

“How'd We Get Here?”

The first several centuries of the church were tremendously important for its future. It was during these early centuries that the church struggled to define itself amidst ever changing circumstances, both internal and external. During this crucial period the response of the church was a mixed bag. On the one hand, much valuable work was accomplished with regard to defining and refining orthodoxy (i.e. right doctrine/teaching). On the other hand, the church adopted a pragmatic stance on many issues that, given time, created problems for it.

I. Expansion of the Church

A. The Great Commission

“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” – Acts 1:8

The Book of Acts records the historical expansion of the Faith as the Lord had predicted:

B. Pentecost: the Church begins

...a group numbering about a hundred and twenty – Acts 1:15

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. – Acts 2:41

C. Jerusalem and beyond

But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand. – Acts 4:4

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. – Acts 6:7

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. – Acts 9:31

D. Secular witnesses to the expansion of the Church

1. Josephus, Jewish historian (c. 37 – c. 100)

He estimated that the normal population of Jerusalem, 50,000, would swell to 3,000,000 during feasts such as Pentecost, when pilgrims would sojourn to the Holy city. This shows that the numbers that Luke recounts in Acts are quite plausible (contrary to those who say 5000+ Christians is not possible for the population of Jerusalem).

2. Tacitus, Roman historian (55 – 117)

Commenting on the treatment of the early Christians, he wrote:

To suppress the rumor [that he had set fire to Rome], Nero fabricated as culprits, and punished with the most refined cruelties a notoriously depraved class of people whom the crowd called “Christians.” The originator of the name, Christus, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate... First, the self-acknowledged members of the sect were arrested. Then, on their information, a vast multitude was condemned.

Note the phrase “vast multitude.” Tacitus was no friend of Christianity and therefore would not be interested in lying about its popularity. This shows his recognition of the rapid growth of Christianity.

Thus, in a mere thirty-one years after its inception, Christianity had reached “vast multitudes” in a place (Rome) that is more than 1500 miles from its beginning, Jerusalem!

II. Opposition to the Church

A. First century opposition

1. Persecution

a. The Sanhedrin

The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem.
– Acts 4:5

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin — the full assembly of the elders of Israel — and sent to the jail for the apostles. – Acts 5:21

b. The martyrdom of Stephen

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.
– Acts 7:57-58

c. The Dispersion

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.
– Acts 8:1

2. Heresy

Examples of false teaching in the Church can be found in Paul's letters to Corinth, Galatia, Colosse, etc. At this early stage in the church's development, the apostles handled all matters of Truth.

B. Post first-century opposition

1. Persecution

a. Sporadic persecution (100-250)

1. Pliny's persecution
2. Polycarp in Smyrna
3. Justin Martyr under Marcus Aurelius

b. Systematic persecution (250-313)

1. Decius in 250
2. Diocletian in 303

2. Heresy.

- a. Gnosticism
- b. Marcionism
- c. Montanism

III. Response of the Church

A. Growth

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church – Tertullian

B. Apostolic Teaching

1. Apostolic fathers

- a. Clement of Rome
- b. Polycarp of Smyrna

2. Apologists

- a. Justin Martyr
- b. Aristides

3. Polemicists

- a. Irenaeus
- b. Tertullian

C. Apostolic Writing

To combat Marcion's canon and other heresies, the Church began to officially recognize those books that were authoritative. The prime criterion was that of apostolicity.

D. Apostolic Authority

1. Scriptural teaching

- a. The apostles were a select group with unique abilities.

The apostles are called "the Twelve" throughout Scripture. For instance:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them... - Luke 18:31

Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve?" - John 6:70

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said... - Acts 6:2

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. - 1 Corinthians 15:3-5

The things that mark an apostle — signs, wonders and miracles — were done among you with great perseverance. - 2 Corinthians 12:12

...you are...members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. - Ephesians 2:20

The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. - Revelation 21:14

- b. The government of the church

After the apostles, the Scriptures provide but two offices in the church, Pastor and Deacon (see Philippians 1:1). With regard to the office of Pastor, the Bible uses several terms. However, it should be noted that each term refers to the *same person* in the *same office*:

...Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders ("presbyters") of the church. When they arrived, he said to them... Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (or "bishops"). Be shepherds (or "pastors") of the church of God... - Acts 20:17-18, 28 [Cf. Also 1 Peter 5:1-2]

2. Pragmatic developments

In response to the challenges faced by the church in the early centuries, both internal and external, some proposed the elevation of certain persons and offices above the pastor:

a. Ignatius

Writing in 115, Ignatius made the “first clear indication of a difference between elders and bishops.” (see Boer’s treatment in *A Short History of the Early Church*)

b. Rationale

The reasons for the rise of the monarchical bishop, in distinction from the pastor, are the following (see Boer, pp. 29-30):

- ❑ The natural tendency of one of any group to become a “first among equals.”
- ❑ The need to centralize the church’s authority for administrative purposes
- ❑ The need for leaders to speak and act on behalf of the church in response to persecution
- ❑ Heresy required authoritative leaders to uphold sound doctrine

E. Apostolic Succession

1. Scriptural teaching

The Bible teaches that the apostles were a select group of men, chosen for a select purpose (establish the Church) and time. And, apostles are clearly distinguished from elders/pastors:

It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. - Ephesians 4:11-12

2. Pragmatic Developments

a. Clement of Rome

Writing in about 95, to combat a problem that had arisen in Corinth, Clement wrote and admonished obedience to the bishops of the church in Corinth. Clement wrote that, “elders (bishops)...had authority in the church because they followed directly in the line of the apostles... They were appointed by and spoke with apostolic authority.” (Ibid., p. 69)

b. Irenaeus

In Irenaeus, the authority of the bishop took an enormous leap. This important teaching of Irenaeus arose directly out of his long struggle with Gnosticism. He wrote to the Gnostics:

...if the apostles had known hidden mysteries...they would have delivered them especially to those whom they were also committing the churches themselves. For they were desirous that these men be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men.

Note: With the establishment of the doctrines of apostolic authority and succession, the next step was recognition of a supreme bishop. The most likely candidate (for several reasons – see attached “Factors Contributing to the Supremacy of the Bishop of Rome” [taken from Robert Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, Zondervan, 1986]) was the bishop of Rome.

IV. Liturgy and Polity of the Early Church

The New Testament and early centuries of the Church saw a very simple form of worship and government. The earliest descriptions are those of Justin Martyr and the *Didache*:

The service, which was held on “the day of the sun,” started with the reading of the “memoirs of the apostles” or the “writings of the prophets” for a period “as long as time permits.” An exhortation or homily based on the reading was then given by the “president.” The congregation then stood for prayer. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper followed the kiss of peace. The elements of bread and “water and wine” were dedicated by thanksgiving and prayers to which the people responded by an “Amen.” The deacons then distributed them to the homes of those unable to attend. They finally took up a collection... then the meeting was dismissed, and the people made their way to their homes.
(Cairns, p. 83)

A. Imperial church worship

The emperor Constantine is one of the major figures of Christian history. After his conversion, Christianity moved swiftly from the seclusion of the catacombs to the prestige of the palaces. The movement started the fourth century as a persecuted minority; it ended the century as the established religion of the empire. Thus, the Christian Church was joined to the power of the state and assumed a moral responsibility for the whole society. To serve the state, it refined its doctrine and developed its structure. (Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, p. 104)

As the emperor became the number one layperson in the church, a simple ceremony no longer sufficed. The pomp and circumstance of the imperial court was adapted to honor the Emperor of emperors. Processionals, lights, special dress, and numerous other elements added to the grand setting. (Christian History, Volume XII, No. 1: Worshiping Like Pagans?)

B. Imperial church government

1. State involvement in church matters.

Constantine ruled Christian bishops as he did his civil servants and demanded unconditional obedience to official pronouncements, even when they interfered with purely church matters. (Shelley, p. 110)

An example of state involvement in church affairs is seen in the Council of Nicea (325). The purpose for the council was to address the issue of the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity. Some very vocal and influential heretics were teaching that the Son was a created being (Arius' view). The council denounced Arianism as heresy. But aside from the theological importance of this issue, the council represented another important development: the council was called by the emperor, Constantine. Thus, a precedent was set that continued for centuries.

2. Church involvement in state affairs

Historical events during this era conspired to enhance the reputation of the Bishop of Rome. Rome had been the traditional center of authority for the Roman world for half a millennium and was the largest city in the West. After Constantine moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople in 330, the center of political gravity shifted from Rome to that city. This left the Roman bishop as the single strongest individual in Rome for great periods of time, and the people of that area came to look to him for temporal as well as spiritual leadership whenever a crisis faced them. He was a tower of strength during the sacking of Rome in 410 by the Visigoths, and his clever diplomacy had at least been able to save the city from the torch. The Emperor at Constantinople was remote from Rome and its problems, but the Bishop was near at hand to exercise effective authority in meeting political as well as spiritual crises. When the imperial throne in the West fell to the hands of barbarians in 476....the people of Italy came to look to the Roman bishop for political as well as spiritual leadership. (Cairns, pp. 157-58)

3. When in Rome...

By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had achieved a dominant position in the empire and Christians felt they could borrow cultural language and ideas more freely than before. (Worshipping Like Pagans?)