

INTRODUCTION

So whichever period of Church history we are studying, it is always worth pausing and reminding ourselves of this: the entire history of the Christian Church is rooted in one central reality—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If Jesus of Nazareth had not risen, there would be no Church history. The rest of the story told in these pages flows out of the resurrection.¹

WHY SHOULD WE STUDY HISTORY?

1. Because it shows us the ways God has worked
2. Because it reminds us of the mistakes of the past
3. Because you probably don't know it very well
4. Because church history is your history
5. Because the 21st century didn't solve or create all our problems
6. Because it's biblical
7. Because it's fun

WHAT ARE OUR LIMITATIONS IN STUDYING CHURCH HISTORY?

- Limited Sources
- Personal Biases
 - We cannot be neutral, but we can be objective
- Chronological Distance
- Pride

HOW DO WE STUDY HISTORY?

- Primary sources
- History books

THE STRUCTURE OF CHURCH HISTORY

- Apostolic Church (30-100 AD)
 - Led by the apostles
 - Rapid expansion
 - Continuing revelation
 - Persecution
- Early Church (100-590 AD)
 - Begins with the death of John
 - Transition from persecuted church to dominant church
 - Foundational theological battles

¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, Newly revised edition, vol. 1 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 48.

- Ends with the papacy of Gregory the Great
- Medieval Church (600-1517 AD)
 - Begins with the papacy of Gregory the Great
 - The Church dominates European religion and politics
 - The rise of Islam
 - Significant corruption
 - Battles between East (Orthodox) and West (Catholic)
- Reformation Church (1517-1790 AD)
 - Begins with Martin Luther posting the 95 Theses
 - Europe fractures around theological positions undermining the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and giving rise to modern state power.
 - The Protestant churches grow in both political and spiritual influence.
 - The end of the Reformation Era is debatable with dates ranging from 1555 (The Peace of Augsburg) to 1800 (The end of the Enlightenment).
- Modern Church (1790-present)
 - Begins with the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution
 - The church expands beyond the West through the rise of modern missions.
 - The fruit of the Enlightenment is secularization and individualism.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The Roman Empire

- Founding
 - Rome was founded in 753 BC
 - The Republic was formed in 510 BC
 - Octavius (Caesar Augustus) becomes emperor in 31 BC transitioning the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire.
- Religion
 - Greco-Roman paganism
 - Emperor worship
 - Mystery religions
 - Philosophy
- Impact
 - During the time of Christ Rome is the governmental authority over Palestine
 - There is a Roman global economy and transportation system which facilitates the speedy development of Christianity

The Jewish world

- The Sanhedrin held limited political power
- The Jews were spread throughout the world (diaspora) and present throughout the Roman Empire
- The Jewish system in Palestine included four important groups
 - Sadducees
 - Pharisees

- Essenes
- Zealots
- The Jewish War
 - The Jews rebelled against Rome as a response to oppression, overtaxation, mismanagement of Palestine in AD 66.
 - The Romans crushed the revolt (Josephus estimates over 1,000,000 Jews were killed) and sacked Jerusalem in AD 70.
 - The Christians fled the rebellion securing the divide between Jewish Christianity and Judaism.
 - The Pharisees did not participate in the revolt and largely survived

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

- Centralized growth in Jerusalem
- Dispersion of the saints
- Mission to the gentiles

PERSECUTION

- The apostles faced opposition and persecution, but such opposition largely came from outside the Roman government until the time of Nero.
- The earliest persecution was from the religious leaders of Jerusalem and resulted in the spread of the gospel as the Christians fled.
- This persecution was also carried out by diaspora Jews throughout the rest of the empire.

Nero

- Great fire in AD 64
- Nero had become an unpopular emperor and was accused of starting the fire himself. As a response he blamed the Christians to take scrutiny off of himself.*
- Nero blamed the Christians to remove scrutiny from himself.
- This persecution was centralized in Rome.
- This is likely when Peter and Paul die.

Tacitus (~ AD 56-120):

In spite of every human effort, of the emperor's largesse, and of the sacrifices made to the gods, nothing sufficed to allay suspicion nor to destroy the opinion that the fire had been ordered. Therefore, in order to destroy this rumor, Nero blamed the Christians, who are hated for their abominations, and punished them with refined cruelty. Christ, from whom they take their name, was executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Stopped for a moment, this evil superstition reappeared, not only in Judea, where was the root of the evil, but also in Rome, where all things sordid and abominable from every corner of the world come together. Thus, first those who confessed [that they were Christians] were arrested, and on the basis of their testimony a great number were condemned, although not so much for the fire itself as for their hatred of humankind.

Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it. Nero opened his own gardens for these shows, and in the circus he himself became a spectacle, for he mingled with the people dressed as a charioteer, or he rode around in his chariot. All of this aroused the mercy of the people, even against these culprits who deserved an exemplary punishment, for it was clear that they were not being destroyed for the common good, but rather to satisfy the cruelty of one person.

Domitian

- Nero is deposed in AD 68 leading to *The Year of Four Emperors*
- Persecution mostly stops for the reign of two emperors
- Domitian becomes emperor and renews a limited persecution for reasons mostly unknown

Eusebius (~AD 260-340):

Domitian's horrible cruelty struck down many victims. In Rome, he put to death large numbers of distinguished, high-born men of great achievements, without a fair trial. He banished countless other eminent men for no reason at all and seized their property. And then at last Domitian showed himself to be an emperor who walked in the steps of Nero for his hatred and hostility towards God. Indeed, he was the second emperor to organise a persecution of us Christians, although his father Vespasian had harboured no evil designs against us. There is abundant evidence that the apostle and Gospel-writer John was still alive at that time, and because of his testimony to God's Word he was sentenced to exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) ... In fact, our faith shone out so brightly at that time, that even historians who rejected our beliefs wrote down without hesitation in their history books both the persecution and the martyrdoms it produced. They also recorded the exact date of the persecution, that it was in the fifteenth year of Domitian [AD 96]. Flavia Domitilla, who was a niece of Flavius Clemens, one of Rome's consuls [chief magistrates] that year, was banished to the island of Pontia, along with many others, as a punishment for their testimony to Christ...

After fifteen years of Domitian's rule, Nerva became emperor. The Roman Senate voted to strip the dead Domitian of his honours, and to return to their homes all whom he had unjustly banished, restoring their property to them. The historians of the time record this. At the same time the apostle John, after his exile on Patmos, went back to live once more in his home at Ephesus, as early Christian tradition says.²

² Needham, 62.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

EARLY PRACTICE OF CHRISTIANITY

Worship Practices

- Components of an early worship service
 - Service of the Word (all welcome)
 - Public reading of the Word
 - Singing
 - Acapella
 - Psalms
 - Antiphonal
 - Exhortation
 - The Eucharist (only baptized allowed)
 - Prayer
 - Lord's Supper
 - Benediction
- Baptism
 - *Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have not living water, baptize into other water; and if you can not in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whatever others can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.* (Anonymous, *Didache*, 1st Century)

Leadership Structure

- In the New Testament, the terms bishop (episkopos) and elder (presbeuteros) are interchangeable.
- Early in church history they began to be treated as distinct offices.
 - Ignatius of Antioch writes to the church of Ephesus that they should obey their bishop and the elders that is fitted to him.
 - He viewed a singular bishop assisted by a team of elders was best for the unity of the church.
 - Justin Martyr refers to the bishop as “president of the elders” implying a “first among equals” approach more similar to modern “elder-led” government.
- The bishops were not viewed as apostles, but as a continuation of the apostles’ ministry.

EARLY PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANITY

Objections to Christianity

- Cultural offensiveness
 - Sexual Purity
 - Slavery
 - Gladiatorial games
 - Abortion/infanticide
 - Refusal to participate in public activities that included idolatry
- Atheism
 - *"Hail, Lord of the Earth, Invincible, Power, Glory, Honor, Blessed, Great, Worthy art Thou to inherit the kingdom."* (From an ancient coin)
- Insubordination (see reading 1)
- Slander
 - Love feasts
 - Cannibalism
 - Incest
- Classism
 - *"Far from us, say the Christians, be any man possessed of any culture or wisdom or judgment; their aim is to convince only worthless and contemptible people, idiots, slaves, poor women, and children... These are the only ones whom they manage to turn into believers."* (Celsus, *The True Word*, ~170 AD)

Early Martyrs

- Ignatius of Antioch (~35-110 AD)
 - Bishop of the church at Antioch
 - Also called "Theophorus" – God-bearer
 - Tradition labels him a disciple of John
 - Arrested under Trajan and transported to Rome
 - Wrote 7 letters to churches and friends as he journeyed. The letters emphasized church unity, faithfulness under persecution, the importance of the Eucharist, and opposed *docetism* (the heresy which teaches that Jesus only appeared to be human).
 - He was eaten by beasts in the arena in Rome
- Polycarp (~69-155 AD)
 - Bishop of the church of Smyrna
 - A disciple of John

- His only surviving letter is his *Epistle to the Philippians*
 - Calls them to live virtuous lives.
 - Warns against *docetism*
 - References his letter from Ignatius, whom he met on his journey to Rome
 - Calls them to submit to their leaders
- He was eventually arrested for refusing to curse Christ
 - Ultimately he was burned at the stake
 - His martyrdom is recorded in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, a letter sent from the church in Smyrna to the church in Philomelium.
 - The letter emphasizes Polycarp's faithfulness, but warns that martyrdom ought not be pursued.

EXTENDED READINGS

Reading 1: An Exchange between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan

Pliny

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be

discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Trajan

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

Reading 2: Ignatius letter to the Romans

Chapter 4. Allow me to fall a prey to the wild beasts

I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless you hinder me. I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable good-will towards me. Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread

of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death], I may be no trouble to any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]. I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain.

Chapter 5. I desire to die

From Syria even unto Rome I fight with beasts, both by land and sea, both by night and day, being bound to ten leopards, I mean a band of soldiers, who, even when they receive benefits, show themselves all the worse. But I am the more instructed by their injuries [to act as a disciple of Christ]; “yet am I not thereby justified.” 1 Corinthians 4:4 May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray they may be found eager to rush upon me, which also I will entice to devour me speedily, and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched. But if they be unwilling to assail me, I will compel them to do so. Pardon me [in this]: I know what is for my benefit. Now I begin to be a disciple. And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ.

Chapter 6. By death I shall attain true life

All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better for me to die on behalf of Jesus Christ, than to reign over all the ends of the earth. “For what shall a man be profited, if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?” Him I seek, who died for us: Him I desire, who rose again for our sake. This is the gain which is laid up for me. Pardon me, brethren: do not hinder me from living, do not wish to keep me in a state of death; and while I desire to belong to God, do not give me over to the world. Allow me to obtain pure light: when I have gone there, I shall indeed be a man of God. Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any one has Him within himself, let him consider what I desire, and let him have sympathy with me, as knowing how I am straitened.

Reading 3: The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Now, as Polycarp was entering into the stadium, there came to him a voice from heaven, saying, “Be strong, and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!” No one saw who it was that spoke to him; but those of our brethren who were present heard the voice. And as he was brought forward, the tumult became great when they heard that Polycarp was taken. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, “Have respect to your old age,” and other similar things,

according to their custom, [such as], “Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists.”

But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, “Away with the Atheists.”

Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, “Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ;”

Polycarp declared, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, “Swear by the fortune of Caesar,” he answered,

Since you are vainly urgent that, as you say, I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretend not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and you shall hear them.

The proconsul replied, “Persuade the people.” But Polycarp said,

To you I have thought it right to offer an account [of my faith]; for we are taught to give all due honor (which entails no injury upon ourselves) to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God. Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1 But as for these, I do not deem them worthy of receiving any account from me.