

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Chapter 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 would be with the church. Starting as a small renewal movement in Judaism, the church sprouted quickly, staking its position in the Mediterranean world within decades. In less than 300 years, it grew into the established faith of the Roman Empire. Through the centuries since, the church has grown even further, reaching into most every nation in many different forms.

We can use the tree analogy to explain the approach of these lessons. 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 the tree 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, having no part of the rightly growing tree.

Why Study Church History?

“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 reasons it is important we learn about our “tree.” Here are five:

First, a study of church history is a study of Scripture and theology. It is only in the pages of church history that we understand the “canon,” or what writings we understand to *be* Scripture versus those that aren’t. From there, many of our teachings and understandings of the *meaning* of Scripture are based in historical enlightenment that developed over years and even centuries. The Trinity, for example, developed in the understanding of the church over time. It is certainly found in Scripture, but the word itself (“Trinity”) is not. It took the church a long time to understand the concepts as we understand them today.

Second, the more we understand our roots, the more we can identify matters of faith as opposed to matters of opinion. Many of the reasons the church has

divided in the past make good rational sense. The issues are very important. Many of the reasons, however, are also lamentable. Jesus prayed for the church to be united. Seeing division over petty things that get promoted into significance serve as a warning to us.

Third, it will help us understand why different churches “do church” differently. Some churches are “high church;” others aren’t. Some churches build themselves around certain creeds; others are not even sure what creeds are!

Fourth, 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.

Fifth, we can best understand where we are and what we believe if we understand the historical context in which we live. It will make better sense of what we do and why we do it.

Our Approach

The general approach we will use is chronological. For some topics, however, we will deviate and use a thematic approach. For example, we will consider 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 Scripture and to where we are today. This will be the particular focus of our "Points for Home," trying to link what we learn to our own lives in ways that make a difference for God.

THE SOIL – The 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 should note three different areas that combined to make just the right world for the gospel to sprout and flourish.

The Jewish Dispersion (The "Diaspora"¹) and the Septuagint

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," detailed below). 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 lifted, the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their original home (538 B.C.) That being said, 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. This worship was manifested through obedience in life and synagogue. It involved prayer and preaching, but not animal sacrifice. Sacrifices were maintained only under the guidance of the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem.

¹ Scholars use the word "diaspora" to refer to the voluntary dispersion of Jews, as opposed to "exile" or "captivity." While historically it might have its genesis in a captivity, once Jews were allowed to return to their land, but instead chose to remain where their lives had taken root, they became a part of the diaspora. The word "diaspora" comes from the Greek *diaspora* (διασπορά) and means simply "dispersion."

When the church was born, it came into a world already populated with many people living 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 had taken 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” and abbreviated “LXX,” the Roman numerals for “70”²) 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.

The first Jewish Scriptures translated were the Torah, the five books of Moses generally agreed to have been translated into Greek around 250BC.³ The remaining Jewish Scriptures followed, and many other Jewish writings were included as well. By the time of the New Testament book of Acts, these Greek translations were important in the Greek-speaking Jewish communities throughout the diaspora. Most Jews living outside the Semitic countries likely were more familiar with Greek than Hebrew.⁴

This Septuagint was the Scripture Paul generally quoted in his letters to the churches outside Judea. Luke also had great familiarity with the Septuagint as evidenced in his usage in Luke and Acts. Not only did Greek-speaking Jews know

² The name “Septuagint” comes from the Latin title of the translation: *Versio Septuaginta Interpretum*, which means “version of the seventy interpreters.” This also explains why the abbreviation for the Septuagint is the Roman numeral for 70. Somewhere around 200BC, a letter from “Aristeas to Philocrates” was written containing an account, generally accorded to be legend in many aspects, about the writing of the Septuagint. In the letter, it is explained that the Alexandrian librarian Demetrius of Phalerum persuaded Ptolemy II (309-246 BC) to enrich the library with a set of the Jewish Scriptures. The king sent ambassadors to the High Priest in Jerusalem asking for help. The High Priest sent 72 scholars (representing six from each tribe) to do the work. Supposedly (and this is generally deemed to be part of the legend as opposed to fact) the scholars finished their work in exactly 72 days. For more, see, Wasserstein, Abraham, and Wasserstein, David, *The Legend of the Septuagint, From Classical Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge 2006).

³ Jobes, Karen, and Silva, Moises, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, (Baker 2000), at 29.

⁴ 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.

the Septuagint translation, but it was understandable by Greek-speaking Gentiles as well. The ramifications of the ready availability of the Septuagint are profound.

First, the obvious result is the ready availability of Scriptures that Paul, Barnabas, and others could use in their mission efforts. They were able to go into areas and use Scriptures that local people had at their disposal. These were not “invented” by the church, but had been in place for over a century or two. They were already established before the birth of Christ.

Consider the impact this would have on the story of Jesus’ birth. Luke informs us in his first volume (his gospel) that Jesus was born of a virgin. Many skeptics are quick to point out that when the New Testament speaks of Jesus born of a virgin as fulfilling Isaiah 7:14 (“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel”), it uses the Greek word “*parthenos*” (παρθένος), which clearly means “virgin.” Yet the Hebrew of Isaiah, the critics add, speaks of an *almah* (עלמה), which means “maiden.” Now a “maiden” was considered a virgin, as a young unmarried woman; however, it is possible that the word might mean a young unmarried woman and leave no comment on the question of promiscuity. Yet Jews and others would have been readily able to determine what the understanding of the Old Testament passage was by people uninfluenced by the birth of Jesus or the Christian faith. Simply by looking at the Septuagint, they would see that their Jewish fathers understood “*almah*” in its normative sense of “virgin” because the Jewish scholars translated the word into Greek as *parthenos* (παρθένος), a “virgin.”

A more subtle way the Septuagint influenced the Scriptures and the spread of the church is seen in the writings of Luke, both his gospel and Acts. Luke was clearly wise to the Scriptures and deeply influenced by them. His writings reflect this in structure as well as quotations. Consider the following:

- Luke includes five extended quotations from the Septuagint of Isaiah, two in his gospel and three in Acts (Isa. 40:3-5/Lk. 3:4-6; Isa. 61:1-2/Lk. 4:18-19; Isa. 66:1-2/Acts 7:49-50; Isa. 53:7-8/Acts 8:32-33; and Isa. 6:9-10/Acts 28:26-27). These are more extended quotations from Isaiah than found in any other book of the Bible.
- Scholars have found over 100 verbal allusions to the Septuagint of Isaiah in the writings of Luke.⁵

⁵ This is found in Appendix IV of Nestle Aland’s 27th edition of the Greek New Testament; Aland, B. K., *et al.*, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1993).

- This leads some scholars to think that “Luke probably had access to Isaiah LXX (an abbreviation for the Septuagint) scrolls, if not his own copies.”⁶

There is still another way the Septuagint played a critical role in preparing the soil for the growth of the church. Think again of those Jews who heard the gospel message in Jerusalem and then returned to their homes. Acts 1 and 2 inform us that many foreigners were in Jerusalem for festivals and they heard Peter’s Pentecost sermon each in their own language. Acts points out that Peter was speaking in Hebrew (or Aramaic). The people, however, were not hearing in Hebrew. It was not a language they had dexterity with. For many of them, they certainly would have had a decent comprehension of Greek. That was the language of the international world. Because that was a language of their Scriptures (the Septuagint), as the people returned to their homes, they had the Scriptures available to search and study to determine whether Jesus was indeed the Messiah. There was a resource of God’s revelation available in a tongue they could understand. If they had been limited to Hebrew Scriptures, this research ability would not have existed.

The Synagogues and the God-fearers

As referenced earlier, the dispersed Jews built local synagogues as places of community, teaching, and worship. I agree with the assessment of Louis Rabinowitz,

[The synagogue] has had a decisive influence not only on Judaism throughout the ages, but on organized religion as a whole.⁷

The synagogue as a community site of meeting and formal worship/teaching would become the basic form and idea followed by the Christian church as well as the Muslim mosque.

While its origins are not definitively known, the synagogue was clearly a creation of the diaspora. Jews sought to maintain meeting places that reinforced and nurtured their faith and community as they lived away from Jerusalem and the temple. By the first century, the synagogue is well established. We read of the synagogues in the New Testament, but we can just as readily read of them from

⁶ Mallen, Peter, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, (T&T Clark 2008), at 3.

⁷ “Synagogue,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Keter Publishing House 1972), Vol. 15, at 579.

the pens of non-Christian first-century Jewish writers like Philo of Alexandria (c.20BC-c.50AD) and Josephus (37-c.100 AD).⁸

These synagogues provided a place for Paul and other missionaries to go and find people who already believed in God's Scriptures. They were places of teaching and discussion that provided a rich and ready mission field for the word of God. Over and over in Acts we read that Paul went into the synagogues and taught of Jesus (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14ff.; 14:1; 17:1, 10ff.; 18:4ff.; 18:19, 26; 19:8; 24:12).

These synagogues provided not only a place for the Jews to fellowship, worship, and study, but they also provided a forum for Gentiles who were interested in the Jewish conception of a single God rather than many. A number of Greeks had grown semi-attached to the worship found in the Jewish faith. The Greek mythologies we 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 they saw it. For many, this became an understanding of a singular power considered "god," though not necessarily in a personal sense that we understand God.

With the Roman Empire, Greek philosophy and language were never fully displaced. Though perhaps an oversimplification, 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.

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

⁸ Philo, *Legatione ad Gaium*, at 132f.; Josephus mentions a number of different synagogues throughout his writings.

also the root of our ending for “the study of” (-ology).⁹ *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 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 took the Greek language and culture with him to all corners.¹⁰

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.

The result of this dispersion was a ready made audience in all corners of civilization that was 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.

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 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.¹¹ These roads and the ease of travel

⁹ So, “theology” means “the study of God” (*theos* being Greek for “god”), “anthropology” means “the study of mankind” (*anthropos* being Greek for “man”), etc.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

in the Empire would allow the church to spread easily. History recognizes Caesar Augustus (63BC-14AD) as the Emperor first initiating the purposeful building and maintenance of roads as an integral part of the Empire.¹² 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, and 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 were easily transported around the civilized world.

The Roman structure included a core value in citizenship. Initially the class of “citizen” was enjoyed by the ruling few in Rome and select places. The core right of citizens was that of participating in Roman politics. As a result of a war against Rome in 91BC, Roman citizenship was extended to all free males living on the peninsula of Italy.

Over the next generation, the rights of citizenship were extended to certain favored people, who were well-off, entitling them to the right of participation not only in local politics, but also in other Roman rights as well.¹³ This became important to the spread of the gospel because it was a right that by the time of Christ had spread outward to places like Tarsus, where the family of Saul enjoyed the privilege of Roman citizenship. Citizenship was given as a means of shoring up needed community support or as a reward for loyalty. This included a right to appeal a criminal finding in the court of Caesar in Rome. Paul availed himself of this right as a means of going to Rome both to encourage the church and also to preach and evangelize the unsaved (Acts 25:6-12).

Rome also had armies of great size stationed throughout the Empire. At a cost of one-half the state’s entire budget, these armies kept a peace (popularly called the *pax Romana*, or “peace of Rome”) ushered in by Augustus Caesar. That is not to say that there was no conflict, but that the civil wars and wars of expansion known in earlier centuries were replaced with a general stability that enabled freedom of travel and trade.

Augustus also established a “Praetorian Guard,” an elite group of personal bodyguards for the Emperor who were paid at three times the rate of normal

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!

¹² Boatwright, Mary, *et al.*, *The Romans – From Village to Empire*, (Oxford 2004), at 343.

¹³ Woolf, Greg, ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World*, (Cambridge University Press 2003), at 124ff.

soldiers.¹⁴ These were important individuals, and it is no small thing that Paul, while imprisoned in Rome awaiting his appeal to Caesar, saw his testimony before the Praetorian Guard as an amazing work of God. (Phil. 1:13 – called the “Imperial Guard” by the ESV).

A final important note on the timing of the church’s growth recorded in Acts and the Roman factor: Rome recognized the Jewish religion. Jews in Rome were credited with providing Julius Caesar with the necessary funds to rise to power. As a reward, Julius issued a decree that recognized the rights of the Jews to freely practice their religion.

All other measures notwithstanding, I allow these persons [the Jews] to gather and to organize their community following the customs of their fathers and according to their own laws.¹⁵

This would get reinforced by Caesar Augustus and Claudius Caesar. Claudius’ edict would be the last to recognize Jewish freedom in this way:

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: . . .Therefore it is right that also the Jews, who are in all the world under us, shall maintain their ancestral customs without hindrance and to them I now also command to use this my kindness rather reasonably and not to despise the religious rites of the other nations, but to observe their own laws.¹⁶

Once the Jewish rebellion began in 66AD, the window of Roman approval of Jewish practice began to close. Yet by this time, the Book of Acts is complete, and the church had taken on a life of its own.

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 church¹⁷ we have is actually our New Testament book of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, at 336.

¹⁵ Callewaert, Joseph, *The World of Saint Paul*, (Ignatius Press 2011), at 14.

¹⁶ Edict of Claudius on Jewish Rights, 41AD.

¹⁷ 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

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 fledgling community starting to spread throughout the Mediterranean world. In Acts 2, we know of the start of the “church.”¹⁸ 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, and around 3,000 were 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 AD) found what many scholars see as an early Christian cryptogram square.¹⁹

who shared a belief in Jesus as God, the Messiah that brings salvation to humanity. The church is the people who share that belief, not those affiliated with a building in the neighborhood.

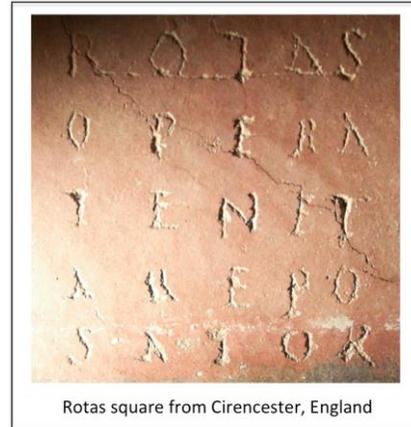
¹⁸ *Ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) is the Greek word for church. It comes from two Greek roots, *ek* meaning “out” and *kaleo* meaning to “call” or “invite.” The sense of those “invited” or “called out” is built into its usage in New Testament times where it meant an assembly or gathering of people. In the Septuagint (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*).”

¹⁹ J. Gwyn Griffiths writes, “the Christian intent of the square has been widely accepted.” “Arepo in the Magic ‘Sator’ Square,” *The Classical Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1971), p.6. Some scholars dispute the Christian meaning of this cryptogram as it was first framed. It could have been merely an interesting way to write about farmers! If not originally Christian, the cryptogram was certainly seized upon by the church and reproduced in divergent places in Europe. The illustration above from Cirencester, England is a popular example, as is the one in Oppède, France.

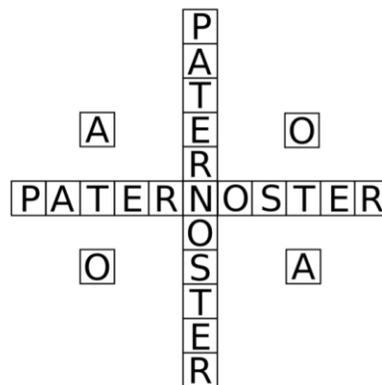
The cryptogram reads:²⁰

RO T A S
O P E R A
T E N E T
A R E P O
S A T O R

In Latin, the words “*rotas opera tenet arepo sator*” mean, in essence, “the sower Arepo holds steady the wheels.” 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 as set out below). *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.



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

²⁰ The cryptogram bears the label “*CIL IV.8623.*” *CIL* is the common abbreviation for *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, the German publication of all extant Latin inscriptions.

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.²¹

Other Christian cryptograms are found in Aquincum (modern Budapest) and Manchester, England dating 107AD and 175AD 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!

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.

PIVOT POINT 1: The Destruction of the Temple

In 68 to 70AD, 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

²¹ The Pompeians were especially fond of word play as evidenced in the extensive graffiti still present in the ruins. They used palindromes extensively as did many of the ancient peoples. See, N. Horsfall, “Stesichorus at Bovillae,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*,” Vol. 99 (1979), p. 28.; P. Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity*, (Routledge 2014), esp. at 213-215.

Jerusalem church left before Titus invaded and went to other outpost churches, gathering together after the invasion to discuss leadership issues.²²

Certainly, the centrality of accountability and its concomitant uniting effect on the church were 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.²³ 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.²⁴

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.

PIVOT POINT 2 – Death of the Apostles

²² Eusebius, *Church History* 3.11.

²³ The Jews did seek to resettle Jerusalem and re-establish their national identity after the 68-70 destruction of Titus, but in 132–135AD, a final revolt of Jews in Jerusalem was quashed by Rome with the decree that no Jews would be allowed to resettle the town.

²⁴ 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.

The Bible indicates, and history confirms, that John was the last of the Apostles to die, likely dying around 100AD.²⁵ We know of one apostle's death through Scripture, and the others we know through historical writings, some more closely related to the deaths than others.

James the son of Zebedee

In Acts 12, we read Luke's note that the apostle James (John's elder brother, a son of Zebedee) was martyred²⁶. King Herod put James "to death with the sword" and sought others to kill and imprison as well. Based upon an Acts chronology, our best estimate puts the martyrdom of James around ten years after Stephen was stoned, around 44AD. We can recall that in Mark 10: 34-45 (Mark wrote Peter's recollections and teachings), James and his brother John asked Jesus to grant them the request of their choice, namely sitting at Jesus' right and left in glory. Jesus explained that neither knew what he was asking for, and then pressed with the question: "Can you drink the cup I drink?" James and John stated they could indeed drink that cup. Jesus prophesied that in their lives they would drink the cup, but that the right-hand/left-hand position was outside the scope of Jesus' granting. In Acts 12, James drank the cup.

Writing some 130 years later, Clement of Alexandria, added an interesting historical memory of the events surrounding this apostle's death. The man who brought James into court stayed and listened to James's confession. The accuser was so moved by James's testimony that the accuser became a Christian on the spot, confessing as much to King Herod. Clement then writes, as recorded by Eusebius, "So they were both taken away, and on the way, he [the accuser] asked James to forgive him. James looked at him for a moment and replied, "Peace be with you" and kissed him. So they were both beheaded at the same time."²⁷

Andrew

²⁵ 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!).

²⁶ This James is called "James the Great." He is so called to distinguish him (the apostle) from James the brother of Jesus.

²⁷ Eusebius, Church History, Book 2, Chapter 9.

Church history teaches that Andrew was martyred through crucifixion. Perhaps you've seen an "Andrew Cross." It is a cross that looks like a capital "X" rather than a "t." Why? There is a 3rd Century writing called the Acts of Andrew²⁸. In that writing, Andrew's crucifixion is explained as occurring on a cross, which was in the shape of an X. Andrew was not nailed to the cross but was tied with ropes so that his death might be longer and more painful. The executioner's plan was for dogs to eat away at the legs of Andrew in the night, figuring Andrew would last two days at most. The martyrdom recounts that Andrew lived on the cross with no food for four days, preaching and proclaiming the Lord with a clear head and a clear voice. Echoing his own comments earlier before being fastened to the cross, Andrew told all who would listen that he had spent his adult life as a slave to the cross, and so he prayed for a chance to be on the cross, not to escape it. In fact, Andrew stripped himself, handed his clothes to the executioner, and urged them to get on with their work.

Eventually, the Proconsul was going to let Andrew down, as the masses marveled in faith over the events. Out of fear, the Proconsul tried to let Andrew down from the cross after four days, but Andrew prayed and died first.

Peter and Paul

We covered the martyrdom of Peter and Paul as noted in Clement's letter to the Corinthian church around 95AD. Those two were martyred under Nero's persecutions in Rome around 65-69AD.

If we look at the Acts of Paul (written around 160-170AD) for data on his death, we read of Paul arriving in Rome with Luke and Titus already there. The Acts of Paul records that Paul was beheaded, not crucified or burned as many other martyrs were. That beheading is consistent with Roman law that a Roman citizen could not be crucified or burned. As given in the Acts of Paul, the beheading occurred with Paul standing, facing east, with arms outstretched to heaven in prayer.

²⁸ There are five so-called "primary" books of Acts that are products of the early church and not included in our scriptures. These are not fully accurate, but do contain early traditions about a number of New Testament people. The books are called: The Acts of John, The Acts of Paul, the Acts of Peter, The Acts of Andrew, and the Acts of Thomas. There are also some "secondary" books of Acts, including the Acts of Philip, the Acts of Andrew and Matthew, and others. Some of these have greater credibility and reliability than others. Even internally, portions of some of these books contain more reliable data and passages than other portions. Of these books, the "primary" books seem to date fairly early and have some reliable data in them. Still, they also contain a good bit of teaching and a number of stories that seem unorthodox and even outlandish! The credibility of these books was no doubt tarnished in the church when the Manicheans adopted them as their New Testament "Acts" in place of what Luke wrote (but more on that when we study the Manicheans!). Most scholars date the Acts of Andrew around 260AD, though some as early as 200.

The Acts of Peter were most likely written down around 200AD. It is in this book we read of Peter requesting his crucifixion be upside down because he did not deserve to die in the manner Jesus did.

John

John the brother of James and author of the fourth gospel, Revelation, and the three Johannine epistles, certainly suffered greatly in the cause of Christ. Revelation itself was written while John was exiled for his faith on the island of Patmos. But, history does not tell us clearly how John died. The church has considered him a martyr because of the events on Patmos and historical references to being burned in oil. Still, those accounts, even the burning, did not ultimately cost John his life.

While we do not know for certain the events surrounding the death of John, we have a decent indication. Most scholars agree that Leucius, one of John's disciples, wrote the early book, The Acts of John, within 50 years or so of John's death. The book recounts many of the horrible occurrences like the burning in oil. Concerning the ultimate death, the book tells us that John finally went to a trench, prayed, and then "stood and said: 'Thou art with me, O Lord Jesus Christ and laid himself down in the trench where he had strewn his garments, and having said unto us, 'Peace be with you, brethren' he gave up his Spirit rejoicing" (Chapter 115).

Philip

The apostle Philip's death is also not contained in Scripture. Scripture teaches us that a deacon named Philip was assigned the chores of helping distribute food in Acts 6. Some scholars believe this was a different Philip than the apostle, while others believe it the same. This Philip was noted in Acts for his missionary efforts in Samaria and for his work in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

While scripture does not tell us of Philip's death, we have multiple other writings that do. We do have references in the 2nd Century from Papias (130ish AD) and Polycrates (190AD) that reference Philip and his three daughters. These indicate Philip was martyred but provide no details. The Acts of Philip, a legend-filled account from later 3rd century offers the tradition that Philip was crucified.

Other Apostles

Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* gives us accounts of the deaths of the remaining apostles, but there is no credible early evidence to support the information Foxe gives. While Foxe relied upon early church traditions and feast days, it is uncertain to

what extent he relied on early church writings. So, for example, Foxe writes that Bartholomew was crucified and beaten by impatient idolaters. Where Foxe got his information, he never tells (perhaps footnoting was not a big deal in the 1500's!). The previously referenced Acts of Philip does convey that Bartholomew was crucified in Lycaonia (Chapter 131).

There are writings that come from later years of the early church (4th and 5th centuries) that convey other legends and folklore about the apostles. The Martyrdom of Matthew, for example, gives an accounting of Matthew's death. But, its relatively late date and glaring inaccuracies in other areas make its information of very dubious value historically.

The apostles were not the only people to give their lives in conviction and faith. There were many martyrs in the early church. In fact, there are many martyrs in our lifetime 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.²⁹ 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.

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.

²⁹ 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.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”* (Mt. 13:31-32).

This might have seemed a bold overstatement at the time Jesus made it, as well as at the time it was written. After all, how could the kingdom proclaimed by the carpenter turned untrained rabbi in the northern hill country of a backwater area ever hope to be planting a seed that might one day grow larger than all the other plants?

But God doesn't make bold overstatements. God is the one who can make bold promises and then back them up! This is the assurance of those of us who stand in the faith of our fathers. We see the tree of believers and stand amazed at the God who works his will!

2. *“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.”* (Gal. 4:4-5).

It is amazing to look at the church and see the exquisite timing of God in sending Jesus into the world. We can stand amazed, but we miss out if we fail to accredit to God the same marvelous timing in our own lives. He calls us out of the world into his holiness, seeking to fuse our individual timelines with his will and purpose for us. This should bring us to carefully examine each day to see God's hand and seek to follow his will, being amazed at how his timing works for us!

3. *“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father... that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to*

know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Eph. 3:14-19)

The cross has long held special significance for the believer and the church. Its use as a symbol of faith and redemption is lost in the pages of history, but whether we see it in the cryptogram at Pompeii or from etching into funeral boxes, it is etched into the church’s life from antiquity, bringing out the significance of the events on the cross at Calvary.

The early church used even the above verse from Ephesians 3:18 as symbolic of the cross. The “breadth and length” and the “height and depth” are horizontal and vertical measurements that the early church as recognized and credited Paul with subtly ascribing to Christ on the cross the ultimate manifestation of God’s unfathomable love. It is hard to argue with that!

HOMEWORK

We are going to memorize 1 John in 2015! This is not going to be hard, but it will require a commitment. Here is the plan: There are 105 verses in 1 John and we want to be able to recite it in unison at the first chance we are afforded in 2016. It will be a great start to another year should the Lord tarry.

SO -- 105 verses in 52 weeks. That is basically two verses a week! So for this first week, let’s all memorize 1 John 1:1-2 in the English Standard Version:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—