

**Church History, Lesson 2:
The Ancient Church, Part 1:
The Age of Jesus and the Apostles (5 BC – AD 70)**

2. Overview of church history

- a. The Ancient Church (5 BC – AD 590)
- b. The Medieval Church (590 – 1517)
- c. The Reformation Church (1517 – 1648)
- d. The Modern Church (1648 – present)

3. The historical context of the Early Church

a. Galatians 4:4: “the fullness of time”

i. Politically

1. Government: The Mediterranean world (including Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East) was under the unity of Roman rule. This unity of rule made the message of the gospel, which proclaimed the unity of the human race in Adam, an ample environment to be received.
2. Transportation: Because the empire was united under one common rule of law, not heretofore seen in the ancient Near East, an excellent road system made travel easy. With the relative ease of travel, the gospel spread to all corners of the Mediterranean world (cf. Col 1:6).
3. Military: The Romans contributed a strong military presence to the Mediterranean world which provided safety, security, and peace (*pax Romana*) for the advancement of the gospel.

ii. Culturally

1. Language: The Mediterranean world had a universal language. Having a universal language that was known by the “common man” bolstered the communication of the gospel. The New Testament is itself written in this common language, Koiné Greek, which was so precise, it used four different words for “love.”

2. Philosophy: Greek philosophy set the stage for Christianity. The philosophy of the Greeks destroyed the intellectual credibility of the polytheism of the day, which opened the door for the gospel to be embraced.

iii. Religiously

1. Romans: Romans had two primary “religions”: Roman emperor worship and the “mystery religions.” While both of these were rivals to Christianity, emperor worship appealed to people only to stomach the idea of the Roman Empire. The mystery religions left people empty, recognizing that all the blood sacrifices could do nothing for their souls.
2. Jews: Diaspora Judaism (i.e., Jews living through the Roman Empire) contributed several important elements to the Early Church
 - a. Monotheism.
 - b. The Hebrew Scriptures (including the Greek Old Testament called the Septuagint).
 - c. The hope of a coming Messiah.
- b. Second Temple Judaism. This phrase describes the culture and society of the Jewish people after the Babylonian captivity (538 BC) to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (AD 70).
 - i. Parties (“recognized groups”) and sects (“groups claiming exclusive right to the whole”)
 1. Pharisees
 - a. Emphasized the accurate interpretation and application of the Torah. They wanted to make the faith relevant to every situation. They were the biblical fundamentalists of their day.
 - b. Wanted the pure practice of Jewish traditions, which ultimately set them apart from pagan culture. They did not want to be influenced by Greco-Roman world. They were the “separated ones.”

- c. Theological beliefs: the one true and living God, freedom of the will, the sovereignty of God, existence of angels, the last judgment, the resurrection of the dead.
- d. Because of Jesus' bold issues with the Pharisees in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 9:9-13 [Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:27-32]; Matt 15:1-20 [Mark 7:1-23]; Matt 12:1-13 [Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 6:1-11]; Matt 19:3-12 [Mark 10:2-9]) many Christians associate "Pharisee" with "hypocrite." But this fails to see all that Jesus had in common with the Pharisees, more than any other party in Judaism; in addition to the many friendly encounters with them (Matt 23: 1-2; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 7:36ff; 11:37; 13:31-33; 14:1).

2. Sadducees

- a. Had no influence among the common people. Were not looked on favorably.
- b. The party of the wealthy priests and friends in the aristocracy (Acts 5:17).
- c. Held only to the first five books of Moses (Torah). Other Hebrew Scriptures were not rejected but not treated as a source of doctrine. So Jesus, in answering their question about the resurrection (Matt 22:23-33), cited a passage from the Torah (Ex 3:6) and not another more obvious portion of Scripture.
- d. Theological disagreement with the Pharisees on many points.

3. Essenes

- a. We don't know much about them from the New Testament but they have been identified as the people of the Qumran community, which is where the Dead Sea Scrolls were located.
- b. Lived in seclusion to be faithful to the Torah.
- c. Proselytes underwent a strict probation period of up to three years before allowed into membership of the

community; oaths were sworn; there were strict disciplinary procedures.

- d. Highly structured governing system.
- e. Lived in the sense of being in the last days.
- f. Spent much time in study and copy of the Scriptures.

4. Zealots

- a. Revolutionary movement that sought to bring the Torah ideal to Roman rule.
- b. Theologically, they are on the same page as the Pharisees.
- c. The reference to Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13) is probably a reference to a general characteristic not the party of the Zealots mentioned here.

5. Samaritans

- a. Conservative group. Considered themselves as the *semarim*, “keepers” (of Torah), rather than from *someronim*, “inhabitants of Samaria.”
- b. Looked upon by some Jews as foreigners (Luke 17:18; cf. Matt 10:5).
- c. Beliefs: worship of one God; avoidance of images; Torah observance; circumcision; chosen people of God; future hope of Messiah.
- d. Adhered to the rival sanctuary at Mount Gerizim.
- e. Preserved their own text of the Pentateuch, the “Samaritan Pentateuch,” and only the first five books of Moses were considered authoritative.

- 6. Peasantry: the poor and unlearned Jews living in the land of Palestine. Most of Jesus’ disciples came from this group of people.

ii. Organization and institutions

1. Temple and priests.
2. Sanhedrin: a council composed in the New Testament times of the chief priests, elders of the people, and scribes (scholars of the Law).
3. Rabbis: ordained minister who had authority to interpret Jewish law.
4. Synagogue
 - a. Meeting place for religious life. Jesus and apostles taught in the synagogues.
 - b. Services consisted of prayers and study of the Scriptures.
 - c. A synagogue could be formed wherever ten men wanted to organize one.

4. The birth and growth of the Early Church

a. In biblical history

i. The Gospels

1. Into this historical context Jesus is born (ca. 5 BC).
2. Jesus was a Jew; he came from a Jewish family (Matt 1:1-17); he studied Jewish Scriptures (Mark 1:44; 12:36); he observed Jewish religion (Mark 14:12).
3. Jesus retraced the steps of Israel: spent time in Egypt (Matt 2:13); entered the Jordan in baptism (Matt 3:13); tempted in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11); called twelve apostles (like the twelve tribes) (Matt 10:2-4); spoke God's word like Moses (Sermon on the Mount); preached five sermons (compare the Pentateuch) in Matthew; performed mighty deeds of deliverance (signs, wonders, exorcisms); confronted imperial powers.
4. Jesus was the long awaited Messiah for the Jews and the Savior of Gentiles. "Many religions could exist without their human

founders, but the removal of Christ from Christianity would leave a lifeless, empty shell.”¹⁰

ii. Acts

1. Acts 1: apostolic commission and wait for the promised Spirit.
2. Acts 2: church is born on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem among Jews. “Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven” (v. 5).
3. Acts 3-5: ministry of Peter and John among Jews living in Palestine.
4. Acts 6: dispute between the Hellenists (i.e., Greek Jews) and native Hebrews.
5. Acts 7: Stephen (Hellenistic Jew) became first Christian martyr.
6. Acts 8: persecution of Hellenistic Jews causing them to scatter from Jerusalem “the regions of Judea and Samaria” (v. 1). Interestingly, apparently the apostles (native Hebrews) were not affected by the persecution.
7. Acts 9: Paul converted; Peter preaches to the coastal towns.
8. Acts 10: Cornelius, the Macedonian (Greece), is converted.
9. Acts 11-12: gospel spreads to “Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch” (v. 19). First called “Christians” in Antioch (v. 26) because they were different than a Jewish sect, now being more Gentile. The term “Christian” was a derogatory label by opponents of the church. It meant “a person devoted to the Anointed One.” Believers adapted it gladly. Summary statement: “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life*” (Acts 11:18).
10. Acts 13-28: Paul’s ministry to the “remotest part of the earth” (1:8). The Gentiles begin to dominate the church’s landscape.

b. “Acts 29”: after the biblical history

¹⁰ Earle E. Carins, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 57.

i. Significant events

1. Fire in Rome: Nero persecutes the church in AD 64

- a. The first state sanctioned persecution of Christians though it was not empire wide. In AD 64 Rome was set ablaze for six days, burning 10 of 14 districts. Many blamed Nero for the fire, saying that he wanted to rebuild the city into his own liking, but it is unlikely he started the fire. In order to deflect the attacks, Nero blamed the Christians and began persecution. The apostles Peter was likely martyred (crucified upside down) during this time period (cf. John 21:18-19). (For more on what happened to the twelve apostles after Jesus' death, see Robert C. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, revised and expanded [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005], chart 10.)
- b. Marked the first time that an emperor considered Christianity distinct from Judaism.

2. Fire in Jerusalem: The Jewish War (AD 66 – 73) and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (AD 70)

- a. The Jewish War: In AD 66 tensions between Jews and the Romans were growing. The Jews refused to make sacrifices to the emperor. In AD 70 Emperor Vespasian's forces broke through the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the Holy City.
- b. The destruction of the temple in AD 70: Only one wall of the temple mount remained. Today it is known as the "Wailing Wall."

ii. The significance of the significant events

1. Rome originally considered Christianity a sect of Judaism (Acts 16:20; 18:12-15) and thus received sanction from persecution as a legal religion.
2. During the invasion of Jerusalem in AD 70, the church leaders had been advised in a vision to flee the city. Jews accused the Christians of treason. Jews, therefore, barred Christians from

synagogue services, and thus the break between Christianity and Judaism was officially marked.

In the lands outside Palestine, the decade which ended with the year 70 marked the close of the period when Christianity could be regarded as simply a variety of Judaism. . . . From A.D. 70 onward the divergence of the paths of Jewish Christianity and orthodox Judaism was decisive. . . . Henceforth the main stream of Christianity must make its independent way in the Gentile world.¹¹

3. AD 70 also marks the end of the apostolic age since most of the apostles were dead by this time.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from Its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 157-58.