Church History

Lesson 1

Age of the Apostles

1. Intro
   1. What is an apostle?
   2. Mark 2:13, Luke 6:13, & Acts 1:8
   3. They didn’t just plant churches, they were sent by God.
   4. The early Church had a special privilege in having the apostles
   5. The Church is built on the teaching of the Apostles, Eph. 2:20

This era was marked by:

1. Organized Persecution

* *The foremost reason that persecution arose is because of the wrath of the devil. See Rev 12:17 “And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”*
* *The first persecutors of the Church were the Jews. We read of their persecution in Acts (see Paul - Acts 9, Acts 13:50, Acts 14:19). This persecution caused the dispersion of Christians (Acts 11:19).*
* *The Romans had little interest in the Christians initially. They saw them as just another sect of Judaism, like Pharisees, Sadducees – the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5). The Jews attempted to get the Romans interested, but they would not listen (Acts 18:12-16).*
* *Claudius banished Jews from Rome 50 AD (Acts 18:2) [they couldn’t differ between Christians and Jews]*
* *When the Romans conquered a people, they permitted them to worship on their own as long as that worship did not interfere with Roman policy. At first they saw Christians as simply a sect of Judaism.*
* *Rome eventually became interested in the Christians. This was foremost because early Christians would not attend theater and sporting games, where incense was burned to idols, and games were held in the nude. Therefore, they were seen as being unpatriotic and anti-Roman. Also, the idol trade was greatly affected by Christians.*
* *There were early rumors that Christians were involved in terrible things, such as committing incest, cannibalism, and atheism.*
* *Nero (64-68 AD) was the first Roman Emperor who began a more systematic persecution of Christians. We do not have much information about this persecution. However, most historians believe that when Rome began to burn that the people began to blame Nero. Nero reacted by blaming the Christians whose sect of the city was damaged the least. Peter and Paul were believed to have been martyred during this time. Some believe Revelation was written around this time.*
* *Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD by Titus*
* *Domitian (81-96) was next emperor who persecuted Christians. Many feel John’s Revelation was written during this time.*
* *Imperial Roman persecution ranged during Adolescent Era. The following marked the “don’t ask, don’t tell” time frame.*
  1. *Domitian (reigned 81 - 96)*
  2. *Trajan (reigned 98-117) see Pliney the Younger (Ignatius martyred)*
  3. *Hadrian (reigned 117-138)*
  4. *Antoninus Pius (reigned 138-161) Polycarp martyred*
* *More severe and deliberate persecution:*
  1. *Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-180) (Justin martyred)*
  2. *Severus (reigned 193-211) restricted persecution to Egypt and North Africa*
  3. *Maximinus (reigned 235-238) attacked Christian leaders only in certain areas*
* *Empire wide persecution*
  + *Decius (reigned 249-251) enforced state religion for political stability*
  + *Valerian (reigned 253-260) at first Christian-friendly, but changed attitude and martyred many Christians*
  + *Diocletian (reigned 284-305) imprisoned clergy and destroyed places of worship and sacred books*

1. The Era is Closed with the Death of the Apostles

* James of Zebedee – *James’ death is recorded in Acts 12:2 (John’s brother)*
* Philip – *Reportedly he ministered in Upper Asia, and was martyred in Phrygia in 54 AD by crucifixion. Tradition says he preached from the cross.*
* Matthew (Levi) – *Was reportedly martyred in Ethiopia in 60 AD, with a battle axe.*
* James son of Alphaeus (James the Less) – *The brother of Jesus, called an apostle by Paul (Gal. 1:19). Was reportedly beaten and stoned by Jews, and according to Fox’s Book of Martyrs “had his brains dashed out with a fuller’s club.”*
* Matthias – *He replaced Judas (Acts 1). Reportedly he was stoned at Jerusalem and beheaded.*
* Andrew – *Peter’s brother. He reportedly went to Asia Minor, and was crucified in Edessa on a cross transversely fixed to the ground (St Andrew’s Cross).*
* Mark – *Supposedly converted to Christianity by Peter, and served as Peter’s amanuensis (secretary). Was reportedly killed in Alexandria when he was dragged to pieces (~AD 67).*
* Peter – *Most likely died during Nero’s persecution in 67-68 AD. Tradition tells that he was fleeing Rome when he had a vision of Jesus going into the city. He asked Jesus where He was going. Jesus responded, “I am come again to be crucified.” Peter took this to mean he was to return to the city. Tradition says that he was crucified upside down as he was unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus.*
* Paul – *Most likely was killed during Nero’s persecution in 67-68 AD. Was believed to have died by beheading because he was a Roman citizen.*
* Jude (Judas)– *The brother of James, possibly called Thaddeus. Tradition tells he was crucified in Edessa in 72 AD.*
* Bartholomew (Nathaniel?)– *Believed to have evangelized in several countries, but finally went to India where he was beaten and crucified.*
* Thomas Didymus – *Traditionally believed to have preached in India where he was thrust through with a spear by a pagan priest.*
* Luke – *Most certainly traveled with Paul. Was believed to have been hanged to death on an olive tree in Greece by idolatrous priests.*
* Simon – *Surnamed the Zealot (Luke 6:15). Tradition tells he preached in Africa and perhaps Britain, where he was crucified in 74 AD.*
* John of Zebedee – *Tertullian writes that the “Apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil” and then banished to the island Patmos. Tradition indicates he died in Ephesus.*
* Barnabas – *Set apart by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2) to travel with Paul, he was called an apostle by Luke (Acts 14:14). Tradition holds that he was stoned to death by the Jews in Cyprus around 73 AD.*

Early Post-Apostolic to Early Church (70 AD – 325 AD)

1. Fall of Jerusalem – occurred in 70 AD
   * + *In May 66 AD, tensions reached a boiling point in Caesarea when a bird was sacrificed in a chamber pot in front of a synagogue by some Greeks. Jews were eventually struck down and Rome refused to intervene. This appeared to be the straw that broke the camel’s back.*
     + *The Jews had a number of small victories against Rome.*
     + *Vespasian was sent with four legions to quell the uprising*
     + *After surrounding Jerusalem, Nero died and Vespasian returned to Rome*
     + *The Christians escaped Rome at this time.*
     + *Vespasian’s son, Titus, was tasked with completing the destruction of Jerusalem.*
     + *Sulpicius Severus, a Roman historian, reported that Tuus was eager to destroy the temple “in order that the Jewish and Christian religions might more complete by abolished.” It is clear that Titus believed Christians were an offshoot of Jews.*
     + *The destruction of the city severed the perceived ties to Judaism.*
     + *The destruction pushed Christianity out on its own.*
     + *Without its Jewish framework, how would Christianity appear? From where would its authority come? How would it ward off dangerous teaching?*
     + *Christianity’s separation from Judaism also made it stand out as a completely different religion (to Rome).*
2. Marked by Initial Silence
   1. For about 50 years from the Apostle’s time we have practically no information on Christianity. *Then, the writings began to trickle it*. *These writings give us a glimpse into early Church history. They also give us a glimpse into what the church was facing, and what it was doing.*
3. Era Marked by Rise of Church Fathers
   1. Ignatius of Antioch
   2. 1st Clement
   3. Shepherd of Hermas
   4. Didache
   5. Polycarp
4. Marked by Rise of the Creeds

The early church was assaulted by various false teachings/heresies. To combat this, various creeds were developed. These were often recited at baptisms, but were also memorized and made part of the church’s early ligurgy.

“The Apostles Creed” is believed to have developed in Rome around 150 AD. It was originally called “symbol of faith.” A symbol meant a “recognition.” Those who could not affirm the creed were either Gnostics, Marcionites, or pagans.

See ‘Turning Points, page 43 for three examples.

1. Marked by Rise of Canon

The word canon likely came from “cane” and means measuring rod.

The first need for a canon of scripture was precipitated by the appearance of false canons – namely Marcion’s canon.

*Marcion was son of a bishop In Pontus, and was excommunicated by his father for immorality. He developed his own Gnostic system of theology in which the Old Testament is rejected and Christianity is simply a religion of love. The demiurge, or god of the O.T. is viewed as different from the God that Jesus came to reveal. He taught a Docetic view of Christ and that the death of Christ was not the work of the God of love but of the demiurge.*

*Marcion established small communities that practiced strict asceticism. Believing that only Paul fully understood the gospel, Marcion formed his own canon which accepted only ten epistles of Paul (rejecting the Pastorals) and an edited version of Luke's Gospel. It was largely due to his teaching that the orthodox church began to define the true canon of the New Testament. By the third century, most Marcionite communities had been absorbed Into Manichaeism (see below).*

* *The early tests for canonicity seemed to be: was it inspirational? Did it have apostolic authority? Did it provide standards agreeable with other apostolic writings? Was it widely accepted?*
* *The earliest marks of a canon were provided by Clement of Rome near end of 1st century.*
* *Muratorian canon (200) drawn up in Rome included named for an 18th Century scholar who identified the canon: four gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline Epistles, Revelation, James, Jude, 1,2 or 3 John. It disputed: Epistles of Peter, Hebrews, possibly one of John’s epistles*
* *Origen’s canon (Alexandria 250): included: four gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline Epistles, Revelation, 1 John, 1 Peter. Disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude.*
* *Eusebius’ canon: (c. 300) included: four gospels, Acts, 13 Pauline Epistles, 1 John, 1 Peter, Revelation (though authorship was of doubt). Disputed: James, 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude*
* *It is clear that the four gospels attained earliest recognition. The early church recognized the differences and apparently saw the need to keep all four. This seems in response to the Marcionist who believed the secret was given to only one writer.*
* *Acts and 13 Pauline Epistles were secondly recognized*
* *The Third Council of Carthage decided upon the 27 present canonical books (397 AD).*
* *Books held in suspect:*
  1. *Hebrews: anonymous book – accepted in eastern Churches as Pauline*
  2. *James & Jude: authors called themselves “servants of God” not apostles*
  3. *2 Peter: significant difference in Greek style from 1 Peter which was accepted*
  4. *2 & 3 John: author identified himself as “the elder” not an apostle*
  5. *Revelation: authorship was disputed*
* *Those who decided on the final canon were not above reproach or infallible. However, they were in a much better position than us to judge the authenticity of the books. The care that was taken in deciding upon the books is evidence that the matter was not taken lightly.*