

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 1

Setting the Stage

INTRODUCTION

In the gospels, Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32). The small seed falls into the ground and grows into a tree. So, it is with the church. Starting as a small renewal movement in Judaism, the church sprouted quickly, staking its position in the Mediterranean world within decades. Within 300 years, it grew into the established faith of the Roman Empire. Through the centuries, the church has grown even further, reaching into most every nation in many different forms.

We will approach this class using the tree analogy. We will not start out with the specific branch that is our local church today; instead, we will focus on the soil into which the seed fell (the world in which the church got its start). Then, we will chart the growth of the church from its initial sprouting through its early growth. We will find it branching off many times before we finally reach our particular branch. We will see the church bearing fruit. We will also see wild branches that were pruned early, having no part of the rightly growing tree.

Why?

“Why study church history?” is a fair question. Why does it make a difference in who we are and how we walk with God?

There are a number of legitimate reasons it is important we learn about our “tree.” First, we can best understand where we are and what we believe if we understand the historical context in which we live. Second, the more we understand our roots, the more we can identify matters of faith as opposed to matters of opinion. Third, any study in church history is also a study in God and the work of Christ. As we better understand that, we grow closer to him and we get a greater appreciation for what he has done. Finally (although there are probably many more reasons we are not setting out) as we understand the history of our faith, we find an unbroken line of belief that takes us back to the empty tomb itself. That is a faith building process as we see the links between who we are today and God’s intervention in history in Jesus Christ.

Our Approach

The general approach we will use is chronological. For some topics we will deviate slightly and use a thematic approach, for example, looking at the development of the doctrine of the trinity on its own, while leaving out other events that occurred during the decades involved (Rest assured, we will pick up on those events in other classes for literacy's sake!). Additionally, some classes will focus on people, as opposed to merely events. Finally, sometimes we will deviate from chronology to cover geographic issues. There were some events that occurred in parts of the world that make sense on their own without intruding on other "chronological events" that occurred elsewhere.

We can expect to cover a variety of materials in the class. We will cover the early church after the Apostles, the development of church structure (elders, deacons, Pastors, Bishops, Popes, etc.), the development of doctrines and creeds, saints, martyrs, and other key figures in the church's past, the interplay between church and state, the canonization of scripture, the rise and development of monasticism, the division between the Roman church and the Greek church, the reformation movement, as well as the rise of various denominations and the reasons behind their formation.

The church's history is much more than mere theology and ideas. It is a history of art and architecture. It is a history of music. We expect to cover these aspects of church history throughout this class as well.

In the midst of this class, we will try to keep a modern focus on the issues by comparing them to where we are today. This will, in part, include our "Points for Home" in a constant effort to see that we link what we learn to our own lives in ways that make a difference for God.

WARNING

As stated when we first started down this road: This is a tough class to teach! In the event that I decide to punt the class and move to another subject, you can't fuss! The lawyer in me has now warned you in writing that I might need to do so!

1. THE SOIL – The Known World of the New Testament Church

The timing of the church was perfect. The soil into which the seeds of the church fell was ready and fertile (Gal. 4:4, “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son...”). We will look at three different areas which combined to make just the right world for the gospel to sprout and flourish.

A. *The Jewish Dispersion*

As a nation, the Jews were repeatedly exiled from the physical boundaries of Israel in the centuries before Christ. After the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.), many exiled Jews carefully maintained their faith and its practices, even though separated physically from Jerusalem and the Temple. These Jews built local synagogues as places of worship. They took their scriptures and translated them into the Greek language of the masses (the Septuagint). They found a way to practice what was once a regional religion on a worldwide scale. They understood that there was “one God” as they professed multiple times day and night pursuant to Moses’ command in Deut. 6:4-9. Because of that belief, the same one God was to be worshipped whether they were in Israel or Rome.

When the Babylonian captivity was reversed, the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their original home (538 B.C.) That being said, many (a majority) of Jews did not relocate back to Judah. Instead, they stayed dispersed throughout the world, plying their trades, working their jobs, rearing their families and worshipping Yahweh God revealed in the Old Testament through obedience in life and synagogue. This worship involved prayer and preaching, but not animal sacrifice. Sacrifices were maintained only under the guidance of the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem.

When the church came, it came to a world already populated with many far beyond the boundaries of Israel who believed in the Old Testament. There were large centers of Judaism in the two major cities of the day, Rome and Alexandria, and a great number of synagogues were dotted around the Mediterranean Sea.

The Jews took their scriptures (our Old Testament) and translated those Hebrew/Aramaic writings into Greek for use throughout the Greek-speaking world. Those scriptures (called the Septuagint) provided a foundation and resource for understanding God’s history with man and the Old Testament prophecies of Jesus by all, not

merely those Jews who could read Hebrew. We will see the importance of this more and more as we see the Greek influx into the church grow. This is an influx made possible by the existence of the Greek Old Testament, for these Greeks could not read Hebrew.¹

The result of this dispersion was a ready made audience in all corners of civilization that were intimate with God and his actions throughout history as recorded in the Old Testament. Similarly, there were people all over who were expectant of a Messiah, even if they did not fully understand what or who he would be. The soil was ripe for the seeds.

B. *The God-fearers*

The Jews were not alone in their synagogues. A number of Greeks had grown semi-attached to the worship found in the Jewish faith. The Greek mythologies we come to learn in our history classes were held true by a number of people; however, a growing number of Greek “thinkers” had decided that the gods taught through the myths and legends had to be that – myths and legends. As the Greeks grew in their learning and thinking, and as philosophy became the leading rudder of Greek society, many came to believe that there had to be a single guiding force behind the universe and world as we saw it.

Plato and others would give names to this single guiding force. Typically, it was termed the *logos* (λογος), a Greek term we associate with “word.” Indeed, “word” can be a very proper translation of *logos*. But, the word also means much more than that. It forms the basis of “logic” and carries the meaning of “reason.” It is also the root of our ending for “the study of” (-ology).² *Logos* was a Greek concept based in the constancy and logic behind the world. So, when Greek philosophers spoke of *logos* as a unifying force behind nature, they spoke in terms that explained a single consistency. For many, this became an understanding of a singular

¹ Over time, we will see that while the Septuagint was translated for the Hebrew people, it became such an indispensable tool for the church that the Jews began distancing themselves from the translation – but more on that when we cover the development of the Christian canon / Bible.

² So, “theology” means “the study of God” (*theos* being Greek for “god”), “anthropology” means “the study of mankind” (*anthropos* being Greek for “man”) etc.

power considered “god,” though not necessarily in a personal sense that we understand God.

While the church came into its own at the height of the Roman Empire, it came to a world filled with Greek thought and the Greek language. Alexander the Great conquered the known world and taken the Greek language and culture with him to all corners.³

With the Roman Empire, Greek philosophy and language was never fully displaced. The Romans, by and large, were more focused on building an Empire that provided peace and stability by emphasizing government and regulation. The Greeks were the ones more bent on figuring out why things were the way they were. Greek philosophy probed the basics of mathematics and geometry, the stars in the sky, the science of medicine and physics as well as the more esoteric problems of human existence, the presence of evil, and the destiny of a human after death.

A number of these Greeks took their belief in one “god” or the unity of all things and found the Jewish faith appealing. In the Jews, Greeks saw a people who from antiquity (and Greeks were fond of things old!) had worshipped only one God and held detestable the idea that there could be more.

In the first century, the Greeks who appreciated the Jewish faith, even though never formally converting, were called “God-fearers.” But, these God-fearers brought another aspect of soil that was ripe for the fullness of teaching on the one true God, his morality, his interactions with humanity, and his plans for the human soul. Greek philosophy would ultimately become a central breeding ground for Christians.

C. The Roman Empire Itself

One final element of the soil that we would be remiss for failure to mention is the Roman Empire itself. As mentioned earlier, the Romans were careful to meld together a coherent empire built upon

³ Some scholars note the unique aspects of the Greek language that allowed scripture its depth as the language of choice for the New Testament writings. Historically, no other language had ever developed that allowed the rich usage and meanings that Greek provided for scripture. Dr. Clyde Galzener, Greek professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, asks his students whether any believe it mere coincidence the New Testament was written in Greek.

regulations and consistency. Critical to maintaining the empire was the means to travel the empire easily. So Rome built roads, some of which are still with us today.⁴ These roads and the travel ease of the Empire would allow the church to spread easily. Along with the roads and trade routes were shipping lanes that moved people and ideas with consistency from port to port. For the first time in history, there was consistency in coinage, in trade, in interaction between what had historically been distrusting people who would have little or no interaction. And into this ripe soil, the church as an idea and faith was easily transported around the civilized world.

2. THE SEED IS PLANTED – The Apostolic Church

The New Testament tells us of the Apostles planting the seed of the church throughout the first few decades after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The first history book of the church⁵ we have is actually our New Testament book of Acts. Through the history recorded in Acts, we read of Paul and others making multiple mission trips around the eastern half of the Mediterranean world planting churches. We also read from the letters in the New Testament and the Revelation of John more information about these churches living and growing beyond the bounds of Israel.

From scripture, then, we understand how Christianity grew from its roots as a reform movement within Judaism into a thriving community that spread throughout the Mediterranean world. In Acts 2, we know of the start of the “church.”⁶ While those were Jews in Acts 2, they were not only Jerusalem Jews. There were folks from all over at Jerusalem in celebration of Pentecost that day. The church started with a bang, around 3,000 were

⁴ The roads are with us in two forms. One can go find these roads amidst ruins in archaeological areas of the Roman Empire. A second way the roads are with us is in the form of current roads. There are numerous places in the Mediterranean world today where the roads are just modern pavements over the older roads that the Romans originally established!

⁵ It is important here that as we speak of the “church,” we remember that we are not talking of a religious institution with a building, paid staff, etc. We are speaking of a community of people who shared a belief in Jesus as God, the Messiah that brings salvation to humanity. The church here are the people who share that belief, not those affiliated with a building in the neighborhood.

⁶ *Ekklesia* “ἐκκλησία” is the Greek for church. Literally, it means those “called out,” but its usage in New Testament times meant an assembly or orderly gathering of people. In the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament), it was used frequently to refer to a gathering of the Jews. See, for example, Dt. 9:10 when Moses referenced the Ten Commandments given the people on the mountain “on the day of the assembly (*ekklesia*).”

added that first day. The church continued to grow. Peter and others took the church beyond the bounds of Jerusalem to Jews in outer Judea and beyond. Then in Acts 10, we read of Peter visiting Cornelius and the first recorded Gentile conversions. Here, the church begins its growth outside Judaism and into the Greco-Roman world.

The growth into the Gentile world exploded once Paul began his missionary work into modern Turkey and Greece. Paul planted churches and established the practice of conversion straight into Christianity. By that, we mean that one did not have to first become a Jew in order to become a Christian.

History outside that recorded in scripture adds more information to this early church planting. For example, excavators in Pompeii (which the Vesuvius volcano destroyed and buried in ash in 79 A.D.) contain what scholars see as an early Christian cryptogram square.⁷ The cryptogram reads:

ROTAS
OPERA
TENET
AREPO
SATOR

In Latin, the words “*rotas opera tenet arepo sator*” mean, in essence, “the farmer keeps agriculture going by hard work.” Yet, look at the way the words are written in the square. It reads the same forwards or backwards, up or down. The word square is also built around “*tenet*” in a cross position.

If you keep the “n” in the dead center of the cryptogram and rearrange the letters in a cross, you have “*paternoster* A O” twice (Once up and once across). *Paternoster* is the Latin title to the Lord’s Prayer (literally *paternoster* is “our Father”). “A” and “O” are the letters for “alpha” and “omega,” the Greek letters that signified Christ in the early church. Scholars are not all convinced that the Christian meaning of this

⁷ To our reading, the idea of a “cryptogram square” seems bizarre and needless. We should remember that there are several reasons that place them in a bit more comprehensible light. First, the early Christians had no “Christian art.” There was a natural distaste inherited from the Jewish commandment against idols not to make a physical representation of God or Jesus. This left Christians with other ways to creatively express their faith. Further, cryptograms were a word art of the day, much like some may see the crossword puzzles and jumbles today. They were a mental exercise that conveyed meaning and beauty as constructed.

cryptogram is certain. It could merely be an interesting way to write about farmers! Still, there is good reason to know that even in Biblical times, the Christian faith spread beyond the bounds Luke recorded for us in Acts.

Other Christian cryptograms are found in Aquincum (modern Budapest) and Manchester, England dating 107 and 175 respectively. Coimbra, Portugal has produced another cryptogram possibly dating from the first century as well.

These early Christian churches had the Apostles as more than mere founders. In the very early years of the church, the Apostles were the leaders of the churches. The Apostles were authorities for the churches. The Apostles taught and led the churches. We see this clearly expressed in the New Testament. In fact, as we will see later, it becomes a principal impetus behind those who assemble the New Testament!

3. PIVOT POINTS FOR THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

We note two early pivot points for the first century church. These were two events that propel us in our study beyond the pages of the New Testament and into other historical (though not inspired in the same way) writings and discoveries.

A. *PIVOT POINT 1: The Destruction of the Temple*

In 68 to 70 A.D., the Roman Emperor Titus destroyed the Temple as part of quieting a Jewish rebellion. We might remember the last of the rebellious Jews dying on Masada rather than capitulating to Roman rule and conquest. Prior to this decimation of Jerusalem, the church itself, while planted throughout the Greek world, kept its ties to the church in Jerusalem. We read of “international” problems sorted out by a Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. It was the church in Jerusalem that wrote other Greek churches instructions on practice and life. It was to the Jerusalem church that Paul subjected himself, and for it he raised money. Yet, this largely Jewish Jerusalem church was not to be found after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. Church history teaches that John and other leaders in the Jerusalem church left before Titus invaded and went to other outpost churches, gathering together after the invasion to discuss leadership issues⁸

⁸ Eusebius Church History 3.11.

Certainly, the centrality of accountability and its concomitant uniting effect on the church was disrupted by the dissolution of the Jerusalem church. Yet, the pivot point is even deeper. Along with the destruction came a separation of the Jewish faith from the Temple. No longer would Jews offer sacrifices. No longer would the Jewish faith find the High Priest and the Levitical priesthood as the center of practice. Now, certain synagogues would rise up as the focus of the Jewish faith. There was also a chilling fear throughout Judaism of the consequences to the faith once Jerusalem was destroyed.⁹ As a result, the Jews re-wrote their 18 benedictions to more clearly define those deemed adherents to the true faith. As rewritten, Benediction 12 specifically excludes those Jews who believed Jesus was Messiah from inclusion in the faith and its practices.¹⁰

Why was this a pivot point? Once Judaism drew harsh lines eliminating Christians from their midst, the intellectual influence of the church went decidedly Greek. In the earliest church, the thought leaders, the teachers, were by and large Jews, steeped in the Old Testament and the understanding of Jesus' redemption as prophesied. Once the lines were more clearly drawn, we see the future thought leaders and intelligentsia of the church coming from the Greek philosophers with minimal exposure to the Old Testament and even less approach to the Jewish thought patterns that make understanding the Old Testament more possible! We will see the influx of Greek philosophy early in the church in ways deemed orthodox as well as in ways deemed heretical. History shows us a disconnect and break occurring between Christianity and Jewish customs, Jerusalem, and the Temple. This background will become a strong anti-Semitism in later years of the church that lasts for centuries.

⁹ The Jews did seek to resettle Jerusalem and re-establish their National identity after the 68-70 destruction of Titus, but in 132–135 A.D., a final revolt of Jews in Jerusalem was quashed by Rome with the decree that no Jews would be allowed to resettle the town.

¹⁰ Many scholars also recognize that hard feelings must have been present between Christian and non-Christian Jews at this point because the Christian Jews were pacifists who would not have joined in fighting the Romans for Jewish Nationalism.

B. PIVOT POINT 2 – Death of the Apostles

The Bible indicates, and history confirms, that John was the last of the Apostles to die, likely dying around 100 A.D.¹¹ We know that Paul and Peter died, most likely during Nero's persecutions, in the mid-60's A.D. Somewhere in this time period the other apostles died as well.

This is a major pivot point because before the Apostles were dead, there was a ready authority for the pattern and practice of the church. Should a question arise, or should instruction or discipline be needed, an Apostle was available as an authority that was directly connected with the earthly Jesus.¹² But as the apostles died, and the Lord Jesus had not yet returned, the natural questions arose, "Who is in charge?" "Who knows what is right or not?" "Who gets to make doctrinal decisions?" As the church worked to maintain unity in doctrine and practice, these questions were critical.

This brings us to the early church responding to this vacuum of authority in multiple ways. First and foremost, the church began accumulating the writings of the apostles for study and use. The apostles may have departed, but their writings, inspired by the same Spirit that inspired their teaching, would certainly be authoritative. Second, the church looked to the leaders appointed by the apostles to pastor the church in their stead. And the rise of the ecclesiastical office of Bishop/Elder is rooted in the authority passed on to these men by the apostles themselves.

¹¹ It seems apparent from reading John's gospel that he wrote it after the death of Peter and others, most likely writing as the last living apostle. So, for instance, we see John referencing Peter as crucified in his writings (The way John writes of Peter's interchange with Jesus in John 13 apparently indicates the readers would have known of Peter's death by crucifixion. In verse 36, Jesus tells Peter that Peter could not follow Jesus to the cross at that time, but would "follow later."). Similarly, we read of John warning the church that while Jesus said John would be last to die, Jesus never said John would NOT die (Jn. 21:22-23). John seems to prepare the church readers for his impending death, even though some thought he might live forever (he was near 100, after all!).

¹² It is not fair to say that only the Apostles made decisions. Certainly, we see in Acts 15 the Elders and congregation involved in the decision making as well. However, it was the Apostles that had the authority that Paul so often invoked to lead and teach the church.

So with this scene, we begin a study of church history – the history of a tree that has grown throughout the world, a living tree bearing fruit for thousands of years. We will find much of who we are and what we believe in this study. It should enrich our faith, challenge our lives, and bring us into greater harmony with God and each other.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God's people are part of a great living tree that God has nurtured and caused to grow.
2. We have Holy Scripture as a guide and practice in life and worship. Its roots are in the faith God delivered to the church.
3. Studying history can help us understand our forefathers in faith so as to embrace their righteousness but not repeat their mistakes. (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10)