

FOUNDED UPON ROCK: PART I
THE DAWN OF THE GOSPEL AND THE FIRST CENTURY

I. Starting with Pentecost, the Church expanded rapidly throughout the Roman Empire. Acts of the Apostles describes some central events in the early expansion of the Church.

A. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the early Christians and, from that time onward guided them to spread the Gospel throughout the known world.

1. At the Last Supper, and again before ascending into heaven, Jesus promised the Apostles that He would send the Holy Spirit to them, and that they would be witnesses of the Gospel to the far ends of the earth. John 14:15-17, 15:26-27, 16:7-15; Acts 1:8.

2. After Christ ascended into heaven, Mary, the Apostles, and some early Christians remained in Jerusalem. At the calling of St. Peter they replaced Judas Iscariot with St. Matthias to restore the number twelve to the Apostles, reflecting the fact that they were forming a new Israel.

3. Ten days after the Ascension, on the fiftieth day of the Resurrection, which was during the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to Mary, the Apostles, and the early Christian community gathered in Jerusalem (about 110 total) in the form of a colossal wind and flames of fire. The early Christians then proclaimed the Gospel in Jerusalem, and brought in 5000 converts that day. Acts 2:1-36.

B. Soon Christianity expanded throughout the Jewish and Samaritan communities, and then throughout the Roman Empire.

1. Acts of the Apostles records both the opposition of the leaders in Jerusalem to the new faith and the rapid expansion of the number of Christians in the Church, which enjoyed mostly internal peace in the face of external opposition. See, e.g., Acts 4.

2. With the expansion of the Church, the Apostles appointed the first new clerics, seven deacons, to help with administration. See Acts 6:1-7. Among the earliest martyrs was one of those deacons, St. Stephen, who was stoned to death when he criticized the negativity of Jerusalem. Saul (soon to be called Paul) presided at the stoning. And a persecution against Christians soon began in Jerusalem. See Acts 7.

3. Soon the Gospel spread to Samaria and Syria; and even the Apostles were astonished at the fact that the grace of God was coming to pagan nations. See Acts 8-14.

4. In the midst of this spread of the Gospel, the leaders in Jerusalem sent Saul to arrest Christians in Damascus, the capital of Syria. While Saul was on the way, Jesus appeared to him, and brought him to faith in Him. In Damascus, Saul would learn about the faith from Annanias. Soon, the Holy Spirit would guide the Apostles to commission Saul (now called Paul), along with Barnabas, to begin missionary work in the Church, first in Syria and then to other nations. See Acts 9:1-30, 13:1-14:28.

5. With new converts coming in from pagan nations, the issue arose of whether those converts had to adhere to the Jewish ritual laws. At the Council of Jerusalem, which occurred in or about 49 A.D., St. Peter led the Apostles and the whole Church to decide that the new converts did not have to adhere to the Jewish ritual law, although there were some requirements to avoid unnecessary offense. See Acts 15.

D. Most of the rest of Acts of the Apostles describes the missions of St. Paul to bring the Gospel to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), Macedonia, Greece and the Aegean peninsula generally. Acts of the Apostles records three missions that St. Paul made in particular to the areas of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), Greece and Macedonia before his travel to Rome.

E. For different reasons, St. Peter and then St. Paul came to live in Rome, where Acts of the Apostles ends. St. Peter came there to lead the Church from the center of the Empire. St. Paul was accused of crimes against Judaism; and because he would not get a fair hearing in Jerusalem, or anywhere in Palestine, he appealed to the Roman Emperor. They were both martyred there during Nero's reign, and thus consecrated that city as the new capital of the Church.

F. Other Apostles and early Christians also evangelized far off lands. Thus, according to ancient traditions, St. James the elder brought the Gospel to Spain and St. Thomas brought the Gospel all the way to northern India. The people who had converted to Christianity at Pentecost also came from many nations, and presumably brought the message back to those lands as well.

G. As the first witnesses to Jesus were beginning to die off, the evangelists began writing accounts of the life of Christ, based largely upon the preaching the Apostles and others

who had been witnesses to His life. The Scriptural Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were all from the first century and had an apostolic origin, being written by either the Apostles themselves or (as with Mark and Luke) by their assistants. See Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum 19 (1965.)

H. The epistles of the New Testament come largely from communications with these communities. They likewise have an apostolic origin, being written either by the Apostles (including St. Paul) or by their assistants.

1. St. Paul wrote numerous letters to the communities that he had evangelized. The fourteen Pauline letters in the New Testament were mostly written to communities that St. Paul evangelized or, as with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, to bishops he commissioned. The Letter to the Hebrews was written to formerly Jewish Christians to demonstrate that Christianity was not an abandonment of their traditions but a fulfillment. Philemon was likewise written to a prominent early Christian.

2. St. Peter, St. John, St. James and St. Jude, or their disciples, also wrote letters to the early Christians reflecting upon different aspects of the faith. They are often called the “catholic letters” because the Greek word *catalicos* means “universal”; and these letters were not written to any specific communities, but more for general circulation.

I. St. Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, probably in the 70s, to record some of the history of the early Church, particularly emphasizing its unity in the face of opposition, and the spread of the Gospel to all the world. The book begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, the new capital of the Church. The Book of Revelation presents in symbolic form the victory of God’s kingdom in the face of all opposition during the first century, and by extension throughout human history. Probably in the 90s, St. John wrote the Book of Revelation, based upon visions he received while in exile on the island of Patmos. The Book of Revelation also concerns church history, but in a more symbolic and apocalyptic manner.

II. Meanwhile, other opposition to the Christian faith also increased, starting in Jerusalem, spreading to pagan lands, and finally reaching the imperial throne itself.

A. Early on, the tetrarch Herod began persecuting the Church, more for popularity than for any beliefs of his own. He beheaded St. James the elder, the first Apostle to be martyred, and then launched a general persecution in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. See Acts 12.

B. Acts of the Apostles also records opposition rising to St. Paul's proclamation of the Gospel, sometimes because of the economic interests of the pagan temples. See, e.g., Act 19:23-27.

C. At first, the Roman Empire's imperial government did not seem to take much interest. Acts of the Apostles records the Roman officials and local kings such as the governor Festus and the king Agrippa puzzled by the controversies and wondering what to do with St. Paul, who appealed to Rome. See Acts 25.

D. However, the Roman Emperor Nero, in order to deflect unpopularity from himself, which especially increased after allegations that he set the great fire of Rome in 64, began persecuting Christians. He was overthrown by the Senate and committed suicide in 68, but the persecutions continued to varying degrees. The persecutions were worst in Rome, where the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum were places of torture and death, generally with the crowds looking on for amusement.

E. During the last years of Nero, the Jewish people in the Promised Land staged a revolt in an effort to overthrow Roman rule. After some initial success, the Roman army crushed the revolt and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. This event would dramatically change the course of Judaism and was also considered a transitional event by Christians, for Jesus had predicted this destruction and used it as an image of the end of all earthly kingdoms. See, e.g., Matt. 24:15-31; Mark 13:14-23; Luke 21:20-33.

E. We have records from many of the early martyrs, such as those of Polycarp and Perpetua and Felicity. Also, many Christians who were persecuted wrote texts that are helpful in understanding Christianity today, such as the works of St. Justin the Martyr and the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, both from the mid-2nd century.

F. There were also Romans who wrote about Christians. For example, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor to what is now Spain, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan about the year 112 asking him how to deal with Christians. Trajan maintained that the governor must stop Christianity, but put limits on how this opposition was to be carried out. Some other Roman commentators, such as Celsus in the second century and Porphyry in the third, wrote in opposition to Christianity.

- Meanwhile, Christians such as St. Justin the Martyr, St. Irenaeus, Origen and St. Cyril of Alexandria wrote defenses of the faith, doctrinal works and Scriptural commentaries that are widely used to this day.

III. As the early Church grew, she would gradually develop her early practices and teachings, often in the face of struggles and heresies.

A. The Scriptures themselves give an indication of early practices of the Church, including the ordination of bishops (episcopoi), priests (presbytoi) and deacons (diaconoi) as described in 1 Timothy and Titus, and the Eucharist (along with some problems of laxity) as described in 1 Corinthians.

B. During the second and third centuries, there were also other non-canonical Gospels written by those who wished to give an account of Jesus. Some of them, such as the Protoevangelium of James and the Gospel of Peter, while not written by the Apostles, still give mostly reliable information about Jesus and the Holy Family. Other attempts at gospels, such as the so-called Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, have very erroneous theology.

C. Some other writings, such as the letter from Pope St. Clement of Rome to the church in Corinth, the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas give a picture of the early Church. While not canonical, their insights often provide a sense of the first springtime of the Church.

1. The letter of Pope St. Clement to the Corinthians dates from about 96, and describes the importance of clergy and unity in the Church.

2. The Didache (the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), probably written in the late first or early second century, deals with morals and some matters of Church governance, such as how to respond to new preachers and how to administer baptism and the Eucharist.

3. The Shepherd of Hermas, written by a unknown author in the first or second century, describes visions, moral law, and parables designed to guide the Christian life and to bring about repentance.

D. The accounts of the martyrs and the writings of those who defended Christianity also give us an insight into the practices and understanding of the early Church.

1. For example, the letters written by St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, to various churches while on his way to martyrdom in Rome in the mid-second century, emphasize the nobility of sacrifice, and the need for a unified, moral Church.

2. St. Justin the Martyr (d. 165) wrote his First Apologia to the Emperor Antoninus and the Senate and people of Rome, patiently explaining the faith as bringing out the best in Roman culture and the fulfillment of the virtues sought by the philosophers. He also wrote Second Apologia to round out the teachings, and the Dialogue with Trypho to argue that Christianity fulfilled the Jewish faith. His

writings give us an early description of such practices as the essential elements of the Mass, and the importance of morals in the early Church.

3. The account of the martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicity (circa 203) indicate, among other things, the importance of prayers for the dead.

4. The Letter to Diognetus (the tutor of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180) gives arguments for Christianity and against paganism. Chapter 5 describes the overall life of Christians in glowing terms, describing Christians in the world as like the soul to the body.

E. Throughout all of this time, the early practices of the Church were gradually developing.

1. As the Vatican II Council explained, the universal early practices of the Church, such as the veneration of Mary, the structure of the Mass, the roles of the clergy, and the books recognized as Scripture form the Sacred Tradition of the Church which stands alongside of the Bible as a part of Revelation. See Dei Verbum 8-9.

2. Thus, for example, the letters of St. Ignatius and the account of the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp (about 100) describe early roles of the bishops, priests and deacons. See, e.g., Didache ch. 15; Letter of St. Polycarp to the Philadelphians ch. 5-6; Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Trallians ch.3, to the Magnesians ch. 3-4, 13, and to the Philadelphians ch. 7-8. Over the course of time, the church developed a system under which bishops (episcopoi in Greek) would guide over a community and lead in liturgical celebrations. Thus, the bishops succeeded the authority of the Apostles. However, except for the Bishops of Rome, who succeeded St. Peter (and St. Matthias, who succeeded Judas Iscariot) the bishops were not thought of as successors on any one Apostle, but rather of apostolic authority generally.

3. St. Ireneus from the second century and Tertullian from the third century refer to the successors of St. Peter, who ruled the Church from Rome. The third of these successors, St. Clement wrote to the church in Corinth in the manner of one with authority over the churches generally. These successors to St. Peter would eventually be called the Pope. The exact method of election was not clear, but it seems that the clergy and some prominent people in Rome were central to the selection.

4. Likewise, the early Christians venerated the saints and celebrated Masses at their tombs, as is indicated by the excavations of the catacombs around Rome. The Christians probably did not hide out in the catacombs, for they were not the

mazes we see now, but rather rooms for burials. However, the altars and symbols at the catacombs indicate a strong belief in the intercessions for and from the dead. And the catacombs were more protected from persecution because the Romans did not wish to disturb the dead.

F. Early on, the Church had to deal with heresies and schisms, most especially Gnosticism and related ideas.

1. Gnosticism was a Greek based philosophy, but it found its way into Christianity. Gnosticism taught that our souls were created in an entirely spiritual realm, but are now trapped in this world by demiurges, or powerful beings that fell from the greater realm and made this one. The goal is to get back to that greater realm through a sort of secret knowledge.

2. Such erroneous writings as the Gospel of Thomas present Jesus as one who would, by this secret knowledge, free us to leave this earthly body. There were variations of attempts at Christian Gnosticism, but they all maintained that Jesus did not really become man, but only appeared to do so. St. John's letters indicate that this error was a problem early on. See 1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7.

3. One version of Gnosticism in Christianity was proposed by Marcion in the second century. He argued that the Old Testament was inspired by a lesser, or perhaps even evil, god, who emphasized justice, but not mercy and grace, and who was violent and focused on things of this world. He accepted only part of the New Testament, including the Gospel of Luke and the letter to the Galatians, as truly the inspired word of God.

4. There were also mystery cults such as Mithraism and the Eleusinian and Orphian mystery cults that promised immortality if certain secret rituals were done. Christianity was sometimes called a mystery cult because of the importance of sacraments and the promise of immortality. However, while the Christians (largely for security reasons) kept the liturgies private and did promise immortality, the teachings were public, the calling universal, and the moral life stressed as central to salvation. Furthermore, the mystery cults tended to believe that this body is a prison of the soul, rather than our means of glorifying God. And, above all, salvation is not from pleasing some mysterious god, but from friendship with God and man, Jesus Christ. See Bokkenkotter, The History of the Catholic Church (2004) 27.

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