roman named Cyprian converted to Christianity at the age of 40. Although he was an admirer of Tertullian, Cyprian never joined the Montanist sect, and he was strongly opposed to any heretical or schismatic groups. As a new Christian, Cyprian was so jubilant to have found Christ and to be born anew that he liquidated his entire estate and gave the money to the poor. He rejoiced to be

unfettered from the weight of his material possessions, and his writings contain some of the most moving passages on the Christian rebirth ever penned. The church in Carthage respected his enthusiastic commitment to Christ. Though he had been a Christian only a few years, they selected him to be the overseer (bishop) of their church, a very unusual event in that age. Cyprian's writings are particularly valuable because they consist chiefly of correspondence with the leaders of other churches, revealing the everyday concerns and problems of Christian congregations in that period. Cyprian was forced to carry on much of his pastoral work underground, since intense persecution raged during much of his ministry. He was a tireless shepherd, pouring out his energy, and ultimately his very life, for the flock that Christ entrusted to him. He was finally arrested by the Romans and beheaded in 258.

-Lactantius (260-330)—Teacher of the Emperor's Son. Lactantius is less familiar to most Christians today. This is our loss, because he wrote with unusual clarity and eloquence. Before embracing Christianity, he had been a celebrated teacher of rhetoric, receiving notice from Emperor Diocletian. After his conversion, Lactantius dedicated his literary abilities to the cause of Christ. He lived through the last great Roman persecution of Christians in the early 300s, and he eventually settled in France. Although Lactantius was an old man when Constantine became emperor in 312, Constantine asked him to be the personal instructor of his oldest son. The writings of Lactantius are important because they were written at the very end of the pre-Constantine period of the church. They demonstrate that most Christian beliefs had changed very little during the 223 years from the end of the Apostle John's life to the beginning of Constantine's reign.

