

**Church History, Lesson 3:
The Ancient Church, Part 2:
The Age of Catholic Christianity (70 – 313)**

5. “Catholic Christianity”
 - a. The age of catholic Christianity is marked by the destruction of the temple (AD 70) to the reign of Constantine with the Edict of Milan (313).
 - b. The term “catholic” means “universal.” The term is not to be confused with the Roman Catholic Church.
 - c. The Christian church is “universal” not solely “local.”
 - d. The term was used because various historical developments caused the church to become “universal”:
 - i. the spread of the church into all the Roman Empire and beyond;
 - ii. persecutions forced the church to be a united front;
 - iii. growing pains in organization and practices;
 - iv. the need for a recognized canon of Scripture;
 - v. and the need for a common creed and doctrine against heresies.

6. Historical developments
 - a. Spread of the ancient church
 - i. Divine power of the gospel (Rom 1:16).
 - ii. Passion for the gospel.
 - iii. Relationship with God because of the gospel.
 - iv. Christian love demonstrated through the gospel (John 13:35). Emperor Julian (332 – 63), one of Christianity’s worst enemies, says:

Atheism (i.e., Christian faith) has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans [i.e., Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours

as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.¹²

- v. Persecution for the sake of the gospel. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

- b. Persecution of the ancient church

- i. Why did persecution take place?

- 1. Political: While Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism, it received official religious sanction. But when Christianity departed from Judaism, most notably during AD 70 at the destruction of the temple, Christianity became its own religion. As such, Christianity was considered a threat to the Roman state, because Christians would not swear allegiance to the Roman Empire as lord.

- 2. Religious: accusation against Christians.

- a. Distinct lifestyle: Christians are called to be “saints” (i.e., holy). Christians were different. Because they were different, people viewed them with suspicion. Christians had different views of slavery, children, and marriage and sex, entertainment.

- b. Church meetings: Because Christians met alone, they were accused of many things

- i. Cannibalism: Because of the references to eating the bread of Christ and drinking his blood (John 6:52-58; 1 Cor 11 23-25), Christians were accused of cannibalism.

- ii. Incest: “brothers and sisters;” “Love Feast” (Jude 1:12); “holy kiss” (Rom 16:6).

- c. Atheism: Roman religion was mechanical and external, consisting of altars, idols, priests, processions, sacrifices, etc. Because of the external nature, anything that was internal, which Christianity is by nature internal (e.g.,

¹² Quoted in: Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 38.

praying to God with eyes closed, etc.), Christians were accused of atheism.

3. Economic: priests, idol makers, soothsayers, architects, sculptors, and butchers means of livelihood was threatened when Christians would not transact in their business with pagan gods (cf. Acts 19:27).

ii. What persecution took place?

1. Nero has the dubious distinction of being the first persecutor of Christians (AD 64). While Nero persecuted Christians, before 250 persecutions were mainly local and sporadic.
2. During the reign of Trajan (98 – 117) Christianity became illegal, but persecution only took place when caught.
3. During the reign of Emperor Decius (249 – 51), he made it mandatory for every Roman citizen to come to the Temple of Caesar and burn incense and say, “Caesar is Lord.” After paying homage, you would receive a certificate acknowledging your participation. Empire wide persecution began under his reign.
4. Persecutions did not finally end until Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313.
5. For a full listing of the persecutions, see Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 20.

iii. Results of the persecution

1. Growth of the church

No merely human religion could have stood such an ordeal of fire [i.e., persecution] for three hundred years. The final victory of Christianity over Judaism and heathenism, and the mightiest empire of the ancient world, a victory gained without physical force, but by the moral power of patience and perseverance, of faith and love, is one of the sublimest spectacles in history, and one of the strongest evidences of the divinity and indestructible life of our religion.¹³

2. Deniers of Christ: How to handle the “apostate”?

¹³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, vol. 2, Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1910), 8.

3. Relationship between church and state: The persecutions showed the perennial problem of the relationship between the state and the church. Christians are to obey the state as long as it doesn't violate their allegiance to God (Acts 5:29).
4. Significance of the persecutions: Though the church has experienced persecutions through its history, Schaff writes:

Before Constantine the Christians were a helpless and proscribed minority in an essentially heathen world, and under a heathen government. Then they died not simply for particular doctrines [e.g., justification by faith alone], but for the facts of Christianity. Then it was a conflict, not for a denomination or sect, but for Christianity itself. The importance of ancient martyrdom does not rest so much on the number of victims and the cruelty of their sufferings as on the great antithesis and the ultimate result in saving the Christian religion for all time to come.¹⁴

c. Organization and practice of the ancient church

i. Organization

1. The local churches were initially led by elders and deacons. The terms "elder," "bishop," and "pastor" all referred to the same office (see: Acts 20:17, 28; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5, 7).
2. Because of persecution and heresy, the church needed to "organize" the "organism" with central teaching and authority (cf. 1 Cor 14:40). This prompted them to see a distinction between an "elder" and a "bishop" so each church had one "bishop" (i.e., pastor), elders, and deacons.
3. By the late 2nd century, a "bishop" started to have authority over several churches in an area, as opposed to authority over one local congregation.
4. Eventually this gave rise to more and more centrality which gave rise to the idea of the bishop of Rome, being the chief figure head of the church. By the 3rd century papacy claims starting being made.

ii. Practices

¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

1. Liturgy (i.e., order of worship)
 - a. Meeting place: homes (Acts 12:12; Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Phlmn 1-4); temple (Acts 5:12); public auditoriums of schools (Acts 19:9); and synagogue (Acts 14:1, 3; 17:1; 18:4). By 3rd century, church buildings were constructed. Met on Sunday to commemorate Christ's resurrection.
 - b. Scripture reading (1 Tim 4:13).
 - c. Prayers.
 - d. Singing (Col 3:16).
 - e. Exhortation or homily (preached from a sitting position; pews were not invented until the 14th century).
 - f. Baptism
 - i. usually performed at Easter or Pentecost;
 - ii. faith in Christ required, though toward the end of the 2nd century, a probationary process through catechesis was followed;
 - iii. normal mode was immersion, though pouring and sprinkling happened on occasion;
 - iv. infant baptism began to be practiced around the end of the 2nd century.
 - g. Lord's Supper:
 - i. initially probably conducted with a meal (the "Love Feast");
 - ii. commonly a collection for the poor was taken;
 - iii. ended with the "kiss of peace."
2. Life

- a. Slavery, as an institution, was not forbidden or attacked. However, slaves were to be treated with respect as a fellow Christian (cf. Col 4:1).
- b. Separated from pagan practices of society that contradicted Christian principles.
- c. Paid taxes and prayed for those in authority (Rom 13:7; 1 Tim 2:1-2).

3. Discipline

- a. How to handle those that have denied the faith, the “lapsed”? Are they barred from church or are they admitted back in after a time of “penance”?
- b. Some denied readmission into the church; others accepted readmission into the church with stipulations.
- c. Bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, argued for a system of readmission based on the degrees of sin. And thus, the church created a graded system of penance.
- d. Thus, although not fully developed and formed until years later, these were the seeds of what would later become a sacrament of the Roman Catholic Church, the sacrament of penance.

d. Canon of the ancient church

i. Background

1. The New Testament was not completed until the end of the 1st century. Yet even after its completion, the New Testament was not bound together in book form as we have it today.
2. The New Testament was originally written on papyrus and then on scrolls.
3. Copies were made and were circulated and read in the churches.

- ii. The books: What New Testament books should be accepted as inspired and authoritative? Answer: a “measuring rod” or “rule,” from where we get the term canon, was devised:

1. Apostolicity: was the book written by an apostle?
2. Acceptance: was the book widely accepted by the church? Was the book used in Christian worship?
3. Agreement: was the book orthodox in content? Did the book contradict another book?

iii. Development

1. Up to about AD 140 there was no debate or pronouncements on the canon. We find quotations of Scripture in the Apostolic Fathers.
2. In 140 Marcion came to Rome and promoted a form of Gnosticism. He taught that the Old Testament God was full of wrath and vengeance and only for the Jews. Consequently, he rejected the Old Testament and any books that dealt with Jewish themes (e.g., Matthew, Acts, and Hebrews). He was excommunicated in 144. Unfortunately, many churches started and spread his heresy, which continued to prompt the need for an official "canon."
3. About 180 the Muratorian Canon compiled the list of New Testaments books at 22. (The Muratorian Canon was not discovered until the 18th century.)
4. Various lists from leading Christians were used (particularly Origen and Eusebius).
5. The New Testament Canon as we know it today made official at the synod of Carthage in 397.
6. Note: people often error in saying that the church councils produced or created the canon. The canon wasn't created by the councils; it was merely publically recognized at the councils (first being the synod of Carthage). At this synod, the church (East and West) publically proclaimed what had already been widely accepted as the canon of the New Testament.¹⁵

¹⁵ Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 115.

7. About 5,500 manuscripts attest to the integrity of the New Testament.
8. For a helpful chart on the development of the canon, see Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 17.

e. Orthodoxy and heresy in the ancient church

i. Orthodoxy

1. Orthodoxy means right belief. It refers to the right belief embraced by the Church (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant). Orthodoxy is sometimes called the “Rule of Faith.”
2. Development of orthodoxy

Since orthodoxy arose from the conflict of the gospel with error we speak of its development. The idea of development in Christian doctrine may seem strange to those who believe firmly in God’s revelation of himself through Christ, given once and for all. But theology [= the rational thought or word about God], don’t forget, is not synonymous with God’s revelation itself; rather, the theology is the human understanding of revelation and the effort to express it clearly in teaching and preaching. Theology is using our own language and our own way of thinking to explain God’s truth. And we know that people belonging to different times and cultures simply think and speak in different ways.¹⁶

3. Creeds

- a. A statement of faith for public use that gives articles for the salvation and the well-being of the church.
- b. Creeds were used to test orthodoxy; to recognize a believer from a heretic; and to summarize the essential teachings of the Christian faith.
- c. The earliest creed, Apostles Creed (probably not written by the apostles or finalized until ca. 700), was used as a baptismal formula. The Apostles Creed contains the famous line which marks this period: “I believe in the holy catholic church.”

¹⁶ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 51-52.

d. The idea of for creeds comes from the Scriptures itself in gospel summaries: 1 Cor 15:3-4; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Tim 3:16 and “traditions” (cf. 2 Thess 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2).

4. The idea of orthodoxy (and defending it) occurs from the earliest of times. Paul defends the true gospel against Jewish legalism in the letter to Galatians. First John defends the true gospel against deniers of Jesus Christ coming “in the flesh.”

ii. Heresies: errors in theology

1. Ebionites (1st century): denied deity and virgin birth of Christ; required circumcision for salvation; Jesus was made Messiah by his obedience to Law.
2. Gnosticism (1st – 2nd centuries): believed to possess a unique, higher insight (gnosis); strong belief in dualism; matter is evil; rejected Old Testament; believed Christ’s body was an illusion (Docetism). Prominent leaders include Simon Magus (1st century, cf. Acts 8:9-24), Cerinthus (late 1st century), Marcion (referenced above), Tatian (110-172).
3. Montanism (2nd century): were ascetic; practiced speaking in tongues; expected in the imminent start of the Millennium; practice prophetic revelation; opposed art of any kind. Promoted by Montanus and others.
4. Manichaeism (3rd century): held dualistic view of creation; said that apostles corrupted Christ’s teaching; taught Docetism, that Christ’s body was illusionary. Promoted by Mani (215 – 277).
5. Note: heresy was many times taught by professing Christians and leaders of the church. Heresy arises from within. Every generation must defend the truth (cf. Jude 3-4).

7. Major figures: all the figures in the period of the Ancient Church are referred to under the general category of Early Church Fathers.¹⁷

- a. Apostolic Fathers (ca. 30 – ca. 150): this refers to a subset of Early Church Fathers appearing after the apostles.

¹⁷ Some of this information in this section is adapted from: Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, chart 13, chart 14, chart 16. Used with permission.

- i. Clement of Rome (ca. 30 – 100)
 - 1. Writings: *1 Clement*
 - 2. Notable facts: Is perhaps mentioned in Phil 4:3; is considered the fourth pope by the Roman Catholic church.
- ii. Ignatius (d. 117)
 - 1. Writings: *To the Ephesians; To the Magnesians; To the Trallians; To the Romans; To the Philadelphians; To the Smyrnaeans; To Polycarp*
 - 2. Notable facts: Was the first to distinguish between bishops and elders; opposed Gnostic heresies.
- iii. Hermas (Late 1st – early 2nd century)
 - 1. Writings: *The Shepherd of Hermas*
 - 2. Notable facts: was contemporary of Clement; wrote of visions and parables; was probably Jewish.
- iv. Polycarp (ca. 69-160)
 - 1. Writings: *Epistle to the Philippians*
 - 2. Notable facts: an acquaintance of the apostle John; compiled and preserved the epistles of Ignatius; is said to have confronted Marcion as “the firstborn of Satan.”
- v. Unknown author (early 2nd century)
 - 1. Writings: *Didache*
 - 2. Notable facts: oldest surviving church manual; gives instruction for fasting, baptism, Lord’s supper, and hospitality; tells how to recognize false prophets.
- b. Apologists (2nd century): defenders of the faith
 - i. Justin Martyr (ca. 100 – 165)

1. Writings: *First Apology, Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew; Against Heresies; Against Marcion*
 2. Notable facts: itinerant lay teacher; trained in philosophy; personally opposed Marcion.
- ii. Tertullian (155 – 230)
1. Writings: *Prescription of Heretics; Against Marcion; Against Praxeus*
 2. Notable facts: converted in mid-life; first to use the Latin word *trinitas*, “trinity,” which laid important ground work for the doctrine of the Trinity.
- c. Polemicists (3rd century): fighters of false doctrine
- i. Irenaeus (late 2nd century)
1. Writings: *Against Heresies, On the Unity of the Godhead and the Origin of Evil*
 2. Notable facts: studied under Polycarp, strong opponent of Gnosticism; had premillennial views; promoted the “Rule of Faith.”
- ii. Origen (ca. 185 – ca. 254)
1. Writings: *Hexapla; Against Celsus; De Principiis*
 2. Notable facts: was a notable advocate of allegorical interpretation of Scripture; taught subordination of the Son to the Father; was exiled by his enemies in the church.
- iii. Cyprian (ca. 200 – 258)
1. Writings: *Unity of the Church; De Lapsis*
 2. Notable facts: emphasized authority of the episcopate; took moderate stand (see above) against those who faltered under persecution, opposing the strict view of Novatian.