

**KEEPING
THE
FAITH**

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The Early Church and the Apostolic Pattern

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FOREWORD

It seems that from the time of the apostles to the present day there have been numerous attempts to resuscitate the original faith. It has always been a challenge to determine when and where the original faith was corrupted. It is essential that any kind of investigation treats the early church characters and literature accurately and fairly, since today it is in vogue in many circles to bash the early church. Nevertheless, there are important questions about the ancient faith that must be answered.

One question relevant for today is, “How can churches prosper in faith, maintain apostolic doctrine, adjust to world changes, and avoid institutionalism?” If there was ever a need for an answer to this question, it is now. There were roughly only one hundred million people in the ancient civilized world when Jesus sent out the Eleven. Today, we are approaching six billion souls. I would hope that every professing believer, all one billion of them, could re-examine the roots of their faith—even learn of the Post-Apostolic church. In this respect, disciples within the modern day movement of God should be no different.

Of the billion professed believers, only a few hundred million believe such cardinal doctrines as the deity of Jesus and the resurrection of Christ. Of the remainder, only a few truly understand the requirements of the Bible or have a deep understanding of the early church. Many are living out some latter-day vision of altar call Christianity (“Just accept Jesus into your heart and you will be okay”) or embrace some form of the medieval doctrine like the devotion and

worship of Mary. To further divide believers, there are many sects that began in the 1800's that believe in principles with no followers before that time. As for the rest of us in Christendom, we must consider that the possibility exists that we, too, may be under a delusion; our practices and commitment might not survive the scrutiny of biblical inspection and ancient comparison. I would hope that any Christian would welcome such an interrogation rather than avoid it since keeping the faith requires regular self-scrutiny.

If I were asked, what does it mean to keep the original faith in a later time and context, I would say I must begin by identifying a paradigm to define original Christianity. I would avoid dated terms and strive for timeless criteria to define the Christian enterprise. I would begin with the nature of God, the nature of man and the answer from the former to the predicament of the latter. Christianity can be first surmised from the prophets, the gospels and teachings of Jesus, the sermons in Acts, and then doctrinal treatises in the epistles. But where would that lead us? Would I merely be looking for a set of beliefs and fail to see the passion required to follow Jesus?

When we begin looking at the details leading to the eventual demise of Christendom, we should begin by taking the speck out of our own eye. Undoubtedly, we run into errors because early Christians were human before they were made into towering figures of history. Eusebius, an early church historian, implied that those who succeeded the apostles were inferior to them. He gave us this adjective to describe most second generations of movements. As this investigation will indicate, later generations continually imitated and amplified the lower elements of the great church. If someone could have figured out long ago how to stop this formula, we wouldn't have so many stories in the Old Testament that sound like "king so and so did evil in the eyes of the Lord and was not like his father."

The generation after the apostles had an enormous challenge—keeping the original faith in the midst of a loss of apostolic leadership and no formal New Testament canon. It is with good reason that the period between 70-150 A.D. is sometimes called the Tunnel Period. On one side were apostles and on the other was an informal New Testament. After some eighty years of intense challenges, Christianity was being clarified forever. It was this generation who examined their landscape in pursuit of a New Testament. They tightened the reigns

on the rule of faith, established the baptismal confession and promoted monarchical bishops in churches to keep the movement unified.

Think about this: where in the Old Testament or the sayings of Jesus was there a promise of a New Testament collection? Like it or not, the follower of Jesus is dependent on the post-apostolic orthodox Christians and all who accept the New Testament have already accepted their testimony. If a person belongs to historical orthodox Christianity, he could easily discover that he has accepted virtually every one of their corroborating conclusions. From my own investigation on post-apostolic Christianity, I found that wherever the second century church was in concert on an idea, it was essentially in line with the apostles.¹ It is here that liberals and heretical groups acquire anxiety. These groups of dissenters must invent a reason to explain away such early uniformity in the church. Some of their answers would surprise us. But the rest of us who depend on the early church's testimony should walk gently over their written memorials, as I believe John Engler has done.

Over the last few hundred years, many have attempted to alter the way in which people view the early church. Prior to the eighteenth century, most Christians generally viewed the early church in a positive way. It tended to be romanticized, which is a problem in itself. But not too long after the Reformation there began to be new approaches in religious studies. F. C. Baur (1792-1860) attempted to prove that Christian origins were part of a fabrication of second century Christians. Baur, his theories, and his followers were eventually refuted, but his legacy is still being seen on shelves of your local bookstore.

About one hundred years ago, the famed History-of-Religions School (this is an approach, not a university) promoted a new notion that early Christianity was an experience contrived by those earliest believers right after Jesus' death. It says that these believers merely created the myth of the resurrected Christ along the procedures of other religions. This school gave rise to more theories postulated by theologians Walter Bauer (1877-1960) and Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). The former implied that the orthodox breed of early Christians only gained prominence through bullying groups now labeled as

¹ Stephen Staten, *Was There Unity in the Sub-Apostolic Period* (Wheaton, Illinois, Wheaton College, 1996)

heretical. Allegedly, these groups were equally legitimate branches of the first church. Bauer was only missing proof, but that has not discouraged many churchmen. Bultmann romanticized early Christian Gnosticism, which has had many rippling effects. The bogeyman theories against the early church seem to be mere pennings of men affected by the anti-authoritarian views prevalent in this century. These men, and many of their contemporaries, have given rise to modern liberalism and helped undermine the long-held view in Christendom of the orthodox origins of the ancient church.

From new areas the early church has been under attack. Nearly every latter day religion (Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Armstrong's Church of God) has attacked the early church as having gone apostate quite early. In my opinion, they must do this because most cultists and bizarre religious groups cannot normally find support for their particular views in the church fathers. Even modern evangelicals who tend to be hyper-Pauline (over emphasizing Paul's writings in contrast to the Gospels and even against the balance of New Testament) have inadvertently damaged the reputation of the early church. Maybe there is another reason that the life and practice of the apostolic and Post-Apostolic church does not look like many of our denominations and cults. Perhaps both have succumbed to "chronological snobbery."

C.S. Lewis defined "chronological snobbery" as when one looks at the past only through their present-day experience. People are sometimes suspicious about the early church because of the absence of their own particular dogma. Consider other recent innovations: 1) Altar call evangelism (reciting the Sinner's prayer for salvation); 2) Worship service taken over by a phenomenon involving laughing (Toronto Blessing); 3) Worship services dominated by Sunday pulpit preaching. Lewis had a cure for this problem: visit all of church history and discover how much particularism you may have unknowingly capitulated to in your own church. It took a good number of family cycles² before the church dwindled in conviction, which did not happen everywhere at the same time. Therefore, it would be foolish to project our so-called discoveries as their failures.

² Newly wed couples in the ancient world usually gave birth to all of their children between the ages of 15-25.

A second trend occurs in latter-day groups that hold to the authority of the Bible: the practice of generalizing about the early church. Abusers have felt empowered to allege that the early church was oriented on works by merely reading the Shepherd of Hermas. Or they say that the early church was harsh and authoritarian based upon the writings of Ignatius. Some read Tertullian and concluded that writing was strict. Others censure the church because it failed to exalt Paul's writings to their rightful place and therefore lost the purity of "faith only." And still others will cry anti-Semitism, and so on. An observation perceived out of a context may be an anachronism stemming from interpolating our issues onto theirs.

The author, John Engler, was brave in letting me read his earlier manuscript. Obviously, I have strong convictions on the subject. I had recently read every known Christian document from the end of the New Testament through the early third century (about three times the size of our Bible) at least twice. I had also completed both independent study and thesis work related to ancient Christian origins. I sent him a number of pages for consideration, which he took with great humility and enthusiasm. He has the heart of a great scholar. For being a layman—that is, not having achieved his learning in an academic setting—he did remarkably well. In some ways, it is better for such a profitable work to have been published from this perspective because John can better echo the concerns of the average church member.

John did not write *Keeping the Faith* to vindicate Christian origins against heresy, nominalism, or liberalism. If he had, this treatise would have had a very different slant. He could have written an equally convincing treatise in this respect. However, because his investigation is about chronicling the factors, which eventually gave rise to nominal Christendom, it is possible for the uninformed reader to think he is only looking at the problems. He is not. He and I share both a fascination and love for the early church. However, both of us are realists and the empirical evidence shows that the mainstream church eventually gave way to Christianity by proxy, resulting in a watered down faith, which is no faith at all. The true church was relegated to remnant adherents within the larger church and eventually pockets. Thank God for the reformation and the other movements that have ensued since that time which have refocused man on the Bible.

John completed quite a sweep of the life and doctrine of the early church. He took on the challenge to investigate the difficult issues of deviation in practice and waning of discipleship without condemning the whole enterprise of the early Christian church. Obviously, he did not expect them to use our present terminology and neither did he expect us to use theirs. John has objectively looked at the meaning, intentions, heart and faith while investigating ancient church literature and body life. The reader will be able to draw his or her own conclusions in places because John was confident enough to leave lengthy references for your eyes to see.

What I appreciate most about *Keeping the Faith* is that John Engler writes with an Indiana Jones sense of intrigue and adventure, striving to turn over every piece of evidence. This work is often captivating, always relevant and filled with the right questions. In addition, John has handled even the most challenging material in such a way as to learn positive lessons. Thus, the title *Keeping the Faith* describes what many readers will be more empowered to do. In the end, his conclusions are helpful for those interested in preserving an apostolic commitment to the person and truths of Jesus Christ, thus keeping the faith.



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November 1997

INTRODUCTION

I remember when I first sat down as an adult and read from the New Testament. The difference between the “Christianity” I had been exposed to up to that time and the historical Christianity of the first century church immediately stood out to me. The first Christians—the ones who lived in the time period of the New Testament—lived lives of faith in Jesus and discipleship that changed their world. The institutionalized form of Christianity to which I had been exposed seemed to be absent from the Bible. I have always wondered how the changes took place.

In studying this topic, several other questions also become apparent: How can biblical Christianity be defined? What institutionalism existed in the church of the apostolic age? What should be done to assure that the changes of the post-apostolic church do not occur in our experience? This book answers these questions from the history of the apostolic and of the post-apostolic churches.

The primary source for the history of the apostolic church, as one might expect, is the New Testament. The history of the post-apostolic church is taken from primary sources that are available over the first four centuries. The truly authentic writings, which we do have, are relatively few in number. Here is a list of the authentic, early authors and writings, many of which are referenced in this book.¹

¹ Ray C. Petry, Editor. *A History of Christianity Readings in the History of the Church, Volume 1, The Early and Medieval Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1987), 33.

- Clement (Roman bishop) - about 95 A.D.
- Tacitus (Roman historian) - about 100A.D.
- Ignatius (Syrian bishop) - about 110 A.D.
- Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna) to the Philippians - about 130 A.D.
- Pliny (governor of Bithynia) to Trajan (Roman emperor) - about 110 A.D.
- The Didache (Teaching of the Apostles) - about 120 A.D.
- Justin Martyr (Apologist) - about 150 A.D.
- Martyrdom of Polycarp - about 150 A.D.
- Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons) - about 180 A.D.
- Dionysius (Bishop of Corinth) - about 190 A.D.
- Tertullian (North African bishop) - about 200 A.D.
- Hippolytus (Bishop of Rome) - about 220 A.D.
- Origen (North African, Syrian bishop) - about 220 A.D.
- Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage) - about 250 A.D.
- Eusebius (Church historian) - about 310 A.D.
- Cyril (Bishop of Jerusalem) - about 350 A.D.
- Jerome (Roman scholar) - about 375 A.D.

There is no shortage of writings *purporting* to be authentic, claiming authorship from a reliable source. Fortunately for us, these supposed authentic writings are missing key evidences of authenticity and reliability, and their lack of worth historically is usually obvious and generally agreed to by a wide range of scholars. In addition, Christian writings were targeted for destruction during periods of persecution. What we are left with, especially in the earliest and most critical periods of church history, are scant traces of church practice and thinking from relatively few authors.

As a result of the limited amount of evidence, we must be careful how we proceed. We must recognize that whatever ideas or practices may appear in the writings of these various church fathers, it is extremely difficult to discern whether these ideas or practices were

originated by these men, or are contained and referenced simply as a reflection of the contemporary thought of their age.

We must carefully consider the differences in practices and ideas from era to era, and place to place. We must be careful to understand the context and intent of the writings, understanding their limitations. This often means not looking for a technical comment on a particular issue where none was intended.

Though the early church was both culturally and geographically diverse, certain common processes can be clearly observed. We will see that the change from the apostolic pattern to the post-apostolic church was based upon perceived needs, logical or expedient solutions to problems and through many subsequent steps over many years. If the post-apostolic church ended up somewhere it should not have been (that is, distant from or in opposition to things taught and practiced in the New Testament), it is not because that was the intent and desire of all of those along the way. This is important for all of us today, because the close of this book will bring the lessons of history to the church today.

It is my intent to present the historical evidence in a clear and straightforward manner, to give the reader a solid basis for making intelligent, sound observations and conclusions about these matters. The early part of this book is heavily weighted with Bible references as though the New Testament was a history book (though it is clearly more than that!), with a deliberate attempt to find evidence for what the early church believed, practiced and thought. The later part of this book shows some departures from the apostolic faith by drawing heavily upon primary sources of the early churchmen and some excellent secondary sources, with references to New Testament situations as warranted.

The extensive documentation of sources is so that you, the reader, can read these sources for yourself. These matters are too important to base your conclusions upon hearsay evidence and that is why I refer to many primary sources. Every effort has been made to provide references as needed and the bibliography provides sources, which I have found helpful.

This book is the culmination of many years of analytical research. My own formal education is in the area of electrical engineering, not in areas of theology, ancient languages or history. Though there are certainly limitations to my expertise because of this, this manuscript

has been reviewed by those with such credentials. The goal has been to create a book that presents this material clearly, honestly and accurately—and I hope, timelessly.

It is my hope that it will be read in the spirit in which it is written: with an honest and thoughtful look at the truth of the word of God, the history of the early church, and our own hearts as well. May this help provide a solid basis for our faith today, help equip us to avoid trappings that will attempt to consume *our* faith and inspire us to be true to the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints, that we may bring *this* faith to the world in our generation.



John Engler
Highlands Ranch, Colorado
November 1997

*In the beginning was the
Word, and the Word was with
God, and the Word was God.
John 1:1*

1

THE EARTHLY MINISTRY OF JESUS

The study of Christianity must begin with the study of Jesus Christ. By definition, a Christian is a follower of Jesus. Jesus is the focal point. In order to follow Jesus, one must know what Jesus taught and how he lived. A “Christianity” that is not rooted in Jesus’ life and teachings cannot truthfully be called Christianity. A thorough study of the gospels concerning the life and teachings of Jesus amounts to a thorough study of the foundations of Christianity itself.

The Purposes of the Earthly Ministry of Jesus

It is clear from examining the New Testament that Jesus sought to change the world. He did not come to Earth to go through some actions to be observed by men without any intended effect. He had the following clear and definite purposes.

- Bring salvation
- Reveal God

- Polarize mankind
- Fulfill destiny

Bring Salvation

The salvation of individuals was a primary purpose of the earthly ministry of Jesus. One can see from the Scriptures that Jesus came to bring salvation.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10).

For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:16-18).

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it (John 5:21).

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:27-28).

For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:2-3).

It is helpful to consider exactly what Jesus was going to save people from. Consider the following summary of the preceding passages.

Passage	Saved From
Matthew 1:21	sins
Luke 19:10	lost
John 3:16-18	perishing condemned
John 5:21	lack of (spiritual) life
John 10:27-28	lack of eternal life not perishing not possessed by Jesus
John 17:2-3	not knowing God

To bring salvation, Jesus atoned for the sins of men and called people to repentance and discipleship.

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32).

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10).

As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it (John 12:47).

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Reveal God

One clear purpose of Jesus was to reveal God. There are actually two ways that Jesus sought to reveal God. One way is simply by his being God in human form.

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"- which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14).

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (John 1:18).

The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does (John 5:19).

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" (John 14:9)

I have made you known to them (John 17:26).

By being God in the flesh, human eyes could at last see the invisible God. His being, lifestyle and example are thus an integral part of his revelation of God to men. This is an immensely significant concept and could easily be a topic of many further studies.

Not only did Jesus teach about God by his life and example, he also revealed God in specific ways by his teachings:

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (Mark 1:38).

"For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God" (John 3:34).

I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence (John 8:38).

For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it...So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say (John 12:49-50).

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work (John 14:10).

For everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you (John 15:15).

Thus, Jesus revealed the Father to mankind, both by his life and by the standards and values reflected in his teachings.

Polarize Mankind

Jesus intended to have a strong effect upon human relationships. By offering salvation to those who would be his disciples, those who would be saved would be drawn together. Consequently, those who rejected Jesus would be distinctly separated from those who did not reject him. The end result is that there would be two groups of people.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:11-12).

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34).

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37).

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets (Luke 6:26).

I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled...Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division (Luke 12:49-51).

You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me (Luke 21:16-17).

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:15-16).

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you (John 15:18-19).

It is interesting to see how enemies became united in their opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees and Sadducees were rivals (Acts 23:6-8), yet came together to oppose Jesus. Likewise, the followers of the Pharisees teamed up with the followers of Herod. Also, after being enemies, Herod and Pilate became friends on the day Jesus was crucified.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven (Matthew 16:1).

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians (Matthew 22:15-16).

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together (Matthew 22:34).

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus (Mark 3:6).

That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies (Luke 23:11).

In conclusion, there is one flock following one shepherd, with an inherent enmity between this flock and the rest of the world. The people of Jesus would be united in following him, and those who would not follow him—both the religious and non-religious—would be united in their opposition to his people.

Fulfill Destiny

The last purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry was the fulfillment of his destiny. For Jesus, this amounted to the fulfillment of the Scriptures and the prophecies about him. A detailed examination of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled is beyond the scope of this book, though other resources that discuss this topic are available.¹

However, there is a great benefit in considering how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures and his destiny as the Messiah or Christ (Anointed One). From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was understood as the Christ:

The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ) (John 1:41).

The prophecies about the Messiah support the purposes of Jesus as they have been discussed. According to Isaiah, the Messiah would bring salvation to both Israel and the Gentiles:

¹ A good source of information on the fulfilled prophecies of Jesus is chapter 9 of Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc. 1979). Roger Nicole offers a more scholarly treatment of this in, "The Old Testament in the New Testament," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979), Volume 1, pp. 617-626. In addition, there are many places in the Gospels where references are made to Jesus fulfilling scripture in some specific manner: Matthew has 15, Mark has 3, Luke has 8, John has 15.

And now the Lord says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:5-6).

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied, by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:5-6,11).

According to Isaiah, the Messiah would also reveal God and bring the knowledge of God to all mankind:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth (Isaiah 11:1-4).

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will

shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand (Isaiah 52:13-15).

Finally, Isaiah saw that the Messiah would gather a people for himself out of all mankind:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this (Isaiah 9:6-7).

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth (Isaiah 11:10-12).

From just this brief look at Isaiah, it is clear that the ideas of salvation, revelation of God and the polarization of mankind are all purposes of the Messiah. As Jesus fulfilled Scripture and the prophecies about himself, he also fulfilled his destiny. The completion and total fulfillment of his destiny was another distinct purpose of Jesus.

The Methods of Jesus

Having considered the various reasons why Jesus came and the effects he intended to have—namely: 1) To bring salvation; 2) To reveal God; 3) To polarize mankind; and 4) To fulfill destiny—it is interesting to consider what methods he chose to accomplish these

ends. Jesus used two methods to accomplish the goals of his ministry. They are:

- The Cross
- The Apostles

Just as the *purposes* of Jesus' ministry have been considered, the *methods* of Jesus' ministry will now be examined.

The Cross

The death of Jesus on a cross is the most well known fact about Christianity. The gospel writers devote a great deal to Jesus' arrest, trial, death and burial. Though the three days surrounding the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus constitute only one-third of one percent of his three-year ministry, each of the gospels spend a significant percentage of volume² on these three days. It should not surprise us that the cross plays an important role in the purposes of Jesus.

The Cross and Salvation

Jesus planned to give his life as a substitute for mankind and on behalf of mankind:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28).

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19-20).

² Matthew, 8%; Mark, 13%; Luke, 6%; John, 10%.

Matthew 26:28 shows us that the forgiveness of the sins of mankind is made possible as a direct result of the death of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus' death on the cross was not only a physical death but it was a spiritual death as well:

About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama Sabachthani?" - which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

On the cross, Jesus was forsaken by his Father and died a death of extreme humiliation and shame. Jesus fully suffered the penalty of sin as he died a wretched death while separated from the Father. This spiritual death is the most significant aspect of the crucifixion, because it is the death from which men are saved.

The Cross and Revealing God

By the cross, Jesus also revealed God's great love for mankind and his desire to provide a way of salvation despite great personal cost. This is an extremely profound concept:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

The Cross and Polarizing Mankind

The death of Jesus on the cross was an action that was intended not only to save men but also to polarize men:

He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (John 11:51-52).

Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted

up from the earth, will draw all men to myself (John 12:31-32).

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to rebuild the temple in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God."

In the same way, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. he trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him (Matthew 27:39-44).

The Cross and Fulfilling Destiny

Jesus fulfilled Scripture and his destiny by going to the cross:

It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment (Luke 22:37).

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day" (Luke 24:45-46).

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him (John 12:16).

But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.' (John 15:25).

In conclusion, Jesus revealed God's love, brought salvation, polarized mankind and fulfilled his destiny—all by going to the cross.

Thus, the cross was indeed a method that Jesus used to accomplish his purposes.

The Apostles

Very early in his ministry, Jesus selected apostles who accompanied him throughout his ministry and then carried on his mission. The apostles were also known as “The Twelve.”

First of all, the apostles would simply be Jesus’ companions and witnesses. Everything that Jesus did and said—and everything done and said to him—was seen by these men.

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons (Mark 3:13-15).

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him (Luke 8:1).

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them (John 3:22).

As the apostles accompanied Jesus, he entrusted his teachings to them.

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables" (Mark 4:10-11).

But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything (Mark 4:34).

When Jesus had called the Twelve together...he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1-2).

When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida (Luke 9:10).

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word...For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me (John 17:6,8).

Ultimately, Jesus wanted to affect the whole world. Having seen how Jesus called, trained and commissioned these men, let us consider how they accomplished Jesus' purpose.

The Apostles and Salvation

The apostles were sent out for the express purpose of bringing salvation to people:

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men" (Luke 5:10).

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38).

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:8).

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name (John 15:16).

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and

make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20).

He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

The Apostles and Revealing God

In going out to bring salvation to mankind, the apostles also revealed God:

who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word (Luke 1:2).

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you (John 15:15).

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning (John 15:26-27).

You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:48-49).

The Apostles and Polarizing Mankind

By going into the world to bring salvation and reveal God, the apostles polarized mankind.

I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me (John 13:20).

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also (John 15:18-20).

The Apostles and the Fulfillment of Destiny

The work of the apostles may be summarized by seeing that they were sent to follow in the footsteps of Jesus himself. Their ministry was in fulfillment of Scripture and the destiny of Jesus; it was also the fulfillment of God's destiny for their lives.

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me (Matthew 10:40).

And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me (Luke 22:29).

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:44-49).

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:18).

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

By their ministry, the apostles revealed God, brought salvation to the world, polarized mankind, and fulfilled Scripture—thus fulfilling the purpose of Jesus.



Conclusions

- Jesus had four precise purposes: Bring salvation, reveal God, polarize mankind and fulfill his destiny.
- Jesus used both the cross and the apostles to accomplish these purposes.

For Today

- Since Jesus had well-defined purposes, everything he did and taught should be viewed in that context.
- How does a view of Jesus as a purposeful man change your perspective on his teachings? His actions?
- If Jesus was purposeful and you seek to imitate him, shouldn't your purposes be the same as his?
- Do *your* purposes coincide with his purposes?

*But you are a chosen people, a royal
priesthood, a holy nation, a people
belonging to God, that you may
declare the praises of him who called
you out of darkness into
his wonderful light
(1 Peter 2:9).*

2

THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

The Apostolic Church Fulfilled the Purposes of Jesus

Having seen the thrust and focus of Jesus' ministry, in this chapter we will consider the thrust and focus of the apostolic church¹ as recorded in the book of Acts. The apostolic church exactly followed the purposes of Jesus.

- Brought Salvation
- Revealed God
- Polarized Mankind
- Fulfilled Destiny

¹ This term will be used throughout this book to refer to the church in the lifetimes of the apostles.

The Church Brought Salvation

The early church proclaimed a message that brought salvation to those who accepted it.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:38-41).

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed (Acts 13:47-48).

The Church Revealed God

Through the preaching of the early church, God was revealed. To Jews and God-fearing Gentiles,² this was done by preaching Jesus as the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God and the one who fulfilled the prophecies: This put a definite, real-life historical identity into the long awaited yet variously-conceived Hope of Israel. The gospel was rooted in the message of the Old Testament and apostolic preaching used the Old Testament to teach about Jesus.

² *God-fearers* were Gentiles who were almost proselytes to Judaism, except that they had not been circumcised (F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, New York, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1980, 266. Luke refers to God-fearers numerous times in Acts (2:5, 10:2, 10:22, 13:26, 13:50, 17:4, 17:17).

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:22).

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all (Acts 10:36).

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' (Acts 13:32-33).

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11).

God was revealed to Gentile audiences two different ways: in preaching about the nature of God; and in preaching about how God works in the lives of men through ways which were understandable to them.

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy (Acts 14:15-17).

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and

breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:25-31).

The Church Polarized Mankind

One of the striking things about the early church is how it polarized the world. On one hand, the church was gathered together and was a strong, unified group of people, despite its racial, cultural, political, economic and geographic diversity.

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

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:42-46).

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:35).

On the other hand, the church also encountered opposition, and, as in the case of Jesus, even enemies were united in their hatred of the church.

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day (Acts 4:1-3).

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.(Acts 12:1-3).

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead (Acts 14:19).

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil (Acts 17:5-8).

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up (Acts 17:13).

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject" (Acts 17:32).

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law" (Acts 18:12-13).

The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" (Acts 22:22).

But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect (Acts 28:22).

The Church Fulfilled its Destiny

The members of the apostolic church saw their work of spreading the gospel in clear fulfillment of Scripture. The *prophecies* about the church from the Old Testament were taken as the future *destiny* of the church.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:4-8).

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he

was one of our number and shared in this ministry. (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)"

"For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms," 'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, 'May another take his place of leadership.' Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:15-22).

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Acts 2:14-21).

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city

to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness" (Acts 4:24-29).

Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: "Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you!" (Acts 13:39-41).

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Acts 13:46-47).

When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things'" (Acts 15:13-17).

In conclusion on this point, it is clear that the apostolic church brought salvation, revealed God, polarized mankind and fulfilled its destiny. Thus, the church fulfilled the purposes of Jesus.

The Church: The Body of Christ

The early church was known as the spiritual body of Christ. This became a useful description of the identity and mission of the church.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:27).

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:22-23).

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:10-11).

for we are members of his body (Ephesians 5:30).

And he is the head of the body, the church; (Colossians 1:18).

As Christ had purposes during his earthly ministry, so the spiritual body of Christ had those same purposes. Everything it did served those purposes. The church simply saw itself as an extension of Jesus.

The Primacy of the New Testament Church

Since the apostolic church was uniquely commissioned by Jesus and the apostles and fulfilled Jesus' purposes, it is the prototype or example for the Christian church in every era. It exhibited variety in structure, organization, methods and in countless other ways too numerous to discuss here. However, it was entirely devoted to accomplishing the purposes of Jesus.



Conclusions

- The apostolic church had the exact same purposes as Jesus—bringing salvation, revealing God, polarizing mankind, and fulfilling its destiny.
- Everything the apostolic church did revolved around those purposes.
- The apostolic church is the prototype for the church in every era of mankind.

For Today

- Is your church accomplishing *each* of the purposes of the church?
- How much of what is being done in your church is *getting in the way* of accomplishing *each* of the purposes of the church?
- Is the church focused on the purposes of Jesus? If there is no focus on the purposes of the church, the church doesn't have a chance of accomplishing them.
- What are some areas where the purposes of Jesus are neglected or cast aside in the day to day operations of the church? What can you do about it?
- Can your church *truthfully* from God's point-of-view be viewed as the spiritual body of Christ as a result of its purposes? If not, what needs to change?

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16)

3

FAILINGS IN LIFE AND DOCTRINE

In this chapter the notion of a Christian becoming unfaithful to Jesus will be considered. Jesus spoke of the threats of becoming unfaithful on several occasions¹ and identified two fundamental ways that people could do this. Consider the following scripture.

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:9-13).

In warning that people will “turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,” Jesus was referring to people who would abandon the faith due to persecution or hardship and to those whose would hate or betray other Christians. In warning that false prophets

¹ For instance, Matthew 13:21 (Mark 4:17, Luke 8:13), John 16:1.

would “appear and deceive many people,” he was referring to a departure from true faith as a result of teachings brought by false prophets. Thus, Jesus identified “life” and “doctrine” issues.²

Just as Jesus identified these two areas regarding people leaving him, this message is confirmed in the ministry of the early church. Paul warned Timothy in the same manner.

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).

In the same way, James warned the readers of his letter about these same issues.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17).

Now we will discuss how failings in life and doctrine jeopardized salvation and negated the purposes of Jesus in the lives of the apostolic age Christians.

Failings in Life

The Bible recognizes two basic ways to sin. First, there is the sense of the actively doing wrong things—this is “sin” in the sense in which most people understand the word. Second, there is the idea of not doing right things—this is “sin” in a way not immediately recognized by most people. Each of these ideas will be considered separately.

² Of course, some may choose to leave the Lord deliberately. This would constitute a third way of leaving the faith.

Doing Wrong

It should come as no surprise that doing wrong things (sin in the traditional sense) is a way in which Christians could lose their salvation. But there are several aspects to this that must be considered.

First, every Christian sins. This is part of the human condition, whether someone is interested in following God or not. John spoke of this in his first epistle.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (1 John 1:8-10).

For the “average” Christian of the apostolic age, this type of sin was simply part of life due to being human. However, these sins were confessed and forgiven and were not a threat to salvation.

Another aspect of sin in the life of a disciple is the idea that *any* sin could take root in someone’s life and cost him his salvation. James warned that all sin could “mature” in a believer and thus lead to spiritual death.

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:13-15).

He recognized that something had to intervene between the birth of sin and the maturity of it, or the sinner would die spiritually.³ This shows that the issue is not just the nature of the sin but the response of the sinner to the sin.

Lastly, in the apostolic church there was a certain class of sin that was treated more seriously. The church was cautioned about

³ The appropriate intervention would appear to be confession of and repentance from the sin. See 1 John 1:9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-11.

these sins and was commanded to take direct and specific action on several occasions. Generally speaking, these sins constitute an immediate threat to salvation and testify to a special hardening of heart on the part of the sinner—even if that person was a “part of the fellowship!” Let us consider the evidence for this class of sin in the apostolic church.

Salvation-Threatening Sin in the New Testament Church Era

The Corinthians were warned that some very specific sins absolutely should not be tolerated.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:1-6).

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor

drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel (1 Corinthians 10:6-10).

The Galatian churches⁴ were warned that both obvious, external sins and hidden, inner sins could disqualify a disciple from an inheritance in the kingdom of God.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21).

The Ephesian churches⁵ were also warned that certain sins disqualified a disciple from an inheritance in the kingdom of God.

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for

⁴ The Galatian churches are the churches in Derbe, Iconium and Lystra.

⁵ This letter was probably circulated to the churches that had Ephesus as a pillar.

because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient (Ephesians 5:3-6).

Paul warned Timothy that people would sin in a number of different ways even with the deceptive appearance of godliness, and that these people were not to be a part of his ministry.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

James also warned against being merciless towards one another and grumbling against each other.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (James 2:12-13).

Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:9).

Peter discussed the steps in departing from the faith. First one becomes entangled in sin, then one is overcome by sin and “turns their backs” on the sacred commands passed on to them.

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them (2 Peter 2:20-21).

In summary, we may observe that the traditionally understood “big” sins are a part of this group of sins that presented an immediate threat to salvation and demanded a response from the apostolic church. Yet there were other, more subtle sins that could also cost one his salvation, whether or not the church acted to remove the person involved. Sins of commission were a real threat to salvation in the apostolic age.

Failure to Persevere

If it is obvious that sins of commission can cost a disciple his salvation, then one must realize that losing heart and failing to persevere in advancing the purposes of Jesus can also have the same effect. A disciple must persevere to be saved in the end. This teaching is seen in numerous warnings in the New Testament. The letter to the Romans warns that disciples would be cut off if they failed to continue in their relationship with God.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off (Romans 11:17-22).

Paul warned the Galatian churches that the disciples needed to persevere to receive their reward from God.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9).

The Philippians were taught that those who would claim to be disciples, but fail to embrace a pattern of life in harmony with the cross of Jesus would only reap destruction.

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things (Philippians 3:17-19).

In his dealings with the Thessalonians, Paul was afraid that the persecutions they faced would lead to their giving up the faith.

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5).

Paul warned Timothy about the temptation of worldliness that could cost believers their faith and salvation.

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

The writer to the Hebrews was concerned that the readers would abandon their faith through all forms of lack of perseverance: apathy, weariness, shrinking back from the costs of discipleship or neglecting continued holiness⁶ in their lives.

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. (Hebrews 2:1)

Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:11).

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (Hebrews 10:36-39).

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

Peter warned the church that spiritual growth was necessary for the assurance of salvation.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he

⁶ The word "holy" (Greek *agiasmon*) carries with it the ideas of distinctiveness of lifestyle compared to the world. Consider H. Seebass: "[in the New Testament] The sacred no longer belongs to things, places or rites, but to the manifestations of life produced by the Spirit." From H. Seebass, "Holy," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975), 2-228.

is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-11).

In the message to the seven churches of Asia, Jesus warned the disciples against neglecting their “first love” and against varying forms of spiritual lethargy.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (Revelation 2:4-5).

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you (Revelation 3:1-3).

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:14-16).

In the apostolic age, sometimes this lack of perseverance was a direct result of persecution. Sometimes the lack of perseverance was the result of weariness or losing heart over a period of time. Sometimes it was the result of allowing worldliness to gain a foothold in one's life and then being unable to resist, and sometimes it was just

failing to continue to love God. But the end result of these conditions was the same: In the apostolic age, a disciple could lose his salvation by failing to persevere in the faith.

The Decision to Leave

In the apostolic church, there were instances where some actively and willfully decided to renounce their commitment to be a disciple and/or walk away from the fellowship of believers. This action was more willful than a simple lack of perseverance, though these did have the same dreadful end result. Jesus talked about this type of sin.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that `every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:15-17).

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away (Mark 4:16-17).

Several other passages in the New Testament discuss this topic of willfully departing from the faith.

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. (Hebrews 3:12).

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Hebrews 10:26-27).

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I

refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death (1 John 5:16-17).

The behavior associated with this type of sin is characterized by unrelenting stubbornness in resolving issues with other disciples or deliberate sin after receiving knowledge of the truth. It seems to result from a gradual increase in sin in one's life.

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them (2 Peter 2:20-21).

This "turning away from the faith" is to be distinguished from the unfaithful person who "wandered away" from discipleship but did not renounce it.

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

Christians of the apostolic age could be (and were) involved in all forms of sin while claiming to be disciples of Jesus. The New Testament shows that the apostolic church urged and expected (and allowed!) repentance in these areas to bring forgiveness and salvation to those in sin.

The practice of restoring those who were repenting from various forms of salvation-threatening sin has a significant basis in the New Testament. Likewise, some renounced the faith willfully and had hope of neither repentance nor salvation.

Doctrine Issues

When life issues that threaten salvation are obvious or at least evident, doctrinal problems are often hidden and subtle. Christianity is spiritual, and spiritual concepts are often difficult to express and comprehend. Because of this, care in teaching was important in the apostolic church, and false teaching proved to be a problem in the apostolic era. Let us consider some instances of false teaching from the New Testament church era.

False Teachings in the New Testament Church Era

Virtually every book of the New Testament contains references to false teachings and false teachers. Some books (for instance, Galatians, 2 Peter, Jude) are almost entirely devoted to the topic.

In Acts 15, the Judaizers⁷ make their first appearance. Under the guise of a “more correct” teaching, they attempted to persuade the Gentile Christians to be circumcised and obey the law as a part of being a true Christian.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15:1-2).

Later on in Acts, Paul spoke with the elders of the Ephesian church and warned them about wayward preachers, men from their own number seeking pre-eminence and a following of their own by distorting the truth. These false teachers would divide the flock and replace truth for lies in the minds of the deceived.

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own

⁷ The Judaizers are those who sought to make conversion to Judaism an essential part of conversion to Christianity for all non-Jews.

number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:29-30).

In Romans, the church is given a warning about false teachers. Again, the false teachers sought to manipulate and divide the church with teachings contrary to what was initially taught.

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people (Romans 16:17-18).

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addressed a false teaching concerning the resurrection.

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul addressed the issue of false teachers who had already been to Corinth and undermined what the church had been taught. He plainly describes these teachings as a different gospel or a different Jesus, and chastises them for not rejecting these things. He identifies the false teachers as agents of Satan and not merely misinformed or misguided disciples.

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve (2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

The letter to the Galatians addresses the Judaizing issue again. In the Galatian churches, the Judaizers had actually gained some “converts” and had succeeded in alienating some disciples from the truth. Paul urged the rejection of this “new” gospel and shed light upon the motives of the false teachers.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9).

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human

effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:1-4).

You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! (Galatians 4:10).

Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them (Galatians 4:17).

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? (Galatians 4:21).

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:2-4).

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be (Galatians 5:7-10).

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh (Galatians 6:12-13).

The Judaizers apparently were trying to gain a foothold in all the churches in the Ephesian region as well. As in Acts,⁸ Paul warned the

⁸ E.g. Acts 20:29-31.

churches about the deceitful men who would try to draw them away from the faith. He also placed importance upon the concept of reaching “unity in the faith and knowledge” of Jesus as protection from false teachings.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:11-16).

It was he 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 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:11-14).

Paul warned the Philippians about the Judaizers with exceptionally strong language.

Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ

Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reasons for such confidence (Philippians 3:2-4).

The Colossian church was subject to “fine sounding arguments” from the Judaizers and ascetics. Paul urged them to continue in what they were initially taught.

My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments (Colossians 2:2-4).

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (Colossians 2:6-7).

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations

indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:16-23).

The first Thessalonian letter did not address any specific false doctrines, but the second Thessalonian letter dealt with a fraudulent teaching, supposedly from Paul, regarding the second coming of Jesus. In his letter Paul gives insight into the work of Satan in false teaching.

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).

Paul's first letter to Timothy urged him to deal with false teachers while staying righteous. As he taught Timothy on this topic, one could learn a wealth of information about the motives and agenda of false teachers, as well as the true source of false teachings which are demons. He also provides a warning about future heresies that will threaten the believers.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away

from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm (1 Timothy 1:3-7).

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Timothy 6:10).

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you (1 Timothy 6:20-21).

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul addresses the false doctrine issues even more pointedly.

Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:16-18).

Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected (2 Timothy 3:8).

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Paul's letter to Titus touched upon the same themes as his letters to Timothy.

For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain. Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to

know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good (Titus 1:10-16).

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Titus 3:9-11).

The letter to the Hebrews addressed the threat of drifting away through neglect of the gospel message and urged the readers to reject strange teachings.

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away (Hebrews 2:1).

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat (Hebrews 13:9-10).

James recognized the risk of teaching false doctrines for any teacher.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (James 3:1-2).

The book of 1 Peter does not address any issues of false teaching, but 2 Peter is almost entirely devoted to the question of disciples remaining saved and standing firm in the face of false teachers.

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping (2 Peter 2:1-3).

This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings; yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord. But these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish (2 Peter 2:10-12).

They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness (2 Peter 2:13-15).

For their mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him (2 Peter 2:18-19).

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters,

speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The book of 1 John warned that those who left the apostles and the church started their own movement. Those people showed themselves to be false by their divisiveness and false teaching.

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:18-19).

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also (1 John 2:20-23).

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous (1 John 3:7).

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (1 John 4:1-3).

2 John addresses the issue of false teachers who impersonated true teachers but went beyond what was taught by the apostles.

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work (2 John 1:7-11).

3 John addresses the issue of a local church leader who would not accept the true teachers.

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church (3 John 1:9-10).

Jude was almost entirely devoted to the topic of helping disciples stand firm against false teaching, moral decay and divisiveness.

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 1:3-4).

In the very same way, these dreamers pollute their own bodies, reject authority and slander celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not

understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals—these are the very things that destroy them (Jude 1:8-10).

These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage. But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life (Jude 1:16-20).

In Revelation, some of the churches of Asia Minor were chastened for how they handled false teachings and teachers, even while one church was praised for how it handled the false teachers.

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false (Revelation 2:2).

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:14-15).

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:20).

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): (Revelation 2:24).

Seeing that nearly every book of the New Testament contains references to false teachings and false teachers that threatened the apostolic church, we can conclude that false teachings were a serious threat to the salvation of the church. The prevalence of false teachings in the apostolic age shows this to be Satan's primary tool to destroy the faith of the believer. Thus, it should not be taken lightly.

The Conscience

The lack of a clear conscience is the "sin of omission" in regard to doctrinal issues. While a disciple of Christ must not believe false doctrines, he must also sincerely believe correct doctrines and live according to them. If a Christian's belief is not sincere, the conscience is violated. Consider the following passages.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (Romans 14:22-23).

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment (1 Corinthians 11:27-31).

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk (1 Timothy 1:5-6).

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to

faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

While there is not a large volume of discussion about conscience in the New Testament compared to the other topics discussed in this chapter, it is clear that failing to have a clear conscience about one's faith and life also jeopardizes the salvation of the believer.



Conclusions

- There are four basic areas where failings could cause one to lose his salvation
 1. Sins of commission
 2. Failure to persevere - sins of omission
 3. Failure to reject false doctrines
 4. Failure to believe in right doctrines or to have a clear conscience about one's faith
- In addition, a disciple could leave the faith simply by choosing to do so
- The struggle to stay faithful in life issues comes down to purity and holiness in view of the temptation to moral decay; perseverance in maintaining the purposes of Jesus in view of hardship, suffering, or discouragement.
- The struggle to stay faithful in doctrinal issues comes down to rejecting additions to the original gospel message and maintaining a clear conscience about the truth of the gospel.

For Today

- Do you take each of the above threats to salvation *equally* seriously? If not, why not?
- Do you have a “clear conscience and sincere faith?”
- Is the right standard of discipleship truly being laid before members of the church, or have certain “church membership standards” taken their place?
- How can the leadership of the church make sure that church members are truly faithful disciples?

*He who stands firm to
the end will be saved.
(Matthew 24:13)*

4

STANDING FIRM

The New Testament church was well equipped to deal with the threats to the salvation of its members and to promote the purposes of Jesus. There were two basic tools that kept the church on track with the purposes of Jesus and kept its members saved. These were.

- Protodoxy
- Unity

Now *protodoxy* is not a word you will find in your dictionary, but it serves to illustrate the important concept here: it comes from “proto” (first) + “doxy” (teaching) and means the things that were first taught. The early church made every effort to adhere to what was originally taught. The early church was also diligent to oppose ideas that either: 1) went against what the gospel taught; or 2) added to what the gospel taught.

This is in stark contrast to our culture today, where people may “switch churches” for trivial reasons such as the location of the

building or the style of the preacher. In the first century, there were no other churches to “switch” to; disciples learned to get along with each other and valued unity more than any private idea or preference. As a result, there was always one church that matured in its faith as new situations presented themselves, all the while not compromising the fundamentals of discipleship to Christ. Each of these tools for guarding the church will be discussed with a view toward how they served to protect the church from failing in life and doctrine.

Protodoxy

The apostolic church was careful to follow the message taught by the apostles both in areas of life and doctrine. The chief reason for this is that the first century message was revealed once for all time. As a result, the apostolic church recognized that any teachings or practices contradicting or adding on to what was already taught by the apostles were to be rejected outright, without consideration. The focus of ministry in the apostolic church was to stand firm in the life and doctrine that it already possessed.

Virtually every book of the New Testament urged the church to follow the message that was originally taught. In Acts, the early believers were devoted to the teachings of the apostles.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

In the preaching of the gospel in the early church in Jerusalem, we see that the full message of the gospel was proclaimed.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life" (Acts 5:19-20).

For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God (Acts 20:27).

The Romans were urged to beware of any teachings contrary to what they had previously learned.

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people (Romans 16:17-18).

The Corinthians were urged to hold firmly to what was originally taught to them.

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 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, (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong (1 Corinthians 16:13).

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

Paul warned the Galatian churches that any additions or changes to the gospel would lead to condemnation.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have

already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9).

Paul taught the Ephesian churches that God had given them every blessing in Christ through the gospel that they had heard.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

Paul told the Colossians that adherence to the gospel message they heard would lead them to salvation.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Colossians 1:21-23).

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints (Colossians 1:25-26).

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (Colossians 2:6-7).

Paul told the Thessalonians to hold to what they heard from him, whether in person or by his letters.

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Paul told Timothy to adhere to the original message he had heard as a result of his relationship with Paul.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Paul told Titus that the grace of God that brings salvation had indeed appeared to all men.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men (Titus 2:11).

The Hebrews were told to adhere to what they had previously heard.

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away (Hebrews 2:1).

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess (Hebrews 4:14).

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat (Hebrews 13:9-10).

Peter urged his readers to stand firm in the faith they already had.

Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings (1 Peter 5:9).

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:3-4).

So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things (2 Peter 1:12-15).

Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles (2 Peter 3:1-2).

Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position (2 Peter 3:17).

John repeatedly reminded his readers to remain with what they were originally taught.

See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need

anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him. And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming (1 John 2:24-28).

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (1 John 4:1-3).

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work (2 John 1:7-11).

Jude warned his readers to contend for the faith that was previously entrusted to the church.

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 1:3-4).

The breadth of these references is astounding: multiple authors; multiple local churches; and multiple eras of the first century. The first tool to protect the church from failings in life and doctrine was an unwavering adherence to the truth that was originally preached by the apostles, and an *outright rejection* of any additional or contradictory teachings.

Unity

The second tool to protect the church from failings in life and doctrine was unity. The apostolic church had an extraordinary commitment to unity, especially when cultural and ethnic differences are considered. In one day, the church grew from a small and united group of apostles (which was initially quite diverse itself) and followers¹ to more than 3000 people from numerous regions around the Roman Empire.² The church was born in diversity, and grew in diversity from then on.

From time to time, issues arose as a result of the growth of the gospel to various places and cultures. These issues may have been doctrinal, cultural or practical issues, but they threatened to erode the unity of the church. Not only did the church respond to these challenges in ways that resolved problems and maintained unity, these issues forced the church to define faithfulness and discipleship in ways that transcended cultural, ethnic and economic factors. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Jesus and Unity

To understand how the apostolic church viewed unity, it is necessary to consider what Jesus taught about unity. As seen in the first chapter, the unity of believers was one purpose of Jesus. He mandated unity as a testimony to his identity as the Christ and as a means of reaching the world with the gospel (another of his purposes).

Unity was not a matter of mere tolerance or even acceptance to Jesus, but rather was a matter of love. Jesus' dream of unity would be reached by faithfulness to him and genuine love for one another.

¹ Acts 1:12-15.

² Acts 2:9-11, 41.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

The Apostolic Church and Unity

The New Testament church forged unity through a variety of issues. In Acts 6, there was a conflict over taking care of Grecian³ widows, who were an ethnic minority in the Jerusalem church. The apostles resolved the problem by appointing leaders chosen by the church to see to it that no one would be overlooked. The church itself was sensitive to the issue as well, as Grecian⁴ men—of the same ethnic group as those offended—were selected by the church to be in charge of this matter for the entire church.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We

³ The Greek-speaking Jews were regarded as outcasts among the Hebraic-speaking Jews. The primary reason for this was that the Hebraic Jews generally felt that those who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world had compromised their heritage by speaking Greek and following the social customs of other nations.

⁴ The assertion that the Seven were Grecian is from Richard Longnecker's "Acts," *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Gaebelein, Frank E., General Editor. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979) 9:331.

will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:1-6).

As the gospel reached the Gentiles, one of the greatest threats to the unity of the church came into view (old covenant v. new covenant acceptance). Even Peter was criticized for associating with the Gentiles and he had to explain the vision he received from God in order to preach to them.⁵

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the

⁵ Considering the great commission to "make disciples of all nations" of Matthew 28:19 and the difficulties that the earliest Jewish Christians had with the Gentiles even being disciples, we can see just how great a struggle it was for the Jews and Gentiles to be united in the church.

man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:1-18).

How the church would function with both Gentiles and Jews in it came to be a controversial topic indeed. Though the prophets had foreseen the global expansion of the gospel beyond the borders of Israel⁶ and Jesus said to make disciples of all nations⁷, the practical realities of a church with both Jews and non-Jews provided an enormous challenge to apostolic church unity.

In Acts 15, some men came to Antioch (a church with a significant Gentile membership) from Judea with an unauthorized teaching, which created a great controversy.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15:1-2).

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).

⁶ See Isaiah 2:2 or Isaiah 52:15, for example.

⁷ Matthew 28:19.

In the ensuing discussion, the position of the Judaizers was rejected: one could be a Christian without being a Jew first. Whatever divisive and false teachings may have come up later from people sharing these opinions, there is no evidence of a schism at this point in the history of the apostolic church: both Gentile and Jew alike were at home in the church.

It is interesting to see that a few years later, Paul returns to Jerusalem and finds the Christian church full of zealots for the law.

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (Acts 21:20-25).

The leadership of the Jerusalem church allowed Jewish Christians to continue to observe the law and the leaders did not discourage it, though it did not believe the law should be binding to Gentile Christians. This potentially divisive issue was not allowed to divide the church.⁸

⁸ It appears that God allowed Israel one generation of 40 years (from 30 A.D. to 70 A.D.) to respond to Christianity. During this period, Jewish Christians made the most of their heritage to win other Jews for Jesus. But after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Jewish temple worship ceased and "Jewish Christianity" became "Christianity." This forty-year time period could have been the

In the letter to the Romans, Paul addressed some unity issues in chapter 14, which is quoted in full here.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' " So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the

era of time referred to by Peter (Acts 2:17) and the prophets as "in the last days" of Judaism.

kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (Romans 14:1-23).

Here we see several cultural issues becoming primary issues in the unity of the church. Paul recognized that disciples could disagree on some issues, being fully convinced in their own minds, and that neither of the disagreeing disciples is wrong or sinning. This principle applied to the concept of special days (possibly adhering to the law) and eating meat (probably related to eating meat sacrificed to idols or meat unclean according to Jewish custom), but certainly extends to other issues. The point is that not every issue matters and not every issue is seen in the same way by all faithful disciples.

Interestingly, Paul taught that eating any meat is acceptable (Romans 14:14), but he allowed others to believe otherwise because of their backgrounds.

Paul taught a set of guidelines in these areas that he passed on to the Romans.

- Do not let non-essential issues become a means of division in the church.
- Therefore, do not pass judgment or look down upon one who thinks differently than another in one of these areas.
- Don't do things in these areas that make others stumble.

- Christian freedom exists to allow those who are strong to do (or *not* do) things that will keep others from stumbling or being offended, *not* to justify selfish or reckless behavior which may have a detrimental impact upon others.⁹
- Make every effort to do what leads to peace and the building up of your brother; that is, the stronger brother ought to submit to the weaker brother on these issues without being condescending toward him.
- Keep your beliefs in these areas between you and God. One's beliefs in these areas will be judged by God.

This standard of respect and love promoted unity. Not far after this discussion, Paul gives a prayer and an instruction to promote unity in the Roman church.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Romans 15:5-7).

In the first Corinthian letter, Paul also addressed a number of unity issues. First, he addressed the divisions in the church based upon loyalty to certain leaders.

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow

⁹ The command to "not allow what you believe to be good to be spoken of as evil" was a command to not do things that could hurt others or be spoken against, not a license to disarm or silence one's critics or opponents.

Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:10-12).

After discussing some other issues, Paul returned to this topic and explained that the important issue is God, his word and his church, and not men who are merely God's servants. To Paul, it was ridiculous to divide the church based upon its servants!

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow (1 Corinthians 3:1-7).

The next issue threatening the unity of the church at Corinth was the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. Consider the entire discussion of 1 Corinthians 8.

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall (1 Corinthians 8:1-13).

Paul repeated the standard expressed in Romans 14 that if eating meat causes a brother to sin, it should not be done at all! His point is that Christian rights and freedom are not to be used to hurt brothers, but to keep a disciple from hurting his brothers. Paul used himself as an example.

This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? (1 Corinthians 9:3-6).

But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast (1 Corinthians 9:15).

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not

having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Corinthians 9:19-27).

Paul willingly gave up his rights and used his freedom in the Lord to help people be saved, and he taught others to do the same. After providing the reasoning and his own example, Paul concluded the discussion with the sound instruction for the people to follow: Do not cause anyone to stumble.

"Everything is permissible"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others (1 Corinthians 10:23-24).

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1).

The Corinthians had another issue dividing them: spiritual gifts. These gifts were having the intended positive effects in the church, but some undesired division was also present. Paul showed that the church is a body, and that the different roles in the church should not

breed envious division but rather a positive sense of dependence and unity.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts (1 Corinthians 12:14-30).

Paul then concluded this argument with a discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13. The context of this passage is people loving each other in the church and staying unified in the face of difficult obstacles to unity!

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:1-7).

The second letter to the Corinthians deals with unity in two specific areas: First, the church was commanded to forgive a person who had grieved them, possibly the person spoken of in 1 Corinthians 5:1ff.

If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

Paul's command to forgive contains an important instruction about how Satan uses the lack of forgiveness to divide the church.

The second issue about unity in 2 Corinthians is the issue of giving offerings for the poor in Jerusalem. In Romans, Paul discussed the offering for the poor which is the subject of 2 Corinthians 8-9.

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings (Romans 15:25-27).

The act of a Gentile church giving to a Jewish church was a great builder of unity as well as a means of meeting a need in the Jerusalem church.

The letter to the Galatian churches contains a lot of discussion about false teachings and provides an explosive example of how false teachings can divide a church. Paul's first mention of unity in Galatians is the unity he shared with the apostles to the Jewish churches.

As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews (Galatians 2:6-9).

Paul then mentioned an instance from Antioch where he confronted Peter's hypocrisy in regards to the whole issue of Jews fellowshiping with Gentiles.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his

hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray (Galatians 2:11-13).

Paul went on to show that things that formerly divided men according to God's law no longer do so in the church.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28).

The latter part of the letter shows the effect the doctrinal controversies had upon the Galatians. They used their "freedom" to hurt each other by provoking each other, devouring each other, and causing great divisions in the church. This is the context of the oft-quoted list of sins in Galatians 5:19-21. It was not originally intended to illustrate what specific actions are sinful (though it does do that), but rather to show that the sins going on in the churches regarding their personal relationships over some of these issues were on a par with the "more offensive" sins in that list!

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:13-26).

The letter to the Ephesian churches addressed the disunity issue caused by the Judaizers, and Paul reassured the role as Gentiles in the overall plan of God.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,

according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (Ephesians 2:19-3:13).

Paul also taught that the truth of just one church is on par with some of the other “ones” in Christianity seen below. For this reason, every effort should be made to maintain unity in spirit.

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:2-6).

Paul was looking forward to the day the Ephesian churches could be mature and unified in the faith instead of being constantly shaken into division by false teachers.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:14-16).

The letter to the Philippian church contains general calls to unity. Philippians also mentions a specific instance where two people were not getting along.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition

or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:1-4).

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life (Philippians 4:2-3).

Likewise, the letter to the Colossians contains some general calls to unity.

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:11-14).

The Thessalonian church was praised for its unity, though there was some evidence that things could be improved.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10).

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4).

Timothy was warned about the results of false teachings, which created division in the church.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith (1 Timothy 1:3-4).

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen (2 Timothy 2:14).

Titus was also warned about false teachers and their doctrines dividing the church.

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and

then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Titus 3:9-11).

The Hebrews were taught that daily encouragement of one another in the church would keep the disciples' hearts from getting hard. This daily encouragement is a real and necessary benefit of unity.

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness (Hebrews 3:12-13).

James challenged the church to not show favoritism of any kind, especially favoritism based upon worldly wealth, appearances, desires and possessions.

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4).

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).

John warned the church that love and unity were so important that a disciple simply could not be saved without loving his brother. In the same way, the love shared between disciples is a testimony to

their salvation, because disciples learn from God to love one another. The one specific way John mentioned that this love should be expressed is in the sharing of material possessions with brothers in need.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him (1 John 2:9-11).

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything (1 John 3:14-20).

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:19-21).

There were many threats to the unity of the apostolic church, but the church valued its unity and used its diversity for good. It strove to preserve unity while addressing issues that could have divided the people.



Conclusions

- God has given the church two tools to remain faithful.
 1. Protodoxy
 2. Unity
- Focusing on protodoxy keeps false teachings and practices from entering into the church.
- Maintaining unity is part of the calling of a disciple.
- Unity cannot be based upon worldly or cultural issues, but upon spiritual issues! The diversity of the church ought to enhance its unity.

For Today

- Do you have a good grasp of *protodoxy*?
- Do you search the Scriptures to learn to practice what they teach, or do you look to the Scriptures to find support for what you already practice?
- Do you see unity with other disciples as *essential* to your faith and salvation? What can *you* do to be more unified with others in the church?
- Is your unity with other Christians based upon worldly or spiritual considerations?
- Are you doing anything that is making other people in the church stumble? How can you use your Christian freedom to keep others from stumbling?
- How can diversity in the church make the church stronger? Is diversity occurring in your congregation?

*Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.
(Matthew 25:45-46)*

5

LEADERSHIP

The final tool given to the apostolic church to prevent failings in life and doctrine was leadership. Leadership was especially entrusted with the task of keeping false teaching out of the church, helping the disciples stay unified and faithful to the Lord. This chapter will consider how leadership in the apostolic age performed the task of protecting the church from failings in life and doctrine.

Revelatory and Non-Revelatory Leadership

The leadership of the church was different in different stages of its early history. The apostles were the leaders of the early Jerusalem church.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

The apostles were the last in the line of revelatory leaders such as Abraham (Genesis 20:7) and Moses (Numbers 12:5-8). The

apostles led the people of God (Acts 2:29-30) *and* brought the very Word of God to them as well. Consider the following passage.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:2-6).

As the age of the apostles passed, so did the age of revelation and revelatory leaders.¹ The next generation of leaders was represented by people like Luke, Timothy, Titus and the writer of Hebrews. Though some of these were inspired authors and/or prophets in their own right,² they adhered to the teachings of protodoxy!

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:1-4).

¹ This is corroborated in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Here the "perfect" which was to come is contrasted to the revelatory gifts of the Spirit which constituted an imperfect understanding of Christianity. Thus, the "perfect" was the complete revelation and understanding of Christianity.

² Timothy, the writer or writers of Hebrews and Luke were inspired writers (Timothy co-authored some of Paul's letters); Timothy was also a prophet (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

Though this “second generation” of leaders did not hear the gospel from Jesus, it heard the gospel from those who heard Jesus. Prophet or not, they were determined to preach and adhere to the original teachings as they led the people of God.

One lesson from the Old Testament is how leadership instructed the non-leaders in the divine revelation. Only Moses in the Old Testament actually *brought* the revelation of the Law of God.³ The other leaders (many of them prophets like Samuel, David and Nehemiah) had a place in Israel to lead the people to follow God’s original revelation from Moses or other commands from God. For example, David’s psalms exalted the law given through Moses, which to David *was* protodoxy.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes (Psalms 19:7-8).

Jesus and the apostles were like Moses in that they *brought* the divine revelation of Christianity. Thus, subsequent leaders (prophet or not) were not in a position of adding to or taking away from those things, but rather were responsible for leading the people to follow what had *already* been revealed.

³ This accounts for the strong treatment of those who opposed Moses from time to time, ref. Exodus 33:11, Numbers 12:8. See the connection between Jesus and Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15.

The Churches of the New Testament

It is important to consider all of the congregations of the New Testament: where were they located; how were they started; and who were their local and external leadership. This will help us understand the varying types of leadership in the churches at various times and how the leadership of the apostolic church maintained protodoxy. Each major region of the Mediterranean area is listed, with all known churches of the New Testament from that region. (The leading churches of each region are in **bold**.)

Judea and Samaria

External Leadership: None since Jerusalem was the base of the apostles (Acts 8:1, 15:2,4). Peter and John exercised a special role in the early days (see Acts 3:1, 4:23, 8:14, 8:25) and James later came to similar prominence (Galatians 2:9, James 1:1). It is possible that Phillip exercised some influence in the western part of Palestine from Caesarea (Acts 8:40).

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Caesarea	Acts 8:40, 10:1-24, 21:8	Phillip, Paul	Phillip
Jerusalem	Acts 2:5, 12:17, 15:13, 15:22, 21:18, Galatians 2:12	Apostles	Apostles, elders, James, Silas, Barsabbas, Agabus
Joppa	Acts 8:40, 9:36-43, 10:32	Unknown, possibly Phillip	unknown, possibly Simon the tanner?
Lydda	Acts 9:32-38	Unknown	unknown
Various cities in Samaria	Acts 8:1-5, 8:14, 8:25, 15:3	those scattered in Acts 8:1, Phillip, John and Peter	unknown

Syria, Phoenicia, Cilicia and Mediterranean Sea Islands

External Leadership: The church in Antioch had strong ties to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:19, 22, 27, 15:1, 22-23) and was a base for Paul's missionary activity in Galatia and Asia (Acts 14:26, 15:36-41, 18:22-23). The churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia were

addressed as a group by the letter from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:23).⁴

⁴ Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire, behind only Rome and Alexandria, with a population of approximately 500,000. From Steven Barabas, "Antioch," *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1967), 47-48.

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Antioch	Acts 11:19-30, 13:1, 15:35	Men from Cyprus and Cyrene, scattered from Jerusalem in persecution of Acts 8:1	Barnabas, Paul, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen
Crete (island)	Acts 2:11, Titus 1:5	Unknown, possibly Paul and Titus?	Titus, elders
Cyprus (island)	Acts 4:36, 11:19, 13:1-6, 15:39	Those scattered in Acts 8:1, Paul and Barnabas, John-Mark	Barnabas and John-Mark
Damascus	Acts 9:10, 9:22, 22:12, Galatians 1:17	Unknown	Ananias?, Paul
Ptolemais	Acts 11:19, 21:7	Those scattered in Acts 8:1	unknown
Tarsus	Acts 9:11, 9:30, 11:25, 15:23, 22:3, Galatians 1:21	Paul?	Paul?
Tyre	Acts 11:19, 21:3-6	Those scattered in Acts 8:1	unknown

Galatia and Pamphylia

External Leadership: The apostle Paul maintained a long-term relationship with the churches in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra and Iconium. Paul and Barnabas planted the churches in the region, and Paul visited them later at various times to appoint elders and provide direction (Acts 14:21-23, 16:6, 18:23, 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2 Timothy 3:11). He wrote to them as well (Galatians 1:2). Peter, James and John were also known to the Galatian churches (Galatians 2:9). Later, Peter addressed believers in Galatia, Pontus, Cappadocia and Bithynia in his letters (1 Peter 1:1, 2 Peter 3:1).

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Derbe	Acts 14:6-7, 20-21	Paul, Barnabas	unknown
Iconium	Acts 14:1	Paul, Barnabas	elders, Timothy
Lystra	Acts 14:6-23	Paul, Barnabas	elders, Timothy
Perga	Acts 14:25	Paul, Barnabas	unknown
Pisidian Antioch	Acts 13:14-50, 14:21-23, 15:41	Paul, Barnabas	elders

Macedonia

External Leadership: Philippi was the “leading city of the region” (Acts 16:12) and a Roman colony. The apostle Paul maintained a long-term relationship with the church at Philippi (Acts 19:21-22, 20:1-3, Philippians 1:3-6). Luke probably helped lead this church for some time, along with its elders (Philippians 1:1, Acts 16:11-12, 40, 20:6, notice the “we” sections).

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Berea	Acts 17:10-14, 20:4	Paul, Silas, Timothy	Silas, Timothy, Sopater
Philippi	Acts 16:12, 16:40, Philippians 1:1, 2:25	Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke	Luke, elders, Epaphroditus
Thessalonica	Acts 17:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13	Paul, Silas, Timothy	those in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

Achaia

External leadership: The apostle Paul had a long-term relationship with the Corinthian church, and at least one of his letters to Corinth was intended to be shared with other churches in the region

(2 Corinthians 1:1). In addition, it is possible that the Gospel of Luke first circulated in Achaia.⁵

⁵ This piece of information is mentioned in the anti-Marcionite Prologue and the commentary on Matthew by Jerome. From Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1970), 96.

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Athens	Acts 17:15-34	Paul	unknown
Cenchrea	Acts 8:18, Romans 16:1	Unknown	unknown
Corinth	Acts 18:1-19:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1, 1:12, 16:15-17, 2 Timothy 4:20	Paul, Aquila, Silas, Timothy	Sosthenes, Stephanus, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Apollos, Peter, Erastus

Asia

External Leadership: The apostle Paul maintained a long-term relationship with the church in Ephesus (Acts 19:1, 20:17). The Ephesian epistle shows evidence that it was intended for some people who did not know of Paul personally (Ephesians 1:15, 3:1-2), even though he planted the church there. Therefore the letter was probably intended to be circulated to churches in the region. Later, Peter named Asia in his letters (1 Peter 1:1, 2 Peter 3:1).

At the end of the first century, the apostle John had ties with the Ephesian church; the letters to the churches in Revelation were addressed to churches in this region (Revelation 1:11). Accordingly, the Gospel of John probably circulated first in this region.

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Colosse	Colossians 1:1, 1:7, 4:7-9, 17, Philemon 1:1-2	Epaphras	Tychicus, Onesimus, Philemon, Epaphras, Archippus
Ephesus	Acts 18:19, 19:1-20:36, 21:29; 1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:16-18, 4:12, 4:19	Paul, Aquila, (Apollos may have formerly led a group of followers of John the Baptist)	elders, Timothy, Tychicus, Trophimus, Onesiphorus?
Hierapolis	Colossians 4:13	unknown	Epaphras?
Laodicea	Colossians 2:1, 4:13-16, Revelation 1:11	unknown	unknown
Pergamum	Revelation 1:11	unknown	unknown

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Philadelphia	Revelation 1:11	unknown	unknown
Sardis	Revelation 1:11	unknown	unknown
Smyrna	Revelation 1:11	unknown	unknown
Thyatira	Revelation 1:11	unknown	unknown
Troas	Acts 16:8-11, 20:5-12; 2 Corinthians 2:12, 2 Timothy 4:13	Paul?	Carpas?

Italy

External Leadership: The church at Rome was probably started by the earliest Christians when the scattering of the persecuted Jerusalem Christians took place (Acts 8:1). Many of the people in the early Jerusalem church had some Roman connection (Acts 2:10). The apostle Paul maintained a relationship with the Roman church, though the church there was not the direct result of his work (Romans 15:15-24). Paul knew a great number of people in the Roman church (Romans 16:3-15). At one time Aquila was probably one of the leaders of the church, and Paul had a long-lasting relationship with him (Acts 18:1-2, 2 Timothy 4:19). Later, both Paul (2 Timothy 4:17) and Peter were there (1 Peter 5:13, Rome is referred to as Babylon).

City	Reference	Started By	Local Leadership
Puteoli	Acts 28:13-14	unknown	unknown
Rome	Acts 28:14-16, Romans 16:3-5, 16:14-15	unknown, probably from those scattered in Acts 8:1	Aquila, Asyncritus, Philologus, Peter, Mark

Primitive Church Leadership

In the New Testament years, a new church would be started by an apostle, prophet, evangelist or by disciples who held no church office. The early gospel message (the *kerygma*, *khrugma*) was likely similar to the messages in Acts 2:15ff, 13:16ff and others, focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus and the appropriate response to the gospel. These young churches maintained relationships with stronger churches and/or apostles over a period of time and

received both revelatory and non-revelatory direction and leadership in that way.

Most frequently, churches that were started by apostles or evangelists were left in the charge of a provisional leader or in charge of one or more who had been raised up to hold a church office. In either case, stronger churches and apostles maintained their relationships with the local church and its leaders from a distance.

Protection from Life and Doctrine Failings

Having discussed how churches in the New Testament era were led, let us now consider how leadership protected the church from failings in life and doctrine.

First of all, it should be mentioned that all of the references made in the previous chapter concerning the need for the apostolic church to adhere to what the apostles had originally taught came through a leader who had some form of an authoritative relationship with his audience. Though this leader was not in the same town as the church he wrote to, the New Testament writers clearly had some type of authority over the churches to which they wrote.

Let us survey the New Testament for references to leadership and its role in maintaining protoodoxy in the apostolic church.

In Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas returned to visit the churches some time after they had been planted, and urged them to remain true to the faith. Toward this end, they appointed elders in each of the churches.

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:21-23).

After the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15, Paul and Silas visited the predominantly Gentile churches and passed on the decisions

reached by the apostles and elders there. As a result the churches were strengthened in the faith.

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers (Acts 16:4-5).

One of the most prolific and preeminent churches in the New Testament is the church in Ephesus. Paul instructed the elders⁶ there in the specific work with which they were charged. He warned them that in the future there would be some people who would hurt the church. Even from among their own number, he warned, there would be those who would distort the truth to divide the church and gain a following. He warned them to be on guard against these things and so protect the church.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears (Acts 20:28-30).

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul discussed the importance of building God's church properly. Paul said that the foundation of Jesus is absolutely critical to successful building of the church, and that great care should be exercised in how a leader leads a church. Good work will bring a reward; poor work will bring no reward, and a leader who destroys the church will himself be in danger of being destroyed.

⁶ In Acts 20:17 and 20:28, Luke uses the terms elder (presbuteros, *presbuterou*"), overseer or bishop (episkopos, *episkopou*") and shepherd or pastor (poimaino, *poimainw*) interchangeably; thus they all refer to the same office in the church.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple (1 Corinthians 3:10-17).

Paul praised the church in Corinth for holding to the teachings as he had passed them on to the church.

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you (1 Corinthians 11:2).

Paul showed that the leadership of Corinth consisted of the household of Stephanus, probably meaning Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus, and that the disciples should submit to them because of their experience in the Lord and their hard work.

You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it. I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition (1 Corinthians 16:15-18).

Paul spoke to the churches of the Ephesian area and showed how not only was leadership supposed to direct the affairs of the

church, but also leadership was to provide unity in the faith and strength in the face of false teachers.

It was he 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 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:11-14).

Paul urged the Philippian church to continue in the apostolic example and teaching they learned from him.

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9).

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was short, possibly as short as three weeks (Acts 17:2-10). When he left the city suddenly, some unnamed people (possibly Aristarchus and Secundus, see Acts 20:4) led the church. Paul urged the Thessalonians to submit to them, even as he maintained his relationship with the church from afar by emissary and letter (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5).

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

In a later letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encouraged the church to stand firm and hold to the things he had taught them, whether in person or in writing.⁷

⁷ Incidentally, this shows that the writings of the apostles had the same force as their "in-person" words and leadership.

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are perhaps the most powerful of all New Testament writings concerning the responsibility of leadership to protect the church from failings in life and doctrine. First of all, the evangelists Timothy and Titus were charged to teach the things *they* had been taught, in a manner that would command respect.

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:13).

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather

around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us (Titus 2:7-8).

These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you (Titus 2:15).

In the following passages, Paul used the relatively rare Greek word *heterodidaskaleo* (*heterodidaskaleō*), which directly relates to *different* doctrines, not just false ones as the NIV suggests.⁸

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer (1 Timothy 1:3).

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, (1 Timothy 6:3).

Timothy and Titus were instructed in the raising up of future leaders. Elders and deacons were to be sound in the faith, keeping hold of the truths of the faith with a clear conscience. Leaders had a position of honor and compensation, but were to be faithful to that calling. Paul urged Timothy to not show favoritism or to be hasty in appointing leaders.

⁸ This word occurs in the NT only twice. From K. Wegenast, "Teach," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3-768.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 3:1-12).

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning. I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure (1 Timothy 5:17-22).

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:5-9).

Finally, Paul told Timothy that leaders were to be reliable, taking hold of the trust Paul had given to Timothy and passing it on to still others. This was undoubtedly the means by which the apostolic teaching was to be maintained.

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2).

James was an elder in the Jerusalem church and was a prominent figure in the apostolic church. He warned that being a teacher in the church carried with it special responsibilities.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (James 3:1-2).

Peter wrote toward the end of his life that the church is under the care of the elders.⁹

⁹ This passage is similar to Acts 20:17,28 where the terms elder, overseer and shepherd are used interchangeably.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Peter also wrote that the apostolic teachings needed to be carried on after his death. His efforts in this regard were the writing of his epistles, possibly his influence exercised on the gospel of Mark¹⁰ and certainly the entrusting of his teachings to others who would lead after him.

So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things (2 Peter 1:12-15).

In summary, leadership in the apostolic church age had a responsibility to teach the gospel that had been originally handed down from the apostles. Further, a critical part of the leadership for the apostles was seeing to it that their teachings would be available to subsequent generations. In this way, the church would always be protected from failings in life and doctrine.

Leadership and the Scriptures

The first century writings by the apostles and prophets were held in high regard by those who received them. Certain apostolic and

¹⁰ There is evidence that Mark was Peter's interpreter and wrote this gospel as a result of his association with Peter. The ancient sources include Papias (via Eusebius), the anti-Marcionite Prologue and Irenaeus. From Guthrie, 61-62.

prophetic writings were circulated widely and regarded as Scripture in their own right.¹¹

- 2 Peter 3:16 likely refers to Romans 2:4 and thus shows that Paul's letter to the Romans enjoyed a circulation to Peter's audience in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (see also 2 Peter 3:1, 1 Peter 1:1).
- John 11:2 shows the story of Mary pouring perfume on the feet of Jesus (contained in Matthew 26:7ff, Mark 14:3ff, Luke 7:37ff, John 12:3ff) was already familiar to John's readers, presumably via distribution of the other gospels or oral instruction.
- The letters of Paul to Colosse and Laodicea were to be shared with each other (Colossians 4:16).
- Luke 1:1-4 shows that other gospels existed and were generally known when Luke wrote his gospel.
- John's remarks in John 21:25 may be an allusion to the existence of other known writings about the life of Jesus.
- The letters of apostles carried the same force as their in-person leadership (2 Thessalonians 2:15, Philippians 4:9).

In due time apostolic writings were collected and the canon of the New Testament was solidified. The canon will be discussed in more detail later.

¹¹ That is, in addition to the Old Testament.



Conclusions

- The role of leadership in the New Testament was to lead people in obeying what God had commanded.
- Once the revelation of the gospel and Christian practice had been made, all Christian leaders even the apostles themselves, led in submission to that original Christian teaching.
- The apostles trained second-generation leaders to continue in the teachings of the apostles.
- Individual churches had outside influence to help them be instructed and strengthened in the faith.
- Leadership has a special role in protecting the church from failings in life and doctrine.

For Today

- Do you lead in submission to the message of the Scriptures? Are the Scriptures the true standard for you and your church?
- Is your church being strengthened by the outside influence of other leaders or churches? Does it then strengthen still other churches?
- As a leader, do you focus on keeping those you lead from failings in life and doctrine? Do you focus on unity in the church? Do you focus on protodoxy?
- What shortcuts do you take in your leadership?
- In your leadership, are you trying to “blaze new trails” or are you striving to follow the apostolic patterns of leadership and discipling?
- How can your leadership be more like the leadership of those in the first century?

We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood (1 John 4:6).

6

THE AUTHORITATIVE VOICE

The church of the first century was under the leadership and teaching authority of the twelve apostles. Leading and teaching are two distinct roles. As the age of the apostles passed, there was a vacuum in both roles—leadership and teaching authority—in the church.

In the New Testament, there is no mention or evidence of the apostolic group being a permanent one, where positions would be filled by others upon the death of an apostle. Though Judas Iscariot was replaced as an apostle in a special case in accordance with the Scripture,¹ James' place was apparently left vacant.² Further, apostleship (in the specialized sense applying to the Twelve) had specific requirements that only a few could meet.³ From the New Testament we are left to conclude that when an apostle died, his

¹ Acts 1:23-26

² Acts 12:2

³ Acts 1:21-22

office perished as well. As the apostles died, a new leadership structure and teaching authority would be needed in the church.

In this chapter, we will discuss the contenders for authority in the church, how the need for the New Testament canon⁴ arose, and how the canon itself came into being. After this, we will see how the New Testament and the leaders of the churches with apostolic origins were the authority in the early church. Lastly, we will consider how the Roman church and its monarchical bishop rose to prominence as the ultimate “authoritative voice” in the church.

Post-Apostolic Leadership

From our previous studies, it is clear that the apostles wanted their message remembered.⁵ The chosen means of spreading the message was through their disciples, and then through third-generation disciples after them. Yet, in the absence of the apostles, there were three leading contenders for authority in the early second century.

- Itinerant (traveling) preachers
- Local church leadership
- Prolific leaders

One may ask why the New Testament Scriptures are not mentioned as a contender for authority, in place of the apostles who wrote them. There are two reasons for this. First, the New Testament Scriptures did not yet exist in the collected, complete form in which we know them today (we will discuss this in more detail later). Second, even if they did exist in that form, they could not *lead* a church: as leadership cannot take the place of Scripture, neither can Scripture take the place of leadership.

The Itinerant Preachers

From very early in the history of the church, itinerant preachers⁶ commonly traveled to various congregations to meet spiritual needs.

⁴ That is, the set of books which now comprise the New Testament.

⁵ 2 Peter 1:12

⁶ These itinerant preachers were alternately known as apostles or prophets. Both of these terms had two different uses in the early church. Initially, an “apostle” was

From New Testament times, larger and older churches sent preachers to other churches as a part of their support of smaller churches.

Several examples of this may be cited from the New Testament. To start with, the ministry of Jesus himself was that of an itinerant preacher.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him (Matthew 4:23-25).

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee (Matthew 11:1).

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons (Mark 1:38-39).

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him ... (Luke 8:1).

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus ... (Luke 14:25).

Further, the instructions of Jesus to the apostles in the "limited commission" show that the Twelve were trained for this same type of ministry.

one of the Twelve; later it came to mean a "sent one" of any kind. Likewise, a "prophet" initially was one possessing the miraculous gift of prophecy; later it became a general term for any preacher. When referring to itinerant preachers as apostles or prophets, these later, generalized terms are what is in view.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town" (Matthew 10:5-14).

In the New Testament church era, we see Peter and John visiting Samaria in Acts 8:11-14 and Peter traveling around the Judean countryside in Acts 9:32. Barnabas was sent to Antioch in Acts 11:22, though this appears to have been for a longer period of time. Of course, there are Paul's various mission journeys in Acts as well.

Another example of itinerant preachers is Agabus and others visiting Antioch in Acts 11:27-28. This is significant because we see that Agabus and his companions had a ministry in Antioch even though Barnabas and Paul (and others, see Acts 13:1) were already leading the local church.

The first recorded problem with the itinerant preacher system is seen in those who traveled to Antioch from Jerusalem in Acts 15:1. These men were not authorized for the task and caused trouble by their false teachings. Later, truly authorized men were again sent to Antioch.⁷

The traveling preachers would preach a message that needed to be validated against what was already known about the gospel. The outrage over the Judaizing message of Acts 15:1 suggests that other preachers sent from Jerusalem more commonly *did* preach a message in accordance with what things they had already been taught. As Paul told the Thessalonians regarding the evaluation of prophetic messages.

⁷ Acts 15:25, 32

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

Toward the end of the first century, there is continuing evidence that itinerant preachers traveled and preached freely, and were not always sent by a church, nor sent to a specific place. For instance, John⁸ commended Gaius for accepting the brothers, even as he condemned Diotrophes for not accepting them. Again, when the church of Ephesus is commended for rejecting false apostles,⁹ it is false itinerant preachers that are probably in view.

Generally speaking, false teachings in the New Testament age were spread by false itinerant preachers. An example of this can be seen in Paul's remarks to the Corinthians.

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough (2 Corinthians 11:4).

From this entire discussion we can see how the itinerant preacher system matured. Since some men impersonated legitimate preachers in Acts 15:1, the matter of authentication became important. In that case, a letter from the apostles and elders as well as envoys from the Jerusalem church commended the next itinerant preachers to the church in Antioch.¹⁰ It appears that this pattern of letters of commendation became a widespread means of authenticating or providing credibility to such preachers, and was practiced in several cases concerning the Corinthian church¹¹ and the church in Colosse.¹²

⁸ 3 John 1:5, 1:10

⁹ Revelation 2:2

¹⁰ Acts 15:23, 25

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 16:3, 2 Corinthians 3:1, Acts 18:27

¹² Colossians 4:10

Even with this improvement, the itinerant preacher system still had serious problems. Letters of recommendation could be forged,¹³ and those preachers authorized by a legitimate letter could still go astray while bearing their written “authority” to teach. The Didache (an anonymous document dated in the early second century, reflecting a set of post-apostolic church practices) addressed the issue of determining whether an itinerant preacher was a true or false prophet.

Whosoever therefore shall come and teach you all these things that have been said before, receive him; but if the teacher himself is perverted and teaches a different doctrine to the destruction thereof, hear him not; but if to the increase of righteousness and the knowledge of the Lord, receive him as the Lord. But concerning the apostles and prophets, so do you according to the ordinance of the gospel. Let every apostle, when he comes to you, be received as the Lord; but he shall not abide more than a single day, or if there be need, a second likewise; but if he abide three days, he is a false prophet. And when he departs let the apostle receive nothing save bread, until he finds shelter; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet (Didache 11).

While it is interesting that the traveling preachers were expected to preach a message in accordance with what was “said before” (that is, protodoxy), we also observe here that certain patterns of conduct beyond what we see in the New Testament were expected of these traveling preachers. Apart from his message, if any itinerant preacher failed to comply with the expectation he would be labeled as a false prophet.¹⁴

As seen in the problems in Acts 15 and this reference in the Didache, traveling preachers, by their very nature, were unable to provide reliable teaching and leadership to any local church. Evidently, their purpose was to teach known doctrine and encourage the saints.

¹³ Some attempted to forge Paul’s written communications to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:2, 3:17).

¹⁴ It is also interesting that the Didache is not as concerned with specific false messages as much as specific false conduct on the part of the visiting preacher. This would suggest that many itinerant preachers used their position as a means of worldly gain.

This was an important ministry and it served the church well in its earlier years, but the flaws of the system became more evident as time passed and the age of the apostles waned. In the final analysis, each local church was responsible for discerning truth from falsehood based upon its previous knowledge of the gospel. Each local church needed to have its own local leadership to accomplish this function.

The Local Leaders

Since the leaders of local churches had to assume responsibility for watching over the church and the messages taught by visiting preachers, local leadership for the individual church became more significant. One sees the need for local leadership in this capacity addressed in the letters to Timothy and Titus regarding elders and in Paul's discussion with the Ephesians elders.¹⁵

The first local leaders were apostles or prophets who settled in a place, perhaps in like manner as Barnabas had stayed in Antioch or Paul's extended stays in Ephesus,¹⁶ Corinth¹⁷ and Rome.¹⁸ This practice was both common and acceptable, and known to the second century church.

But every true prophet desiring to settle among you is worthy of his food. In like manner a true teacher is also worthy, like the workman, of his food. Every firstfruit then of the produce of the wine-vat and of the threshing floor, of your oxen and your sheep, you shall take and give as the firstfruit to the prophets; for they are your chief priests. But if you have not a prophet, give them to the poor (Didache 13).

In other situations, local men would be appointed to leadership in the churches, or the churches would raise up leaders from among themselves to perform this service.

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to

¹⁵ 1 Timothy 3:1ff, Titus 1:5ff, Acts 20:28

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:8

¹⁷ Acts 18:18

¹⁸ Acts 28:30-31

enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:21-23).

Appoint for yourselves therefore bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are meek and not lovers of money, and true and approved; for unto you they also perform the service of the prophets and teachers. Therefore despise them not, for they are your honorable men along with the prophets and teachers (Didache 15).

Prior to the appointment of local leaders, the churches were simply led by a collection of the men in the church. This is reminiscent of the situations in Thessalonica and Corinth after the departure of Paul, where leaders of no particular church office were nonetheless in a position of authority.¹⁹

In the late first century in Asia Minor, we see that several of the churches were threatened by the teachings of the Nicolaitans;²⁰ some renounced these while others did not.²¹ Other false teachers and teachings are mentioned in the letters to the churches of Revelation as well. This illustrates that each individual congregation had a role in accepting or rejecting messages of purported teachers.

Though the churches were generally autonomous, they were not independent. When one considers the travel and communications obstacles present in the first century, the churches were quite unified indeed. Each letter in the New Testament was delivered to its destination by means of an envoy who endured great risk in travel.²² From the earliest times, apostles and other great leaders exerted an influence beyond their local congregation.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 16:15-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:12.

²⁰ There have been various speculations about who the Nicolaitans were and what false teachings they presented, but there is no reliable evidence about these.

²¹ Ephesus had rejected the Nicolaitans, but Pergamum had not yet done so. See Revelation 2:6, 2:15.

²² 2 Corinthians 11:26, Romans 16:4, Philippians 2:30, Acts 15:26

Local Leaders, Prolific Leaders

It was natural for the smaller and younger churches to look to older and larger churches in varying ways. Two areas where this occurred have already been discussed, those being the sending of preachers and ministers, and the writing of letters.

Another area in which churches looked to other churches was in answering questions and handling disputes. This is seen in New Testament times, as seen in the Antioch/Jerusalem situation in Acts 15 and in Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Thessalonians.²³ It must be observed that these were not necessarily appeals for help to large or powerful churches at Jerusalem, Athens or Ephesus as much as they were appeals to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem²⁴ and to Paul.²⁵

This concept of appeal and help in resolving matters is also seen in post-apostolic times as well. For instance, the church at Corinth looked to Rome for direction in a situation where some elders had been displaced by a small faction of the church. Clement was a leader of the church at Rome around 95 A.D.²⁶ He wrote a letter on behalf of the Roman church in response to the church at Corinth because the Corinthians had removed some elders of the church.

As far as Clement was concerned, this action was unrighteous and he pleaded with the Corinthians to repent. Being the most primitive post-apostolic writing, it is important to consider some excerpts from this letter.

By reason of the sudden and repeated calamities and reverses which are befalling us, brethren, we consider that we have been somewhat tardy in giving heed to the matters of dispute that have arisen among you, dearly beloved, and to the detestable and unholy sedition, so alien and strange to the elect of God, which a few headstrong and self-willed persons have kindled to such a pitch of madness that your name, once revered and renowned and lovely and true sight of all men, has been greatly reviled (1 Clement 1).

²³ For example, consider 1 Corinthians 7:1, 2 Thessalonians 2:2

²⁴ Acts 15:2

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 3:1, 1 Corinthians 16:8

²⁶ J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), 11.

Therefore it is right and proper, brothers, that we should be obedient to God, rather than follow those who in arrogance and unruliness have set themselves up as leaders in abominable jealousy. For we shall bring upon us no common harm, but rather great peril, if we surrender ourselves recklessly to the purposes of men who launch out into strife and seditions, so as to estrange us from that which is right (1 Clement 14).

Therefore let us cleave to those that practice peace with godliness, and not to those that desire peace with dissemination.... For Christ is with them that are lowly of mind, not with them that exalt themselves over the flock (1 Clement 15).

The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. Both therefore came of the will of God in the appointed order. Having therefore received a charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the word of God with full assurance of the Holy Spirit, they went forth with the gospel that the kingdom of God should come. So preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons for those that believe (1 Clement 42).

And our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. For this cause, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, afterwards they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. Those therefore who were appointed by them, or afterward by other men of repute with the consent of the whole church, and have ministered unblameably to the flock of Christ in lowliness of mind, peacefully and with all modesty, and for long time have borne a good report with all-these men we consider to be unjustly thrust out from their ministration. For it will be no light sin for us, if we thrust out

those who have offered the gifts of the bishops' office unblameably and holily. Blessed are those presbyters who have gone before, seeing that their departure was fruitful and ripe: for they have no fear lest any one should remove them from their appointed place. For we see that you have displaced certain persons, though they were living honorably, from the ministration which had been respected by them blamelessly (1 Clement 44).

...You have searched the Scriptures...you will not find that righteous persons have been thrust out by holy men (1 Clement 45).

Your division has perverted many: it has brought many to despair, many to doubting, and all of us to sorrow. And your sedition still continues (1 Clement 46).

It is shameful, dearly beloved, yes, utterly shameful and unworthy of your conduct in Christ, that it should be reported that the very steadfast and ancient church of the Corinthians, for the sake of one or two persons, makes sedition against its presbyters. (1 Clement 47).

Let us therefore root this out quickly, and let us fall down before the Master and entreat him with tears, that he may show himself propitious and be reconciled unto us, and may restore us to the seemly and pure conduct which belongs to our love of the brothers (1 Clement 48).

Those who have set themselves up as leaders of faction and division ought to look to the common ground of hope. For such as walk in fear and love desire that they themselves should fall into suffering rather than their neighbors; and they pronounce condemnation against themselves rather than against the harmony which has been handed down to us nobly and righteously (1 Clement 51).

You therefore that laid the foundation of the sedition, submit yourselves to the presbyters and receive chastisement unto repentance, bending the knees of your heart. Learn to submit yourselves, laying aside the arrogant and proud

stubbornness of your tongue. For it is better for you to be found little in the flock of Christ and to have your name on God's roll, that to be had in exceeding honor and yet be cast out from the hope of him (1 Clement 57).

A person learns several things from the letter of Clement. First, Clement apparently responded to the request of the Corinthians to consider this matter, and his answer is in the spirit of appeal, love and concern. Second, the terms "bishop" (or overseer) and "elder" (or presbyter) are used interchangeably in English translations, and the office of elder was held with the consent of the congregation, by those approved by previous leaders extending back to the apostles; all of these were according to the New Testament practice.

However, in Corinth the office of elder had begun to be coveted by the unrighteous, who in turn exploited the complaints of one or two persons to create a faction and ultimately provide the impetus to replace elders who had served righteously. In light of this, it is not hard to imagine that the early church would make some move to assure that duly appointed elders would remain in authority and in control of the churches. Twenty years later, the letters of Ignatius show us what was happening in this regard.

Ignatius of Syria was a bishop of the church at Antioch. He was passing through Asia Minor on his way to martyrdom in Rome in the early second century (110 A.D.) when he authored five letters to churches in Asia Minor: Smyrna, Ephesus, Magnesia, Philadelphia, and Tralles, plus one to the Roman church and one letter to Polycarp of Smyrna.²⁷ He was a true hero in the faith, and Ignatius' letters were treasured by their recipients. Each of these letters touches upon the common theme of submission to the bishop (elder) as the focal point of unity and correct doctrine in response to false teaching which threatened the churches. Some excerpts from these letters are included below.

It is therefore meet for you in every way to glorify Jesus Christ who glorified you; that being perfectly joined together in one submission, submitting yourselves to your bishop and

²⁷ Lightfoot *op. cit.* pp. 55-88

presbytery, you may be sanctified in all things (Ignatius, *Ephesians 2*).

Let us therefore be careful not to resist the bishop, that by our submission we may give ourselves to God (Ignatius, *Ephesians 5*).

Assemble yourselves together in common, every one of you severally, man by man, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ, who after the flesh was of David's race, who is Son of Man and Son of God, to the end that ye may obey the bishop and the presbytery without distraction of mind; breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die but live forever in Jesus Christ (Ignatius, *Ephesians 20*).

Let there be nothing among you which shall have power to divide you, but be ye united with the bishop and with them that preside over you as an example and a lesson of incorruptability. Therefore as the Lord did nothing without the Father, either by himself or by the apostles, so neither do ye anything without the bishop and the presbyters. And attempt not to think anything right for yourselves apart from the others; but let there be one prayer in common, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love and in joy unblameable, which is Jesus Christ, in whom there is nothing better. Hasten to come together all of you, as to one temple, even God; as to one altar, even to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from one Father and is one and departed unto One (Ignatius, *Magnesians 6-7*).

In like manner let all men respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, even as they should respect the bishop as being a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God and as the college of apostles. Apart from these there is not even the name of a church (Ignatius, *Trallians 3*).

Be you therefore on your guard against such men, and this will surely be; if you not be puffed up and if you be inseparable from Jesus Christ and from the bishop and from the ordinances of the apostles. He that is within the

sanctuary is clean; but he that is without the sanctuary is not clean, that is, he does anything without the bishop and presbytery and deacons, this man is not clean in his conscience (Ignatius, *Trallians 7*).

To the church which is in Philadelphia which church I salute in the blood of Jesus Christ, more especially if they be at one with the bishop and the presbyters who are with him, and with the deacons that have been appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ, whom after his own will he confirmed and established by his Holy Spirit. (Ignatius, *Philadelphians* introduction).

As children therefore of the truth, shun division and wrong doctrines; and where the shepherd is, there follow you as sheep. For many specious wolves with baneful delights lead captive the runners in God's race; but where you are at one, they will find no place. ... For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ, they are with the bishop; and as many as shall repent and enter into the unity of the church, these also shall be of God, that they may be living after Jesus Christ. ... Be you careful therefore to observe one eucharist, for where there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup into union in his blood; there is one altar, as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow servants, that whatsoever you do, you may do it after God (Ignatius, *Philadelphians 2-4*).

I cried out when I was among you; I spoke with a loud voice, Give heed to the bishop and the presbytery and deacons. Do nothing without the bishop. Now the Lord forgives all men when they repent, if repenting they return to the unity of God and the council of the bishop (Ignatius, *Philadelphians 7-8*).

But shun divisions, as the beginning of evils. Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the presbytery as the apostles; and to the deacons pay respect, as to God's commandment. Let no man do anything pertaining to the church apart from the bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to

whom he shall have committed it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be, even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal church. It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing to God; that everything which you do may be sure and valid. It is reasonable henceforth that we wake to soberness, while we have time to repent and turn to God. It is good to recognize God and the bishop. He that honors the bishop is honored of God; he that does anything without the knowledge of the bishop renders service to the devil. (Ignatius, *Smyrnans* 8-9).

Let nothing be done without your consent; neither do anything without the consent of God, as indeed you do not (Ignatius, *Polycarp* 4).

From the letters of Ignatius, we learn how the church had changed in the twenty years since the end of the New Testament period. We see that a single bishop has replaced a plurality of elders as the local leadership of the churches, yet some have thought this was not yet universal in all the churches.²⁸ Ignatius saw the monarchical episcopate²⁹ and devotion to the local bishop as the way to maintain unity and faithfulness to the apostolic pattern in the face of the threats that those churches faced.³⁰

We also see that the faithfulness of an individual Christian began to be measured by a conformity to the bishop of the church. This opened the way for a changing standard of discipleship. Recall again Ignatius' words.

Let us therefore be careful not to resist the bishop, that by our submission we may give ourselves to God (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 5).

²⁸ The vehemence with which Ignatius makes his argument suggests that Ignatius' view was not yet universal.

²⁹ That is, the rule of a single bishop over the local congregation.

³⁰ It should be mentioned that Ignatius personally knew all of the bishops that he referred to in his letters. Though he taught obedience to "the bishop," he had a specific individual in mind in each case!

Further, a baptism, communion or any other event in the church could not occur without the approval (if not the presence) of the bishop, and any lack of unity with or submission to the bishop was *de facto* held to be equivalent of apostasy. As far as Ignatius was concerned, if you did not have a bishop, you did not even have a church. Though Ignatius may have had legitimate reasons to provide this instruction for these specific instances, it is beyond the spirit of the New Testament church (since none of the early churches even had elders). This may be properly viewed as one of the early beginnings of ritualistic conformity to a static religious hierarchy and pattern centered on the bishop.

Lastly, we see an appeal to the authority of the bishop based upon his continuity of leadership with the apostles.³¹ Of course, this logic breaks down if such a leader departs from the apostolic pattern, as in the words of F.F. Bruce, “The idea that a bishop himself might sponsor such [false] doctrines does not seem to have occurred to Ignatius.”³² The matter of teaching authority was soon to become a major issue in the post-apostolic church.

Post-Apostolic Teaching Authority

At the same time as the monarchical bishop was becoming a universal reality, the appeal to apostolic writings as a source of authority became a concern. Though writers such as Clement and Ignatius quoted various apostolic writings, the need soon arose that the apostolic writings themselves would need to be *canonized*, or recognized as definitive and authoritative. Here we will discuss how the process unfolded.

Early Sayings of Jesus and the Oral Tradition

In the earliest days of Jesus’ ministry, certain sayings came into usage. Many of the teachings of Jesus were given in a way that could easily be memorized; some examples of these are the parables, the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, and the remark of Jesus quoted in Acts 20:35. However, the most important of these easily

³¹ This is the definition of “apostolic succession.”

³² Bruce, *New Testament History*, 418.

memorized sayings was the simple confession, “Jesus is the Christ.”³³ This was ostensibly the reason for Jesus’ condemnation by the religious leaders of Israel,³⁴ and this confession was carried into the early days of the church.³⁵

Since the term “Christ” carries a Jewish connotation, the meaning of “Jesus is (the) Christ” would be lost on most Gentile audiences. However, in the first century Roman Empire it was common to hear the secular confession, “Caesar is Lord.” So as the church reached out to the Gentile world, the confession, “Jesus is Christ” came to be replaced by the confession, “Jesus is Lord,” since this more accurately communicated to the Gentile mind the true position of Jesus. This confession “Jesus is Lord” can be found in numerous places in the New Testament³⁶ and was in use in the first century.

In the time of the early church, the *kerygma* (Greek *khrygma*, preaching) consisted of simple messages concerning the basics of the gospel—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and the response required to become a Christian. These can be observed in the preaching contained in the book of Acts. In time, these and other statements of belief³⁷ came to be written down or were referred to by the apostles in their writings. This is the beginning of the written apostolic record.

The Apostolic Writings

To support the *kerygma*, the oral teaching about Jesus, many gospels were written to maintain a permanent written record of the life of Jesus.³⁸ These were generally used on an as-needed basis. As well, the various epistles contained in our New Testament are a

³³ Matthew 16:18, John 20:31

³⁴ Mark 8:29, Matthew 26:63-64

³⁵ Acts 5:42

³⁶ Acts 2:36, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Philippians 2:11

³⁷ Comments on early creeds and statements of faith are from Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 59-65. Other early creeds may be referred to in Romans 8:34, Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Timothy 3:16. In addition, the text of Acts 8:37, though an addition to the original text of Luke, nevertheless probably reflects a second-century Christian usage of the creed in the simple confession of faith prior to baptism.

³⁸ Luke 1:1-4

further written record of apostolic teaching, given in the context of occasional communications between apostles and various churches and individuals. Initially, individual churches collected apostolic writings as they had opportunity. However, there was no large-scale, systematic collection of all of these until the middle of the second century.

The primary use of these early writings was to read them in the assemblies of the churches. In this way, they were the chief means of instruction of the early Christians. This is referred to in the following passages.

The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message (Acts 15:30-31).

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. (1 Thessalonians 5:27).

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. (1 Timothy 4:13).

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near (Revelation 1:3).

In later, post-New Testament times, this practice continued. In his apology, Justin wrote.

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place. There the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read, for as long as time permits. When the reader has ceased, the presiding brother verbally instructs us and urges us to imitate these good things that were read to us (Justin, Apology, 67:1).

In due time, the question arose as to which books were allowed to be read publicly in the churches. For instance, the Muratorian fragment (which we will discuss shortly) discusses the books of the canon in terms of what books could and could not be read in the church.³⁹

The Canon

In the middle of the second century, Marcion and Montanus arose as false teachers. Though on opposite extremes in their view of Scriptural authority, these two had in common the challenge to apostolic teaching which provided the impetus for the widespread recognition of the New Testament canon.

Since Marcion was a gnostic and the gnostic threat had a significant impact upon Christianity during this era, a short discussion of gnosticism will help us. Gnosticism was a religious philosophy that existed prior to the time of Christ. It generally held that material things were bad and that only spirit was good. There were many variations to this general belief, and there were many prominent teachers of these various doctrines. In the words of Harold O.J. Brown,

The gnostic movement has two salient features that appeal to countless minds in every age, i.e. the claim to present a secret lore, explaining otherwise incomprehensible mysteries, and the assertion that its secrets are accessible only to the elite- thus by implication defining as elite all who take an active interest in them⁴⁰

With the advent of Christianity, some gnostics began to suppose that Jesus instituted a gnostic system and twisted the teachings of Christianity into a gnostic form. Based upon the arguments presented by the authors of Colossians, John and 1 John, it is likely that a form of gnosticism was an opponent in view in these writings. Largely due to the influence of the apostles, gnosticism remained only a relatively minor problem during the apostolic period. The problem of writings falsely attributed to apostles or other reliable authors, discussing

³⁹ Henry Bettenson. *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press: London, England, 1967) 29.

⁴⁰ Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988), 44.

obscure and speculative topics, were magnified with the speculative concerns of the writings of Christian gnosticism.

However, about the year 140 A.D., Marcion arrived in Rome from his home of Pontus. He presented his gnostic arguments to the Roman church. More significantly, Marcion had created a “canon” of Scripture to which he appealed. His canon of Scripture consisted of ten letters of Paul, Luke’s gospel and Acts. These were all “sanitized” by removing any positive references from the Old Testament. Marcion held that all the other apostles besides Paul had been corrupted and had wrongly combined Judaism and Christianity, so all the other gospels and apostolic writings were invalidated.

This stand brought Marcion in conflict with the Roman church. He was expelled from the church because of his false teachings and went on to start his own church, which was far-reaching and lasted for many generations.

Montanus was another false teacher who arose shortly after the time of Marcion. He believed that he was the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit, and that revelation from the Holy Spirit occurred through him and through his followers. Like Marcion, he was excommunicated and started a rival church which lasted for many generations.

Both Marcion and Montanus raised questions that directly addressed the question of authority: If their message contradicted the apostolic message, then what *was* the unambiguous proof and record of the true apostolic message? Both the church and the heretics claimed they had received instructions from the apostles. Both appealed to a written record. So the question arose: Of all the existing writings purporting to be apostolic, which were truly and genuinely apostolic?

As a result, the church had a need to provide the canon (or standard) of New Testament Scripture, which would completely and truthfully represent the teaching of the apostles.

This process should not be viewed as one in which the church designated a canon simply to oppose Marcion or Montanus, or others like them. Nor did they somehow designate certain writings as authoritative. On the contrary, individual apostolic writings had always carried with them intrinsic authority *because they were apostolic*. Even before the time of Marcion, writers such as Clement and Ignatius appealed to apostolic writings precisely because of this, and there is evidence that limited collections of Paul’s letters and the four

gospels existed in various churches. The creation of the canon of what we now call the New Testament was *not* the giving of authority to things that did not possess authority, but the *recognition* of the authority already possessed in these writings, and then the collection and widespread dissemination of all such writings.

Various canons have been discovered. The Muratorian fragment (discovered by a man named Muratori) discusses a canon that was in place in the Western/Roman churches toward the end of the second century, and closely resembles our canon today.⁴¹ By the middle of the fourth century, the canon of Athanasius of Rome is known and is identical to our New Testament. The following chart shows how the canon developed.

⁴¹ The information here about the various canons is from Andrew F. Walls, "The Canon of the New Testament," *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Gaebelein, Frank E., General Editor. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979) 1:635-642.

New Testament Canons⁴²

Book	Marcion (140)	Muratorian (170)	Irenaeus (180)	Origen (230)	Eusebius (310)	Athanasius (367)	Modern
Matthew		x	x	x	x	x	x
Mark		x	x	x	x	x	x
Luke	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
John		x	x	x	x	x	x
Acts	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Romans	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
1 Cor.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
2 Cor.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Galatians	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Eph.		x	x	x	x	x	x
Phil.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Col.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
1 Thess.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
2 Thess.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
1 Timothy		x	x	x	x	x	x
2 Timothy		x	x	x	x	x	x
Titus		x	x	x	x	x	x
Philemon	x	x		x	x	x	x
Hebrews					x	x	x
James				x		x	x
1 Peter			x	x	x	x	x
2 Peter				x		x	x
1 John		x	x	x	x	x	x
2 John		x		x		x	x
3 John		x		x		x	x
Jude		x		x		x	x
Rev.		x	x		x	x	x
Hebrews (gospel)				x			
Didache				x			
Shepherd of Hermas				x			
Epistle of Barnabas				x			
Paul to the Laodiceans	x						
Apocalypse		x	x		x		

⁴² Much of this information is taken from F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 232-235.

Book	Marcion (140)	Muratorian (170)	Irenaeus (180)	Origen (230)	Eusebius (310)	Athanasius (367)	Modern
of Peter							
Wisdom of Solomon	X		x		x		

Church Tradition and the Scriptures as Authority

As the canon was being established, it gave the church two primary weapons in refuting the false teachers: The new canon of Scriptures and the previously established church tradition that was supposedly safeguarded through “apostolic succession,” the succession of leaders dating back to the apostles. Irenaeus was the bishop of Lyons about 180 A.D.⁴³ and wrote concerning apostolic succession and the false teachers of gnosticism.

When, however, they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. For [they allege] that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but *viva voce*: wherefore also Paul declared, "But we speak wisdom among those that are perfect, but not the wisdom of this world." And this wisdom each one of them alleges to be the fiction of his own inventing, forsooth; so that, according to their idea, the truth properly resides at one time in Valentinus, at another in Marcion, at another in Cerinthus, then afterwards in Basilides, or has even been indifferently in any other opponent, who could speak nothing pertaining to salvation. For every one of these men, being altogether of a perverse disposition, depraving the system of truth, is not ashamed to preach himself.

But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying that they themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth. For [they maintain] that the apostles intermingled the things of the law with the words of the Savior; and that not the apostles alone, but even the Lord Himself, spoke as at one time from the Demiurge, at another from the intermediate place, and yet again from the Pleroma, but that they

⁴³ Bettenson, 340.

themselves, indubitably, unsulliedly, and purely, have knowledge of the hidden mystery: this is, indeed, to blaspheme their Creator after a most impudent manner!

It comes to this, therefore, that these men do now consent neither to Scripture nor to tradition (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, 2:1-3).

Tertullian was a North African bishop who lived in the early third century. To him, the truth concerning Christianity would be found in the unanimous teachings and practices of all churches having a direct apostolic connection.

But what they (apostles) preached, that is, what Christ revealed to them, this, on my ruling, ought to be established solely through the same churches which the apostles themselves founded by preaching to them as well as by their living voice, as the phrase is, as by their epistles afterwards. If this is so, it follows straightaway that all doctrine which accords with those apostolic churches, the sources and originals of the faith, must be reckoned as the truth, since it preserves without a doubt what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God (Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, xxi).⁴⁴

But if any of these heresies are bold enough to insert themselves into the apostolic age, in order to seem to have been handed down from the apostles because they existed under the apostles, we can say: Let them produce the origins of their churches; let them unroll the list of their bishops, an unbroken succession so that the first bishop had as his precursor and the source of his authority one of the apostles or one of the apostolic men who, though not an apostle, continued with the apostles. This is how the apostolic churches report their origins (Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, xxxii).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Bettenson, 70-71.

⁴⁵ Bettenson, 71.

Church tradition from leadership via apostolic succession was already the *de facto* authority when the canon came into existence, and the canon was used to substantiate the established tradition in the church in response to challenges from false teachers.⁴⁶

The Rise of the Roman Church

We have already made some references to the early prominence of the Roman church. Now we shall turn our attention to how the Roman church came to be so prominent.

When Claudius Gaius restricted the behavior of Jews, with the intent to drive them from Rome in 50 A.D.,⁴⁷ Aquila and other Christians left as well. This shows us that the church was started before this time. We have no reason to not think that the Roman church started from those present at Pentecost in Jerusalem that were from Rome⁴⁸ and either returned to Rome as a matter of the course of life or were later scattered “preaching the word wherever they went.”⁴⁹ Tacitus (a Roman historian) wrote of Christianity and Rome following the crucifixion of Jesus and suggests an early origin of the church in Rome.

This pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every corner of the globe, which there finds a following (Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44).

Paul’s letter to the Roman church from Greece in about 57 A.D.⁵⁰ shows a large church which he has desired to visit for “many years.”⁵¹ Paul lists many friends in his greetings at the end of the letter, though there is no indication of the leadership of the church.

⁴⁶ It is unfortunate that the newly collected canon was not used to correct the already-straying course of the mainstream early catholic church as a whole.

⁴⁷ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 15. Also reference Acts 18:2.

⁴⁸ Acts 2:10.

⁴⁹ Acts 8:4.

⁵⁰ Guthrie, 396-7.

⁵¹ Romans 15:23

Nevertheless, the Roman church seems to enjoy the status of a “pillar church” (see chapter 5) for all of Italy.

Since Rome was the capital of the empire, it became a large and wealthy church. Larger and wealthier churches consistently gave financially to help other Christians from the earliest times of the church,⁵² and Rome was preeminent in this area. Consider the words of Dionysius, bishop of Corinth in the late second century, as quoted by the church historian Eusebius.

There is extant also another epistle written by Dionysius to the Romans, and addressed to Soter, who was bishop at that time. We cannot do better than to subjoin some passages from this epistle, in which he commends the practice of the Romans which has been retained down to the persecution in our own days. His words are as follows: "For from the beginning it has been your practice to do good to all the brethren in various ways, and to send contributions to many churches in every city. Thus relieving the want of the needy, and making provision for the brethren in the mines by the gifts which you have sent from the beginning, you Romans keep up the hereditary customs of the Romans, which your blessed bishop Soter has not only maintained, but also added to, furnishing an abundance of supplies to the saints, and encouraging the brethren from abroad with blessed words, as a loving father his children" (Eusebius Book 4, Chapter 23, quoting letter of Dionysius of Corinth to the Romans).

Apart from other factors, this giving alone could account for the primacy of the Roman church. In the words of F.F. Bruce, “A church which could receive tributes like this from other churches had no need of any dogmatic basis for its pre-eminence.”⁵³

There were, however, other reasons for the increasing prominence of the Roman church. Irenaeus wrote about the Roman church and the authority it had come to possess.

⁵² E.g. Acts 11:27-30, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15, Philippians 4:18.

⁵³ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 191.

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to "the perfect" apart and privately from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. For they were desirous that these men should 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; which men, if they discharged their functions honestly, would be a great boon [to the Church], but if they should fall away, the direst calamity.

Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say,] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere.

The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. Of this Linus, Paul makes mention in the Epistles to Timothy. To him succeeded Anacletus; and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the bishopric. This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said

to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes. Nor was he alone [in this], for there were many still remaining who had received instructions from the apostles. In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome dispatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith, and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the apostles, proclaiming the one God, omnipotent, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Creator of man, who brought on the deluge, and called Abraham, who led the people from the land of Egypt, spake with Moses, set forth the law, sent the prophets, and who has prepared fire for the devil and his angels. From this document, whosoever chooses to do so, may learn that He, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was preached by the Churches, and may also understand the apostolical tradition of the Church, since this Epistle is of older date than these men who are now propagating falsehood, and who conjure into existence another god beyond the Creator and the Maker of all existing things.

To this Clement there succeeded Evaristus. Alexander followed Evaristus; then, sixth from the apostles, Sixtus was appointed; after him, Telephorus, who was gloriously martyred; then Hyginus; after him, Pius; then after him, Anicetus. Soter having succeeded Anicetus, Eleutherius does now, in the twelfth place from the apostles, hold the inheritance of the episcopate. In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth (Irenaeus *Against Heresies, Book 3, 3:1-3*).

This excerpt tells us a lot about how the Roman church came to prominence, and what the ramifications of that prominence were.

Nobly, Irenaeus was out to protect the practices which the apostles had instituted in the churches. To him, a succession of leaders

dating back to the apostles themselves was proof of the apostolic nature, and thus correctness, of a church.

However, the claim that Peter and Paul “founded and organized” the church at Rome merits further investigation. Paul could not have initially started the Roman church—he explicitly stated that he wanted to preach where Christ was not known, and that he had not yet been to Rome.⁵⁴ In a similar manner, it is highly unlikely that Peter had anything to do with the initial origins of the Roman church, though he evidently was there later in his life.⁵⁵

So what was Irenaeus writing about? Perhaps Peter and Paul, prior to their martyrdoms in Rome, spent a significant period of time there and had such an influence on the Roman church that its form in the time of Irenaeus was indeed “started and organized” by Peter and Paul.

This appeal to Rome and its unbroken apostolic connection was proof of its superiority over the churches of the heretics who were claiming secret apostolic instruction for themselves.

Over time, the Roman church became the most important church in the world. Several additional factors contributed to this. First, the emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 311 A.D. with the Edict of Milan. The close relationship with the seat of the empire and the church in Rome enhanced the prominence of the Roman church, as emperor Constantine himself called the general councils of Arles in 314 and Nicaea in 325.

Christianity became the exclusive religion in the Roman Empire at the decree of Theodosius I in 380 A.D. In 392 A.D., the edict of Constantinople actually prohibited paganism.⁵⁶

Though Rome had become a prominent church, it was not alone in this prominence. In 451 A.D. the Council of Calcedon reflected and confirmed the existing church tradition and listed five primary “sees” (seats of authority for the entire church): Rome in the west;

⁵⁴ Romans 1:13, 15:20-24.

⁵⁵ 1 Peter 5:13. Notice in Acts 8:1 that all but the apostles were scattered, and that Peter came to have a ministry in the region of Palestine—Acts 9:32, 9:43, 12:3. Also see Galatians 2:8. It is also highly doubtful that if Peter had started the church in Rome, that Luke would not have recorded it in Acts.

⁵⁶ Earle A. Cairnes, *Christianity Through The Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 124-125.

Constantinople in the east; Alexandria in northern Africa; Antioch in the far east; and Jerusalem, the first church of all.⁵⁷

The non-Roman “sees” were different from Rome in two important ways. First, they were eastern and thus had their own culture apart from Italy and Rome.⁵⁸ Second, the eastern churches were perceived to have wavered in some of the various doctrinal debates on the Trinity and on the nature of Christ in the early church years.⁵⁹ As a result, Rome gradually became established as the “lead” church.⁶⁰

Prolific Leaders and the Development of the Papacy

The whole concept of a leader of one church having influence over other churches merits a thoughtful discussion. To refer to our discussion of “pillar churches” in Chapter 5, it may be observed that pillar churches were often pillar churches because of the prolific leadership in them—wherever Paul was, *that* church was a “pillar” church. The same could be said for Timothy and Titus. In the same way, Peter, James and John wrote to the church at large in their epistles because of their stature as “pillars of the church.”⁶¹

In the post-apostolic age, this same situation continues. Clement writes to Corinth from Rome because he is a great leader in the church in his day. Ignatius was from Syrian Antioch, yet he wrote to the other churches and was received by them because of his outstanding stature as a spiritual hero (he was about to undergo martyrdom at Rome). Polycarp (about 150 A.D.) was the leader of the church at Smyrna, yet wrote to the Philippians and possessed influence over many churches because of his outstanding stature as a leader—he was a disciple of the apostle John himself.

⁵⁷ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 34.

⁵⁸ As a result, Latin became the predominant language in the West, where Greek remained the predominant language in the East.

⁵⁹ An excellent source of information about these doctrinal debates is Harold O.J. Brown’s book referred to in the bibliography.

⁶⁰ Once the east-west schism of 1054 A.D. took place, Rome became the undisputed lead church to western Christians.

⁶¹ Galatians 2:9.

As the Roman church was rising to preeminence, the monarchical bishop of that church came to be the beneficiary of that preeminence. Defenders of this development spoke of the primacy of the bishop of Rome because he was the “successor of Peter.” This claim is an anachronism, since neither Peter nor the other apostles regarded him as a pope-like figure. The third supposed pope, Clement, did not regard himself as a pope; as seen in his letter, he did not even recognize the monarchical episcopate!

Though Ignatius strongly advocated the monarchical episcopate as the means of maintaining protodoxy in the churches, he knew nothing of the papacy or the primacy of Rome. If the papacy and the primacy of Rome did exist in his time, it is especially hard to conceive of why he would not make any mention of it, at least in his letter to the Roman church.

The conclusion here is that, in the first and second century, the influence of renowned leaders over the church beyond a local congregation was based upon individual spirituality, merit and respect, not upon the possession of the episcopacy of the Roman church.

By the time of Irenaeus (cited above), the list of bishops in the Roman church are given as evidence that the Roman church had apostolic origins and an unbroken apostolic connection. This is done as a form of argumentation against various heretics, not in the context of suggesting supremacy to the position of Rome over other churches.

In the third century, it is apparent that the primacy of the church at Rome is beginning to lead to a primacy of the Roman bishop. Origen lived in North Africa and Syria in the early third century and made opposition to these claims.

But if you suppose that upon that one Peter only the whole church is built by God, what would you say about John the son of thunder or each one of the apostles? ... For all bear the surname "rock" who are imitators of Christ (Origen, *Commentary of Matthew 12:11*).

Origen's opposition proves that the monarchical bishop of Rome did not have a historical claim to primacy, but that some were beginning to make such an appeal in his day.

Later in the third and fourth centuries, we see an appeal to the passage in Matthew 16:17-19. Cyprian was the bishop of Carthage

and wrote around the year 250 A.D., and still saw the Roman bishop as equal to other bishops in succession to Peter and as the object of unity. However, he did draw the parallel of the bishops in his day with Peter, the first of the apostles.

If any one consider and examine these things, there is no need for lengthened discussion and arguments. There is easy proof for faith in a short summary of the truth. The Lord speaks to Peter, saying, "I say unto you, that you art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." And again to the same He says, after His resurrection, "Feed my sheep." And although to all the apostles, after His resurrection, He gives an equal power, and says, "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you: Receive the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins you remit, they shall be remitted unto him; and whosoever sins you retain, they shall be retained"; yet, that He might set forth unity, He arranged by His authority the origin of that unity, as beginning from one.

Assuredly the rest of the apostles were also the same as was Peter, endowed with a like partnership both of honor and power; but the beginning proceeds from unity. Which one Church, also, the Holy Spirit in the Song of Songs designated in the person of our Lord, and says, "My dove, my spotless one, is but one. She is the only one of her mother, elect of her that bare her." Does he who does not hold this unity of the Church think that he holds the faith? Does he who strives against and resists the Church trust that he is in the Church, when moreover the blessed Apostle Paul teaches the same thing, and sets forth the sacrament of unity, saying, "There is one body and one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God?" And this unity we ought firmly to hold and assert, especially those of us that are bishops who preside in the Church, that we may also prove the episcopate itself to be one and undivided. Let no one deceive the brotherhood by a falsehood: let no one corrupt the truth of the faith by perfidious prevarication. The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each one for

the whole. The Church also is one, which is spread abroad far and wide into a multitude by an increase of fruitfulness.

Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church. The Lord warns, saying, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who gathers not with me scatters." He who breaks the peace and the concord of Christ, does so in opposition to Christ; he who gathers elsewhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ. The Lord says, "I and the Father are one"; and again it is written of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, "And these three are one." And does any one believe that this unity which thus comes from the divine strength and coheres in celestial sacraments, can be divided in the Church, and can be separated by the parting asunder of opposing wills? He who does not hold this unity does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and the Son, does not hold life and salvation (Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, 4-6).

Jerome was a well-traveled Roman scholar who wrote around 375 A.D. to consult bishop Damasus of Rome regarding various matters.

I think it my duty to consult the chair of Peter, and to turn to a church whose faith has been praised by Paul...My words are spoken to the successor of the fisherman, to the disciple of the cross. As I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none but your blessedness, that is with the chair of Peter. For this, I know, is the rock on which the church is built (Jerome *To Damasus*, 1,2).

By the time of Jerome, the Roman bishop is being called the successor of Peter. Then, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. issued the following statement upon receiving the word of Pope Leo I.

Peter has spoken through Leo!⁶²

Within three hundred years of the death of the apostles we see the establishment of the bishop of Rome as the “successor of Peter” for the purpose of creating unity in the faith. Accordingly, the reasons for the invalidity of the papacy are not seen in Scripture alone, but also in the history of the early church.

⁶² Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc. 1974), 284.



Conclusions

- The vacuum of apostolic leadership was filled by the monarchical episcopate and the beginnings of a system claiming apostolic succession for the leaders of existing churches.
- The second century church replaced the apostolic teaching of the first century with the established tradition in the churches of apostolic origin, bolstered by the New Testament canon.
- The need for an authorized and unifying voice of leadership eventually led to the rise to prominence of the Roman church and its bishop.
- Through these responses, the church unwittingly set the stage for numerous and widespread departures from the pattern of the apostolic church.

For Today

- What is the authoritative voice for your church?
- Can that authoritative voice go astray?
- What safeguards are in place if that authoritative voice does go astray?

*Let us not give up meeting together,
as some are in
the habit of doing, but let us
encourage one another—and
all the more as you see
the Day approaching
(Hebrews 10:25).*

7

CHURCH ASSEMBLY

In this chapter, we will begin a consideration of some of the practices of the early church. Here we will examine the church assembly; the following chapters will discuss baptism and communion.

Church Assembly in the New Testament

The church assembly is the most prominent church practice, so it is the logical place to begin a discussion of early Christian practices. We will examine the New Testament for examples of church meetings, then we will consider the evidence of how and why church meetings changed in the post-apostolic period.

There seem to have been three unique types of meetings in the early church. They are.

- Leaders' Meetings
- Special Meetings
- Regular Meetings

These will be discussed in this order, from the most specialized to the least specialized. This is because the New Testament tends to discuss things that are unique or out of the ordinary with more detail than those things that were not unique or ordinary. As a result, there is more information comparatively about the more specialized meetings compared to regular meetings. After examining special meetings, then the knowledge of how special meetings were different from regular meetings will help explain regular meetings.

Leaders' Meetings

The most specialized type of meetings of Christians seen in the New Testament center around the activities of the leadership of the church.

The Leaders' Court

It appears that the leadership of each local church had some form of a "leaders' forum" or "court." This was an avenue for the leaders to be contacted by the members of the church, and a way for them to conduct the leadership of the church. This is distinct from "closed" leaders meetings and different from the general church assembly as well.

The primary evidence for the leaders' court comes from the early Jerusalem church. Those in Jerusalem who brought money to the feet of the apostles seem to have brought it to them in some leaders' forum. When Ananias and Sapphira brought their money to the apostles, they also laid it at the feet of the apostles.

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband (Acts 4:34-5:2, 5:6-7, 9-10).

Those who buried Ananias and Sapphira were probably attendants or visitors to the leaders' forum.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about news from various churches, it seems that such news was communicated to them in the leaders' forum.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them (Acts 8:14).

News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22).

After the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the leaders' court heard about the conversions. In this forum Peter was questioned about what had happened and provided answers as well.

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ... Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: (Acts 11:1-2, 4).

When Peter is miraculously freed from prison, he instructs those who were meeting to pray to let "James and the brothers" know about it. This suggests that those he spoke to knew how and where to access "James and the brothers." For them to be referred to collectively strongly suggests the existence of the leaders' court.

Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place (Acts 12:17).

When Paul and Barnabas were to go from Antioch to Jerusalem to consider a question, they first met with the apostles and elders in the leaders' court.

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ... When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:2,4-5).

Subsequently, it appears that a separate, private meeting with the apostles, elders, Paul and Barnabas took place where this question was resolved.

The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them (Acts 15:6,12).

Now up to this point, these leaders' courts were in Jerusalem. But in Antioch, Paul and Luke, among others, were apparently in the leaders' court (possibly a part of a larger fellowship gathering) when the prophet Agabus visited.

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said,

"The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' "

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done" (Acts 21:10-14).

Again, Paul and his companions went to see James and the elders in the leaders' court in Jerusalem upon their return from the mission fields.

The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry (Acts 21:18-19).

When Paul planned to visit Corinth, it seems that he planned to have some sort of leaders' forum to take care of certain situations in the church there. These things could have been handled privately, but the thought of establishing matters by the testimony of witnesses suggests a leaders' court.

I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world (2 Corinthians 10:2).

And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete (2 Corinthians 10:6).

For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier

and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you (2 Corinthians 12:20-13:3).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul referenced a visit to Jerusalem where he addressed the leaders of the church. This probably would have taken place in the leaders' court.

I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain (Galatians 2:2).

The leaders' court seems to have a basis in the life and leadership of the leaders of the Jews. Consider the court of Moses.

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws" (Exodus 18:13-16).

The advice of his father-in-law was not to do away with the court, but to expand the court system with more courts at different levels. These courts were led by responsible men at each level, all with the final result of lightening the load on Moses and providing satisfaction for the people.

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied" (Exodus 18:20-23).

In the same manner, the judges of Israel also held court. This is seen in the life of Deborah.

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided (Judges 4:4-5).

In a similar manner, the leaders of the Jews in the days of Jesus had some sort of a public forum. On numerous occasions, people went to see the priests and leaders of the Jews, who were accessible for the general public.

Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues (Matthew 10:17).

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests (Matthew 26:14).

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened (Matthew 28:11).

The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well (John 5:15).

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" (John 7:46).

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ... To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out (John 9:13, 34).

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (John 11:46-48).

In short, holding court was an effective way for the members of the church to have direct and personal access to the leadership of the church collectively on a regular and "as needed" basis. From the open courts, the leaders also took the opportunity to investigate matters privately as needed.

Leaders' Prayer Meetings

There is strong evidence that the leaders of the early church consistently devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to prayer. The first evidence of this is seen in the response of the apostles to the expanding needs of a growing church and how they viewed their priorities in regard to all other needs in the church at the time.

...and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

This seems to date back to the pre-Pentecost time, when the apostles gathered in the upper room and prayed constantly.

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers (Acts 1:12-14).

Since the apostles were in the habit of praying together for significant periods of time, it follows that they chose to delegate other responsibilities that certainly would have interfered with their prayer and ministry of the Word.

In Antioch, the leaders of the church were apparently in the habit of fasting and praying together.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:2-3).

Paul and Barnabas engaged in prayer and fasting for a period of time when appointing elders in the mission churches.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:23).

Paul and his companions (Silas and/or Timothy) could say they were constantly in prayer for their hearers. This suggests leaders gathering and praying on a consistent basis.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you (Colossians 1:3).

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12-13).

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith (1 Thessalonians 3:10).

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith (2 Thessalonians 1:11).

The prayer of leaders for the sick was regarded as a great ministry.

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven (James 5:14-15).

Based upon the preceding passages, the conclusion is that the leaders of the early church met together consistently and spent an enormous amount of time and energy in prayer together.

Leaders' Training Meetings

In addition to the leaders' court and the leaders' prayer meetings, there were private meetings of the leaders of the church. Paul had a special meeting with the elders in the Ephesian church in Miletus.

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church (Acts 20:17).

When Paul charged Timothy to train leaders, he tells Timothy to continue the pattern and practice Paul used in training Timothy and others.

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2).

Paul had an entourage of followers, which included Timothy and his apparent peers. These would have received great training as they traveled with him, much as Jesus trained the apostles in his travels.¹

He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia (Acts 20:4).

While there is not a large volume of passages on this topic, it is evident that there were training meetings for leaders in the early church. As a necessity, these meetings would probably occur on a regular basis, though there were also irregular or special training meetings as well.

The concept of leaders' training meetings has its roots in the ministry of Jesus with the apostles, which was discussed at length in chapter one.

In conclusion on the topic of leaders' meetings, leaders regularly met in the early church to receive members of the church (and handle special issues as needed), to pray for the church and to receive training.

¹ These other men appear to have been peers of Timothy, whom we know became an evangelist. We can reasonably conclude that all these men would in time become church leaders as well.

Special Meetings

After leaders' meetings, the next most specialized group of church meetings that appear in the New Testament church is special meetings. These were special meetings in the sense that they were neither regular meetings (to be discussed later) nor a part of the set of leaders' meetings (discussed previously), but rather were taking place because of a special occasion. Also in this category are some seemingly unique or irregular actions that took place in what would have otherwise been regular meetings.

After the first persecution in the early church, Peter and John gathered the church together to report on what had happened, and to pray.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them" (Acts 4:23-24).

The controversy over the feeding of the Grecian widows led to a special meeting of the church to solve the problem and appoint leaders to a position of authority to take care of the need at hand. Both the apostles and the church had a role in making this decision.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these

men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:1-6).

When Herod arrested Peter, a number of disciples apparently had spontaneously gathered at a house to pray for his release.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place (Acts 12:5, 12-17).

At the conclusion of the "Jerusalem Conference," it is interesting to see that both the leaders and the church in Jerusalem made the decision to choose some of their own men to send to Antioch with the letter from the apostles and elders.

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers (Acts 15:22).

In Philippi, the release of Paul and Silas from prison merited a special farewell gathering of the brothers.

After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left (Acts 16:40).

When Paul left Ephesus after the riot, he met with the disciples for a farewell meeting in much the same manner.

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-by and set out for Macedonia (Acts 20:1).

Often, visiting preachers would address the church. There would be good news from mission areas, messages of encouragement to the church and possibly some other actions as well. These could have taken place either in regular meetings of the church or in specially called meetings of the church, but these did not occur on a regular basis.

When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17).

When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (Acts 11:23).

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said (Acts 14:21-22).

From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them

and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:26-27).

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them (Acts 15:3-4).

The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers (Acts 15:30, 32).

When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch (Acts 18:22).

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples (Acts 18:23).

He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece (Acts 20:2).

But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left (Acts 20:6-7, 11).

After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. Finding the disciples there, we stayed with

them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. After saying good-by to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home (Acts 21:3-6).

Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you (Ephesians 6:21-22).

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here (Colossians 4:7-9).

We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God (3 John 1:6).

On occasion, unique actions occurred in the regular assembly of the churches. For instance, Paul instructed the Corinthians to hand over an immoral brother to Satan² during an assembly.

² This "handing over to Satan" is a technical term for removing one from the fellowship.

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:4-5).

At one time, the churches of Galatia and Greece were involved in a special collection for the Judean churches. Paul instructed the Corinthian church to set money aside for this contribution, so it would be ready when Paul came through town. This “setting aside” seems to have been done as a part of their regular assembly.

Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

We may observe that Paul planted both the church in Galatia and the church in Corinth, yet at a later date he instructed them to have these special collections. This shows that these collections were not an intrinsic part of the assembly, but that these were special collections for a special need.

There are other references to these special contributions in the New Testament.

For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26)³

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else (2 Corinthians 9:12-13).

³ The Greek work for contribution here is *koinonian* (*koinwniān*), literally fellowship or sharing.

As a part of this contribution, the churches that were involved in this contribution had chosen a particular brother to accompany Paul to Judea with this contribution. And Paul bragged that the Macedonians urgently pleaded with him to have a part in this special collection.

What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help (2 Corinthians 8:19).

... they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints (2 Corinthians 8:4).

Though the special offerings were probably not a regular feature of all regular meetings of the church, the giving of money to those in need in other places shows a conscious recognition of a world-wide fellowship and the willingness to meet material needs as they arose.

On occasion, contributions were also taken to support missionary activity.

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only (Philippians 4:15).

Thus, the missionary activity of the early church was a major reason for special meetings and activities of the church. In these settings, good news from other places would be passed on, and a message of encouragement would be given. The emissary would in turn bring back news to the place from which he was sent.

In other situations, special needs were met with special prayer meetings or farewell gatherings, and special offerings were taken to help with needs as they arose. When decisions needed to be made, they were often made together by the whole church.

Regular Meetings

The apostolic church seems to have met on a regular basis, typically on the first day of the week. This is evident from the following passages.

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight (Acts 20:7).

When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present (1 Corinthians 5:4).

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it (1 Corinthians 11:17-18).

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in (James 2:2).

Though the statement “all Christians met every Sunday” will not be found in the New Testament, we see that the Corinthians, Galatians and the church in Troas seem to have met regularly on the first day of the week. Reasons for meeting on Sunday (the first day of the week) were perhaps: Jesus was resurrected on Sunday (Mark 16:1-9); Jesus was first seen in the resurrected state on Sunday; while resurrected, Jesus met together with the apostles on Sunday, first without Thomas (John 20:19) and then with Thomas (John 20:26); and the beginning of the church (Pentecost) was on Sunday (Acts 2:1-4, 16-21). Other references indicate regular meetings of the church.

What took place during these regular meetings of the church? There are four things that seem to have consistently taken place during regular meetings of the church.

- Preaching, Teaching and Reading
- Fellowship
- Prayer
- Communion

It is very interesting that these elements closely resemble the short description of the early Jerusalem church.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

There is strong evidence for each of these elements of worship from the New Testament.

Preaching, Teaching and Reading

Of all the activities that took place during the meetings of the church, those revolving around preaching and teaching are the most prolific. Preaching also included encouraging, strengthening, admonishing, rebuking and prophesying, with the goal of training the *hearts* of believers. Teaching was a means of imparting information in various formats, including lectures and discussions, designed to train the *minds* of believers. The reading of Scripture provided the basis of both preaching and teaching.

Though closely related, preaching and teaching were generally regarded as two distinct actions and ministries.

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul (Acts 13:1).

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord (Acts 15:35).

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20).

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13).

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17).

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction (2 Timothy 4:2).

It appears that in the apostolic age, more than one speaker would commonly address the church. This particularly applied to the prophets, as a prophet would receive a revelation, stand up and announce it to the church.

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) (Acts 11:27-28).

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a

time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged (1 Corinthians 14:23-31).

This practice of individuals talking to the church was not for the prophets alone, but also to those with evident gifts of teaching and members of the church in general. The objectives were to instruct, encourage and strengthen the church, and to use the gifts God had given the local congregation.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6-8).

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16)

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

Teaching was a distinct aspect of the meetings of the early church. This could have included some sort of organized curriculum or

pattern of study, as well as general instruction about the faith. In contrast to preaching, teaching also allowed for situations where questions and even discussions aided in the process of education.

...that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:4).

and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch (Acts 11:26).

So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (Acts 18:11).

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:8-10).

Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor (Galatians 6:6).

Closely related to preaching and teaching was the reading of Scripture.

When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Mark 13:14).

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers (1 Thessalonians 5:27).

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13).

In the general meetings of the body, women were not allowed to speak or ask questions. However, older women were charged with teaching women, necessarily apart from the assembly of the whole church.

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church (1 Corinthians 14:33-35).

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God (Titus 2:3-5).

Breaking of Bread

“Breaking of bread” is a technical term for communion, and it was a prominent feature in the meetings of the early church. However, since this topic is so large and significant, it will be discussed on its own in a later chapter.

Fellowship

Fellowship was also an important aspect of the meetings of the church. Clearly, the church did not need to meet together for fellowship to take place; however, it is inconceivable that fellowship and other aspects of personal relationships did *not* take place when the church met together.

I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints (Philemon 1:6-7).

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings (Romans 16:16).

All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss (1 Corinthians 16:20).

Greet one another with a holy kiss (2 Corinthians 13:12).

Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ (1 Peter 5:14).

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

In this context, we should consider that the meeting of the church was an event where numerous Christian relationship activities occurred. The “one another” passages of the New Testament certainly apply in this context; a discussion of these is found in Appendix A.

Another aspect of this fellowship and encouragement was that of singing, though singing could also be regarded as praise to God.

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the

Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name." Again, it says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples" (Romans 15:8-11).⁴

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind (1 Corinthians 14:15).

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, (Ephesians 5:18-19).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise (James 5:13).

Several of these references to singing seem to suggest solo singing, though congregational singing is probably also in view since singing to one another is a general command to the church. Private devotional singing is probably in view in James 5:13.

The objective of all these elements of meeting was the strengthening of the church.

⁴ In context, Paul cites these Old Testament references to show the place of the Gentiles in the plan of God, not to legislate the "singing of praise" in the Christian assembly. Each of these references to singing originally was written so that Gentiles would praise God in an "Old Testament" context on the basis of God's kindness and future plan for their blessings in Christ. Yet, an application of these passages to the church-age praise of God follows from this.

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Prayer

Prayer also seems to have been a normal part of the regular meetings of the early church.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing (1 Timothy 2:8).

From this sampling of Scripture, we can see that preaching, teaching, reading of Scripture, fellowshiping, singing, praying and breaking of bread were normal features of the regular meetings of the early church.

Meeting Places

Churches in the first century met regularly in the houses of certain members and other private individuals.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts... (Acts 2:46).

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying (Acts 12:12).

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God (Acts 18:7).

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20).

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia (Romans 16:3-5).

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings. Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you their greetings (Romans 16:23).

The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house (1 Corinthians 16:19).

Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house (Colossians 4:15).

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: (Philemon 1:1-2).

The early church also met in other places, such as public gathering areas, schools and other unnamed places.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts (Acts 2:46).

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31).

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade (Acts 5:12).

But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9).

There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting (Acts 20:8).

The early church met in all sorts of places. The primary criteria for meeting places seems to have been availability and suitability for the purposes at hand.

Church Assembly in the Post-Apostolic Church

As in the New Testament, the writings of the early church fathers contain very little direct information concerning meetings of the church. Only a few directly discuss church assemblies, and those that do not focus on meetings contain incidental references to church meetings. In these early writings, certain practices not known in the New Testament age are discussed. Here we will cite these practices and the references, which testify to their existence.

In many cases, the practices cited are not necessarily bad. Some of these may even be good or could be in keeping with the intent of the New Testament. But, because they are in addition to what is seen in the New Testament, they made this list.

Confession of Sin Prior to Participating in Assembly

The writing of the Didache (early second century) contains references to confession as a required practice prior to meetings of the body and participation in communion.

In church you shall confess your transgressions and not pray with an evil conscience (Didache 4).

And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your

transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. And let no man, having dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled (Didache 14).

In time, the formalized practice of confession led to the sacrament of penance.⁵

Worship, Ministry and Sacrifice

In the Didache above, reference is made to the “sacrifice” that those in the assembly would perform. This merits further discussion.

To the Jew, the terms worship, service (or ministry) and sacrifice had very precise meanings centered on the temple and obedience to the Law of Moses. In radical contrast, there were no ceremonial aspects to worship, ministry and sacrifice in the apostolic church. These terms were used, but in the context of non-ceremonial actions. Appendix A discusses the usage of these words and concepts in the New Testament.

Very early in its history, the post-apostolic church came to understand and use these terms in ways that were inconsistent with their use in the apostolic age. For example the use of this term in the Didache above is probably a reference to the communion. The term carries with it the suggestion of some ritual or ceremonial actions.

Taking an Oath in the Assembly

The letter from Pliny to Trajan discusses the meetings of the church. Pliny was governor of Bithynia, and about 110 A.D. he wrote to the emperor Trajan concerning the arrest and punishment of Christians. The context of their arrest was their refusal to participate in the public worship of the Roman gods and their private meetings.⁶

⁵ The Roman Catholic Church practices seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, communion, marriage, penance/confession, holy orders and extreme unction (anointing of the sick). Ott, 338.

⁶ The Romans were suspicious of all clubs or societies, supposing they provided an avenue for political opposition to the established leadership of the government. In Bithynia, even a volunteer fire department was outlawed on this basis. Thus the participation of Christians in their own assemblies was at issue. Reference Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 169 (quoting *Epistles of Pliny*, X, 33 and 34).

This source is also interesting because it is a hostile, non-Christian writer describing Christian assemblies.

But they declared that the sum of their guilt or error had amounted only to this, that on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of any crime but to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery and breach of faith, and not to deny deposit when it was claimed. After the conclusion of this ceremony it was their custom to depart and meet again to take food; but it was ordinary and harmless food, and they had ceased this practice after my edict in which, in accordance with your orders, I had forbidden secret societies (Pliny to Trajan).⁷

Interestingly, the churches of Bithynia had apparently ceased the *agape* feast after the edict, which forbade secret societies, though the early morning assembly was still taking place.

The focus of these morning assemblies was an antiphonal hymn to Christ and an oath to abstain from various forms of sin. There is no mention of teaching or preaching. However noble the purpose, the taking of an oath seems to ignore the whole teaching about oaths in the New Testament.⁸

The Prominent Position of the Bishop

The writings of Ignatius (early second century) show a focus on the role and position of the bishop in maintaining the course of the church.

For if the prayer of one and another has such great force, how much more that of the bishop and of the whole church (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 5).⁹

⁷ Bettenson, 3-4.

⁸ Mt 5:33-37; see also Judges 11:31-40, 1 Samuel 14:24-45. However, it is also valid to consider what Pliny may have meant by this term, and how that usage might compare with the oath of which Jesus spoke.

⁹ Lightfoot, 64.

Assemble yourselves together, every one of you severally, man by man, in grace, one faith and one Jesus Christ, who after the flesh was of David's race, who is Son of Man and Son of God, **to the end that you may obey the bishop and the presbytery without distraction of mind**, breaking one bread which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die but live forever in Christ Jesus (Ignatius, *Ephesians 20*)¹⁰

But assemble yourselves all together with undivided heart (Ignatius, *Philadelphians 6*)¹¹

Let no man do anything pertaining to the church apart from the bishop...Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be...whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which you do may be sure and valid (Ignatius, *Smyrnans 8*)¹²

Notice that Ignatius makes a point of highlighting the teaching position of the bishop as the focal point of unity. The bishop apparently also had an element of latitude in other things he might approve for an assembly.

He recognizes a special impact of the prayer of the bishop and the whole church when assembled together.

Ignatius sees an important role of the church members participating in the communion.

What we see here is a change in the *focus* of church meetings. In New Testament times, the church meetings were an interactive event, with all members of the church participating in various activities as well as the leadership preaching or teaching. In the era of Ignatius, we see the meetings of the church becoming the avenue for the bishop to exercise leadership over the church. Thus the interactive, participatory element of the church assembly was declining, and leadership was becoming not so much a matter of ministry outside the church as much as primacy inside the church.

¹⁰ Lightfoot, 68.

¹¹ Lightfoot, 80.

¹² Lightfoot, 84.

We also see here the increasing importance of the communion, which was one of many aspects of New Testament church meetings. During the time of Ignatius, the church member merely participated in communion and listened to the instructions of the bishop.

Marriage Ceremonies

In keeping with his view of episcopal primacy and control, Ignatius saw a benefit in the bishop approving marriages.

But it becomes both men and women who marry, to form their union with the approval of the bishop, that their marriage may be according to God, and not after their own lust. Let all things be done to the honor of God (Ignatius, *Polycarp*, 5).

This testifies to some method in which the bishop approved the union between spouses.

In the New Testament, there is no mention of Christian wedding ceremonies. The only discussions on this matter were those who might be married¹³ and how one ought to court a spouse.¹⁴

Later on, marriage was to become one of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. This was probably in response and reaction to the false elevation of celibacy by some, including the gnostics.

Feast Days of Patron Saints

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna in the middle of the second century. He was martyred in Rome, and the story of the martyrdom was relayed to the churches in the *Letter of the Smyrnans to the Church at Philomelium*, also known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. This letter is one of the most remarkable writings of the post-apostolic age. In this letter, we see the plans for future commemoration of the day of Polycarp's death.

And so afterwards we took up his bones which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place; where the Lord will permit

¹³ 1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14.

¹⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5. The NIV footnote references a possible meaning of this passage as, "acquire a wife."

us to gather ourselves together as we are able, in gladness and joy, and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom for the commemoration of those that have already fought in the contest and for the training and preparation of those that shall do so hereafter (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18).

The Smyrnans plainly intended to meet together at the grave of Polycarp on the anniversary of his death to commemorate him and other martyrs, and to inspire others who might go through martyrdom in the future.

There is no evidence in the New Testament that the days of the death of Stephen, James or any others (including Jesus himself!) were *ever* commemorated on an annual basis.

However heartfelt and reasonable it would be to remember a martyred loved one (especially as beloved and outstanding an individual as Polycarp), this shows the beginning of the commemoration of feast days of “patron saints” (local heroes in the faith). In time, the Roman Catholic church placed certain feast days throughout the church “year.”

Celebration of Easter; The Beginnings of Lent and the Church Year, Enforced Uniformity

The church historian Eusebius discussed the second-century conflict concerning the celebration of Easter. Consider the remarks of Eusebius.

A question of no small importance arose at that time. For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Savior's passover. It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice which, from apostolic tradition, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the resurrection of our Savior.

Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all, with one consent, through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree, that the

mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's day, and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only. There is still extant a writing of those who were then assembled in Palestine, over whom Theophilus, bishop of Caesarea, and Narcissus, bishop of Jerusalem, presided.

And there is also another writing extant of those who were assembled at Rome to consider the same question, which bears the name of Bishop Victor; also of the bishops in Pontus over whom Palmas, as the oldest, presided; and of the parishes in Gaul of which Irenaeus was bishop, and of those in Osrhoene and the cities there; and a personal letter of Bacchylus, bishop of the church at Corinth, and of a great many others, who uttered the same opinion and judgment, and cast the same vote. And that which has been given above was their unanimous decision.

But the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him:

"We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed

Papirius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said ' We ought to obey God rather than man.' "

He then writes of all the bishops who were present with him and thought as he did. His words are as follows:

"I could mention the bishops who were present, whom I summoned at your desire; whose names, should I write them, would constitute a great multitude. And they, beholding my littleness, gave their consent to the letter, knowing that I did not bear my gray hairs in vain, but had always governed my life by the Lord Jesus."

Thereupon Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia, with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate. But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant, sharply rebuking Victor. Among them was Irenaeus, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the

Lord's day. He fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom and after many other words he proceeds as follows:

"For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith."

He adds to this the following account, which I may properly insert:

"Among these were the presbyters before Soter, who presided over the church which you now rule. We mean Anicetus, and Plus, and Hyginus, and Telesphorus, and Xystus. They neither observed it themselves, nor did they permit those after them to do so. And yet though not observing it, they were none the less at peace with those who came to them from the parishes in which it was observed; although this observance was more opposed to those who did not observe it. But none were ever cast out on account of this form; but the presbyters before you who did not observe it, sent the eucharist to those of other parishes who observed it.

And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one

another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him. But though matters were in this shape, they communed together, and Anicetus conceded the administration of the eucharist in the church to Polycarp, manifestly as a mark of respect. And they parted from each other in peace, both those who observed, and those who did not, maintaining the peace of the whole church."

Thus Irenaeus, who truly was well named, became a peacemaker in this matter, exhorting and negotiating in this way in behalf of the peace of the churches. And he conferred by letter about this mooted question, not only with Victor, but also with most of the other rulers of the churches.

Those in Palestine whom we have recently mentioned, Narcissus and Theophilus, and with them Cassius, bishop of the church of Tyre, and Clarus of the church of Ptolemais, and those who met with them, having stated many things respecting the tradition concerning the passover which had come to them in succession from the apostles, at the close of their writing add these words:

"Endeavor to send copies of our letter to every church, that we may not furnish occasion to those who easily deceive their souls. We show you indeed that also in Alexandria they keep it on the same day that we do. For letters are carried from us to them and from them to us, so that in the same manner and at the same time we keep the sacred day"

(Eusebius Book 5, Chapter 23-25).

The first point of Eusebius to address is the mere celebration of Easter. The controversy arose as to when Easter should be

celebrated, whether on the Sunday nearest the Jewish Passover (as in Rome and Palestine) or on the fourteenth day of the month, regardless of the day of the week (as in Asia).

It would be hard to imagine Christians being aware of the Jewish Passover season without connecting it to the death and resurrection of Jesus. But what probably began as a casual remembrance in time gave rise to the full-blown observance of Easter as the centerpiece of the church year, or, in the words of Eusebius above, “a matter of no small importance.” The seeds of this expansion were seen in the middle of the second century.

Not only did the church of this era celebrate and commemorate Easter;¹⁵ it was in the habit of fasting prior to Easter. This could properly be considered the origin of the Lenten season¹⁶ in the scheme of the church “year.”

Even more significant than the mere celebration of Easter are the following items, which set a dangerous precedent for future events.

- The controversy that arose over a matter that was not even discussed in the New Testament.
- The “ecclesiastical decree” of the Palestinian bishops and the attempts by the Roman bishop Victor to mandate uniformity of practice.
- The inappropriate level of seriousness with which the issue was taken (“that we may not furnish occasion to those who easily deceive their souls”).

At the council of Nicea in 325 A.D. the Roman viewpoint was adopted in both the East and the West. The whole story of Easter is an example of how a non-essential practice which was deemed to be good by some (the commemoration of Easter) led to a dogmatic mandate of uniformity for all for the sake of “unity.”

¹⁵ For the church in the era prior to Constantine, Easter became the most prominent church day of the year, and even to this day it ranks with Christmas as the most significant of all celebrated days for denominational Christians.

¹⁶ The Lenten season is the forty days prior to the day of Easter.

Ceremonial Ordination of Leadership

Hippolytus was a Roman bishop in the early third century. About 220 A.D.¹⁷ His *Apostolic Tradition* contained an antiphonal script for the installation of a bishop and other leaders.

Let the bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people. When he has been named and shall please all, let him, with the presbytery and such bishops as may be present, assemble with the people on a Sunday. While all give their consent, the bishops shall lay their hands on him, and the presbytery shall stand by in silence. All indeed shall keep silent, praying in their heart for the descent of the Spirit. Then one of the bishops who are present shall at the request of all lay his hand upon him who is ordained, and shall pray as follows, saying...

And when he is made bishop, all shall offer him the kiss of peace, for he been made worthy. To him then the deacons shall bring the offering, and he, laying his hand upon it, with all the presbytery, shall say as the thanksgiving:

Bishop: The Lord be with you.

People: And with your spirit.

B.: Lift up your hearts.

P.: We lift them up to the Lord.

B.: Let us give thanks to the Lord.

P.: It is meet and right.

B.: We give you thanks, O God, through your beloved son Jesus Christ, whom you did send to us in the last times to be a savior and redeemer and the messenger of your will; who is your inseparable Word, through whom you made all things, and in whom you were well pleased. You did send him from Heaven into the Virgin's womb, he was conceived and was incarnate, and was shown to be your Son, born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin, who, fulfilling your will and preparing for you a holy people, stretched out his hands in suffering, that he might free from suffering them that believed on you.

Who when he was being betrayed to his voluntary suffering, that he might destroy death, break the chains of the devil, tread Hell underfoot, bring forth the righteous and set a

¹⁷ Petry, 27.

bound, and that he might manifest his Resurrection, took bread and have thanks to you and said: Take Eat, This is my body which is broken for you. Likewise also the cup, saying This is my blood which is shed for you, whenever you do this you do it in remembrance of me.

Therefore we, being mindful of his death and resurrection, do offer to you this bread and this cup, giving thanks to you that you have deemed us worthy to stand before you and minister as your priest. And we beseech you that you would send your Holy Spirit upon the offering of your holy church; and that you would grant it to all the saints who partake, making them one, for the fulfillment of the Holy Spirit and for the confirmation of their faith in truth; that we may praise and glorify you through your Son Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and honor to you, to the Father and to the Son with the Holy Spirit in the holy church, both now and forever (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 1:3-4).¹⁸

The point in reading Hippolytus is that the offices of leadership had become ceremonial, so the installation of office holders also became ceremonial. This ceremonial ordination of bishops, together with the celibate orders for men and women, in time led to the Roman Catholic sacrament of “holy orders.”

Formalized Liturgy

The existence of such a planned and scripted ceremony as the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus shows evidence of a strong desire to make sure all the appropriate things were being affirmed or rejected in this ceremony. Consider the introduction and concluding remarks to this ordination ceremony document.

But now, moved by His love to all His saints, we pass on to our most important theme, "The Tradition," our teacher. And we address the churches, so that they who have been well trained, may, by our instruction, hold fast the tradition which has continued up to now and, knowing it well, may be strengthened. **This is needful, because of the lapse or error which recently occurred through ignorance, and through**

¹⁸ Petry, 27-28.

ignorant men. And the Holy Spirit will supply perfect grace to those who believe aright, that they may know how all things should be transmitted and kept by them who rule the church (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 1:1)¹⁹

The bishop shall give thanks as we have prescribed. It is not, to be sure, necessary for anyone to recite the exact words that we have prescribed, by learning to say them by heart in his thanksgiving to God; but let each one pray according to his ability. If, indeed, he is able to pray competently with an elevated prayer, it is well. But even if he is only moderately able to pray and give praise, no one may forbid him; **only let him pray sound in the faith** (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 1:10).

The reasoning for such a scripted ceremony is “because of the lapse or error which recently occurred.” Thus, ceremonies were not only a means of installing leaders (or whatever other ceremonies had crept into the church), but more significantly and importantly they also became an occasion to affirm truthful doctrine and repudiate false doctrine. Notice how many doctrinally oriented remarks are contained in the ordination prayer of the bishop.

Even with the allowance for variation in the conclusion of the document, the existence of the script and the requirement to pray “sound in the faith” shows the concern that church practices are “right” and that “right” doctrines ought to be affirmed at every instance. This sort of tradition is the father of a liturgy.²⁰ Further, by publishing of this *Apostolic Tradition* for all the churches, it shows the concern of the Roman church that practices ought to be done the “right” way by all the churches who received this document. In this manner, the Roman church would then be able to measure the “rightness” of any other church by its adherence to the *Apostolic Tradition*. This is an instance of the how one good way to do something for one church in a specific situation was mandated to others as the only way to do something. In time, such patterns for the

¹⁹ Petry, 27.

²⁰ Considering this text makes one wonder if this prayer were truly intended for God’s hearing, or for man’s. Jesus disapproved of prayer for these types of purposes.. See Matthew 6:5-6.

assembly would come together in the Roman Catholic ceremony of the Mass.

Church Year

In the time of Tertullian (early third century), we see the expanded celebration of the days of death of martyrs and an expanded church year.²¹

As often as the anniversary comes around, we make offering for the dead as birthday honors. We count fasting or kneeling in worship on the Lord's day to be unlawful. We rejoice in the same privilege also from Easter to Whitsunday (Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, III).²²

The pattern that had begun with the Smyrnans and the death of Polycarp had expanded. Not only are the "feast days" of local heroes commemorated, we also see the continued recognition of Easter and a Christian significance to a Jewish feast day, Pentecost.²³

In the New Testament, there is no evidence of the early church observing a "church year."

Sign of the Cross

Also in the time of Tertullian, we see the mention of the ceremonial "sign of the cross"²⁴ in actions of everyday life.

At every forward step and movement, as every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign (Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, III).²⁵

²¹ Whitsunday is the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover.

²² Petry, 97-98.

²³ In the case of references to Pentecost in Acts 20:16 and 1 Corinthians 16:8, it is likely that Paul's interest in Pentecost was because of its significance as a feast of the Jews.

²⁴ This is done by tracing the shape of a "t" upon one's body, usually the forehead, upper chest/"heart" and the shoulders, or tracing the entire shape upon one's forehead, lips, etc.

²⁵ Petry, 97-98.

The ceremonial usage of the sign of the cross exists to this day in the Roman Catholic church. The sign of the cross is prominent in the Mass and many other events. However, there is no evidence of the ceremonial sign of the cross in the New Testament.



Conclusions

- In apostolic times, church meetings were simple, participatory and functional. They focused on the fundamental needs of the church in relation to the purposes of Jesus.
- As the post-apostolic era came into view, church meetings became less participatory. They became an occasion for the monarchical bishop to lead and instruct the church, and more of an occasion for the church to submit to the bishop.
- Later, meetings became an opportunity to affirm correct teachings and refute false teachings. To this end, formalized liturgies came into practice.

For Today

- What aspects of church meetings in the New Testament church discussed in this chapter ought to be restored today? (Hint—the answer is *all* of them!).
- How many things that take place in meetings of *your* church have no biblical precedent? Does this make them wrong? Why or why not?
- Do church practices have to be uniform from one church to another for there to be unity and faithfulness to Jesus?
- Church meetings should be diverse within the limits defined within the New Testament. Spontaneity and variety allow the various needs of the church to be met.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

8

BAPTISM

Water Baptism in the New Testament

Water baptism was practiced in the apostolic church as the means of conversion to Jesus and entry into the church. Let us review the evidence of actual, historical baptisms in the early church.

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

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw (Acts 8:12-13).

And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him (Acts 8:38).

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized... (Acts 9:18)

So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days (Acts 10:48).

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us (Acts 16:15).

At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized (Acts 16:33).

Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized (Acts 18:8).

On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5).

The striking thing about these baptisms is that they took place more or less immediately upon one's belief in the message of the gospel. Baptisms took place at any time of day or night, any day of the week, in any number of different places, private or public, performed by apostle and unnamed individual alike—all simply conditioned upon the sincere belief in and acceptance of the message of the gospel.¹

¹ One might ask where the "counting the cost" may appear in these seemingly "fast" instances of baptism. It is most likely that the cost of discipleship to Jesus was readily apparent to those who lived during New Testament times: Jesus had been killed by a conspiracy of the Jewish and Roman leaders; to claim an alliance to him was to risk the wrath of the Jewish leaders and the Romans. This cost—of

Baptism had four primary results.²

- Forgiveness of sins
- Receiving the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit
- Salvation
- Membership in the church.

Consider the following passage, which is the definitive first statement concerning baptism in the New Testament church.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**. And you will receive the **gift of the Holy Spirit**. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "**Save yourselves from this corrupt generation**." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were **added to their number** that day (Acts 2:38-41 emphasis mine).

Each of these four actions followed from the first baptisms in the history of the apostolic church.

Baptism is defined as dipping or immersion,³ and was practiced by both John the Baptist and the followers of Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry.

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River (Mark 1:5).

persecution and other forms of very real and imminent suffering—was readily apparent to all. Thus, counting the cost is not excluded, but probably implicit in becoming a Christian in such circumstances.

² The theological and practical implications of baptism have been the topic of many fine studies. An excellent source of these is *Born of Water* by Rex Geissler, referenced in the bibliography.

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 131.

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized (John 3:22-23).

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples (John 4:1-2).

For the church age, Jesus commanded baptism as an essential ingredient of the “great commission” which has been discussed earlier.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:18-19).

In summary, baptism in the apostolic church had the following characteristics.

- Resulted from hearing and personally responding to the gospel message, especially the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.
- Preceded by a change of heart that involved repentance and a response to the call of discipleship to Jesus.
- Brought forgiveness of sins, gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, salvation and membership in the church.

The results of baptism were the primary means of satisfying the purposes of Jesus to both bring salvation to men and to polarize men (by bring them into the church from the world).

Baptism in the Post-Apostolic Church

Very early in the history of the post-apostolic church, the practice of baptism began to move away from the New Testament pattern. We will discuss evidence of this departure.

Triune Baptism, Pouring as an Option to Immersion, Fasting Prior to Baptism

In the *Didache* (early second century) we see explicit remarks about triune baptism, pouring of water as an alternative to immersion, and mandatory fasting of both the person being baptized as well as the person doing the baptizing.

But concerning baptism, thus shall you baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water. But if you do not have living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able to in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But before baptism let him that baptizes and his that is baptized fast, and any others also who are able; and you shall order him who is to be baptized to fast a day or two before (*Didache* 7)⁴

In some cases in the New Testament, fasting occurred prior to baptism—the conversion of Paul stands out in this instance.⁵ However, this fasting did not normally occur in all cases. Mandatory fasting of the baptized and the baptizer, pouring as a substitution for immersion and preferred types of water for baptism are beyond the scope of the New Testament and thus are additions to apostolic practice.

Baptism Authorized by the Bishop

In keeping with his strong view of episcopal primacy as a means of safeguarding the church, Ignatius made the claim that baptism was not lawful unless practiced or approved of by the bishop.

It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast, but whatever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which you do may be sure and valid (*Ignatius, Smyrnans* 8).⁶

⁴ Lightfoot, 126.

⁵ Acts 9:9-19.

⁶ Lightfoot, 84.

This is another instance where Ignatius sees the controlling role of the bishop as the way to make sure false teachings and practices do not enter into the church. His intent was that baptism be practiced correctly, and that candidates for baptism meet his requirements. This was not inherently bad, on the surface.

However, the person performing the baptism in the New Testament era did not matter,⁷ and baptism seems to have been administered by *any* disciple upon finding someone receptive of the gospel.⁸

Non-Spontaneous Practice of Baptism

About the year 150 A.D., Justin Martyr wrote his apology, which explained Christianity to the Romans. In it he mentions the common practice of fasting prior to baptism, with the notion that fasting and prayer have a role in attaining the forgiveness of sins.

So that you will fully understand everything there is to know about is. I want to describe the manner in which we dedicate ourselves to God when we have been made new through Christ. First, those persons who are convinced that what we teach is true, and who promise that they can live accordingly, are instructed to implore God with prayer and fasting for the forgiveness of all past sins. We pray and fast with them. Then we take them to a place where there is water, and they are spiritually reborn in the same manner in which we ourselves were reborn. Then they are washed with water in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. For Christ said, "Unless you are born again, you will not see the kingdom of heaven."

...The apostles taught us the reason for this ceremony, as follows. We have no say in our original birth. It results from the union of our parents. And often we grow up ignorant of the truth, being raised in bad habits and being taught wicked things. However, we do not have to remain the

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:14-17.

⁸ Acts 11:19-21, Matthew 28:18-20.

children of necessity and ignorance. We can become children of choice and knowledge through a second birth.

In order for a person to obtain the forgiveness of his past sins in the water, there is pronounced over him—the one choosing to be born again and who has repented of his sins—the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe. The man who leads the candidate to the place of washing refers to God only by that designation.

This washing is called illumination because those who learn these things are illuminated in their understanding. And the person to be illuminated is washed also in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Spirit (Justin, *Apology* 61).

First, he mentions that the church would meet after baptisms, suggesting that baptisms took place prior to the Sunday assembly.

After we have washed the one who have been convinced and who has accepted our teaching, we bring him to the place where those who are called brothers are assembled. There we offer heartfelt prayers for both ourselves and the baptized person. We also pray for everyone else in every place. We pray that, now that we have learned the truth, we may be counted worth by our works to be found good citizens and keepers of the commandments, so that we may be saved with an everlasting salvation. When we are finished praying, we greet each other with a kiss (Justin, *Apology* 65).

In the New Testament, baptisms were performed spontaneously and were not reserved for a particular time of the week.

Justin also mentions the idea that *past* sins were forgiven in baptism. In later times, people actually delayed baptism until older age so that more sins could be forgiven. This resulted from a misunderstanding of how sins are forgiven after baptism (by confession and faithful living).⁹

⁹ 1 John 1:5-10.

Formalized Confession of Faith

In the story of the baptism of the Ethiopian in Acts 8, the confessional¹⁰ text of 8:37 does not appear in any of the early manuscripts; the first manuscript in which it appears is from the sixth century. Yet, Irenaeus (about 180 A.D.) quoted the story with this verse present in his *Against Heresies*¹¹ showing that this was indeed a very early Western addition to the original text from Luke.¹²

Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."
The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37).

In the New Testament, a confession of some sort may have been made prior to baptism,¹³ but this was not necessarily the case in *all* instances.

In the second century, the heresy of gnosticism threatened the church. Among other things, this heresy denied the deity of Jesus. Thus, this addition to the text probably reflected the second-century thought that baptism must be preceded by the affirmation of the deity of Jesus. This position was held so strongly that *the text of Acts actually had been modified* to assure that this story "showed" the necessity of the confession of the deity of Jesus prior to baptism.

Ceremonial Practice of Baptism

At the beginning of the third century, Tertullian showed how baptism was practiced in his day.

When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge that the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then, when we are taken up, we

¹⁰ Here the term "confession" relates not to the confessing of one's sins, but rather one's faith.

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, 12:8.

¹² Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, Biblia-Druck GmbH 1975), 360.

¹³ See Romans 10:9, 1 Timothy 6:12.

taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey, and from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week (Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, III).¹⁴

Tertullian includes the triune immersion, and a confession of faith that is more elaborate than what has been seen previously. Apparently, baptism took place in the meeting of the congregation, as opposed to being in a river or some other location of water. The eating of ceremonial foods after baptism is a new addition in this time period, as is the instruction not to bathe for a week following baptism.

Here we see the continuation of triune immersion, confession and baptism in the midst of the congregation. Not only were these beyond the scope of the practice in the New Testament, the eating of ceremonial foods and refusal to bathe for a week after baptism have no reference in New Testament times.

Baptism of Blood- Salvation Through Martyrdom

Also added to the set of practices of the early church in the time of Tertullian is the “Baptism of Blood,” the martyrdom of candidates for baptism. Since extensive requirements prior to baptism came into being, it became possible for one studying to become a Christian (a “catechumen”) to fall victim to persecution prior to being baptized. In these cases, the church held that the person would be saved due to the “baptism of blood.” Consider Tertullian.

We have indeed, likewise, a second font, (itself one with the former,) of blood, to wit; concerning which the Lord said, "I have to be baptized with a baptism," when He had been baptized already. For He had come "by means of water and blood," just as John has written; that He might be baptized by the water, glorified by the blood; to make us, in like manner, called by water, chosen by blood. These two baptisms He sent out from the wound in His pierced side, in order that they who believed in His blood might be bathed with the water; they who had been bathed in the water might likewise drink the blood. This is the baptism which both stands in

¹⁴ Petry, 97-98.

lieu of the fontal bathing when that has not been received, and restores it when lost (Tertullian, *On Baptism* 16).

There are two primary problems with this teaching on the “baptism of blood.” The first is that it misunderstands Jesus’ own reference to a figurative baptism of suffering.¹⁵ It assumes that one baptism substitutes for the other based upon a dubious symbolic interpretation of a particular passage (John also spoke of a baptism with fire¹⁶ to be given by Jesus. This baptism was one of destruction and hardly substituted for baptism with water. Again, baptism of the Holy Spirit existed at one time in the church, yet those who received it still needed baptism with water.¹⁷ And later in the church, Paul could say there was *one* baptism.¹⁸)

The other problem with this “baptism of blood” is that it was not known in the apostolic church. Since baptism was practiced immediately upon one’s faith and decision to become a disciple of Jesus, *there was no period of time that would make such a doctrine necessary.*

This doctrine probably originated after some people planned to be baptized but, prior to their baptism, they were in fact martyred. Apparently, the church struggled to find a way that these could be regarded as saved, and the doctrine of the efficacy of a “baptism of blood” served this purpose. This is an excellent example of how a deviation from apostolic practice (delay of baptism) required a false doctrine (baptism of blood) to substantiate it. It shows how speculative theology justified the belief with an understanding of Scripture that was inconsistent with New Testament practice.

Expanded Qualification of Candidates for Baptism

In his *Apostolic Tradition*, Hippolytus offered these lengthy conditions and circumstances concerning baptism.

New converts to the faith, who are to be admitted as hearers of the word, shall first be brought to the teachers

¹⁵ Mark 10:38-39, Luke 12:50.

¹⁶ Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16.

¹⁷ Acts 1:15, 10:47-48, 11:16-17.

¹⁸ Ephesians 4:5.

before the people assemble. And they shall be examined as to their reason for embracing the faith, and they who bring them shall testify that they are competent to hear the word. Inquiry shall then be made as the nature of their life; whether a man has a wife or is a slave. If he is the slave of a believer and he has his master's permission, then let him be received; but if his master does not give him a good character, let him be rejected. If this master is a heathen, let the slave be taught to please his master, that the word be not blasphemed. If a man has a wife or a woman a husband, let the man be instructed to content himself with his wife and the woman to content herself with her husband. But if a man is unmarried, let him be instructed to abstain from impurity, either by lawfully marrying a wife or else by remaining as he is. But if any man is possessed with demons, he shall not be admitted as a hearer until he is cleansed.

Inquiry shall likewise be made about the professions and trades of those who are brought to be admitted to the faith. If a man is a pander, he must desist or be rejected. If a man is a sculptor or painter, he must be charged not to make idols; if he does not desist he must be rejected. If a man is an actor or a pantomimist, he must desist or be rejected. A teacher of young children had best desist, but if he has no other occupation, he must continue. A charioteer, likewise, who races or frequents races, must desist or be rejected. A gladiator or trainer of gladiators, or a huntsman, or anyone connected with these shows, or a public official in charge of gladiatorial exhibitions must desist or be rejected. A heathen priest or anyone who tends idols must desist or be rejected. A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and refuse to do so if he is commanded, and to refuse to take an oath; if he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected. A military commander or civic magistrate that wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If a catechumen or a believer seeks to become a soldier, they must be rejected, for they have despised God. A harlot or licentious man or one who has castrated himself, or any other who does things not to be named, must be rejected, for they are defiled. A magician must not even be brought for examination. An enchanter, an astrologer, a diviner, a soothsayer, a user of magic verses, a

juggler, a mountebank, an amulet maker must desist or be rejected. A concubine, who is a slave and has reared her children and has been faithful to her master alone, may become a hearer; but if she has failed in these matters she must be rejected. If a man has a concubine, he must desist and marry legally; if he is unwilling, he must be rejected.

If now, we have omitted anything, the facts will instruct your mind; for we all have the Spirit of God.

Let the catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word, but if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.

When the teacher finishes his instruction, the catechumens shall pray by themselves, apart from the believers. And women, whether believers or catechumens, shall stand for their prayers by themselves in a separate part of the church.

And when the catechumens finish their prayers, they must not give the kiss of peace, for their kiss is not yet pure. Only believers shall salute one another, but men with men and women with women; a man shall not salute a woman.

And let the women have their heads covered with an opaque cloth, not with a veil of thin linen, for this is not a true covering.

At the close of their prayer, when the instructor lays his hand upon the catechumens, he shall pray and dismiss them; whoever gives the instruction is to do this, whether a cleric or a layman.

If a catechumen should be arrested for the name of the Lord, let him not hesitate about bearing his testimony; for if it should happen that they treat him shamefully and kill him, he will be justified, for he has been baptized in his own blood.

They who are to be set apart for baptism shall be chosen after their lives have been examined: whether they have lived soberly, whether they have honored the widows, whether they have visited the sick, whether they have been active in well-doing. When their sponsors testify that they have done these things, then let them hear the gospel. Then from the time that they are separated from the other catechumens, hands shall be laid upon them daily in exorcism, and, as the day of their baptism draws near, the bishop himself shall

exorcise each one of them that he may be personally assured of their purity. Then if there is any of them who is not good or pure, he shall put aside as not having heard the word in faith; for it is never possible for the alien to be concealed.

Then those who are set apart for baptism shall be instructed to bathe and free themselves from impurity and wash themselves on Thursday. If a woman is menstruous, she shall be set aside and baptized on some other day.

They who are to be baptized shall fast on Friday, and on Saturday, and the bishop shall assemble them and command them to kneel in prayer. And, laying his hand upon them, he shall exorcise all evil spirits to flee away and never to return; when he has done this he shall breathe in their faces, seal their foreheads, ears and noses, and then raise them up. They shall spend all that night in a vigil, listening to reading and instruction.

Those who are to be baptized shall bring with them no other vessels than the one each will bring for the eucharist; for it is fitting that he who is counted worthy of baptism should bring his offering at that time (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 2:16-20).¹⁹

The extensive pre-requisites for baptism were apparently designed to make sure that those being baptized were suitable candidates. Though it was a laudable goal to make sure people getting baptized were ready for the lifestyle of a disciple, such demands were beyond the scope of what was practiced in the New Testament and as such are a clear departure from protodoxy. In this time period, baptism occurs on Sunday as a part of the church assembly, following mandatory fasting. This is in accordance with the continuing tradition of the second century.

One should also note the “baptism of blood” as in the time of Tertullian.

New to this time period is the concept of exorcism prior to the baptism, which is never practiced in the New Testament as a condition of discipleship.

¹⁹ Petry, 30.

Simply put, it is not possible to find any evidence for these sorts of restraints and conditions upon baptism in the New Testament. The apparent intent of all these was to make sure those getting baptized were suitable candidates who had in fact repented of sin and met these requirements that had been established.

Infant Baptism

A Roman tombstone from the third or fourth century contained the following epitaph.

Florentius set up this inscription for his well-deserving son Appronianus, who lived one year, nine months and five days. Since he was truly beloved by his grandmother and she saw that he was destined for death, she asked of the church that he should depart from this life a believer (Lateran 40).²⁰

In this reference, we see evidence for the existence of infant baptism. In this period, the mere act of baptism was taken with greater importance than the faith, repentance and discipleship required to make baptism meaningful. As late as Tertullian and Hippolytus, baptism was for adults able to go through the well-defined catechism.

Infant Baptism and the Sin of Adam

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote about 250 A.D. He addresses additional issues surrounding the practice of infant baptism.

But if anything could hinder men from obtaining grace, their more heinous sins might rather hinder those who are mature and grown up and older. But again, if even to the greatest sinners, and to those who had sinned much against God, when they subsequently believed, remission of sins is granted—and nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace—how much rather ought we to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins—that to him are

²⁰ Bettenson, 86.

remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another (Cyprian *Epistle 58 5*).

Here Cyprian claims that a child has done nothing deserving of being denied baptism except his part in the sin of Adam. This is beyond the teaching of the New Testament. It shows that baptism has gone from the conversion of “sinners” to the birthright of the children of believers. This is another example of Scripture being skewed to “support” a belief or practice not found in the apostolic age.

Baptism and Holy Water

Cyprian also discusses what type of water is to be used in baptism.

And again, sacred Scripture warns, and says, "Keep yourself from the strange water, and drink not from a fountain of strange water." It is required, then, that the water should first be cleansed and sanctified by the priest, that it may wash away by its baptism the sins of the man who is baptized; because the Lord says by Ezekiel the prophet: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness; and from all your idols will I cleanse you: a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you" (Cyprian *Epistle 69 1*).

Here the concept of “clean” water is advanced. According to Cyprian, this is the type of water that must be used in baptism. Thus, a priest must have some power of pronouncement over the water, and this water is then to be used to baptize. Again, we see one deviant practice (being baptized with “clean” water) giving rise to whole family of deviant practices (the cleansing of water by a priest, and the position of a priest who has some power of pronouncement over the water to make it “holy”).

In the time of the New Testament church, there were no Christian “priests,”²¹ and there was no such thing as “holy water.” Baptism was performed in common water.

This advanced and incorrect doctrine was derived from a symbolic understanding of Scripture as the basis for practice in the church rather than the historical practice of the church of the first century. As such, this shows that theological considerations and speculations were coming to be more important than known historical facts concerning the practices of the church.

²¹ All Christians were regarded as “priests” in 1Peter 2:9. This was not in a ceremonial or sacramental sense but rather relates to how all Christians have special access to God.



Conclusions

- Baptism is the event by which a person becomes a Christian and a member of the church.
- Baptism is by immersion and for adults who have made the informed decision to become a Christian.
- In the New Testament church, baptisms took place immediately upon one's belief in the message of the gospel. They took place anytime and anywhere, and were performed by anyone.
- The post-apostolic church had a tendency to prepare candidates for baptism with extensive teaching, rigorous expectations and thorough examinations far beyond the scope of what was practiced in apostolic times.

For Today

- Does your understanding and practice of baptism coincide with the historical New Testament practice of baptism?
- Baptism should be performed without delay, upon a candidate's faith and repentance. It should not be delayed unnecessarily until a Sunday assembly or any other event.
- In the first century, the cost of becoming a Christian was evident. Because of the lack of persecution today, "counting the cost" is an important concept; but what costs ought to be counted today?
- How can Christians today make sure a candidate for baptism is "ready," without introducing unnecessary delays? What does "ready" mean? What Bible verses support your answer?

*For whenever you eat this bread and
drink this cup,
you proclaim the Lord's
death until he comes
(1 Corinthians 11:26).*

9

COMMUNION

The Communion in the New Testament

The communion was practiced in the early church as a response to the commands of Jesus the night before the crucifixion. The word “communion” is derived from the Greek *koinonia* (*koinwnia*), which means fellowship. It was also known as the thanksgiving or eucharist, taken from the Greek *eucharistia* (*euparistia*), which means thanksgiving, or simply as “breaking bread.”

There is very little evidence concerning the actual practice of the communion in the New Testament. In light of this, the available evidence must be carefully considered to understand how the first century church practiced communion.

There are several observations one can make from the institution of the communion at the Last Supper.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:26-29).

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:23-25).

And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:15-20).

It is clear from the institution at the Last Supper that the bread symbolizes the body of Jesus "given for you" and the wine symbolizes the blood of Jesus "poured out for you."¹ First and foremost, the

¹ The symbolism of the bread and its association with the body of Jesus may have a reference to the Passover bread (Exodus 12:15ff), or perhaps the Bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:30, 40:22-23, Leviticus 24:5-9). In a similar manner, the wine may be a reference to the drink offering, a pouring out of wine which accompanied the sacrifice of a lamb (Numbers 28:7ff). Reference 2Timothy 4:6, Philippians 2:17. There is also the symbolism of Melchizedek bringing bread and wine to Abram in Genesis 14:18 and of Jesus feeding the masses in Matthew 14:19 et. al.

elements are directly linked to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. In addition, this was to be done repeatedly in remembrance of Jesus.

The early apostolic church seems to have referred to this practice as “breaking bread.”

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42).

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:46).

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.

Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left (Acts 20:7,11).

This phrase “breaking (the) bread” is generally a technical reference to the communion. There are several reasons to conclude this. The context in Acts 2:42, 46 relates the phrase to other distinctive Christian, spiritual acts. To suggest that this phrase would relate to common meals would be like saying they were *devoted* to breathing or some other trivial and routine act, and that they met together for this purpose. In addition, there are other word groups in the New Testament that denote a common meal. In Acts 20:7,11, this breaking of bread took place after midnight, which strongly suggests an observance of the communion and not a common meal or even an *agape* feast.²

The bulk of what we know about the practice of regular participation in New Testament communion comes from 1 Corinthians.

² The use of this term “breeding bread” in Acts 27 presents an interesting situation. It should probably be viewed as a “feeding of the masses” in the same vein as Matthew 14:19 et. al.

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).³

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions (1 Corinthians 11:20-26, 33-34).

In the letter to the Corinthians, the bread and wine are shared as a clear observance of communion. In addition, it seems to have taken place in a context of a larger meal.⁴ The Corinthian abuse was that the people were hurrying through their meal, some of them in excess, so that the communion observance was not shared in unity with others whom they left behind through their lack of self-control.

Only in 1 Corinthians does the phrase "Lord's Supper" appear. In the case of the Last Supper, the gospels say that the communion took

³ This particular passage uses the word *koinonia* (*koinwnia*) for the word "sharing" in the NIV.

⁴ The fellowship meal (love-feast or "agape") seems to be alluded to in 2 Peter 2:13 and Jude 1:12 (and possibly Acts 2:46). It appears to have been a common though not universal practice in the apostolic church.

place during the supper. It follows that the *Lord's Supper* (an observance of the *Last Supper*) would include the sharing of communion in the context of a common meal as it did on the night Jesus was betrayed.

Interestingly, the cup is only spoken of in 1 Corinthians and not in Acts, though in Acts it is not necessarily excluded. Since the injunction to partake of both the bread and the cup in remembrance of Jesus was a part of the institution, it is reasonable to suggest that it was probably a part of the communion observances in Acts, though this cannot be said with absolute certainty.

In his letter to the Corinthians, it is most likely that Paul is referring to the church with the term "recognizing the body of the Lord." They were not waiting for each other ("the body") to take the communion together. As a result, they were failing to recognize the body of the Lord, instead "despising the church" by failing to *share* in the communion in an orderly and unified manner. Consider the context of the remarks.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment (1 Corinthians 11:27-34).

The critical spiritual aspects of the communion are evident from summarizing these passages. The communion is a fellowship meal with Jesus *and* the church. It is a proclamation of his death. It is to be done in a worthy manner, recognizing the body of the Lord and the unity of the church, symbolized by the bread.

The early Jerusalem church seems to have enjoyed a common meal and communion on a daily basis (Acts 2:42).

The meeting of Acts 20:7 was clearly a Sunday meeting (though the communion took place after midnight!).

The gathering of the Corinthians for their feast and communion was likely though not necessarily also on Sunday (the Corinthians met on the first day of the week, according to 1 Corinthians 16:1).

In conclusion, the early church seems to have broken the bread and taken the cup, apparently once a week (though on other occasions as well), sometimes accompanied by a meal. It was to be taken in a worthy way, with self-examination, respecting the sacrifice of Jesus. It identified the believer with both Jesus and the church. The bread and blood had a direct symbolic link to the feeding of the masses by Jesus, Jesus as the "bread of life," the death of Jesus on the cross, and to certain Old Testament events that now appear to be precursors to the communion.

Communion in the Post-Apostolic Church

Eucharistic Prayer

In the records of the early post-apostolic church, we see some references to the communion very early on. The Didache (120 A.D.) contains the following instructions.

Now concerning the Thanksgiving, thus give thanks. First, concerning the cup: We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David Your servant, which You made known to us through Jesus Your Servant; to You be the glory for ever. And concerning the broken bread: We thank You, our Father, for the life and knowledge which You made known to us through Jesus Your Servant; to You be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Your kingdom; for Yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever. But let no one eat or drink of your Thanksgiving, but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, Give not that which is holy to the dogs (Didache 9).

Confession Prior to Communion, Communion as a Sacrifice

The Didache also discussed the matter of confession prior to participating in the communion.

But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations (Didache 14).

Even at this early stage we see a formula provided for the way in which communion ought to be practiced. This is probably in response to some communion services, which were not conducted as some thought they should have been. This shows that the communion was becoming (or had become) a ceremonial act beyond the mere thanks for, distribution of and consumption of its elements.

In this reference, the symbolic link with the bread and the church (the spiritual body of Christ) is illustrated. Also, we see an early idea of how communion came to be regarded as some sort of a sacrifice.

Elaborate Spiritualization of the Elements

Ignatius, in his writings to the churches of Asia on his way to martyrdom in Rome in the early second century, touched on issues surrounding the Lord's Supper.

Breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die but live forever in Jesus Christ (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 20).⁵

Do therefore arm yourselves with gentleness and recover yourselves in faith which is the flesh of the Lord, and in love which is the blood of Jesus Christ (Ignatius, *Trallians* 8).

⁵ Lightfoot, 68.

I have no desire in the food of corruption or in the delights of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ who was the seed of David; and for a draught I desire His blood, which is love incorruptible (Ignatius, *Romans 7*).

Be careful therefore to observe one eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one cup unto union in His blood; there is one altar, as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow-servants), that whatsoever you do, you may do it after God (Ignatius, *Philadelphians 4*).

They (heretics) abstain from eucharist and prayer, because they allow not that the eucharist is the flesh of Savior Jesus Christ, which flesh suffered for our sins.

Let be held a valid eucharist which is under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it (Ignatius, *Smyrnans 6, 8*).⁶

In the comments of Ignatius, we see a continued spiritualization of the communion elements, equating faith and the bread, love with the blood. There is also an aspect in the communion that the elements are the spiritual body and blood of Jesus, sacrificed to God.⁷

Ignatius also saw that the bishop should have such a role that his absence from or lack of authority over the communion would invalidate it.

There is no evidence from the New Testament that the elements were ever regarded as anything other than bread and wine representing the body and blood of Jesus. Nor is there any evidence that any leader needed to be present for a communion to be “valid.”

⁶ Lightfoot, 63-84.

⁷ This may need to be considered in contrast to the heretical pseudo-Christian gnostics of the time, who believed that Jesus did not truly have flesh.

Water in Communion, Absent Members, Literal Body and Blood of Jesus, and Deacons' Distribution of Elements

In the middle of the second century, Justin's apology discusses the contemporary practice and thinking surrounding the communion.

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place. There the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read, for as long as time permits. When the reader is finished, the presiding brother verbally instructs us and urges us to imitate the good things that were read to us. Next we all rise together and pray. And as I related before, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought. In like manner, the presiding brother offers prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability. And the people assent, saying, "Amen." Then the bread and wine are distributed to each person, and each partakes. The deacons take a portion to those who are absent.

Those who are well to do, and are willing, give what they think fit. The funds collected are deposited with the presiding brother, who helps the orphans and widows, together with others in need because of sickness or any other reason. He also assists the prisoners, and any strangers who happen to be among us. In short, he takes care of all who are in need.

Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common meeting, because it is the first day on which God made the world, having worked a change in the darkness and matter. On this same day, Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead (Justin, *Apology* 67).

And this food is called the thanksgiving. The only ones allowed to partake of this are those who believe that the things we teach are true, who have been washed with the washing that is for the forgiveness of sins and for spiritual rebirth, and who live by the teachings of Christ. For we do not receive these as just ordinary bread and drink. But Jesus Christ our Savior became human by the word of God—having both flesh and blood for our salvation. So we have been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of

his word is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. Our blood and flesh are nourished from it by transmutation.

The apostles, in their memoirs, which are called "good news," have passed on to us the things Jesus commanded them. They relate that Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks, said, "This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me." And in like manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, he said, "This is my blood," and gave it to them alone (Justin, *Apology* 65-66).

In Justin's testimony, we see several practices associated with the communion. The prayer of the one presiding (probably but not necessarily the monarchical bishop) is described as lengthy; certainly more than the simple thanks for the bread and wine in the last supper in the upper room. This is a continuation of the spirit seen in the *Didache* referenced above.

The prayer of the president seems to have acquired some aspect of pronouncement, after which the elements were suitable for use in the communion.

At this time, wine was mixed with water. There is no evidence given why this was done. Adding water to wine was a common practice of the day, to moderate the bitter taste of wine.⁸ In this case, there would be no ceremonial aspect to this practice. However, some have seen the connection between water and blood in this practice.⁹ Further, the context in which Justin mentions this blood and water connection implies a ceremonial aspect.

Note that deacons (members of a known, biblical church office) have assumed a specialized role in distributing communion.

We see a more certain leaning towards the doctrine of transubstantiation, the belief that the bread and the wine, after the pronouncement of the president, are the literal body and blood of Jesus. This is in a contrast to earlier times (reflected in the New

⁸ For instance, consider Mt 27:48, Mk 15:36, Lk 23:36, Jn 19:29, where each gospel writer uses the word *oxous* (*οξου*) to describe wine vinegar, a cheap bitter wine. "It relieved thirst more effectively than water, and, because it was cheaper than regular wine, it was a favorite beverage of the lower ranks of society and of those in moderate circumstances." Bauer, 574.

⁹ Reference 1 John 5:6-8, John 19:34.

Testament, Ignatius, and the Didache) where the elements of communion were regarded as the body and blood of Jesus in a spiritual or symbolic manner, not in a literal manner.

In this time, we also see the taking of the elements to those absent. Certainly the first century church had people absent from the assembly, and there is no word in the New Testament about taking communion to them. So we must consider whether this is a practice that existed in apostolic times and was never mentioned, or was new to the period under consideration. Since Paul told the Corinthians about the necessity of the body taking the communion together, we must consider whether this prohibits or demands the taking of communion to those absent.

Two Realities Offered To God

In the time of Irenaeus (about 180 A.D.), the communion is considered an offering to God, consecrated by a prayer. He considers the elements to become intrinsically different as a result.

But our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and Spirit. For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity (Irenaeus *Book 4*, 18:4-5).

Irenaeus sees the communion as an offering to God and the change in the substance of the elements after the “invocation” of God.

From the Hand of the President, A Sacrament

Tertullian, at the end of the second century, wrote concerning the communion.

We take also, in the congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at

meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike (Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, III).¹⁰

In the time of Tertullian, the congregation met before dawn and took communion from the hand of the president, who in all likelihood is the monarchical bishop. We also see the teaching that communion was to be taken at mealtimes during the love feast. This teaching is cited as from the Lord, but no reference is given. Given the lack of reference to this in the New Testament, we must regard this as simply an unsubstantiated tradition.

In calling the eucharist a sacrament, Tertullian equated the thanksgiving of the elements with the concept of a sacrifice performed by a priest.

Offering To God

About the year 220 A.D. Hippolytus writes of the plan for an entire worship service of the church of his time.

Who (Jesus), when he was betrayed to his willing death, that he might bring to naught death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread hell underfoot, and give light to the righteous, and set up a boundary post, and manifest his resurrection, taking bread and giving thanks to you said: Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. And likewise also the cup, saying, This is my blood, which is shed for you. As often as you perform this, perform my memorial. Having in memorial, therefore, his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, yielding you thanks, because you have counted us worthy to stand before you and to minister to you (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 1:1-15).

Hippolytus, like Irenaeus, regards the thanksgiving for the elements as some form of an offering to God, adding that a minister exercising some aspect of a priestly role performs this. In this, it appears that the primary work of a minister has become the priestly aspect of communion. The practical work, which occupied ministers in the New Testament times (prayer and ministry of the word), had been

¹⁰ Petry, 98.

cast aside in favor of the ceremonial work associated with the communion.

Wine Turned Into Blood

Cyril was the bishop of Jerusalem in the mid-fourth century and wrote in his catechism.

Since he himself has declared and said of the bread, "This is my body," who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He has affirmed and said, "This is my blood," who shall ever hesitate, saying, that it is not his blood? He once turned water into wine, in Cana of Galilee, at his own will, and is it incredible that he should have turned wine into blood? (Cyril, *Mystagogical Catechesis*. 4:1-2).

Cyril suggests a link with the incident at Cana and the communion as the proof that Jesus' words "This is my body" are to be taken literally. But there are substantial differences between the two events that do not support this conclusion.

At Cana, water was changed into wine—those at the banquet tasted wine, not water that *symbolized* or *represented* wine. At the Last Supper, the elements were not changed into the literal body and blood of Jesus; they were still bread and wine. Nowhere do the Scriptures teach or suggest a change to the elements. In the early third century, some came to understand Jesus' words as effecting a change to the elements, which was not understood in the apostolic times.

In the apostolic age, the communion was a thankful consumption of the elements, spiritually sharing in the "body and blood" of Jesus, in remembrance of him. A little more than one hundred years beyond this time, it consisted of some sort of an effectual pronouncement by a priest-like individual. Through this pronouncement, the bread and wine supposedly became not just symbols of Jesus' body and blood, but his literal body and blood. It likewise carried with it the idea that, in the elements, Jesus was present and was somehow being sacrificed to God all over again.



Conclusions

- The communion is a memorial of Jesus himself. It is shared among believers with a direct view to his death on the cross.
- The communion is extremely rich in symbolism with the bread and wine, but one must be extremely careful about going beyond symbolism into spiritualistic concepts regarding the elements.
- Communion seems to have been taken on the first day of the week, but there are instances in which communion was apparently taken on other days.
- The unity of the church is absolutely essential to the practice of communion.

For Today

- Do you participate in the communion in a way that pleases the Lord?
- What are some of the ways of sharing in the communion that would displease the Lord?
- Is it appropriate to take the elements of the communion to absent members? What are the implications of this? What are the arguments on both sides of this issue?

*You were running a good race.
Who cut in on you and kept you
from obeying the truth?
(Galatians 5:7).*

10

FACTORS BEHIND THE CHANGES

The history of the post-apostolic church shows evidence of changes from the apostolic church in both faith and practice. It is certainly interesting to see how certain doctrines and practices came into being, and revealing these things is one of the purposes of this book.

However, we must look beyond the individual changes in faith and practices that occurred and consider *why* and *how* these things changed from the apostolic era. The underlying principles or patterns that were involved in these changes must be identified if we hope to apply these lessons to our lives and churches today.

Authority-Related Effects

In the post-apostolic church, the authority structure changed. The apostolic church was under the authority of the apostles. The post-apostolic church came to regard itself as its own authority. Two important patterns in the post-apostolic church, the myth of infallibility

and speculative theology, provided the supposed authority for other changes which took place.

The Myth of Infallibility

The post-apostolic church had a tendency to consider itself incapable of a departure from the faith. In time it came to define “right” by what it did, apart from Scriptural authority or even previously established church tradition.

One factor in the church’s view of itself was the thought that those who held the positions of leadership once held by the apostles, and those who had been appointed by apostles, came to have the same intrinsic authority as the apostles themselves. The breakdown occurred when people assumed that the leaders appointed by the apostles were like the apostles in everything. This was not true in an empirical sense, and could only be true in a coincidental sense when they taught what the apostles taught (protodoxy).

The apostles possessed a unique teaching authority that no others after them possessed. It was a grave error to assume that leaders after the apostles could teach authoritatively in the same way as the apostles, simply because they had been appointed by the apostles. These people may have been appointed to the leadership positions of the apostles, but they did not have the same teaching authority as the apostles.

Another factor in the concept of infallibility was the rise of spiritual “celebrities” or “heroes.” These may have known apostles personally, endured hardship or persecution or done some great teaching or ministry; whatever the cause for their celebrity, the church gave them enormous respect. However, the church also gave them unwarranted and excessive influence. For instance, any teaching or practice from these celebrities had a way of getting accepted and propagated to disciples in many places precisely because of *whom* they came from, regardless of whether it was part of the apostolic pattern or not.

Some supposed that the teaching of Jesus guaranteed the infallibility of the church.

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will

speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come (John 16:13).

Jesus guaranteed that the *apostles* would be guided into all truth, not that the entire church for all ages would be guided into all truth. There was no need for anyone else to ever be guided into all truth as the apostles were, because the apostles were guided into that truth and their pattern stands for all time, preserved in the history of the apostolic church and the New Testament.

These words of Jesus are not an assertion that the church is incapable of error—even during the lifetimes of the apostles the church had to fight to overcome and resist error. The apostles *never* believed that the church was incapable of error. The fact is the church has always been capable of error! Remember how much of the New Testament is devoted to helping the church stay on the right track?

It was a huge mistake to think that whatever direction the “church” (the visible church and its hierarchy) went in, it went there at the leading of God. God did not, could not and would not ever lead his people into *anything* that contradicted where he led the apostles!

As incredible as it may sound, the post-apostolic church nevertheless thought and acted as though it was infallible. Whatever it did was assumed to be acceptable. This belief is held even to this day. A modern Roman Catholic writer has stated it in this way.

Infalibility is expressed by the belief of the people of the church who are in union with the pope and bishops. **When the people as a whole believe a doctrine, it must be true.** "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One... cannot err in matters of belief" (Constitution on the Church, no. 12).¹

Listed below are some examples of how the post-apostolic church viewed itself as infallible.

¹ Anthony Wilhelm, *Christ Among Us*, Third Edition (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), 150.

- Ignatius in his letter to the Smyrnans said, “Whatsoever he (the bishop) shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God.”
- Ignatius’ view on the monarchical episcopate is an excellent example of how a spiritual “celebrity” or “hero” had the ability to exert influence to his own generation and subsequent generations, perhaps in ways he did not intend.
- Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*) and Tertullian (*The Prescription Against Heretics*) appealed to apostolic succession and the practices of churches with apostolic origins as the standard of truth. In context, they were defending the churches with apostolic links against heretics who had *no* apostolic link whatsoever. Their statements were not true apart from their contexts, because any local church could deviate from the truth whether or not it had apostolic origins.

Speculative Theology

The post-apostolic church had an increasing tendency to understand the writings of the New Testament in speculative ways that were not consistent with how they were understood and/or practiced in the apostolic age.

First and foremost, the New Testament writings are historical documents. Before the New Testament canon ever existed, the New Testament writings testified to the practice of Christianity in the time of the apostles in various times and places. Therefore, the certain and true practices of the apostolic church are seen in the pages of the New Testament.

Speculative theology likely came into being when a practice or concept unknown to the New Testament church was in practice in the post-apostolic church. When the belief or practice was challenged, no valid *historical* evidence from the New Testament could be found to justify it. The proponents of the practice (who may have thought that the church was infallible) were left to justify it based upon an appeal to some passage of Scripture that, when “properly interpreted,” would allow or endorse the practice.

As a result, some began to suppose that the New Testament writings had some “secret,” “spiritual” or “hidden” meanings. Under this supposition, allegorical or bizarre interpretations of the New Testament writings apart from their historical context became valid. This led to more doctrines and practices that were not in keeping with the historical apostolic pattern. To a church that thought itself as infallible or had possibly become bored with protodoxy and wanted “more advanced” theology, speculative theology certainly found a willing audience.²

One contributing factor to this tendency was the use of the Old Testament in the early church. As we considered earlier in this book, the Old Testament frequently described the church age in the figurative language of prophecy. It was a natural progression for the church to consider the apostolic writings in a figurative sense, even though doing so divorced these writings from their contexts and thus their meanings.

Origen was a great thinker and creative theologian who was the primary architect of the doctrine of the Trinity. He advanced the theory that Scripture has multiple levels of interpretation.

The way, then, as it appears to us, in which we ought to deal with the Scriptures, and extract from them their meaning, is the following, which has been ascertained from the Scriptures themselves. By Solomon in the Proverbs we find some such rule as this enjoined respecting the divine doctrines of Scripture: "And do you portray them in a threefold manner, in counsel and knowledge, to answer words of truth to them who propose them to you." The individual ought, then, to portray the ideas of holy Scripture in a threefold manner upon his own soul; in order that the simple man may be edified by the "flesh," as it were, of the Scripture, for so we name the obvious sense; while he who has ascended a certain way (may be edified) by the "soul," as it were. The perfect man, again, and he who resembles those spoken of by the apostle, when he says, "We speak wisdom

² In the course of this discussion, it is useful to recall the prophecy that men would one day be drawn to teachers to say what their “itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

among them that are perfect, but not the wisdom of the world, nor of the rulers of this world, who come to nothing; but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God has ordained before the ages, unto our glory," (may receive edification) from the spiritual law, which has a shadow of good things to come. For as man consists of body, and soul, and spirit, so in the same way does Scripture, which has been arranged to be given by God for the salvation of men (Origen, *On First Principles Book IV 1:11*).³

This is a good example of the type of reasoning used in speculative theology in the post-apostolic period. Is it any wonder that all sorts of fanciful doctrines unknown in the time of the apostles came into being during this era of the church?

Here are some examples of speculative theology in the history of the post-apostolic church.

- The triune baptism of the Didache and Tertullian apparently derives from Matthew 28:19.⁴ Yet, triune baptism was not practiced in apostolic times.
- Tertullian's teaching on the "baptism of blood" attempted to draw a connection between the different baptisms recognized in the New Testament.
- Cyprian's teachings about holy water appealed to understandings of certain passages in ways they were not understood by even the apostles.
- Cyril's discussion of the doctrine of transubstantiation appealed to a parallel between the changing of water into wine at Cana and the pronouncement of wine being

³ The passage quoted from Solomon is Proverbs 22:20-21. The NIV renders this passage: Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you true and reliable words, so that you can give sound answers to him who sent you?" The NASB translates it as follows: "Have I not written to you excellent things of counsels and knowledge, to make you know the certainty of the words of truth that you may correctly answer to him who sent you?" It is not clear how Origen came to apply this particular passage to the interpretation of the Scriptures.

⁴ It is interesting to observe that Matthew 28:19 says "in the name of..." (singular) and not "in the names of..." (plural) when referring to the three persons of God.

“turned into blood” during communion. However, the apostles did not teach this understanding about the elements of communion.

Practice-Related Effects

The post-apostolic church experienced significant changes in its practices. There were three primary characteristics of the changes that took place in the practices and beliefs of the post-apostolic church.

Incremental Changes

There is overwhelming evidence that the changes in the post-apostolic church took place in a succession of small, incremental steps. Even though none of these steps was an immediate cause for concern, their collective effect became substantial. When substantiated by the belief in infallibility, this led to devastating changes over the course of time.

Think about your own life for a minute. Do you have the same practices in terms of your faith that you had a year ago? How about five years ago? What about ten years ago? Even in our own lives, we change our practices over time. In a similar way, the early Christians changed their practices over time, always thinking they were making improvements with each step. Certain things seemed like a good idea to the church at the time, so they were practiced. Certain things seemed reasonable or solved apparent problems, so they were not rejected. In and of themselves, these changes may or may not have been harmful or wrong.

However, when the next generation of Christians came along, the Christianity they inherited as their point of reference was not the apostolic model, but the modified model from their immediate predecessors. As a result, the second generation started off one step removed from the apostolic pattern, and they didn't even know it!

Then the process repeated itself with each subsequent generation making more changes that all seemed reasonable and like good ideas at the time. With changes occurring in this way, it is easy to see how serious and substantial changes to various practices of Christianity could take place in just a few generations.

Here are some examples of incremental changes in the history of the post-apostolic church.

- The assembly of the church in the apostolic age gradually changed into the Mass of Catholicism. This began initially with the prescribed order of certain events and the exclusion of other elements in the assembly compared to apostolic times, and grew into the ritualistic performance of the prescribed order of events.
- Baptism originally began as the spontaneous immersion of disciples immediately upon their acceptance of the gospel and the terms of discipleship. It grew into the baptism of proselytes (or catechumens) who merited baptism after having passed some form of instruction and qualification. From there it evolved into the baptism of infants, who (it was felt) “merited” baptism as much as any catechumen. In addition, the allowance of pouring (first mentioned in the *Didache*) led to the widespread practice of sprinkling.
- The apostolic practice of communion was a simple remembrance of Jesus, whose presence was *symbolized* in the elements of bread and wine. Over time, the failure to adhere to the simple apostolic view of communion eventually led to the ritualistic observance of the communion and the concept that the elements were not simply symbols of Jesus’ body and blood.

Universal Application of Individual Solutions and Allowed Practices

In the post-apostolic church, there was a concern that certain good and righteous actions were done in a “right” way. This was often in relation to those who might do these things the “wrong” way or not at all. This was not a bad thing to be concerned about, in and of itself.

However, the post-apostolic church put various methods or controls into place to assure those things were done “right.” These methods or controls in time came to replace the commands they were intended to facilitate. This line of thinking was extremely pervasive in the post-apostolic church, and was a definite change from the apostolic pattern.

In contrast, the individual disciple (or church) of the apostolic period applied the teachings of protodoxy and his (or its) resources to his (or their) situation to accomplish the purposes of Jesus. When all disciples (or churches) of Jesus did this, then there was *unity of purpose* in the church, even while there was diversity of visible action.

The most obvious problem with the universal application of individual solutions is that it assumes that what is the right or best way to do something in one situation is automatically the right and best way to do it in any and all situations. This is obviously not true. Another problem here is the assertion that certain actions are pleasing to God, apart from the faith (or the heart to please God) which stands behind the action. Again, this assertion is not true. Still another problem with this is that this universal application of some standard solution to a problem prohibits a better solution in other situations.

Initially, these methods and controls merely obscured the right thing they were intended to facilitate. In due time these became more significant than the right thing altogether. The end result was that a man-made command or rule had replaced the good and righteous practice. Similarly, certain practices that were allowed or acceptable eventually became required. These practices were not specifically commanded in the apostolic age but were reasonable in some specific situation. Instead of these practices passing away with the time and place in which they were reasonable, they grew into future requirements for all Christians everywhere. Under this guise, all sorts of practices became an intrinsic part of the practice of Christianity, established and required long after their time of significance had passed.

One might argue here that imitation is a good and commanded thing and that it is not wrong to imitate others who are doing good things. However, the issue is not the practice of imitation (which is good), but the *scope* of that imitation. Specific practices were rarely commanded to be imitated in the New Testament. Instead, it is the spiritual character and purpose of others that are to be imitated. Right

imitation is imitation of purpose and spiritual character, not mere actions.⁵

Here are some examples of how individual solutions and allowed practices were applied universally in the post-apostolic church.

- The whole concept of a “liturgy” (a prescribed script for church assembly) arose as an attempt to make sure all assemblies consisted of the appropriate elements. Even if an assembly following these liturgies would have been acceptable and within the scope of apostolic practice, it was wrong to canonize any such liturgy as the definitive and exclusive fulfillment of the command of God for the assembly. Further, these liturgies excluded from the “right” practice certain elements that were a significant part of the assembly in the apostolic church. Assemblies went from being spontaneous and participatory in the apostolic age to the ritualistic performance of the scripted liturgy of the Mass.
- The manner of handling proselyte baptism illustrated in the era of Hippolytus shows how practices that were reasonable for some were mandated to all Christians everywhere. For instance, some may have needed or desired an extended period of prayer or fasting prior to their baptism, but it grew into a full-blown requirement for all converts.
- The Smyrnans had intentions to commemorate the martyrdom of Polycarp on the anniversary of his death at his grave. This was reasonable for those who knew him, but it was not legitimate to create what became the “feast days” of saints to be commemorated by all Christians everywhere.

Expectation of External Conformity

With its focus on external practices, the concept of *diversity of practices* came to be an issue in the post-apostolic church. In the apostolic church, a wide variety of practices, which accomplished the

⁵ The concept of imitation is discussed in more detail in Appendix A under the the Greek *mimetai* (*mimetai*) and *typos* (*tupo*”).

purposes of Jesus, were acceptable. In the post-apostolic church, it was no longer adequate to have practices that accomplished the purposes of Jesus; practices had to be the same as those of some other more influential group.⁶

The more influential churches had a habit of viewing all other churches in terms of how their external practices matched up against their own. If another church was different, they were often regarded as not just different but wrong. Consequently, these churches stated and published their practices so other churches would “avoid error.”

From time to time, two or more influential churches differed on certain issues. Instead of recognizing the inherent diversity in the apostolic pattern or considering that the issue in question was *not* a critical element of the faith (protodoxy), these situations rather tended to degenerate into a childish “my apostle is bigger than your apostle” type of debate. The post-apostolic church became overly concerned with uniformity of external actions.

It should be noted that there were some truly heretical groups in the post-apostolic age. The intent of the influential churches was undoubtedly to make sure that other churches were right and not becoming heretics, but they wrongly measured and mandated the external actions rather than spiritual qualities and purposes. In their zeal to protect churches from error, the influential churches unwittingly invalidated the legitimate practice of Christianity by others, and reduced the practice of Christianity to the performance of a prescribed set of ritualistic actions.

Here are some examples of how external conformity was expected in the history of the post-apostolic church.

- Many authors of the post-apostolic era used a phrase like, “So you can avoid error” in their liturgies and instruction. Among these are Ignatius and Hippolytus. The implication of these remarks is that anyone who did not follow these instructions was *in error*, no matter how true to the apostolic pattern their practices may have been.

⁶ The Roman church was prominently involved in this in the third century, yet it was not the only church that had such an influence.

- An especially significant instance of this expectation of uniform practices is seen in the Easter controversy of the late second century.

Primary Reasons for Changes

Having seen the key areas where changes took place in the authority and practice of the post-apostolic church, we must consider *why* the changes took place. There were three primary reasons why the post-apostolic church deviated from the apostolic pattern. They are.

- Neglect of Protodoxy by Leadership
- New Purposes
- Change in the Object of Discipleship

Neglect of Protodoxy by Leadership

In order for the changes in the post-apostolic church to occur, there had to be a massive failure in leadership. However, it is not easy to charge these early leaders with fault of *any* kind; these were extremely noble and outstanding men, worthy of respect in their age and ours. Many of them died as martyrs in the cruelest and most inhuman ways that the Romans could devise. They certainly were devoted in their commitment to Christianity.

These leaders did not *deliberately* deviate from the apostolic pattern. As David Berçot says, “If these men had been dishonestly twisting the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, would they have been willing to die for Jesus?”⁷ None of these men decided one day, “Let’s turn Christianity into a ritual-laden religion.”

However, the leaders of the post-apostolic church clearly failed to understand and continually promote protodoxy before the church as the standard of faith and discipleship. They did not judge their own practices according to the apostolic writings they possessed, and instead caused or allowed changes to the baseline of Christianity. This negligence was exacerbated by the perception of themselves and the

⁷ David W. Berçot, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up* (Tyler, Texas: Scroll Publishing Co., 1989), 109.

church as being infallible. With a shifting baseline as the standard in the church, its apostasy was inevitable.

New Purposes

The post-apostolic church had different purposes than the apostolic church. Once the purposes of the church changed, the way the church viewed itself and measured itself also changed. This change in purposes had a far-reaching effect in the post-apostolic church.

The apostles and the New Testament church were concerned about the purposes of Jesus,⁸ and its practices followed from those purposes. But the post-apostolic church somehow discarded the purposes of Jesus and instead became concerned about the observable, external practices of those claiming to follow Jesus, and distinguishing itself from those “in error.” With this change in purposes, the departure of the church from Jesus was real and visible.

Change in the Object of Discipleship

The post-apostolic church experienced a change in the object of discipleship. The principle of discipleship is discussed in Matthew 28:19, “Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This was practiced in the apostolic church—the object of discipleship was the teachings of the Lord, and the trainers in discipleship were the apostles. By a reasonable extension, the trainers came to include other leaders, older disciples, and anyone else who could help teach a Christian to “obey everything” Jesus commanded. Their standard was to follow and imitate Jesus.⁹

In contrast, the post-apostolic church practiced a form of discipleship that could have been stated, “Teach them to obey everything the bishop has commanded; and every good thing that anyone, anywhere ever practiced.” Because submission to leadership¹⁰ and imitation of others are both a legitimate part of Christianity, this perversion of discipleship was especially dangerous.

In the post-apostolic period the monarchical bishops were regarded as the authoritative voice, the exclusive source of reliable

⁸ These were discussed in Chapter 1.

⁹ See 1 John 2:6.

¹⁰ See Hebrews 13:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 1 Corinthians 16:16, 1 Peter 5:5.

and true apostolic teachings. Having the dual role of teacher *and* chief ruling authority in the churches, the door was opened for them to teach as they saw fit and then to demand that the church obey them.

Because the church was so concerned about doing things the “right” way and the appearance of unity, efforts were made to assure that all the churches did everything the same way. This perverted the concept of imitation and helped lead to the church making itself its own standard of authority. With this change in the object of discipleship, the departure from Jesus was complete.



Conclusions

- The authority for changes in the post-apostolic church came from its own self-perception of infallibility and its tendency towards using speculative theology to justify its practices.
- The changes in the practices and beliefs of the post-apostolic church occurred incrementally.
- The post-apostolic church had a tendency to require universal uniformity in its practices.
- The post-apostolic church had three primary breakdowns that led to its demise: The failure of leadership to promote protodoxy, new purposes for the church, and a change in the object of discipleship.

For Today

- What are some examples of practices that may be good and reasonable for some people or for a period of time, but ought to fade away when that time passes?
- What is the opposite of “speculative theology?”
- When is it appropriate to imitate others? What should be imitated?
- Do you know anyone who is infallible? Do you know anyone who *thinks* he is infallible?
- If the desired end of a practice is good then is the practice itself automatically good?

*He who has an ear, let him
hear what the Spirit says
to the churches
(Revelation 2:7).*

11

WARNINGS FOR TODAY

This chapter may be the most important chapter in the book. If one does not apply the lessons taught by both the Scriptures and history to one's life today, this entire study is little more than a sad history of failure.

The first portion of this book discussed the purposes of Jesus from a scriptural point of view, considering how the early church had these same purposes. The book then moved on to discuss threats to the purposes and the tools that the early church had at its disposal to stay faithful to those purposes.

In chapters six through ten, we considered the historical evidence of how the church of the post-apostolic era differed from the apostolic church. We examined specific practices and identified characteristics of the post-apostolic church that were different from the church of the apostolic era.

Here we will consider the key areas for the church to pay attention to in our day.

Know the Purposes

In chapter one of this book, we saw that Jesus had definite purposes; in chapter two, we saw that the apostolic church had these same purposes. In the last chapter we saw that one of the primary factors in the demise of the post-apostolic church was the change in purposes. So for us today, we need to pay very close attention to our purposes.

Early in the movie *Patton*, there is a scene where General Patton assumes command of troops in Africa. He is expected at the headquarters at 9 A.M. but arrives at 7 A.M. As he arrives he finds the troops undisciplined, demoralized and unprepared for war against the German army, having lost the last battle decisively. Walking through the headquarters, he and his entourage open a door and find a soldier sleeping on the floor. The soldier is awoken with a kick in the backside, and one of Patton's assistants asks him what he is doing on the floor. "Trying to get some sleep, sir" was the reply.

Patton said to the soldier, "Well son, get back down there and go back to sleep. You're the only *bleep* in this headquarters who knows what he's trying to do."

Often, the church is like this army headquarters. In the midst of all the activity going on in the church, how much of what is being done is actually accomplishing its purposes?

Bring Salvation

Since bringing salvation is one of the purposes of Jesus, it follows that one of the purposes of the church is bringing salvation to people. This is done through evangelism of those outside the church, to bring them into a relationship with God; and through shepherding those inside the church, to guide and protect them from the failings in life and doctrine that can threaten their salvation. Thus, evangelism of those outside the church and shepherding those inside the church are part of the purpose of Jesus. To drift from either of these is to drift from the purposes of Jesus.

Revealing God

Since revealing God is one of the purposes of Jesus, the church must be concerned about teaching the world and its members about God. There is a clear distinction here between revealing morality (that

is, what is right and wrong) and revealing the One who is the *source* of morality. Consider the following passage.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (John 1:17-18).

Certainly the law—a set of commands concerning morality—came through Moses, but true knowledge of God came through Jesus. True morality follows from the nature of God,¹ and the nature of God is seen in the incarnation of Jesus. In sending Jesus, God wanted his people to know *him*, not just to know about him or the moral commands he sponsored.

Often, teachings about morality from the church can focus on specific actions on “hot” issues but not focus on revealing God. In these cases, teachings about morality are little more than rules of behavior, fail to reveal God and sometimes may even obscure God. God was revealed in Jesus, true morality follows from his life. The church departs from the purpose of Jesus when it takes the shortcut of teaching morality and action instead of teaching about God.

Polarizing Mankind

Since polarizing mankind was one of the purposes of Jesus, the church today must be concerned about doing likewise. This fits into two natural aspects, the unity of the church and its distinction from the world. The unity of the church is a very important topic and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The church must always remember that the world will always hate Christians. It cannot shrink back when persecution or other forms of hatred happen. These things are a part of the purpose of Jesus.

The church can never compromise its distinctiveness from the world in its desire to evangelize those outside the church. It must be careful to not be enticed into being “yoked together” with the world.

There is a fine line in regard to distinctiveness. The church must reach out to the world and teach the world about God, and this

¹ 1 John 1:5.

requires some form of relationship. But the church cannot allow that relationship to influence the church or the disciples in the church. How many have become *more* worldly (and less spiritual) by being taught to be “more relatable?”

Fulfillment of Destiny

The church has a destiny to fulfill: accomplishing the purposes of Jesus in its generation. Every day, the church moves one day closer to these end results. As the apostolic church had a keen sense of its destiny that guided its way, the church of our time should also be guided by the vision of a fulfilled destiny.

The Purpose of the Church and Institutional Christianity

In the “real world,” there are many activities associated with the church that may be reasonable, good and necessary for the ongoing work of the church. But the massive and hidden dangers in these activities must be addressed.

Any organization has a natural tendency to become institutionalized, where daily activities become proven and established, stagnant and cold. This is unfortunate and sad for worldly organizations, but fatal to the church of Christ.

Jesus managed to advance his purposes (*and* train his followers to do likewise) without getting bogged down in the administrative aspects of being an itinerant preacher. Likewise, the apostles refused to allow administrative items to interfere with the true ministry of the word.²

However, the institutional church of today can easily expend significant energy and resources on basic administration, events, changing administrative structures and organizations, and maintaining “church order.” In such cases, accomplishing the purposes of Jesus can get what is “left over” in terms of time, energy, resources and commitment. The church must have the courage to streamline itself and minimize these distractions, focusing instead on accomplishing the purposes of Jesus.

The purposes of Jesus ought to be advanced in everything the church does. Any activity which hinders or opposes the purposes of Jesus ought to be abandoned, as should any practice or tradition that

² See Acts 6:2-4.

gets in the way of accomplishing the purposes of Jesus. If this sounds a bit radical, we might consider the words of Gordon Ferguson, “Practices which were once effective can gradually become non-productive traditions.”³ It follows, then, that non-productive traditions should be abandoned.

Many activities going on in the institutional church of today have their origins in human tradition, two thousand years of Catholic church tradition, five hundred years of Protestant tradition, and three hundred years of American tradition—and minimal relation to the simple ministry of Jesus. Is it any wonder that the institutionalized church has failed to advance the purposes of Jesus? Then why should this failed institutional church be used as a model to be imitated?

Understand the Threats

The church today must clearly understand the threats its members face. Armed with this understanding, it can know what to focus on so that its members stay faithful to Jesus.

In chapter three we discussed failings in life and doctrine, and observed that there were four primary threats to the salvation of disciples.

1. Sins of commission
2. Sins of omission and lack of perseverance
3. Holding to false beliefs
4. Failing to have a clear conscience about right beliefs

In some churches today, people may be considered faithful if they attend meetings of the church regularly and give their contribution consistently. Though this is a relatively high standard for the religious world,⁴ such a standard ignores the true threats to the salvation of Christians. One could become unfaithful to Christ and still be in excellent standing in the church based upon that criteria. A church full

³ Gordon Ferguson, *Prepared to Answer* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Discipleship Publications International, 1995), 192.

⁴ Some religions consider “regular” attendance to mean once or twice a year!

of people in this situation itself is unfaithful to Jesus even while it *looks* faithful.⁵

Therefore the true threats must be clearly understood, and the church must work to stay on top of these issues in protecting its people from becoming unfaithful to Jesus. The church must be willing to spend the time and energy to focus on the right things in discipling and shepherding its people. It must reject the convenient monitoring of prescribed actions that have nothing to do with true faithfulness to God and deal with the true threats to the salvation of its members.

Use the Tools for Faithfulness

Christ's church has special tools to help it remain faithful. Proper use of these tools can prevent the downfall of the modern church, preventing the rise of the critical factors in failure from the experience of the post-apostolic church.

Focus on Protodoxy

The individual disciple and the church as a whole must continually focus on protodoxy as the standard in the church. There can never be too much Bible study, research and prayer into understanding what God has told us to do, and how the apostolic church fulfilled its charter.

Protodoxy is cast aside in many subtle ways. The most obvious way is the replacement of protodoxy with church tradition. This is a subtle way of suggesting that the church of today is infallible.

Sometimes the neglect of protodoxy comes from the pulpit itself. There can be unbalanced teaching. There may be an over-emphasis on challenging the heart of the disciple to *want* to do what is right, but neglect in simply teaching *what* the Scriptures say to do that actually *is* right. The other extreme is where teaching what the Scriptures say is emphasized, but those in the church are not motivated to obey what God has called them to do. Both of these extremes are failures in protodoxy. The apostolic church cared about both *what* was right and *doing* what was right. These concepts are not mutually exclusive; they are dependent upon each other.

⁵ Revelation 3:1

Use and Misuse of Scripture

Sometimes what passes for biblical teaching and scholarship is either the teacher's own opinion and philosophy, or simply speculative theology—an understanding of a passage that is demonstrably inconsistent with the practices and beliefs of the apostolic church. However, the intent of true biblical scholarship is not to find a *unique* interpretation, but the *proper* interpretation that can be a solid basis of right thinking and living. As Fee and Stewart have said.

The aim of good interpretation is not uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has seen before.

Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to "out-clever" the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deep truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias).

Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a text may not often *seem* unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task.

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the "plain meaning" of the text.⁶

We cringe when we read of some of the post-apostolic writers misusing Scripture and the rise of the speculative theology which led the church astray, but we must ask if the preachers and teachers in the church today are any different.

Sometimes those who teach use the Scriptures to substantiate what *they* want to teach (often in the context of a real or perceived "hot" issue), without consideration of what these passages actually teach. The result of this type of teaching is that Scriptures are routinely taken out of context. This type of teaching does not

⁶ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 15-16.

commend itself to those seeking out truth, nor does it build a reliable foundation for the faith of the believer.

Instead, those who preach should consider the biblical passages that apply to or address the specific issue at hand, and apply *those* passages accordingly. Using the Scriptures wrongly, even in teaching or advocating some “good thing,” is still misusing the Scripture. Paul’s warning to Timothy stands for all who teach today.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

The “Big Deal”

Some may ask, “What’s the big deal?” about focusing on protodoxy and the proper use of Scripture. “Isn’t it more important to just have the right heart and do the right things?”

The “big deal” is that the church of today is doomed to the same fate as the post-apostolic church if it imitates its neglect of protodoxy!⁷ If the post-apostolic church had clung to protodoxy, its departure from the faith probably would not have occurred. The post-apostolic church had four tendencies associated with neglecting protodoxy that directly led to its demise.

1. Speculative theology
2. Infallibility
3. Incremental changes
4. Universal application of individual solutions

For the church to return to a focus on protodoxy, it is equipped to combat *all* of these tendencies.

- When the church focuses on protodoxy, it will have neither the appetite nor the room for speculative theology.

⁷ In the post-apostolic church, not everyone had copies of the New Testament writings. Their lack of attention to protodoxy is somewhat understandable in light of this fact. But what excuse could Christians today have for not adhering to protodoxy? Most of us own *many* copies of the Scriptures!

- When the church does not consider itself infallible, it will be more earnest to search out and apply protodoxy.
- When the church understands protodoxy, it will be rightly alarmed at incremental, “minor” changes to apostolic patterns and teachings, regardless of the “reasoning behind it” or the spiritual “celebrity” who advanced the thought in the first place. In such a way the baseline of the faith will always remain with the biblical standard, and each generation will not be corrupted by the one before it.
- When the church accepts protodoxy as the right standard, it will recognize the freedom to accomplish the purposes of God that he has given to all disciples as a part of protodoxy. It will also cease to apply one valid solution in one situation to others in dissimilar situations.

Churches must have strong, Bible-based teaching ministries so that protodoxy can be taught and understood. Additionally, disciples must be equipped to learn and search out protodoxy on their own. This does not require seminary training, but only requires a simple understanding of the basics of exegesis and hermeneutics⁸ in seeking out the will of God.

A church full of disciples who know and understand protodoxy is not likely to stray from protodoxy. Similarly, a church full of members who have no idea what the apostles taught has *no basis* for staying faithful to protodoxy, and will eventually depart from the faith in any or all of the ways that others have fallen before them. As Gordon Ferguson has said, “We must always be determined to be a people of the Book—searching it, discussing our findings, getting input from others, remaining open in our positions, and never allowing others to do our studying or thinking for us.”⁹

⁸ Exegesis is the practice of determining what a passage taught in its original context, and hermeneutics is the practice of applying a passage to a real-life situation in the present time. See Appendix B for a short discussion of the basics of exegesis.

⁹ Ferguson, 73.

Unity

The unity of the church is not just a side benefit of discipleship. It is needed not only in obedience to the command of God and as evidence of the claim of a relationship with him,¹⁰ but also to better understand protodoxy and true discipleship. This is because the growth of the church to those in different cultures and circumstances helps clarify the essence of discipleship apart from cultural conveniences.

The unity of the church must be a unity of mutual love and concern, and a unity of purpose. When unity is warped into the pronouncement of a unity that does not exist or the mere unity of action (and the expectation of that action from others), true unity of purpose is cast into the background. Unlike the apostolic church, the institutional church tends to settle for the performance of easily measured external actions as the indicator of unity.

Unity must be measured in purpose and love. The church today must not simply pronounce that “unity” exists when it does not exist. Similarly, it must cease the attempts to measure unity based upon the uniform performance of certain actions, especially those beyond the scope of protodoxy. The actions necessary to obey God and effectively accomplish his purposes certainly will change in time, circumstances and cultures, but the purposes of Jesus will always be the same. These purposes and genuine love for one another will always be the keys to Christian unity.

Leadership

Leadership has an enormous impact in the church. Not only is there an immediate impact to its teachings and leadership, these will be further imitated and repeated far beyond its own cognizance and control. Paul told Timothy to watch his life and doctrine closely because it was critical to his own salvation and the salvation of his hearers!¹¹

Leadership has a critical role in maintaining the faithfulness of the church. That faithfulness is defined in the following ways.

1. Accomplishing the purposes of Jesus, and training those in the church to do likewise.

¹⁰ John 13:34-35, 1 John 4:7-8.

¹¹ 1 Timothy 4:16.

2. Preventing failings in life and doctrine from threatening the salvation of the members of the church.
3. Advancing protodoxy as the true standard and authoritative voice.

The failures of the post-apostolic church can be attributed to failures in leadership in these areas. The evidence shows that the leadership came to view *itself* as the authoritative voice, instead of the apostles and the Scriptures.

Post-apostolic leadership sometimes took itself too seriously. Some leaders became “spiritual celebrities.” Leadership made itself the object of discipleship instead of Jesus. It was negligent in maintaining protodoxy as the baseline for the faith and instead defined itself in relation to the heretics.

When these things happened, the purposes of Jesus and attention to the true threats to salvation were cast into the background, and the church became unfaithful to Jesus while still proclaiming fellowship with him!

While leadership cannot take itself too seriously, it cannot take its biblical charter seriously enough. Leaders are charged with seeing to it that the church accomplishes the purposes of Jesus. They are responsible for shepherding disciples from the threats to their salvation. They must equip the disciples with protodoxy so that the gospel may grow and produce its fruit in all circumstances and situations.

Based on these concepts, ask yourself these questions.

1. How much of the efforts of your leadership directly accomplishes the purposes of Jesus? How much effort goes into administration and maintaining the “institutional church?”
2. Are you shepherding your people from the true threats to their salvation? Do you know what is going on in these areas? Or do you focus more on “church protocol” and easily measured external actions to check the “spiritual pulse” of your people?

3. Do you promote protodoxy as the standard for the lives of your people? Are you well rooted in protodoxy yourself, and do you equip your people to accomplish the purposes of Jesus in the same way?
4. Do you make yourself the object of discipleship? Do you confuse your word with the word of God?

The right answers to these questions are the difference between a leader whose people are well founded in their faith and a leader whose people will be susceptible to drifting from the faith.



Conclusions

Both Jesus and the apostles warned that some would abandon the faith, and that false teachers would come and pervert Christianity.¹² The goal of this book has been to identify how and why the post-apostolic church drifted from the apostolic pattern, and to apply those lessons to the church today.

It is tragic that the legacy of the apostolic church became the warped church of later centuries. Yet, that fact should open our eyes. If such changes happened in the times of the noble martyrs and other heroes whom we have read about, what changes could occur in our times?

The critical factors in the demise of the post-apostolic church have been identified; it is up to us to decide what our legacy will be.

¹² Matthew 24:10-12, 2 Peter 2:1.

APPENDIX A: WORD STUDIES

Some of the concepts discussed in this book require a detailed study of a particular word or concept from the New Testament. These word studies are discussed here.¹ (In this section, a word that is placed in a bold font is the translated Greek word under consideration.)

Worship, Ministry and Sacrifice

The ideas of worship, service (or ministry) and sacrifice are important in understanding the differences between the apostolic and post-apostolic church. To the Jew, these had very precise meanings centered on the temple and obedience to the Law of Moses. The application of these concepts in the apostolic church was far different from their Jewish counterparts, yet in time the post-apostolic church came to understand these in ways inconsistent with the apostolic age. Let us consider the Jewish and apostolic-age meanings of these concepts.

¹ The reader should be aware of the risks associated with word studies. One of these is that the specific idea in question (supposedly represented by a particular word) may be discussed elsewhere in the New Testament without the specific word in question being used. Another risk is that the words themselves are used in a particular context by each author, and that the context plays a great role in what that word means in its context. Accordingly, there may be difficulties associated with connecting passages having a word in common but with vastly different contexts. Every effort has been made in this appendix to consider these factors and exercise great care in the conclusions that are drawn. The intent here is to show how these words and concepts were used in the apostolic era.

Worship

“Worship” is the common translation for the Greek verb *proskuno* (*proskunw*).

It is defined as “the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc.”² In the New Testament, it is used in a Jewish context with a direct link to the temple at Jerusalem.

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to **worship** at the Feast (John 12:20).

So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to **worship**, (Acts 8:27).

You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to **worship** (Acts 24:11).

Such worship was only due to God himself. This is seen in the discourse between Satan and Jesus.

Jesus answered, "It is written: **Worship** the Lord your God and serve him only.' " (Luke 4:7-8).

During his life on earth, Jesus was often worshipped.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and **worshipped** him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh (Matthew 2:11).

Then those who were in the boat **worshipped** him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33).

Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he **worshipped** him (John 9:38).

² Bauer, 716.

In the book of Revelation, the worship of God is one of the most obvious activities in heaven.

...the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and **worship** him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: (Revelation 4:10).

The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and **worshipped** (Revelation 5:14).

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and **worshipped** God (Revelation 7:11).

And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and **worshipped** God (Revelation 11:16).

The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and **worshipped** God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: "Amen, Hallelujah!" (Revelation 19:4).

In the Christian church age, worship took on a slightly different meaning compared to the Jewish concept of worship. A central aspect is that of paying homage or respect to God. This worship is due from all men.

He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. **Worship** him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:7).

Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and **worship** before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed (Revelation 15:4).

But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. **Worship** God!" (Revelation 22:9).

Though the hearer is told to worship God, the means is not specified other than the fact the worshipper is in willful and reverent submission to God. This would be expected from a book like Revelation.

Christian *proskuno* worship is not dependent upon the place of the worship, but the spiritual nature of the believer in worship.

"Our fathers **worshipped** on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must **worship** is in Jerusalem."

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will **worship** the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans **worship** what you do not know; we **worship** what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true **worshippers** will **worship** the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of **worshippers** the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his **worshippers** must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:20-24).

In his teaching on Christian *proskuno* worship, Jesus testifies to a paradigm shift from Judaism to Christianity. He rejects the idea of worship in a particular place (which was central to temple worship), insisting that worship is by the spirit and not the location. He sets forth the teaching that true worship will be different than that which was in practice in Jerusalem and Samaria.

Such worship must be in spirit and truth, without regard to physical location and through sincerity of heart. The idea here is an inward submission of the spirit similar to the physical submission inherent in *proskuno* worship.

Another term used in the New Testament to refer to worship is *sebomai* (*sebomai*).

It was most often used to refer to "God-fearers, worshippers of God...pagans who accepted the ethical monotheism of Judaism and attended the synagogue, but who did not obligate themselves to keep

the whole Jewish law; in particular, the males did not submit to circumcision.”³

When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and **devout** converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:43).

But the Jews incited the **God-fearing** women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region (Acts 13:50).

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a **worshiper** of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. (Acts 16:14)

Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of **God-fearing** Greeks and not a few prominent women (Acts 17:4).

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the **God-fearing** Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there (Acts 17:17).

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a **worshipper** of God (Acts 18:7).

Since all of these instances refer to places besides Jerusalem, the Jewish practice of *sebomai* worship is more closely (if not exclusively) related to the synagogue compared to the temple. Supporting this suggestion, it was the failed obedience to an ethical aspect of the Law to which Jesus associated Jewish *sebomai* worship and applied the rebuke of Isaiah.

³ Bauer, 746.

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They **worship** me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men (Matthew 15:8-9).

This statement is a rebuke to the prevailing practice of Judaism at the time and not a prescription or authorization for *sebomai* worship in the church age. There is no example of *sebomai* worship in the apostolic church.

However, a cognate of *sebomai*, *eusebia* (*eujsebeia*), is usually translated “godliness.” It is used most often in the pastoral epistles⁴ and 2 Peter, and denotes “a manner of life.”⁵ A representative sampling is included below.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all **godliness** and holiness (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be **godly**. For physical training is of some value, but **godliness** has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of **godliness** but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to **godliness**—(Titus 1:1).

⁴ 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus.

⁵ From W. Foerster, “Sebomai,” *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*, 1012.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and **godly** lives in this present age (Titus 2:11-12).

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and **godliness** through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, **godliness**; and to **godliness**, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love (2 Peter 1:3-7).

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and **godly** lives (2 Peter 3:11).

The *eusebia* worship expected from Christians is entirely wrapped up in a moral and ethical lifestyle which pays respect to God. There is no ceremonial aspect to this type of worship.

Having considered *proskuno*, *sebomai* and *eusebia* worship, it is evident that *proskuno* worship finds its place in the church and private devotional life in prayer, praise and a life of honest submission to God. No form of *sebomai* worship finds a place in the New Testament church. However, *eusebia* worship, consisting of a moral and ethical lifestyle which reflects knowledge of the true God, is commanded. Thus, Christian "worship" of God in the first century consisted of a lifestyle of obedience and submission to God and not a set of ceremonial actions.

Service and Ministry

“Serve” is the common translation for the Greek verb *latreuo* (*latreuō*), and “ministry” is the common translation for the Greek noun *latreia* (*latreia*).

The verb is defined as “carrying out religious duties”⁶ and the noun is defined as “service of worship of God.”⁷ In the New Testament, it is used to describe Jewish temple worship.

Jesus answered, "It is written: `Worship the Lord your God and **serve** him only' " (Luke 4:8).

She never left the temple but **worshipped** night and day, fasting and praying (Luke 2:37).

This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly **serve** God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me (Acts 26:7).

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the **temple worship** and the promises (Romans 9:4).

They **serve** at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Hebrews 8:5).

Now the first covenant had regulations for **worship** and also an earthly sanctuary (Hebrews 9:1).

When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their **ministry**. (Hebrews 9:6).

⁶ Bauer, 467.

⁷ Bauer, 467.

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the **worshipper** (Hebrews 9:9).

If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the **worshippers** would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins (Hebrews 10:2).

We have an altar from which those who **minister** at the tabernacle have no right to eat (Hebrews 13:10).

In Revelation, heaven is a place where service of some kind takes place.

Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and **serve** him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them" (Revelation 7:15).

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will **serve** him (Revelation 22:3).

In the church age, *latreo* ministry or service consists of several things. The primary act of service is in preaching the gospel to the lost.

However, I admit that I **worship** the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, (Acts 24:14).

Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I **serve** stood beside me (Acts 27:23).

God, whom I **serve** with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you (Romans 1:9).

However, this service also consists of various aspects of discipleship. Consider the following passages.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of **worship** (Romans 12:1).

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who **worship** by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—(Philippians 3:3).

I thank God, whom I **serve**, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers (2 Timothy 1:3).

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may **serve** the living God! (Hebrews 9:14).

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so **worship** God acceptably with reverence and awe, (Hebrews 12:28).

Here *latreo* service to God is defined as consisting of the evangelistic preaching of the gospel, self-denial, Spirit-filled living with reverence and awe. While Christian *latreo* service consists of these, the idea of ceremonial *latreo* service for Christians in the church age is foreign to the New Testament.

Another word translated “serve” in a religious context is *leitourgia* (*leitourgia*). It (or its various cognates) is used to specifically describe Jewish temple worship in the following passages.

When his time of **service** was completed, he returned home (Luke 1:23).

In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his **servants** flames of fire" (Hebrews 1:7).

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to **serve** those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14).

...and who **serves** in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man (Hebrews 8:2).

But the **ministry** Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6).

In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its **ceremonies** (Hebrews 9:21).

Day after day every priest stands and performs his **religious duties**; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins (Hebrews 10:11).

Leitourgeia worship is used to describe Christian service in the following passages.

While they were **worshipping** the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

To be a **minister** of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:16).

They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to **share** with them their material blessings (Romans 15:27).

This **service** that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God (2 Corinthians 9:12).

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and **service** coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you (Philippians 2:17).

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to **take care** of my needs (Philippians 2:25).

...because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the **help** you could not give me (Philippians 2:30).

In a Christian context, *leitourgia* service is used interchangeably with prayer in Acts 13:2,⁸ and also was used to describe preaching the gospel or serving others. As in the case with *latreuo* service, there is no ceremonial *leitourgia* service in the church age.

Sacrifice

“Sacrifice” is the translation for the Greek verb *thuo* (*quw*) and noun *thusias* (*qusiā*). In the New Testament, it is used to describe the ritual killing of animals for presentation to God as a part of the Law of Moses.

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and **sacrifices** for sins (Hebrews 5:1).

The same term is used to describe the death of Jesus.

But when this priest had offered for all time one **sacrifice** for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12).

In the church age, the concept of sacrifice appears in several ways. Let us consider these.

⁸ Notice the following verse says that after they “prayed and fasted”; thus prayer was used interchangeably with *leitourgeia* service. Bauer, 470.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living **sacrifices**, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (Romans 12:1).

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the **sacrifice** and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you (Philippians 2:17).

I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable **sacrifice**, pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a **sacrifice** of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such **sacrifices** God is pleased (Hebrews 13:15-16).

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual **sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4-5).

In the church age, sacrifice consists of living a life of self-denial, giving of money to help mission work, praising God, doing good and sharing with others.

In radical contrast to the practice of the Jewish religion, there were no ceremonial aspects to worship, ministry and sacrifice in the apostolic church. Each of these ideas consisted of living lives of prayer and praise, self-denial and furthering the work of God on the earth in the specific ways that have been identified.

Imitation and Example

The concepts of imitation and example are important in the concept of discipleship in the apostolic church. One of the chief

factors in the demise of the apostolic church is the warping of these concepts; therefore a biblical understanding of these terms is crucial.

Imitation

The Greek *mimetai* (*mimetai*) and its cognates are the terms for imitation. They are used in the following passages.

Therefore I urge you to **imitate** me (1 Corinthians 4:16).

Follow my **example**, as I follow the **example** of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Be **imitators** of God, therefore, as dearly loved children... (Ephesians 5:1).

Join with others in following my **example**, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you (Philippians 3:17).

You became **imitators** of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

For you, brothers, became **imitators** of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews... (1 Thessalonians 2:14).

We do not want you to become lazy, but to **imitate** those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised (Hebrews 6:12).

Example

The Greek *typos* (*tupo*) is the term for model or example, and is used in the following passages.

The meaning of the word itself is seen in references to the pattern of items for the temple.

Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the **pattern** he had seen (Acts 7:44).

They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the **pattern** shown you on the mountain" (Hebrews 8:5).

The term is used to describe the teachings of the gospel.

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the **form** of teaching to which you were entrusted (Romans 6:17).

The term is also used of Old Testament situations as examples to Christians.

Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a **pattern** of the one to come (Romans 5:14).

Now these things occurred as **examples** to keep us from setting hearts on evil things as they did (1 Corinthians 10:6).

The term is used of Christians as examples to other Christians.

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the **pattern** we gave you (Philippians 3:17).

And so you became a **model** to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:7).

We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a **model** for you to follow (2 Thessalonians 3:9).

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an **example** for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity (1 Timothy 4:12).

In everything set them an **example** by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness (Titus 2:7).

...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being **examples** to the flock (1 Peter 5:3).

In both *mimetai* and *typos*, the imitation of an example is focused on character, faith and purpose; not in a specific practice.

“One Another” Passages

The New Testament often uses “one another” passages to describe the many aspects of Christian relationships (Though prominent, by no means do these encompass *all* areas of Christian relationships.) These passages naturally fall into the “do” and “don’t do” categories in relationships.

“Do”

First, the things to do in a one another context.

Love

A new command I give you: Love **one another**. As I have loved you, so you must love **one another**. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love **one another** (John 13:34-35).

My command is this: Love **each other** as I have loved you (John 15:12).

This is my command: Love **each other** (John 15:17).

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love **one another**, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law (Romans 13:8).

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for **each other** is increasing (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

Keep on loving **each other** as brothers (Hebrews 13:1).

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love **one another** deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).

Above all, love **each other** deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love **one another** (1 John 3:11).

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love **one another** as he commanded us (1 John 3:23).

Dear friends, let us love **one another**, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God (1 John 4:7).

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love **one another**. No one has ever seen God; but if we love **one another**, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1 John 4:11-12).

And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love **one another** (2 John 1:5).

Keep watch over

Keep watch over **yourselves** and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

Live in harmony with

Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with **each other** (Mark 9:50).

So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the **others** (Romans 12:5).

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to **one another** in brotherly love. Honor **one another** above yourselves (Romans 12:9-10).

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with **one another**. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited (Romans 12:15-16).

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to **mutual** edification (Romans 14:19).

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among **yourselves** as you follow Christ Jesus... (Romans 15:5).

Accept **one another**, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Romans 15:7).

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with **one another** so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Corinthians 1:10).

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for **each other** (1 Corinthians 11:33).

...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for **each other** (1 Corinthians 12:25).

Submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21).

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider **others** better than **yourselves** (Philippians 2:3).

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with **each other** in the Lord (Philippians 4:2).

Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with **each other** (1 Thessalonians 5:13).

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with **one another**; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble (1 Peter 3:8).

Offer hospitality to **one another** without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve **others**, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:9-10).

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward **one another**, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with **one another**, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

Instruct

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct **one another** (Romans 15:14).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish **one another** with all wisdom, and as you sing

psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

Greet

Greet **one another** with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings (Romans 16:16).

All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet **one another** with a holy kiss (1 Corinthians 16:20).

Greet **one another** with a holy kiss (2 Corinthians 13:12).

Greet **one another** with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ (1 Peter 5:14).

Serve

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash **one another's** feet (John 13:14).

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve **one another** in love (Galatians 5:13).

Carry **each other's** burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Bear with, forgive

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with **one another** in love (Ephesians 4:2).

Be kind and compassionate to **one another**, forgiving **each other**, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

Bear with **each other** and forgive whatever grievances you may have against **one another**. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Colossians 3:13).

Kind and compassionate

Be kind and compassionate to **one another**, forgiving **each other**, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to **each other** and to everyone else (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

Sing to

Speak to **one another** with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, (Ephesians 5:19).

Encourage, spur on

...that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by **each other's** faith (Romans 1:12).

Therefore encourage **each other** with these words (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Therefore encourage **one another** and build **each other** up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

But encourage **one another** daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness (Hebrews 3:13).

And let us consider how we may spur **one another** on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage **one another**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24-25).

But you, dear friends, build **yourselves** up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit (Jude 1:20).

“Don’t Do”

Now for the “don’t do” aspects of **one another** relationships.

Pass judgment on

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on **one another**. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way (Romans 14:13).

Lie

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his **neighbor**, for we are all members of one body (Ephesians 4:25).

Do not lie to **each other**, since you have taken off your old self with its practices (Colossians 3:9).

Biting and devouring

If you keep on biting and devouring **each other**, watch out or you will be destroyed by **each other** (Galatians 5:15).

Provoke and envy

Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying **each other** (Galatians 5:26).

Slander

Brothers, do not slander **one another**. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it (James 4:11).

Grumble

Don’t grumble against **each other**, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:9).

While there are some limitations to this sort of a study,⁹ this list of passages gives a good picture of the type of fellowship that Christians in the apostolic age enjoyed in their interpersonal relationships.

⁹ The chief limitation is that certain aspects of Christian relationships may be discussed in passages where the “one another” phrase is not used.

APPENDIX B: EXEGESIS

Truly one of the greatest gifts God has given us today is the Scriptures. The key to proper interpretation of the Scriptures is *exegesis*.

The reason exegesis is important is that all Scripture is historical; exegesis relates to the historical lives, times and situations of the people discussed. God did this so that the Scripture could relate to *our* real lives, times and situations. The objective of exegesis is to determine what those real lives, times and situations were, and how the message of the Scripture related to them. Understanding that historical context and its impact upon the Scripture in mind is the essence of exegesis.

While determining some of this information may take a significant amount of research, which you may not have the resources to undertake, the fact is you would be surprised what you *can* discern about the Scriptures from internal information and simply careful reading.

Many excellent books have been written, which address the skills of exegesis. The intent here is to provide the basics required, so that your Bible study can be true to the message of the Scriptures.

Basic Skills of Exegesis

There are three basic questions to keep in mind when attempting to exegete the Scriptures.

What's Happening?

Every book of the Bible was written by a human author in a particular historical situation. Though under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), each author had a particular occasion for writing his book. For instance, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to address some problems at the church in Corinth.

The place to begin a study of any book is to examine what it says about the occasion in which it was written. This can be gleaned from incidental remarks (especially in the beginning and end of the book), as well as specific things that may be mentioned by the author. While this is easier for some books (the epistles, for instance) than for others, it is the beginning point in the study of any book. Without considering and understanding the historical context of a book, any conclusions gathered during study are in danger of being incorrect and cannot be trusted.

What's the Point?

After seeing the occasion of a specific book, we must see what the author is saying about it. Since he is writing for a specific occasion, we would expect everything in his book to have some bearing upon that occasion. For instance, 1 Corinthians 13 isn't a stand-alone definition of love but rather it fits in the context of the huge problems the Corinthians were having with their relationships with each other in the church.

Some practical hints here are to first read the book in one sitting, just like any letter you would receive. Second, discard your preconceptions about what the book says. Read what the author wrote, not what you *think* he wrote! Third, don't worry about applying anything yet. Fourth, keep asking questions of the text: How does this relate to the main idea? Why did he say this? Why did he say it the way he said it? It's a good idea to jot all of these things down as you study, either in the margin of your Bible or on a separate sheet of paper. These notes will come in handy when you go to apply a Scripture to your life today.

What's the Connection?

The ultimate goal of Bible study is to learn God's will for your life and to obey it. Having seen what situations came up in the Bible and how the inspired author addressed them, you are then ready to make

applications to your life today. The basic rule here is that *when you're in the same situation as a Bible character, God's word to him "back then" is also God's word for you today*. That's why it is important to know the historical context of the book you are studying. These guidelines will prevent you from making the greatest mistake of Bible study, taking a passage of Scripture out of context.

Example in Exegesis: Titus

To get some practice in the skills of exegesis, consider the following questions about the book of Titus.

1. What's Happening - Get the facts. Who is the author? Who is the recipient? Who are the other people mentioned in the book? What places are mentioned in the book? In what situation do the recipients seem to be? What other facts are pertinent?
2. What's the Point - What is the main topic of the letter? What are some sub-topics of the letter? (Note- each sub-topic must relate to the main topic.)
3. What's the Connection - What situations do we face that today are like the situations the author is addressing?

Spend about ten minutes reading Titus and jot down information from Titus that is relevant to these questions.

The Context of Titus

As an aid, consider the answers to these questions about Titus presented below. This is not intended to be all encompassing, but rather an example of how these questions might be answered for the book of Titus.

Category 1 - The facts

- Paul is the author (1:1)
- Titus is the recipient (1:4)
 - note: Titus was a Gentile - Galatians 2:3

- Paul and Titus had been in Crete together, Paul left Titus to lead the work there - (1:5)
 - note: Crete is an island in the Mediterranean Sea about 150 miles wide, 30 miles high. Other NT references include Acts 2:11, 27:7-13.
- There were churches in many towns on Crete (1:5)
- Rebellious disciples, most notably those of Jewish descent, were causing problems in the churches (1:10, 3:9)
- Titus was not well respected by some of these people (2:15)
- Artemis or Tychicus were coming soon to relieve Titus of his work (3:12)
- Paul wanted Titus to visit him at Nicopolis (3:12)
 - note: Nicopolis is on the W. coast of Greece, 150 NW of Corinth
- Zenas and Apollos were on their way to a subsequent destination (3:13)
- Zenas and Apollos probably carried the letter to Titus (3:13)
- Though the text does not say so, we suppose that Paul traveled from Crete to Corinth and sent this letter to Titus via Zenas and Apollos. Paul then intended to travel to Nicopolis to spend the winter. Corinth is likely because of the large number of his disciples there: Apollos, Zenas, Artemis and Tychicus.

Category 2 - The Point

- Paul wrote to Titus to instruct him what to do on Crete (1:5)
- Because of the people causing problems, Titus was urged to appoint elders in every town (1:5)
- Elders were intended to teach disciples correctly and refute those who taught otherwise (1:9)
- Titus was also urged to deal strongly and confidently with these troublemakers and “teachers”
- 1:11 (silence them).
- 2:15 (not tolerate a lack of respect).

- 3:10-11 (warn them and dissociate from them as appropriate).
- Also, Paul discusses the need for the Cretan disciples to be devoted to doing good, with 8 references - 1:1 (godliness), 1:8, 1:16, 2:7, 2:14, 3:1, 3:8, 3:14. This is especially contrasted with the description of Cretans in 1:12
- Paul discussed basic ministry directives for Titus (2:1-10)
- Paul drew a connection between the behavior people ought to have and their conversions in (2:11-14, 3:3-8)
- The people were to be good citizens of the land they lived in- being submissive to rulers and humble towards all (3:1-2)

Category 3 - The Application (how your situation is like theirs).

Though these will be highly specific to your individual situation, some generalizations will probably fit.

- The people were to be good citizens of the land they lived in; being submissive to rulers and humble towards all (3:1-2). Likewise, disciples should be good citizens of their nation, being submissive to the authorities and truly humble towards all people
- Focus of discipleship - discipling ought to resemble the pattern Paul gave in Titus 2:1-10
- Doing what is good - As Paul wanted the Cretans to develop the character to “devote themselves to doing what is good,” we also need to have this character. Consider the following:
 - Elders are to “love what is good” (1:8).
 - The false teachers and troublemakers, in contrast, are “unfit for doing anything good” (1:16).
 - Older women are to teach “what is good” (2:3).
 - Titus was to set young men an example by doing “what is good” (2:7).
 - One purpose of redemption was for God to have a people “eager to do what is good” (2:14).

- The people were to be taught to “be ready to do whatever is good” (3:1).
- The people were to be “devoted” to doing what is good (3:8, 3:14).
- Our conversion has a direct relation to our focus and motives as disciples (2:11-14, 3:3-8)

Conclusion

By asking, “What’s Happening?” “What’s the Point?” and “What’s the Connection?” we can open up new horizons in our own personal Bible study and be able to discern God’s will for us today. Not only that, but we can consider the Scriptures from a true historical context and deepen our understanding of why the Scriptures say the things they do. Then we are equipped to apply the Scriptures properly to our lives today. In this way we can “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

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Edited by B.J. Corbin and Rex Geissler with 21 Co-authors

482 pages, 265 photographs

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