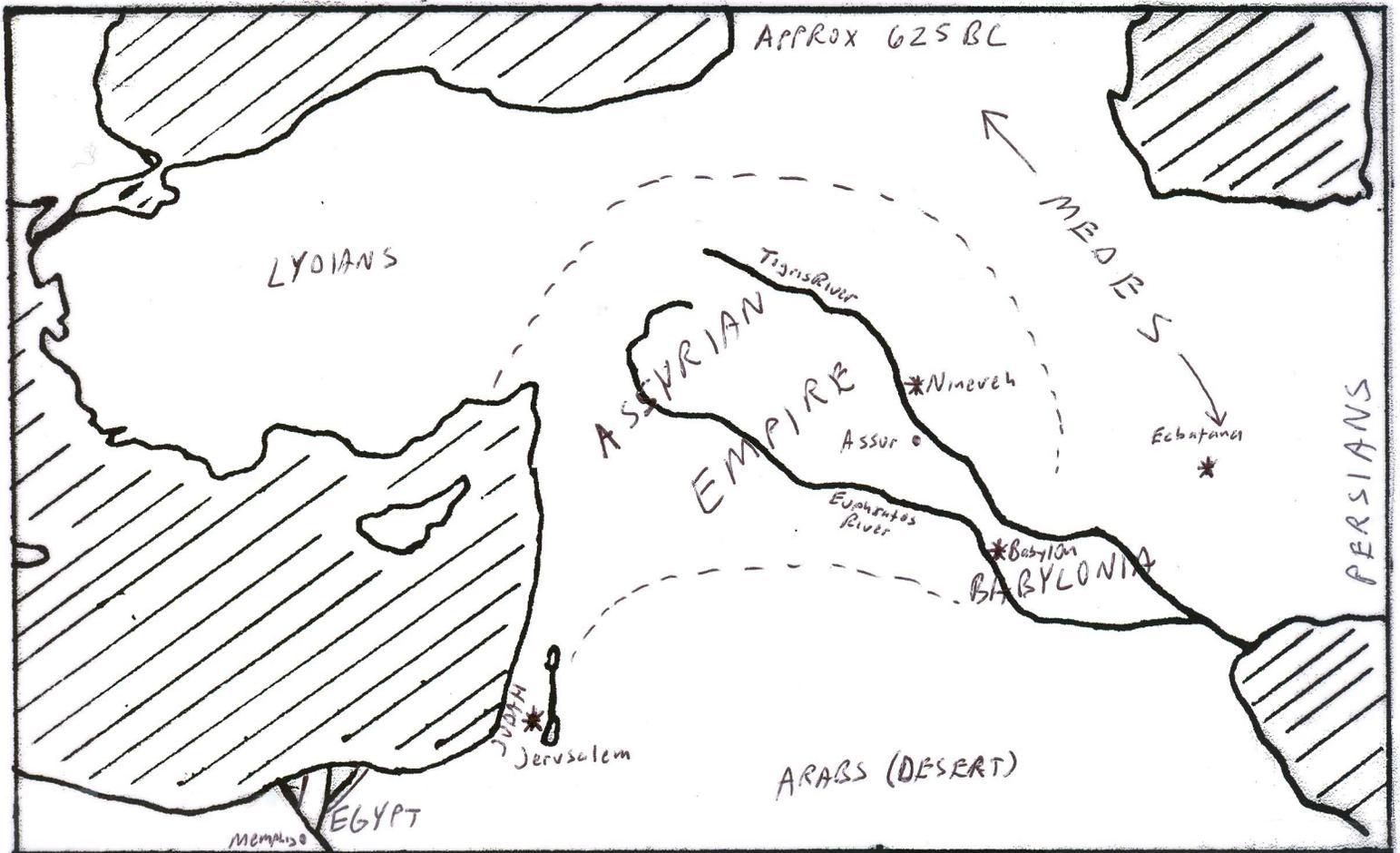


**THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST:
ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE**

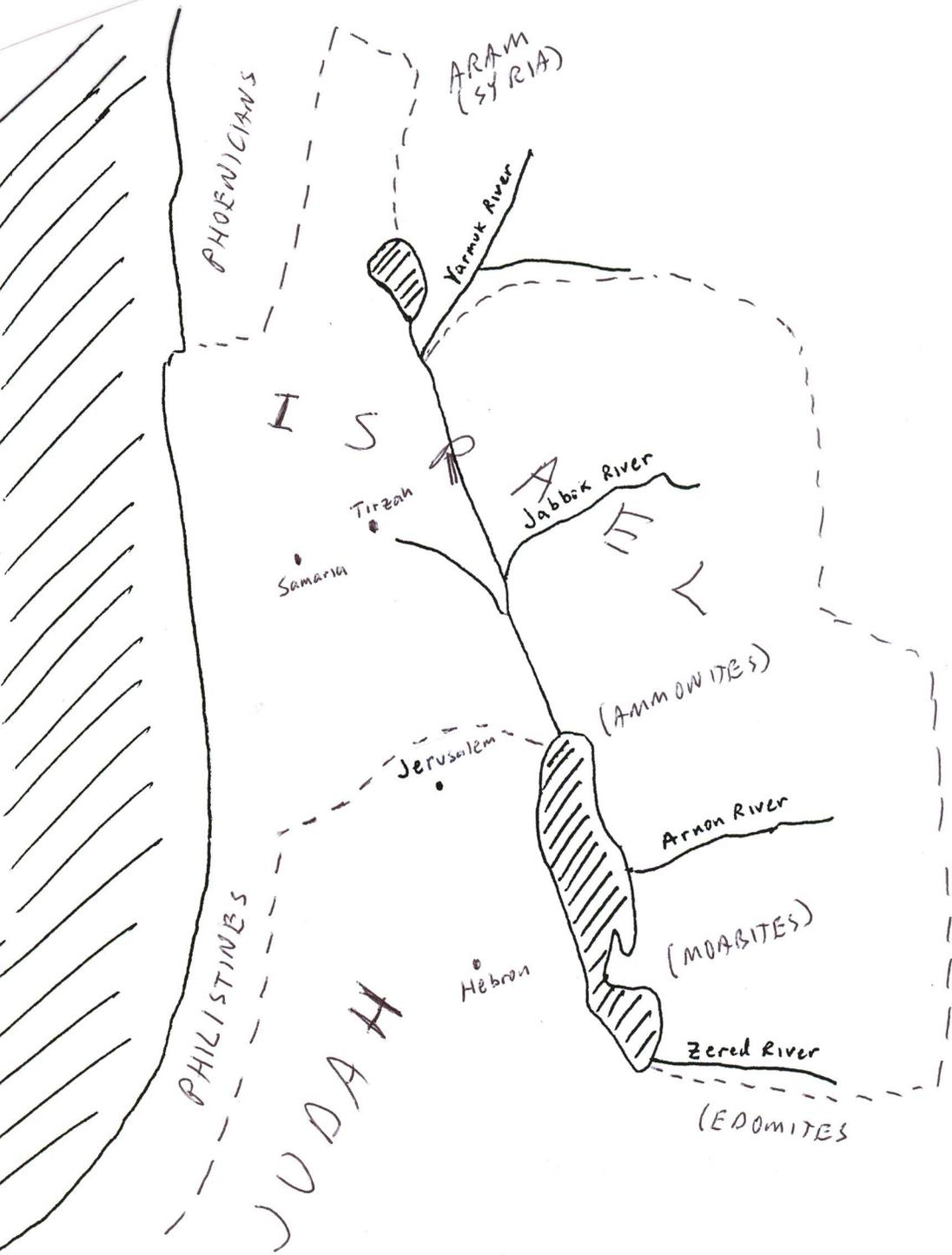
Week Three: Map Supplement

These maps will help you to locate some of the places most significant in Old Testament history. On this side is a map of the region surrounding Judah, during the reign of Josiah late in Judah's existence. On the other side is a map of the divided kingdom in its earlier years, showing the approximate borders of Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom).



- M. G., June 2012

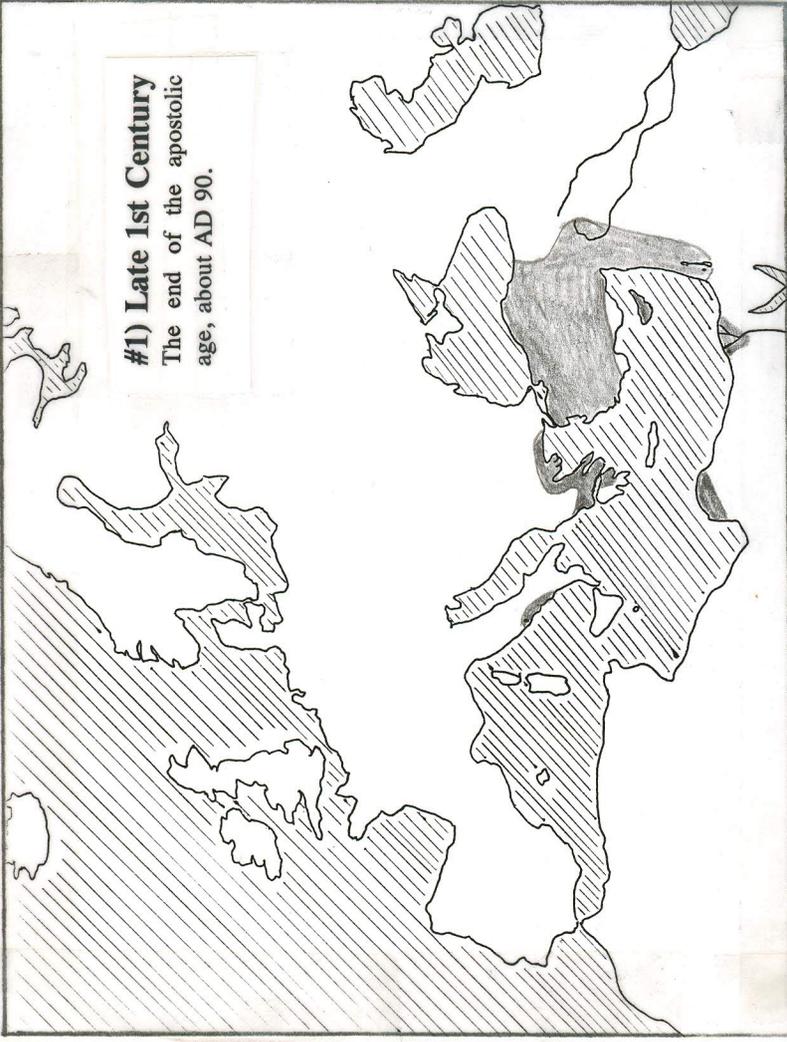
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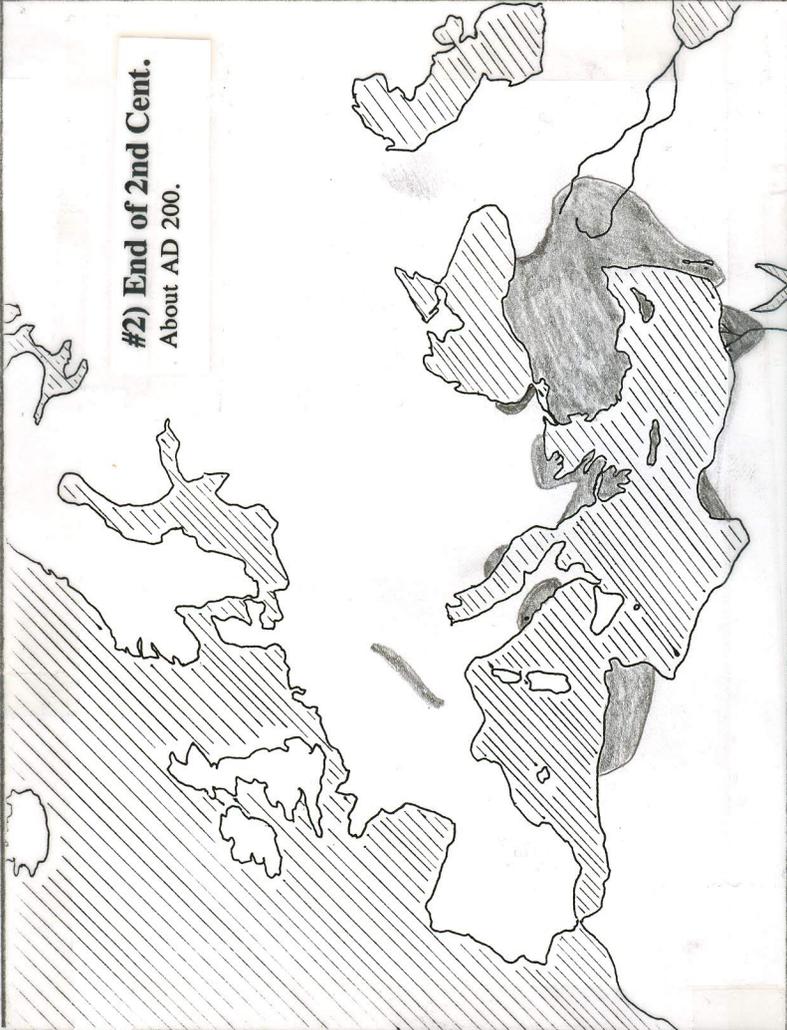
(TO EGYPT)

- M.G., June 2012

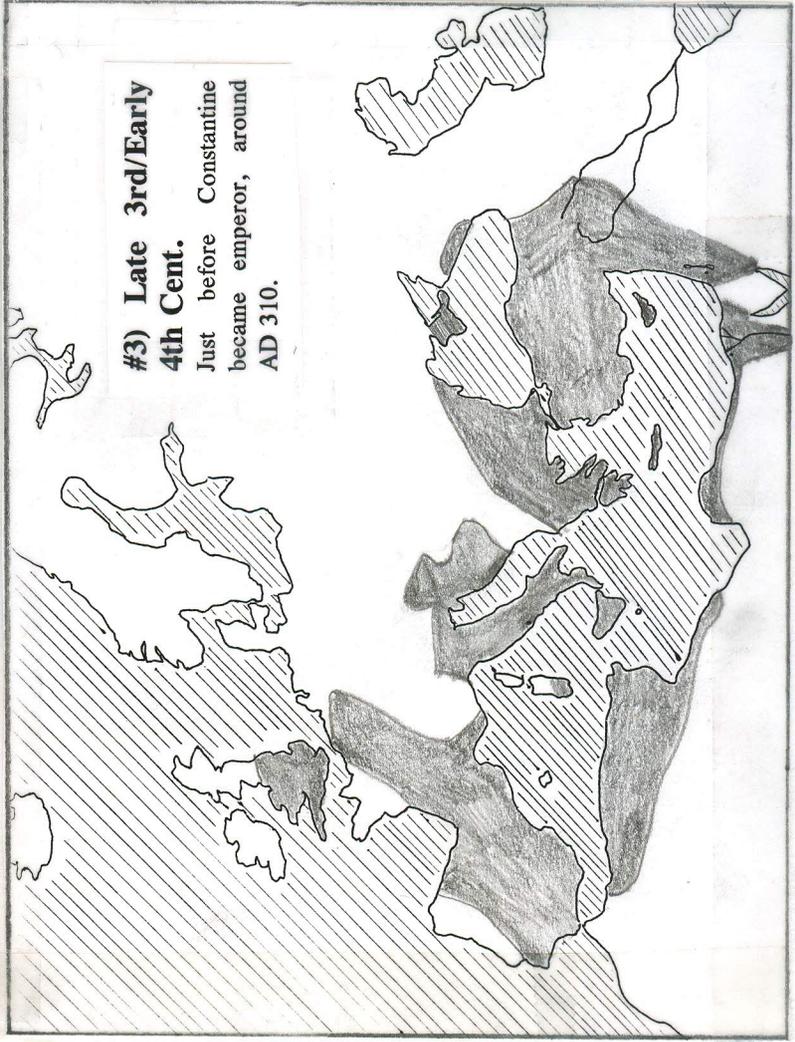
#1) Late 1st Century
The end of the apostolic age, about AD 90.



#2) End of 2nd Cent.
About AD 200.



#3) Late 3rd/Early 4th Cent.
Just before Constantine became emperor, around AD 310.



**THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST:
ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE**

**Supplement For Week Six:
The Geographical Spread Of The Church**

This series of maps illustrates the spread of the gospel in the first three centuries of the church. In each map, the shaded areas show approximately the boundaries of regions where churches are known to have been established at that time. At each time, there were also other (unshaded) areas where the gospel had been preached, but did not take hold, or where the church did not last long. There were also other (unshaded) smaller areas with scatterings, or small local populations, of Christians. The boundaries of the shaded areas are of course approximate, since the early church (before Constantine) did not control territory in any political sense.

- Mark Garner, July 2012

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Chronology Of Biblical And World Events, Part A: From The Great Flood To The Birth Of Jesus Christ

The following chart shows the dates for some of the significant events in the Old Testament and during the inter-testamental period. Many events from world and religious history are also included, providing a context for the events we study in the history of Israel and the church.

The dates in parenthesis (usually older events) are subject to large margins of error. Most of the other dates are known within a few years at the most.

(Before 2500 BC)	The great flood and Noah's ark
(Before 2000 BC)	Call of Abraham (Genesis 12)
(Between 1900 and 1800 BC)	Jacob and his family move to Egypt. This was most likely during the Hyksos period, when Egypt was under the rule of Canaanite overlords.
(Between 1800 and 1700 BC)	King Hammurabi, who is best known for his famous legal code, creates the original Babylonian Empire.
(1570 BC)	Egypt's "New Kingdom" begins, with liberation from the Hyksos rulers.
(1525 BC)	Likely date for the birth of Moses
1504 BC to 1483 BC	Reign of Queen Hatshepsut as Pharaoh of Egypt. As a younger woman, she may have been the "Pharaoh's daughter" who saved the infant Moses.
(1445 BC)	Most likely date for the Exodus from Egypt (See below for alternate date)
(1405 BC)	Crossing the Jordan under Joshua (probable - see below for alternate date)
1350 BC to 1334 BC	Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, renamed Akhenaten, and Queen Nefertiti try unsuccessfully to convert Egypt to monotheism.
(1250 BC, 1210 BC)	Alternate dates for the Exodus and crossing of the Jordan - these were once widely accepted; but they don't harmonize well with the OT's internal chronology and were based on Egyptian records later found to be inaccurate. (These dates would also change dates for earlier OT events.)
1112 BC	Tiglath-Pileser I becomes ruler of Assyria and transforms the nation into a regional power.
(1050 BC)	The period of the "judges" ends, as Saul becomes the first king of Israel.
(1010 BC)	David becomes sole king after Saul's death.
931 BC	After Solomon's death, Israel splits into two rival kingdoms (previously believed to have happened in 975 BC before improved research placed it between 931 and 922 BC). The Northern Kingdom kept the name Israel; the Southern Kingdom took the name Judah, after the tribe of its kings.
883 BC to 859 BC	The notorious Ashurnasirpal II rules Assyria - he openly uses terror tactics to increase Assyria's power and territory.
753 BC	The city of Rome is founded on the banks of the Tiber River.
745 BC	Beginning of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria, who revives Assyria into a world power.
722 BC	Assyria conquers the northern kingdom of Israel (also called Ephraim, after its dominant tribe, or Samaria, after its capital). Both Israel and Judah had sought out the Assyrians as potential allies during the war between Israel, Judah, and Aram (Syria) in about 735 BC.

701 BC	Assyrian invasion of Judah is stopped by God's miraculous intervention.
628 BC	Josiah's reforms are the last and greatest attempt to bring Judah back to God. Jeremiah also began his prophetic ministry about the same time.
626 BC	Nabopolassar establishes the Neo-Babylonian Empire
612 BC	Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, is taken by the Babylonians; and the Assyrian Empire falls.
606 BC	The first Babylonian invasion of Judah - Daniel and his three friends are among those taken captive.
605 BC	Babylon, under crown prince Nebuchadnezzar, wins the decisive battle of Carchemish and establishes undisputed Babylonian supremacy.
604 BC	Approximate birth date of Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism
597 BC	Second Babylonian invasion of Judah - Ezekiel is among the captives
586 BC	Jerusalem falls in the third Babylonian invasion of Judah. The nation of Judah is ended, and most of the people are taken as captives to Babylon.
563 BC	Approximate date of birth of Prince Gautama Siddhartha, "the Buddha"
556 BC	Most likely date of birth of Nataputta Vardhamana, founder of Jainism
553 BC	Cyrus II "the Great" becomes ruler of Persia
551 BC	Probable birth date of Ch'iu K'ung, better known as Confucius
538 BC	Fall of Babylonian Empire - it is conquered by the Persians and Medes, led by Cyrus the Great
536 BC	Cyrus decrees that the Jews may return to their homeland (70 years after the first captives were taken to Babylon - see Jeremiah 25 & 29)
535 BC	Reconstruction on the temple is begun but soon abandoned
522 BC	Darius I Hystaspes becomes ruler of Persia, succeeding Cyrus's son Cambyses, who had ruled 529-522 BC (note: this is not Darius the Mede)
520 BC	Haggai and Zechariah exhort the people to rebuild the temple
516 BC	Temple reconstruction completed
509 BC	Lucius Junius Brutus leads a revolt against Rome's last king, the oppressive Tarquinius Superbus, and Rome becomes a republic.
490 BC	Persia's invasion of Greece is halted when the Athenians defeat Darius's Persian army at the decisive battle of Marathon
486 BC	Xerxes (called "Ahasuerus" in some versions of the OT) succeeds Darius as ruler of Persia
480 BC	With the Persians again threatening to conquer Greece, the Athenian commander Themistocles lures the impulsive Xerxes into positioning his fleet in the cramped strait off the island of Salamis, where the Greek fleet destroys it. This ends the last real threat of Persia taking over Greece.
478 BC	Esther becomes queen of Persia
465 BC	Xerxes (now Esther's husband) is assassinated, and is succeeded by Artaxerxes I, whose cupbearer was Nehemiah
458 BC	Ezra begins his reforms and teachings
444 BC	Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem and leads the rebuilding of the walls
431 BC	The Peloponnesian War begins in Greece. This lengthy and wasteful war lasted until 404 BC, and was a defining event in the ancient world.
420 BC	Approximate date that the Old Testament is completed, with the writing of the book of Malachi
399 BC	In the hysteria surrounding Athens's loss to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians execute Socrates for "corrupting the youth".

359 BC	Philip of Macedon, who will unify the Greeks, begins his reign.
336 BC	Philip of Macedon dies and his son Alexander "the Great" becomes king.
332 BC	Alexander captures Jerusalem.
331 BC	Alexander defeats the Persians and Darius III at Gaugmela. Following this and his earlier victory at Issus, Alexander easily conquered the rest of Persia's territory by 330 BC, and in that year Darius III is killed.
323 BC	Alexander dies at the age of 33, and his empire is divided into several parts. At first Israel (or Palestine) was given to General Seleucus, whose territory was based in Syria.
301 BC	Palestine is annexed by the Egyptian Ptolemies.
285 BC (to 246 BC)	The reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus begins. Philadelphus freed most Jewish slaves and appointed many Jews to high positions. He also successfully promoted Greek culture amongst many younger Jews. The Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) was produced in Alexandria under the direction of Philadelphus's librarian Demetrius.
264 BC	Beginning of the First Punic War between Carthage and Rome. It ends in 246 BC with a decisive Roman victory, elevating Rome from a regional power to a superpower.
219 BC	The Second Punic War begins when Carthage, led by Hannibal, deliberately violates the treaty that ended the first war. Hannibal crosses the Alps and wins some epic victories, reaching the gates of Rome itself before the Romans finally devise strategies to defeat him.
202 BC	The battle of Zama ends the Second Punic War, with another crushing Roman victory. Hannibal barely escapes with his life.
198 BC	After a lengthy war in Palestine, the Seleucids under Antiochus III "the Great" retake the territory, assisted by many Jews. Antiochus, a bitter opponent of Rome, then forms an alliance with Hannibal.
192 BC	The Romans halt Antiochus's expansion at Thermopylae, and they do so again in 191 BC at Magnesium.
175 BC	The half-insane Antiochus IV "Epiphanes" becomes king of the Seleucid Empire. After a defeat by the Romans, he begins to take out his anger by persecuting the Jews, soon provoking them to revolt.
167 BC	The War for Independence begins, first led by Matthias and then by his son Judas "Maccabeus".
146 BC	The Third Punic War (which began in 149 BC) ends with the final destruction of Carthage. Later in the same year, the Romans destroy Corinth and become the undisputed superpower of the Mediterranean.
142 BC	After an indecisive campaign, the Maccabean war ends when Judas' brother Simon makes an agreement with a Seleucid heir that gives independence to Israel.
135 BC	Simon Maccabeus is killed by his son-in-law, who tries to seize power. John Hyrcanus prevents this and stabilizes the government in Israel, but the Seleucids exploit the situation, extorting a large tribute and almost re-conquering Israel.
104 BC	John Hyrcanus dies, leaving instructions for a coalition government between his wife and sons. But one son, Judah, seizes sole power and begins a period of reckless and unstable government, which eventually led Rome to intervene.

63 BC	In the middle of a power struggle between king Aristobulus and high priest Hyrcanus, the Romans send emissaries to negotiate a settlement. After both sides reject and insult the Romans, Rome sends an army under General Pompey to attack and conquer Syria and Palestine. Hyrcanus assumes authority in Jerusalem and delivers it to the Romans.
58 BC	The Gallic Wars begin (ending in 52 BC) - Julius Caesar conquers much of Western Europe for the Romans.
49 BC	Julius Caesar leads his own army across the Rubicon River and begins a Civil War against Pompey. Hyrcanus backs Caesar, the winner, and is rewarded by being made the ruler of the Jewish nation. Hyrcanus's top official is the scheming Antipater, father of the future Herod the Great.
44 BC	Caesar is assassinated in a conspiracy led by Brutus and Cassius. Mark Antony arouses public feeling against the conspirators, and a new civil war breaks out, with the Triumvirate of Antony, Octavian, and Emilius Lepidus taking control of Rome. But they soon fall out with one another.
31 BC	Mark Antony and his ally Cleopatra lose the battle of Actium to Octavian's forces; and they both commit suicide. Herod the Great, formerly a strong ally of Antony, negotiates a new alliance with Octavian.
30 BC	Octavian, having eliminated his rivals by various means, becomes Augustus Caesar and names himself emperor of Rome. When the Roman Senate votes its formal acceptance in 27 BC, Rome is now an empire.
20 BC	Herod the Great begins his lavish refurbishing of the temple.
4 BC	Birth of Jesus Christ (we'll note later why he was born "BC")

Additional Sources & References

For some recommended general sources on studying church history, see the class overview (blue handout) that was given out last week.

Some selected sources for the study of Old Testament history include:

Norman Geisler, *A Popular Survey Of The Old Testament*
 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*
 Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*

Some good sources for studying biblical chronology:

Jack Finegan, *Handbook Of Biblical Chronology*
 Merrill Tenney, *New Testament Survey*
 Edwin R. Thiele, *A Chronology Of The Hebrew Kings*

Good basic sources for chronology of events in the ancient world:

John Haywood, *Historical Atlas Of The Classical World*
 Kinder & Hilgemann, *The Anchor Atlas Of World History, Volume I*

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, June 2012*
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**THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST:
ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE**

**Chronology Of Biblical And World Events, Part B:
From The Birth Of Jesus Christ to the Accession Of Constantine**

By this era, the dates of most important events are known precisely. Dates of some events in early church history are approximate; but they are often known within a couple of years, and at most within a few years. After the end of the first century, most of the dates are known exactly.

This entire era is dominated by events involving the Romans, and a great many of the developments in the Roman Empire had a direct effect on the early Christians.

4 BC (approx.)	Birth of Jesus Christ (see note at end on BCAD)
AD 9	Roman troops are crushed by Germanic tribes in a battle in the Teutoberger Wald, ending the Roman efforts to conquer the Germans. This would have considerable long-term significance.
AD 14	Augustus Caesar dies, and his hand-picked successor Tiberius Caesar becomes emperor.
AD 2 or 29	The public ministries of John the Baptist, and then Jesus, begin.
AD 31 or 32	Crucifixion of Jesus
AD 32-33	Ministry in Judea and Samaria (Peter and Philip)
AD 36	Saul of Tarsus becomes a Christian.
AD 36-46	Ministry of Saul (Paul) in Judea, Syria, and Cilicia. The church at Antioch is established.
AD 37	Caligula, egomaniacal and probably insane, becomes emperor of Rome.
AD 41	The imperial guards assassinate Caligula, and Claudius becomes emperor.
AD 43	Rome invades and later conquers Britain (Julius Caesar had tried unsuccessfully to do so in 55 BC).
AD 46-48	First Missionary Journey of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2-14:23)
AD 50	Church leaders meet in Jerusalem to discuss circumcision and other issues involving Gentile converts to Christianity (Acts 15).
AD 50-52	Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40-18:22)
AD 51-52	1 & 2 Thessalonians are written after Paul is driven from Thessalonica.
AD 54	Claudius dies after being poisoned, and Nero becomes emperor. The early years of his reign are peaceful and successful. In AD 59, he has his mother killed and assumes full control, leading to numerous problems.
AD 54-58	Third Missionary Journey, ending in Jerusalem (Acts 18:23-21:17)
AD 57	Paul writes 1 & 2 Corinthians, and probably writes Galatians at this time.
AD 57 or 58	Paul writes Romans during a return visit to Corinth.
AD 59-60	Paul is arrested in Jerusalem and taken prisoner to Rome (Acts 21-23)
AD 61-63	Paul's first period of imprisonment in Rome. He writes Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon while in prison.
AD 63	Paul is released and continues his ministry; he may have gone to Spain.
AD 64	The great fire in Rome, started at Nero's command. He publicly blames the Christians, leading to a short but brutal period of persecution of Christians in and near Rome.
AD 65	Paul writes 1 Timothy and Titus (Timothy is in Ephesus; Titus at Crete).

AD 66 or 67	Paul is re-arrested in Rome. He writes 2 Timothy and then is executed.
AD 60-70	Most of the New Testament is written down during this decade.
AD 66	Judea revolts against the Romans. General Vespasian methodically begins operations in Judea, and soon places Jerusalem under siege.
AD 6□	Nero is killed in a revolt in Rome. The next three emperors (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) each last only a few months before they in turn are killed.
AD 69	Vespasian is called back to Rome and made emperor. He leaves his son Titus to complete the siege of Jerusalem.
AD 70	Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans. The Romans destroy the temple, permanently ending temple worship and the Levitical sacrificial system. A small group of Jews makes a last stand at the fortress of Masada.
AD 79	Vespasian dies and his son Titus becomes emperor. He completes the construction of the great Colosseum at Rome.
AD 79	Pompeii is destroyed when Mount Vesuvius erupts.
AD □1	Titus dies and Domitian becomes emperor. During his reign (□1-96), he occasionally instigated cruel actions directed at individual Christians
AD 95	A short but severe general persecution of Christians. Most of the persecution was directed at particular individuals who displeased Rome.
AD 95	John is exiled to Patmos and has the visions described in Revelation.
AD 96	John is released, returns to Emphasis, and writes the book of Revelation.
AD 96	Domitian is assassinated and the elderly Nerva becomes emperor.
AD 9□	Nerva dies and is succeeded by Trajan, who leads Rome in new wars of conquest. In Trajan's reign Rome reached the peak of its power and controlled more territory than it ever had or ever again would control. Trajan also directed a thorough investigation of Christianity to determine whether it was a genuine threat to Rome. The result was that Christianity was officially made illegal, but the law was only enforced against particularly disruptive Christians.
AD 10□	Ignatius of Antioch is condemned to death and sent to Rome to be executed. On the journey to Rome, he writes a series of letters that provide valuable information on the state of the church at this time.
AD 117	Trajan dies; Hadrian becomes emperor. Mainly concerned with protecting Rome's territory, Hadrian is best known for "Hadrian's Wall" in Britain.
AD 132	Simon Bar-Kokhba leads a revolt of the Jews in Judea. After three years of conflict, the Romans finally crush the uprising and disperse the Jews, beginning the final Jewish Diaspora.
AD 13□	Hadrian dies and emperor Antoninus Pius begins the Antonine dynasty.
AD 140	Marcion arrives in Rome, promoting false teachings and a rival version of the New Testament, centering on Paul's writings. The established church "excommunicates" Marcion in 144.
AD 155	Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, is burned at the stake.
AD 161	Antoninus dies and Marcus Aurelius becomes emperor. Today Marcus is famous as a ruler, writer, and philosopher; but he despised Christians. He was the first emperor regularly to enforce the laws against Christianity, and he had many Christians executed, including the writer Justin Martyr.
AD 172	Montanus starts his "New Prophecy" movement, dividing the church.
AD 1□0	Marcus Aurelius dies and the inept, lazy Commodus, a former gladiator, becomes emperor. His reign begins a long period of Roman decline.

AD 192-193	Commodus dies, and the next two emperors are quickly murdered. Septimius Severus becomes emperor in 193 and begins the Severan line, which ruled until 235 and consisted mostly of non-entities who allowed Roman government and society to decay badly.
AD 220	The great Han Dynasty in China collapses after over 400 years of rule, beginning an age of disorder and conflict in China.
AD 224	The Parthian Empire falls, and the Sassanids revive the Persian Empire.
AD 249	Decius becomes emperor and launches the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. For the first time, Roman authorities actively hunt down Christians and often execute them if they do not renounce Christianity. The great writer Origen is savagely beaten and dies soon afterwards.
AD 251	After Decius's death, the church faces two controversies that lead to widespread divisions. The Novatian controversy concerns how to handle believers who renounced Christianity during Decius's persecutions. Meanwhile, Cyprian promotes his "Catholic" model for the church.
AD 251-260	Emperors Gallus (251-253) and Valerian (253-260) sporadically persecute Christians, usually targeting church leaders.
AD 284	Diocletian becomes emperor. Extremely concerned with the decline of Roman power and Roman society, he institutes sweeping reforms in many areas. He divides the administration of the empire into east and west, and devises a plan of succession to prepare future emperors. His innovations strengthened Rome from within, and the reforms probably postponed Rome's collapse for over a century.
AD 303	Diocletian suddenly institutes the second empire-wide, systematic persecution of Christians. It is by far the worst persecution in the early church era, and is in many ways inexplicable. Until now Diocletian had allowed many Christians to assume prominent positions in the army and the imperial court. It is usually believed that the persecutions were instigated by Galerius, his adopted son and successor.
AD 305	According to his own pre-arranged plan, Diocletian steps down as emperor, and Galerius takes the throne. Galerius intensifies the persecutions, but the brutality of his methods soon outrages even pagan Romans, and Galerius is eventually forced to abandon them.
AD 311	Galerius's death causes a succession crisis, as several contenders raise armies and fight to become emperor. Diocletian's successors had divided the empire administratively into east and west, creating multiple battlegrounds.
AD 312	At the battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine defeats Maxentius and becomes emperor of a reunited empire. Soon afterwards, Constantine announces that he has become a Christian.
AD 313	Constantine issues the Edict Of Milan, officially cancelling all laws and penalties against Christians and Christianity. During his reign (312-327), Christianity is the favored, but not yet official, religion of Rome. Within a few months after becoming emperor, he becomes the arbiter or authority on church disputes and controversies. All this would quickly change the entire nature and character of the church.

□Note On "BC" and "AD"

The system of giving dates by BC and AD was not invented until hundreds of years after Jesus' birth. The most common calendar in use at the time started counting years with Rome's founding, which is 753 BC on our calendar. Our 753 BC was year 1 to the Romans - they abbreviated it 1 A□C (A□C stands for "ab urbe condita", Latin for "from the founding of the city"). So 4 BC, the probable date of Jesus' birth, was 750 A□C to the Romans. The Roman calendar remained in use well after the fall of the western empire, despite attempts by Christians and others to change it.

(The ancient Greek calendar was based on their Olympic Games, which began in 776 BC. They counted in four-year "Olympiads, so that our 753 BC (the Roman 1 A□C) would have been the 4th year of the 6th Olympiad on the Greek calendar. The ancient Jews, like several other ancient nations, used to count years from the start of a particular ruler's reign.)

The first to suggest using Christ's birth as the benchmark was Dionysus Exiguus ("Dennis the Short"), a Scythian mathematician who had become a monk, in AD 525. He called his system "Anno Domini", Latin for "in the year of the Lord". His system gradually gained popularity, and when the British historian Bede wrote his famous history in AD 731, he adopted Dionysius's system and gave it a considerable boost in prominence. Over the next few centuries it slowly replaced older systems throughout Europe.

When Dionysius calculated the date of Christ's birth, he made an oversight that led to him setting his year 1 AD several years after the death of Herod "The Great", who was alive when Jesus was born. By the time the mistake was discovered, the system was too widely used, and many AD dates familiar, that it was effectively too late to change it. So Jesus was born sometime between 6 BC and 4 BC.

Many contemporary sources currently use BCE and CE ("common era") instead of BC and AD, but the dates and the system are the same.

Additional Sources & References

Besides the general sources given in earlier handouts, here are some additional suggestions for studying the Romans and the church in the first century AD:

Will & Ariel Durant, *The Story Of Civilization, Volume □□Caesar □ Christ*

Note: Volume 2 in this series is *The □ife Of Greece* - last week's notes erroneously referred to this as Volume 3. Sorry for the silly typo!

Josh McDowell, *He Walked Among □s*

Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*

Merrill Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (has a nice section on historical and cultural background)

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2012*

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**THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST:
ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE**

**Chronology Of Biblical And World Events, Part C:
From The Accession Of Constantine To The Final Fall Of The Western Empire**

In this era, history is dominated by the changes that swept across the Roman Empire due to Constantine's accession and the increasing dangers from external attacks. This was a period in which things changed rapidly, both for the ruling classes and for the average person.

(AD) 312	At the battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine defeats Maxentius and becomes emperor of a reunited empire. Soon afterwards, Constantine announces that he has become a Christian.
313	Constantine issues the Edict Of Milan, cancelling all laws and penalties against Christians. During his reign (312-327), Christianity is the favored, but not yet official, religion of Rome.
321	The first day of the week becomes a holiday for the first time.
324	Eusebius of Caesarea completes the final version of his church history.
325	The Council Of Nicaea is called by Constantine to resolve the controversies caused by the teachings of Arius. Although Arius's faction is in the minority at the council, he causes a split that Constantine's power is not able to overcome. The Nicene policies are accepted throughout Europe, but are very unpopular elsewhere, especially in Asia.
331	Constantine founds the city of Constantinople and officially moves the seat of the government there, creating a divided power in the Empire.
337	On Constantine's death, the empire is divided amongst his three sons, all vigorous persecutors of other religions. But they quickly quarrel with each other as well, and Constantius, an Arian, emerges in sole control.
360	The Picts and Scots cross Hadrian's Wall and invade Roman Britain, beginning the long series of "barbarian" attacks that eventually caused the Western Empire to collapse. The same year, the Huns arrive in Europe.
361	Constantine's nephew Julian becomes emperor, and reveals that he does not believe in Christianity. There is a short-lived tolerance for other religions, which ends abruptly when Julian dies in 363.
364	The Roman Empire is divided into the Western Empire, with its capital in Rome, and the Eastern Empire, with its capital in Constantinople.
376	Becoming increasingly worried about pressure from Germanic tribes, the Romans allow the Visigoths to settle inside Roman territory.
378	In the disastrous battle of Adrianople, Eastern emperor Valens is killed and the Roman army is routed by the Visigoths. Afterwards the Visigoths and Ostrogoths are granted their own territory inside the Empire. The Romans became increasingly desperate in their efforts to buy off these tribes with money, position, and land; but in the end nothing worked.
381	The Council Of Constantinople is convened to debate and refute Apollanarius's teachings about the "Trinity".
393	With "barbarian" invasions becoming more frequent, Rome begins to withdraw its legions from its more distant territories, redeploying them to defend more crucial areas.
386	Jerome Of Bethlehem retires from active ministry to begin work on the first standard translation of the Scriptures into Latin. His version, called

	the Vulgate, is completed around 400, and it becomes the standard version used by the Roman church for over 1000 years.
391	All other religions are prohibited by law once-for-all, and the Roman church's version of Christianity becomes the official state religion.
392-395	The Empire is briefly united under Theodosius The Great.
400	The British monk Pelagius arrives in Rome to promote his theory of complete free will and his rejection of "original sin". Augustine Of Hippo assumes the lead in attacking Pelagius.
401	The Visigoths under King Alaric launch the first invasions of Italy.
404	Due to the increasing danger of barbarian invasion, the Western capital is moved from Rome to Ravenna.
410	The Visigoths sack and pillage Rome. Alaric dies, but his army continues moving deeper into Italy. Meanwhile, the Romans withdraw the last legion from Britain, bringing it back to defend Italy.
410	With the disaster in Rome provoking widespread debate and reproach, Augustine writes <i>The City Of God</i> to provide a new perspective on events. His book becomes the foundation of Roman Catholic theology.
416-429	Barbarian kingdoms conquer most of the Western Empire. The Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Huns, Vandals, Suevi, and Franks and fight the Romans and each other to divide the crumbling empire. Britain is overrun by the Scots and Picts, who then in turn lose ground to the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes.
410	Pelagius and his followers are banished from the church (see 400).
431	The Council Of Ephesus is called to debate and refute the teachings of Nestorius. The Council begins with abstract theological discussions and soon degenerates into partisan political struggles.
433	Attila becomes the ruler of the Huns, and begins his famous rampages.
440	Leo I becomes bishop of Rome, the first true Pope.
451	The Council Of Chalcedon debates the arcane doctrines of Eutyches.
452	Attila and the Huns reach the outskirts of Rome. The Roman military and political leaders flee the city in terror, abandoning the people. Leo I goes to plead with Attila to spare the city and, remarkably, persuades him to leave. Unbeknownst to Leo, Attila's army was already ravaged by disease and malnutrition, which made Attila more open to Leo's persuasion.
455	The second sack of Rome, this time by the Vandals.
476	After defeating Roman forces at the battle of Pavia, the Germanic chief Odoacer deposes Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor, and the Western Roman Empire comes to an end.

Additional Sources & References

See the earlier handouts for general sources that cover our whole study.

For this particular era, Edward Gibbon's famous work *The Decline & Fall Of The Roman Empire* is still one of the best secular histories. Michael Grant's works *The Antonines* and *The Severans* cover earlier periods of Rome's decline. See also *Caesar And Christ*, volume 3 of Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story Of Civilization*.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, August 2012
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**THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY, PART ONE:
THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE**

Sunday AM Adult Bible Class, Summer 2012

This summer's study of the New Testament church will be divided into three parts, with about four weeks on the origins of the church, four weeks on the growth of the early church, and four weeks on the decline of the early church. Each study will combine historical material with a look at one or more passages of Scripture that will illustrate important themes, ideas, or applications.

Tentative Outline & Schedule:

Week	Topic	Readings From:
Week 1 - June 3	Introduction: Old & New	Hebrews 10, Matthew 5
Week 2 - June 10	Old Testament Roots: Years Of Building	Genesis 12, Genesis 15
Week 3 - June 17	Old Testament Roots: Years Of Discipline	Habakkuk 1, Jeremiah 29
Week 4 - June 24	The Inter-Testamental Period	Daniel 2, 7, 10 & 11
Week 5 - July 1	The First Century - Jesus & The Apostles	Isaiah 42, Acts 1
Week 6 - July 8	The Early Church - Growth & Foundations	Isaiah 55, 2 Timothy 3
Week 7 - July 15	Life & Worship In The Early Church	1 Timothy 3, 1 Peter 5, Acts 2
Week 8 - July 22	The Early Church & The Pagan World	Philippians 2 & 3, 1 Peter 3 & 4
Week 9 - July 29	Divisions & Problems In The Early Church	2 Timothy 4, Acts 15
Week 10 - Aug 5	Turning Points - The 4th & 5th Centuries	2 Corinthians 10, Hebrews 10
Week 11 - Aug 12	The Decline Of The New Testament Church	Revelation 2, Colossians 2
Week 12 - Aug 19	Transition To The Medieval Established Church	2 Timothy 2, Romans 11

Primary Historical References:

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*

Tim Dowley (editor), *Introduction To The History Of Christianity*

Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History Of Christianity* (2 volumes)

John McManners (editor), *Oxford Illustrated History Of Christianity*

Bruce Shelley, *Church History In Plain Language*

Selected Writings From Early Christians:

Eusebius of Caesarea, *The History Of The Church* (4th century AD)

Loeb Classical Library, *Apostolic Fathers* (2 volumes, writings from 1st & 2nd century AD)

Loeb Classical Library, *Clement Of Alexandria* (1st-2nd century AD)

Loeb Classical Library, *St Basil - The Letters* (4 volumes, 4th century AD)

Loeb Classical Library, *Tertullian, Minucius Felix* (2nd-3rd century AD)

Loeb Classical Library, *Prudentius* (2 volumes, 4th-5th century AD)

Selected Additional References - Restoration Fellowship Perspectives On The Early Church:

Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds Of Early Christianity*

Everett Ferguson, *The Church Of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology For Today*

Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*

- Mark Garner, June 2012

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week One: Old & New (Readings In Matthew 5 & Hebrews 10)

*From God's viewpoint, the history of the church tells us about his desire for all of humanity to know him through the gospel—and this story forms a continuum spanning all of human history—
yet for many years, God's relations with humanity were conducted primarily through one small nation and the laws he gave it—How should we view this period of history today?*

An Important Shadow Series

The Old Covenant and the old laws were never more than shadows of the New Covenant, and could never have been a permanent basis for an eternal relationship with God. But even these shadows are of lasting relevance to Christians, since each aspect of the old law has a spiritual parallel in the New Covenant. In particular, the old law teaches us about holiness.

The Old Covenant was always destined to become obsolete (Hebrews 13). Not one of the laws can stand in itself, for the whole structure was a unit that had to be observed in its entirety or not at all. In Galatians 5:2-4, Paul explains this to Christians who had selected certain portions of the old law and incorporated them into the gospel. This is exactly how not to use the old law.

Compare Romans 11:6 and James 2:10. See also Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is quoted in Hebrews 12.

The law still serves a purpose - but not as a source of commands and permissions. The entire law was nailed to the cross (see Colossians 2:14, Romans 7:6), to be replaced with something much better. The flesh loves laws, for it loves to quote a law and feel as if the issue is settled. But if we want to know Christ, we have to move beyond such fleshly ways of seeking God.

The old law consisted of shadows, not reality (Hebrews 10:1-4). It was imperfect by nature, not in its requirements but in its effectiveness. Law cannot bring us to God permanently, for it can only make us feel prideful or guilty, not humble (though it can provoke false humility). Law is inherently opposed to grace, inherently creates divisions and inequalities, and inherently unsuited to developing relationships. So why did God implement the law?

The law was undesirable but necessary (Hebrews 10:5-10). It provided a temporary way for God's presence to be among his people in a limited sense. God loves humanity and desires for us to know him, yet our sin and uncleanness pushes his presence away. Before Jesus, the Levitical law - with its sacrifices, cleansings, rituals, and prohibitions - preserved a level of cleanness that made it possible for God to maintain a presence amongst his people. It was the only way, but a temporary way; and God was never pleased by the sacrifices and commands in themselves.

The sacrifices were essential to the Levitical law because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). But they became irrelevant when Jesus provided once-for-all forgiveness by his blood - there is no longer any sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:9-10). He eliminated the need for further sacrifices, and rendered the whole law obsolete and inapplicable.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: If the Old Covenant was never meant to be permanent, why did God keep it in place for so long? Why does the law have to be observed in its entirety or not at all? If we understand that the old law is completely obsolete, how might this influence our study of history?

Jesus fulfillent of the old law Matt 5

Jesus did not come to abolish the old law, for it is still preserved in our Bibles for us to learn and to study. Nor did he come merely to replace the old law with a new set of rules. Rather, he came to fulfill the law - that is, he came to show us the true purpose of the law; and with his own ministry he brought us the full measure of the blessings that the old law could only hint at.

Jesus did not abolish the law, but fulfilled it by bringing the purpose of the law to completion (Matthew 5:17-20). The law was always (and only) a vehicle to bring God's people into his presence in a limited sense. By fulfilling the requirements of the law, Jesus replaced the law with something better, bringing us into God's presence in a more perfect and lasting way.

We can only enter the kingdom of heaven if our righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, the law's most religious observers. This does not mean observing the law more diligently - rather, we need to rise above their mentality, their pre-occupation with outward requirements.

Jesus never defines precisely what he means by his frequent references to the "kingdom of heaven" or the "kingdom of God", and there are numerous interpretations of the phrase. In many instances, he is primarily emphasizing what it means to know God, to please God, and/or to serve God as God wishes us to.

Jesus uses examples and commentary to describe how we fulfill the law (Matthew 5:21-4). The law's commands are only a starting point. A person can avoid committing murder or adultery from a legal standpoint, and yet be guilty of these crimes in God's eyes by hating or lusting. To live under grace, we must look past rules; we need to learn to think about our relationship with God and our relationships with other humans, instead of relying on precise laws or guidelines.

Divorce and oaths are further examples. When the marriage vow is seen as a legal contract instead of an enduring relationship, a marriage cannot be what God intended it to be. When the Israelites viewed oaths as a matter of performance or as a contract with God, they learned the wrong lesson, thinking that their words didn't matter when an oath was not involved - just as our own society's use of "oaths" in a few artificial contexts cause other words to be taken lightly.

A different problem is illustrated by Jephthah's foolish vow in Judges 11:29-40. He mistakenly thought that God valued the fulfillment of this pointless vow over the well-being of Jephthah's daughter.

Jesus' teachings on love, peace, and forgiveness show the superiority of grace over law. No set of laws can ever substitute for an attitude of genuine love and compassion (see also Colossians 2:21-23). And Jesus is not making up a new set of rules - Christians are allowed to do all kinds of things that are uncaring or selfish, and the price we pay is not to be punished physically but to find it harder to know God and to see the greater spiritual blessings he offers us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Jesus fulfill the law? Are his statements here "commands"? Why weren't they part of the law to begin with? Can they influence our study of the Old Testament? What happens to us if we disregard what he tells us?

The history of the old law

In a sense, the old law has its own history, which did not end until a little after the life of Jesus. Although the Levitical law itself has been obsolete for many centuries, a look at how God used it can help us learn to move beyond law in our own relationship with God. Moving beyond law, and living truly by grace, is one of the basic spiritual struggles that all believers face.

God's early covenants with Noah, Abraham, and other patriarchs focused on particular persons whose willingness to know and obey God made it possible for them to be in God's presence and for God to use them to help others to see him, or to carry out special tasks.

□ Next week, we shall again study this entire era of history from a different perspective. Here we are interested primarily in the development and implementation of law in the Old Covenant.

Sacrifice, giving back to God, was present in God's earliest relationships with humans. Then with Abraham, circumcision became a symbol and condition for God's relationship with those he chose out of the world to prepare the way for the gospel. But all this was only temporary. God did not give his greatest blessings to Abraham or other believers - "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised" (Hebrews 11:39).

□ Note that in this era the concept of atonement for sins was not yet clearly understood as part of the sacrifices - this would become a clearly-defined concept when the Levitical law was developed.

And so, as described in Exodus and Leviticus, God continued to develop a more detailed, yet still temporary, means of establishing his presence with humanity. This time, the Levitical law allowed God to maintain a presence in the community, instead of merely speaking occasionally with a specific person. It provided an imperfect but practical way of dealing with the primary obstacle in the relationship between God and humanity: human sin.

Levitical law is based on the concepts of holy and common, clean and unclean (Leviticus 10:10). Holiness is the status of belonging to God, not being a part of this world. Anything holy must belong to God 100% - something can only be holy or common, with nothing in between. On the other hand, in the old law cleanness - a lack of sin or impurity - is a necessary condition for holiness. To be made holy, a person (or object) must first be cleansed, usually by sacrifice.

All of the old law revolved around these concepts. Besides daily sacrifices and rituals, there was an annual atonement for sin on the Day Of Atonement (Leviticus 16). An elaborate sacrificial ceremony cleansed the high priest, who then in turn provided sacrificial cleansing for the community. The cleansed community could remain holy and could continue to have God's presence among them, provided they continued following the law's provisions and sacrifices.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament we see the old law both used and misused, and often we see it simply neglected. There were consequences to all these things, but the most important implications went beyond the superficial results that we tend to look for.

The old law was always meant to be temporary, and God provided for its end. When Jesus' sacrifice introduced a better, more lasting way into God's presence, God tore the curtain of the temple to show that the sacrifices and priests were no longer needed (Matthew 27:51).

□ The curtain separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, where the high priest could come into the direct presence of God.

Most of the people continued them anyway, and so in AD 70 there was a final end to the Levitical sacrificial system, when the Roman army destroyed the temple. Though the temple had previously been rebuilt each time it was destroyed or desecrated, this time it was not - and although generations of the descendants of Israel still follow many of the teachings of the old law, the sacrificial system has never been resumed, rendering the rest of the law powerless.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense did the old law allow God to be present among his people? Is this different in Jesus? From our perspective, what is the difference between cleanness and holiness? How does the New Covenant improve on the Day of Atonement and the other provisions of the law? What should we learn from this?

Reflections on the Summer Class Series

Over the rest of this summer, we shall survey the history of the church of Jesus Christ from its Old Testament origins through the end of ancient times. Although of necessity our study will involve many events, dates, names, and locations, the history of the church is not really about any of these. It is about God calling to humanity and providing us all with a way to know him.

For the first few weeks we shall look at Old Testament history and the inter-testamental period. During this time, God's relationship with humanity was primarily through the law; yet it was still founded on grace, for not even the most faithful humans ever obeyed the law perfectly.

The inter-testamental period starts with the completion of the Old Testament in about 420 BC (with the writing of Malachi) and ends with the birth of Jesus. Another way of looking at it is that it covers events that happened after anything in the Old Testament and before anything in the New Testament.

Although the specific laws and practices of this era are now obsolete, they can still teach us many lessons about what it means to be holy. The Israelites focused primarily on the external indications of holiness under the Old Covenant, and indeed so do many believers today. But the real lesson in the pre-gospel era is that holiness always meant, and always will mean, simply to belong to God and to recognize that our true home is with God, not in this world.

In the middle part of our series, we shall look at the history, lives, and practices of the earliest Christians. Though their actions and teachings can be encouraging and useful, there are still more important questions - in particular, what it really means to follow Jesus. Since they were closer geographically and chronologically to Jesus and to those who had seen and heard him, their example - when used with care - can be of considerable use to us.

We shall finish the series with a look at the transition from the early church to the established medieval church, as the church transformed from an informally organized, diverse, persecuted family into a rigidly structured, highly conformist institution that persecuted others. Rather than merely criticize what the church became, we should try to learn what went wrong - not so that we can point out the errors of other groups, but because we are vulnerable to the same mistakes.

We often hear theories and comments on God's role in history. But it is easy to put the emphasis in the wrong place. If we view church history as the story of which groups were right and which were wrong, we miss the point. History teaches that we all need God's grace, protection, and compassion equally. The essence of Christianity has nothing to do with law, methods or results - all of these things create inherent inequalities and injustices. The essence of Christianity has always been the chance for every one of us to know and live with God freely, by his grace alone.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kinds of expectations might we have in studying church history? How might our expectations differ from what would God want us to get from studying it? How might different eras of history teach us different things? How can we help ourselves to focus on things of spiritual importance in history?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2012
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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Two: OT Roots & Years Of Growth (Readings In Genesis 12 & 15)

From the beginning of human history, God has desired to know each person whom he created. But, as even the earliest events in the Bible remind us, this has never been easy because of our tendency towards sin. In the Old Testament, God first used individual believers and then used the nation of Israel to maintain a limited presence in the midst of humanity.

Week 2: Genesis 12 & 15

God's promises to Abraham tell us a great deal about God's hopes for all of humanity. From the beginning, God has hoped for each person to have the chance to know him. Moreover, although he showered many other blessings on Abraham, God always intended for Abraham's greatest blessing to be his relationship with God, rather than any of the earthly things God gave him.

Likewise, God always intended for all peoples on earth to be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-9). So from the beginning there was an extra dimension to his interactions with Abraham. This was true from the start when Abram left his homeland of Ur to go to a new land, which would become Abraham's home and also the Promised Land of Canaan for his descendants.

His original name was Abram, Hebrew for "exalted father". He was given the new name Abraham, which means "father of many", a year before the birth of Isaac (Genesis 17:5).

Ur is an ancient civilization in the region that would later be ruled by the Babylonian Empire.

God made short-term promises and long-term promises to Abraham. His physical descendants inherited most of them, and as his spiritual heirs we too inherit these promises. It is through his spiritual heirs that the promise to bless all nations on earth has been fulfilled through the gospel.

Although Isaac was the 'child of the promise', God also blessed Abraham's first son Ishmael and gave him many of the same promises, in particular making him a great nation in his own right.

Above all, God himself was Abraham's "very great reward" (Genesis 15:1-6). This was true also for Abraham's physical descendants and his spiritual descendants - no other blessing is greater than the chance to know God himself and to live in his presence. God distributes material things, popularity, comfort, and other earthly blessings to believers and unbelievers alike; but only the faithful can know God himself and can fully appreciate his grace and wisdom.

This passage also tells us the grounds on which Abram received these promises: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness" (verse 6). In other words, even Abraham could not stand before God through his personal righteousness. But God accepted his faith as a substitute, and credited him with the righteousness he could not offer in his flesh.

God's promises to Abraham - son(s), abundant offspring, and more - have been fulfilled both literally and spiritually. As with the original promise in Genesis 12, the promise of countless descendants finds its greatest fulfillment in the way that the gospel has opened the way to God for members of all nations, all cultures, everywhere in the world and in every era. The apostle Paul emphasizes this in passages such as Romans 4:16-17 and Galatians 3:16 and 3:39.

There are some important implications for us as Abraham's heirs. God's promises to us are meant to be shared, not guarded jealously. Our greatest reward for our faith is also not any material blessing but God himself - the chance to know God and to be with him. And we can only receive all this by grace through faith, not by earning or deserving God's blessings.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How deeply might Abraham have understood these promises? How were they understood and/or misunderstood in ancient Israel? Find other New Testament passages that discuss Abraham's relevance for Christians. What promises do we inherit from Abraham? What conditions must we fulfill to inherit them?

God's presence in Genesis through Deuteronomy

Through Abraham and the other patriarchs, God maintained close relationships with those persons who sought him and listened to his words. Abraham's descendants then provided the foundation for the future nation of Israel. Despite the many differences in the details, the events of this era provide us today with a large variety of spiritual lessons and parallels.

From creation, when God called humankind "very good", and through the era of the patriarchs in Genesis, God consistently demonstrated the priority of seeking out and showing himself to persons who wanted to know him. God also shows us much about his own nature. His holiness and inability to have fellowship with sin is shown in the days of Adam and again in the days of Noah - and at the same time we see his grace and his desire to know his human creations.

Both before and after Abraham, we see both sides of God's nature. He insists that Adam and Eve leave the garden after they sin, yet he personally makes clothes for them and attends to their new needs. He must send the flood to erase the rampant uncleanness of humanity, but then he lavishes all his love and grace on the survivors. These same defining qualities of God guide his interactions with humanity throughout the Scriptures and throughout history.

Next is the account of Israel's slavery, deliverance, and consecration (Exodus and Leviticus). From Joseph to Moses, God fulfills promises in new ways, as Abraham's family becomes a large nation. Yet God requires his people to go through difficult times for the sake of the future. This parallels our bondage to sin, God's deliverance, and his call for us to become holy in gratitude.

Through Jacob's son Joseph, God blessed both Joseph's family and the Egyptians. The family went to Egypt, where they flourished but later came under oppression. To fulfill the promises in the way that God intended, God's people would have to learn dependence on God. And so later God used Moses, another devoted seeker of God, to lead the exodus. The redemption was brought about by numerous obvious miracles, humbling the Egyptians and Israelites alike.

God's desire was for the Israelites to be a holy people, that is, that they would belong to him and not to this world. But this meant that they first had to be cleansed of sin, and thus while in the desert God instituted the Levitical law. The advance of this over his earlier, simple covenants with the patriarchs is that the Levitical law provided a constant level of cleansing that allowed God to maintain a presence (through the tabernacle) in the community as a whole.

To be made holy is the same as being consecrated or sanctified. In all cases, the Scriptures use the word to refer to something that belongs to God, not to this world.

The Levitical law required cleansing first, then sanctification. In Leviticus and elsewhere in the Old Testament, we can see that there were disastrous consequences when the unclean was brought into God's direct presence. See last week's notes for more.

Instead of remaining humble, the nation endured growing pains, as the people struggled with impatience, rebellion, and sensual desires (Numbers and Deuteronomy). Human nature revealed itself as the people quickly forgot all that God had done for them; yet divine grace is present even in the Old Testament, for God continued to care for their needs even when they completely rejected his presence and his plans for them. Like Jesus' generation, Moses' generation saw many great miracles and still did not remain humble or faithful.

Just as God led his people from the desert to the Promised Land, our lives here can be a journey to a place we do not know. We have the same choices that were available to the Israelites - will we grumble and become pre-occupied with trivial problems, or will we remember God's grace and faithfully seek grace and holiness, instead of worldly things□

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How did God choose the earliest persons with whom he had close relationships□ How does Israel's bondage and deliverance parallel our lives□ Why did God implement the law instead of continuing to communicate with particular individuals only□ What should we learn from Israel's spiritual problems in the desert□

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Eventually, Israel settled into Canaan as a newly independent nation. Although later generations would often look back on this era as something of a golden age, there were some tumultuous events mixed in with the more peaceful times. There were some underlying spiritual problems that would remain beneath the surface for a time, only to be revealed in times of crisis.

After an unplanned delay□ of forty years, a new generation of Israelites finally arrived in the Promised Land (the book of Joshua). For the first time God's presence and his people would be associated with a particular place. For the most part, this is an encouraging story, but the people fell short of taking all the land God gave to them, which would have consequences later.

□ A number of misconceptions about the old law are based on the erroneous thought that the laws were designed for a nomadic society. God's original desire was for the nation to proceed to Canaan within a short time, and so the Levitical laws were always designed for a society settled in the Promised Land.

□ Yet God's presence in Canaan had its consequences, and the events in Joshua require careful interpretation by today's believers. God's commands for Israel to drive out or kill all of Canaan's previous inhabitants can be very disturbing; while on the other hand they can easily be misused. These violent displacements were not a special punishment on the Canaanites□ for they were not appreciably worse than many other ancient pagan cultures. And the practical objective (to rid the land of idols that might tempt Israel) was only one aspect of it.

□ It is true that the vast majority of the Canaanites were violent and brutish, so it is hard to generate much sympathy for them. Even their religions emphasized human sacrifice, mutilation, and group immorality.

In order to establish his presence in his people's new homeland, the land itself had to be cleansed. The more idols that remained, the less fully God could be present, and the less closely he could be with his people. The commands to Joshua, then, cannot be used to justify any kind of violence or aggression by Christians□ The application for Christians is to cleanse our own lives of idols of every kind, so that the Holy Spirit can dwell in us as fully and closely as possible.

□ Note also that those who showed belief in God, such as Rahab and the Gibeonites, were treated gently.

Israel than underwent a transition to a kingdom, as described in Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, and 1 Chronicles. For many years after entering Canaan, there was no central authority, merely a succession of unofficial leaders, traditionally called 'judges', whom God supplied during times of trouble when the people called out to him. This era brought out both the best and the worst in Israel, as "every man did as he saw it" (Judges 17:6, 21:25). In some ways, this era was God's ideal for the people, since there was no artificial human authority to give them false security. But at other times they committed outrageous sins that pushed God's presence far from them.

□ 1 and 2 Chronicles roughly parallel the history from the books of Samuel and Kings, although after the division of the kingdom (see below), Chronicles follows only events in Judah, the southern kingdom. First Chronicles roughly parallels Samuel, while Second Chronicles roughly parallels Kings.

In the days of the priest-judge-prophet Samuel, the people demanded a king, not for spiritual reasons but in order that, "we will be like all the other nations" (1 Samuel 8:20). Though this displeased God - and it parallels our own fleshly cravings to have our beliefs enforced by secular power - God gave them king Saul. Saul was an imposing warrior but had no sense of God's presence. He dealt with any situation by quick action, no matter how ill-advised it was.

After a lengthy period of internal conflict, God brought David to the throne. Although David's life was filled with appalling sins, he always retained a strong sense of God's presence, and unlike Saul he admitted his sins when confronted with them. Even though God at times had to discipline David severely for his mistakes (see, for example, 2 Samuel 12 and 2 Samuel 24), God also gave him some new and significant promises. Unlike Saul (or Solomon), David did not try or pretend to be perfect - he lived in grace and humility, fully aware of his weakness and sin.

□ David was also the one who established Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Something of a natural fortress, Jerusalem was still occupied by the Jebusites until David took it from them (2 Samuel 5) and made it his capital in recognition of its defensive strength and strategic location. For the first seven years of his reign, David had used the town of Hebron as his capital.

One of David's fondest wishes was to replace the old tabernacle with a lavish temple. Because of David's warlike nature, God did not want him to be the one to do this, but in exchange he gave David some new promises quite similar to those he had given Abraham centuries before. Not only will David's son succeed him as king and build the temple David dreamed of, but also "your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:12-16). This would not at all be true in a literal sense, but it would find its fulfillment in the spiritual, eternal reign of David's descendant Jesus.

Solomon's reign began with great hopes, yet he left a mixed legacy (1 Kings/2 Chronicles). He used his great wisdom to lead the nation effectively in his early years, yet he took many undue liberties in his personal life, eventually becoming an oppressive, demanding, unpopular ruler. Knowledge has both value and limitations - Solomon left behind a large collection of wise thoughts in the Scriptures that teach us and challenge us, yet he also showed that knowledge alone is insufficient to be an effective leader or to build a relationship with God.

Besides their historical significance, Israel's first three kings also demonstrate three different options in our relationship with God. We can, like Saul, deal with every situation by direct action - this will superficially appear to be 'zeal', but will often lead to spiritually disastrous consequences even when it produces the outward results we desire. We can, like Solomon, approach everything with reason and study, trying to prove that we know more than someone else. This too can accomplish outward results, but cannot bring us closer to God. Although David committed sins that by human standards were atrocious, he was the man of God who simply lived in humility, relying neither on action nor learning, but on God's gracious presence.

One of the consequences of Solomon's repressive reign was an unstable situation that led to the kingdom becoming divided after his death. His son Rehoboam sought to continue his father's harsh ways, and as a result the rebel Jeroboam successfully drew away the northern half of the kingdom. Both of the new kings sought power and wealth rather than God's grace or God's presence, and they led the Israelites into a long period of spiritual decline.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: If God didn't want to give his people a king, why did he do so? Are there any parallels for us? What purpose did Saul serve? What might God have hoped to see during the kingdom era? Why did God bless and use David in so many ways despite his serious sins? What should we learn from this?

Leviticus 19:15

After Solomon's death, Israel's internal problems came to a head, and the nation divided into two rival kingdoms. The two halves of God's people each developed its own pattern of history, and each of them would eventually be conquered by pagan nations. Amidst the struggles and discipline of this era, there again are spiritual parallels that we can learn from.

After the division, the northern kingdom kept the name Israel, and was later often called Ephraim (after the tribe) or Samaria, after the city that later became its capital. Jeroboam introduced idols to create a new identity for his kingdom, and all of the northern kings worshiped idols. Only one, the bloody reformer Jehu, tried to re-emphasize worship of Yahweh the living God. Besides being idolatrous, the northern kingdom periodically saw a rebel rise up to assassinate the king and seize power. As a result, there was rarely any long-term stability, since several different lines of kings ruled at various times. This half of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC.

Although the name Samaritans comes from the city of Samaria, the Samaritans did not exist until years later, after the northern kingdom fell. Omri, one of the northern kingdom's most powerful rulers, built the city of Samaria and made it his capital during his reign.

The southern kingdom took the name of Judah after tribe of its kings. It settled into a recurring cycle. Rehoboam and his son Abijah were ungodly and incompetent; but the next king Asa instituted spiritual reforms. This pattern continued, with an occasional reformer king followed by kings who were weak, godless, or both. None of the reforms lasted long, for no one person can change a nation's spiritual problems. Ultimately Judah fell to Babylon in 586 BC.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What were the possibilities for this period in Israel's history? What might we be able to learn from it? Was God present during this time?

Sources & References

On last week's schedule for the quarter (the blue handout), there was a full list of references for general study of the ancient church, with selected specialized references as well. For additional sources on this week's class topics, see the separate chronology handout (yellow sheets).

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2012

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Wee Three: OT Roots of Years Of Discipline (Readings In Hab 1 & Jer 29)

Old Testament history reminds us of many principles that are part of God's interactions with humanity in any era. Human idolatry and other sins have always made it more difficult for God to be present among us, and at times this chronic problem makes it necessary for God to institute discipline. But God never punishes for punishment's sake - his discipline looks to the future.

Prophesies of the Lord & the Lord's

God never forgot or denied his promises of blessing to Abraham and David; but there were times when the very fulfillment of those promises made it necessary for him to permit misfortunes that disciplined his people. God's discipline is never impulsive or impatient - it is only given when necessary. And God's discipline always serves a positive spiritual purpose for the future.

God's past promises (to Abraham in Genesis 12 and Genesis 15, and to David in 2 Samuel 7) still stand. Both Israelites and Christians have often failed to hold up their end; but God is always faithful to his promises: "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13).

Despite God's own faithfulness, the sin and idolatry of believers is a chronic problem throughout history - and thus throughout history faithful believers have asked the same question (Habakkuk 1:2-6). We can identify with the troubled prophet as he looks around him and sees all the violence and injustice that are practiced even by believers.

Habakkuk lived in the late 7th century BC and early 6th century BC, roughly the same time as Jeremiah.

When Habakkuk asks, "How long, O Lord", he echoes many sensitive believers who are troubled by the world's ills (v. 2-4). Justice seems absent amidst the aggression and violence, and he wonders openly why God is not doing anything. Even the faithful can have sincere questions about all the pain and evil that exist in this world.

God warns the prophet that he will be utterly amazed - and not in a positive way - by what will happen (v. 5-6). The Babylonians are poised to overrun Judah and take its people captive, to provide painful discipline and cure them of their idolatry. In the rest of the book, the prophet asks God both why he waited so long and why he chose unbelievers to discipline his own people.

Later, when Babylon had indeed destroyed Jerusalem and taken captive most of its people, another prophet would assure the captives that God planned, "to prosper you and not to harm you" (Jeremiah 29:1-14). This comes in the setting of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (v. 1-3)

As the text of the letter shows, many false prophets were proclaiming the quick fall of Babylon and a quick return to Judah, contrary to God's plans.

Though they were living for the first time amongst pagan neighbors and under pagan rulers, Jeremiah advises them simply to settle into their new home (v. 4-9). They are not to hate or resent the Babylonians, but rather should wish them the best, and should live their lives normally. For the present, they will have to endure this situation, for it will bring them to reconsider their identity and priorities. God is looking to the future (v. 10-14); for after seventy years of living under Babylon, they will be ready to return. We can get not only historical

perspective but also some practical perspective from Jeremiah's advice; because in many ways our lives in an unbelieving world parallel the situation of the Judean exiles.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How are Habakkuk's concerns similar to things that trouble us? Does God's response hold any relevance for us? How does the situation of the Babylonian exiles parallel the lives of believers today? How can Jeremiah's advice help us to understand Israel's history? How can it help us today?

9 The Northern Kingdom: The Omri Dynasty & The Samarians

After Israel split into two following Solomon's death, the northern kingdom followed a path that led them directly away from God. The rulers and the people were so intent on defining an independent identity for themselves, and becoming distinct from Judah, that they lost all sense of God's presence and of God's holiness. Their history serves primarily as a caution to us.

From Jeroboam, the rebel who established the northern kingdom as a separate nation, to the powerful king Omri, the north became entrenched in violence and idolatry. Jeroboam's reign was successful by worldly standards, but then his son Nadab was assassinated by the rebel Baasha. Baasha's line also ended abruptly, as his son Elah was killed by the rebel Zimri. Zimri was king for a week before he in turn was killed by Omri (who also fought and killed another rebel, Tibni). All of these kings, including those like Omri who were honored by the nation's pagan neighbors, were idolatrous men who also freely used violence and oppression to rule.

Jeroboam established a new capital in Tirzah (later, Omri moved it to Samaria - see last week's notes). Jeroboam also created new idols in the form of golden calves, and encouraged the northern Israelites to worship them as a way of declaring their independence from the southern kingdom and the line of Judah.

For some time after his reign, Israel was often called "the land of Omri" by other nations. But the Scriptures say nothing about his earthly fame, because he had no positive spiritual qualities.

Omri's son Ahab is the best-known king in the history of the north. The notorious Ahab and his even more notorious wife Jezebel had a series of epic confrontations with the prophet Elijah, and later their sons (and Ahab's successors) Ahaziah and Jehoram battled with the prophet Elisha. Even these two great prophets could make no progress against the rampant idolatry in the north, but they left a lasting legacy of faithfulness during the most unfavorable conditions.

Jehoram's reign was ended abruptly by Jehu, the bloody reformer anointed by Elisha. Jehu killed the kings of both Israel and Judah, wiped out Ahab's family including Jezebel, and slaughtered the officials of Baal-worship. Jehu rid the land of foreign idols, but he did nothing about Israel's national calf idols. This and his brutal methods give him a mixed legacy, yet God allowed four generations of his descendants to reign after him, making Jehu's line the longest in the north.

God explicitly approved of Jehu's destruction of Ahab's family (2 Kings 10:30). This is probably another case of extreme uncleanness that needed to be completely eliminated in order for God's presence to return.

Jehu's great-grandson Jeroboam II had a particularly successful reign by worldly standards (2 Kings 14:23-29), but he was another poor spiritual example.

After the end of Jehu's line, the northern kingdom went downhill quickly, and was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). Of its last six kings, four were assassinated, and the last one was imprisoned by the Assyrians. After the conquest, the Assyrians took most of the Israelites captive and enslaved them, resettling the area with captives from other territories conquered by Assyria. Forcing their victims to lose their national identity was part of Assyria's policy.

The northern kingdom's legacy comes from those few left behind to intermingle with the foreign settlers. They were the ancestors of the Samaritans, whom we see in the New Testament. Over the years, the Samaritans developed their own distinct identity, including a peculiar combination of religious practices that combined some elements of Judaism with elements of pagan religions.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Are there any positive lessons we can learn from the history of the northern kingdom? How does its history help us to understand other aspects of spiritual history? Was God present during any time of their history?

Judean Reformers & the Babylonians

The southern kingdom of Judah followed a much different history. Though also chronically plagued with spiritual problems, it did see periodic reforms from kings who hoped to restore God's presence. None of these reforms produced lasting change, and ultimately Judah too was given over to be conquered by pagans. But Judah's captivity was a beginning, not an end.

After Judah's first reformer king Asa (see last week's notes), Judah and its rulers were for a time closely entangled with the family of the idolatrous Ahab (see above). This led to disorder and spiritual trouble. Judah's king Ahaziah was one of the victims of Jehu's rampage, and after this happened his mother Athaliah - Ahab's daughter - seized power. She killed the rest of her own family to eliminate any rivals, and then plunged Judah into six years of violence and idolatry.

From king Joash to king Josiah, idolatry became more blatant and the periods of reform more dramatic. In this unstable time, even some of the reformers came to bad ends. Joash, the only one of Athaliah's sons to survive, instituted reforms but later became oppressive and idolatrous. Another of Judah's better kings, Azariah (or Azariah), became prideful in his later years and was stricken with leprosy for his spiritual presumption. Azariah lived the later years of his reign in isolation while his son Jotham administered the kingdom in a regency arrangement.

A small group of faithful believers led by his aunt hid Joash until he was old enough to assume his father's throne, and then gave him solid spiritual advice during his reform era. But later, when this generation (led by the priest Jehoiada) had passed away, Joash himself turned to oppression and idolatry.

After Jotham, the foolish and idolatrous Ahaz made the critical mistake of seeking an alliance with Assyria during Judah's war with Israel and Aram in 735 BC - provoking a confrontation with the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:1-9). Ahaz's reign was a near disaster, but his son Hezekiah was a reformer, working closely with Isaiah to guide the nation in times of crisis and in dealing with spiritual problems. Hezekiah did make one major mistake, in getting too close with Babylon.

Sadly, Hezekiah's son Manasseh and grandson Amon were two of Judah's worst rulers - not only idolatrous but active persecutors of worshipers of Yahweh, and they led the nation into rampant violence and oppression. In Manasseh's reign, God declared the impending end of Judah via foreign invasion. The problem was not just Manasseh or any other one ruler - God's distress was because the nation as a whole so eagerly followed in these idolatrous and violent ways.

Ancient non-biblical sources say that Manasseh became enraged at the prophet Isaiah and had him killed by being sawed in half. Although the event is not recorded in the Bible, it is alluded to in Hebrews 11:37.

Very late in his life, some personal sufferings led Manasseh to repent, as recorded in 2 Chronicles 33:11-20. It was too late, though, to undo all of the spiritual damage to the nation.

The reign of Josiah, the last and greatest reformer, was Judah's last chance, if indeed they still had one. Judah's last four kings were political hacks whose inept diplomacy angered everyone, and for its last 20 years Judah constantly suffered from foreign invasions and oppression.

□ In 609 BC, Josiah made an uncharacteristically foolish decision, becoming angry with Egypt's Pharaoh Neco and challenging him to battle at Megiddo. Josiah was killed while still young, seemingly unnecessarily, but commentators sometimes speculate that he was thereby spared from seeing Judah's fall.

Meanwhile, the (Neo-)Babylonian Empire was fulfilling its ambition of becoming a world power and restoring its "ancient glory". Their rival was Egypt, and the wavering allegiances of Judah's leaders convinced Babylon to launch a series of attacks on Judah. In 606 BC and 597 BC, Babylonian forces raided the area and took groups of captives to Babylon as slaves. Finally, in 586 BC the Babylonians launched a full-scale invasion, destroyed the temple and most of Jerusalem, annexed Judah to their empire, and took most of the citizens captive to Babylon.

For another small nation, this would probably have ended the story. But Jeremiah's prophecies (Jeremiah 24, 25: 1-14) already told them that the defeat and captivity provided not punishment and destruction, but "hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29, see above). Moreover, the future would not come from the few Judeans left behind, but from the exiles and their families.

Life under Babylonian rule forced the exiles to decide whether to blend in with secular society or to retain a separate identity. Babylon was a corrupt and often brutal society - in the upper classes there was more of an emphasis on study and learning, but this was done explicitly to further the interests of the nation and its rulers. The experiences of Daniel and his three friends illustrate the types of trials and decisions that many Israelite exiles had to undergo.

The exile brought the community together spiritually. Besides helping them get past idolatry, there was a renewed basic sense of a mutual identity as God's people. It was in this era that the synagogue arose, filling the need for a meeting place for believers in Yahweh amidst a society of idol worshippers. The fellowship of facing common challenges brought them together in a way that even the greatest of spiritual leaders and rulers could never do.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What underlying problems would have caused Judah to undergo their recurring cycle of history? Why did the reformer kings never have any long-term effect? Why did God choose the Babylonian conquest as the way of dealing with their spiritual problems? What can we learn from the captivity in Babylon?

□ The Persians □ The Return & The Rebuilding □

When the time came for Jeremiah's seventy-year prophecy to be fulfilled, it happened dramatically. The stunningly quick conquest of Babylon by the Persians and Medes is one of ancient history's landmark events. And it brought a sudden change in the fortunes of the Israelites, because the Persians had a much different attitude towards conquered peoples.

One of ancient history's great turning points was also a turning point in the history of Israel, when the Persians and their allies the Medes abruptly conquered Babylon in 539 BC (Daniel 5). Persian attitudes towards smaller nations like Judah were much gentler than Babylonian practices, and so the change was greatly beneficial to the Israelites. The Persians preferred to gain the allegiance of smaller nations by treating them well rather than by intimidating them.

□ The ancient historian Herodotus covers this event from the viewpoint of secular history, and the two accounts fit together surprisingly well.

So, just two years after the conquest of Babylon, Cyrus the Great of Persia allowed the Israelites to begin the return to their homeland (536 BC, 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). Over the next century various groups made the trip back. A large Jewish community also remained behind in the Persian Empire, where they were usually treated well, aside from occasional threats. In 473 BC, Esther became Queen of Persia, and her reign led to the new Jewish holiday of Purim. The book of Esther gives us an idea of what these exiles' lives were like (both positive and negative).

□ Her husband Xerxes is quite prominent in ancient history - see the chronology given out last week.

The rebuilding of Israel took place slowly over the next century. The first returnees began work on the temple but quickly abandoned it, attending to many other details of the rebuilding. So some fifteen years later the prophets Haggai and Zechariah exhorted the people to set aside their other projects and complete the reconstruction of the temple. Thanks to their persuasive efforts, the temple was completed in 520 BC, an important step in re-establishing God's presence.

Without central authorities other than the Persian governors, the Israelites again showed both their best and worst sides, making considerable progress in rebuilding the nation while at the same time neglecting important spiritual priorities or being guilty of serious errors of judgment. And so in 458 BC the renowned teacher Ezra came to Jerusalem and initiated a set of sweeping spiritual reforms. Not least of Ezra's actions was a public reading of the law, accompanied by consistent efforts to help the people to learn and understand the law for themselves.

Not long afterwards, God called Nehemiah, part of the community who had stayed behind in Persia and who had obtained an important position there, to return and help the community to rebuilding the fallen walls in Jerusalem (444 BC). Nehemiah also took a much more aggressive approach than Ezra's in dealing with some spiritual disorders that persisted in his day.

A landmark of a different kind came soon afterwards with the completion of the Old Testament. The last book written down was probably Malachi, in about 420 BC. Malachi shows us what things were like a century or so after the return. In many ways the community was doing well, but we see that problems such as materialism and superficial worship are becoming significant.

Look into the future, there would be a long stretch of events between the rebuilding of the physical nation and the coming of the Messiah Jesus. The Israelites would get caught in the middle of the battle between the great empires of Greece and Persia, their territory would be part of a long-running dispute between different factions of the broken-up Greek Empire, and finally they would encounter the Romans. The panorama of history reminds us that spiritual growth must remain our focus, even in the midst of the most tumultuous world events.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is God's hand at work in these events □ Are there any parallels to our own experiences and spiritual needs □ Are there reasons for the order of these events □ Why was there such a gap from the rebuilding to the time of Jesus □

□ *or* □ *urt* □ *er Stud* □

See previous week's handouts for books on these and previous class topics. See also the map handout (pink sheet) for this week's study.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2012
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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Wee Four: The Inter-Testamental Period (Readings In Daniel 2, 7, 8, & 11)

There are over 400 years of history between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus. During this time, many tumultuous events took place in world history, and these events often affected the Israelites. No inspired Scripture was written during these years, but Daniel left several prophecies of what would happen, giving us God's perspective on the coming events.

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From the time of Judah's exile to the birth of Jesus, world history was dominated by a succession of powerful empires. In two different prophecies, Daniel described the nature of these earthly powers; and he explained how they would prepare the way for a more lasting spiritual kingdom. The prophecies in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 are parallel previews of the inter-testamental era.

God first revealed this in a dream to the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:29-45), making known to believers and unbelievers alike his intent to introduce a purely spiritual kingdom greater than the kingdoms of this world. The king dreams of a statue made of different metals, with the feet made of iron mixed with clay. Then a rock, "not cut by human hands", hits the feet, its vulnerable spot, shattering it. The rock then becomes a mountain that "filled the whole earth".

Nebuchadnezzar's relationship with Daniel and the Hebrew exiles holds many lessons for us. He was a violent and oppressive pagan ruler, but Nebuchadnezzar more than once humbled himself before God.

In Daniel 7:1-14, a series of extraordinary beasts emerges from the churning sea, a prophetic symbol of the world's restless striving for power and supremacy. The last and weirdest beast makes boastful proclamations, but is then judged and destroyed. The kingdoms represented in these visions are the superpowers that bridge the era from Daniel's day to the birth of Christ.

Note that this also helps to identify the "beast coming out of the sea" in Revelation 13.

A few commentators, who do not accept the possibility that Daniel could have foreseen these historical developments, assign dates and meanings to these visions different from those indicated below.

The head of gold (Daniel 2) and the winged lion (Daniel 7) are Babylon, then at the height of its power. The wings signify its quick rise - but they are torn off, for its supremacy would not last. It has a man's heart because, as fearsome as it seemed, it was based on mere human strength.

Medo-Persia is the chest and arms of silver in the king's dream, and the lopsided bear in Daniel's vision. The bear is raised up on one side due to the uneven nature of the alliance - the Persians used the Medes as their stooges to help defeat Babylon, but then took full control of the empire they had conquered together. The bear's mouth is full of flesh because, though the Persians considered themselves more civilized than the Babylonians, they were still rapacious carnivores. They were benevolent to smaller and weaker countries, but ruthless to Babylon and Greece.

The belly and thighs of bronze and the four-headed winged leopard are Greece. Leopards are stealthy and intelligent, using brains as well as muscles. The ancient Greeks were examples of learning and knowledge, but they often used their knowledge to conquer and oppress other societies. The wings again represent a quick rise to power; but the four heads show that Greece was not united - except for a brief time, they were plagued by internal rivalries and conflicts.

The feet of iron mixed with clay and the terrifying iron-toothed beast - not even identifiable with any known animal - are Rome. Both images remind us of its inherent disunity - clay is mixed in with the iron, and the horns (symbols of strength) have their own stubborn wills and fight with each other. No matter how terrifying it may have appeared, the Roman Empire too was just one more pathetic and futile human attempt to challenge God's reign and seize control from him.

Some commentators attempt to devise more complicated scenarios regarding the individual horns, but these are only in an attempt to prove some theory extraneous to the vision's actual meaning.

The Messianic kingdom that climaxes these visions represents a different kind of reign, and it comes about by spiritual conquest instead of through military or political action. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:3), for the kingdom we serve has no territory except in the hearts of believers. God's kingdom is everlasting, not a part of this earth; and its ultimate victory is certain, for it never depends on human activity or human will.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did God give this vision to an unbeliever? What purpose did it serve for Daniel? What should we learn from the visions? What do they tell us about the difference between God's kingdom and the nations of this world?

Iron Persian Rule vs. Greek Rule

The Persians treated the Jews generously, and allowed them to return and rebuild their homeland. But while the Persians treated smaller nations kindly, they had a long-standing desire to destroy the Greeks. Eventually this backfired, and the Persians themselves fell to Alexander the Great. So, after two centuries of Persian rule, the Israelites found themselves ruled by the Greeks.

The lengthy conflict between Persia and Greece was the subject of a prophecy in Daniel. The two-horned ram, Medo-Persia, at first seems invincible. But the goat (Greece) challenges it, wins the battle, and shows no mercy to the fallen ram. The struggle between Greece and Persia actually took many years, but from God's perspective Persia's period of supremacy was brief.

After the battle, the goat's large horn breaks off and is replaced by four horns - symbolic of the break-up of Greece's empire after the death of Alexander the Great (see below).

After defeating Babylon, the Persians were intoxicated by success and looked for new conquests. Under Darius the Great (521-486 BC) the Persians conquered the Greek-settled areas in Asia Minor (western Turkey), and then swept through Macedonia and northern Greece. The wars on Greek territory in the 5th century BC featured some of ancient history's most legendary battles.

This is not "Darius the Mede" in Daniel 6 - that person was a minor ruler known in secular history as Gobyrus or Gubaru. The name "Darius" was popular at the time among persons in the upper classes.

In 490 BC Persian armies threatened Athens. The Athenians met them on the plain of Marathon; Athens was heavily outnumbered, but superior leadership gave it a crushing victory. In 480 BC the Persians were back under king Xerxes I (486-465 BC), and they cornered the Greek army at Thermopylae Pass. 300 Spartans under King Leonidas fought a delaying action, in which all 300 died, to allow the rest of the Greeks to escape safely. The tide turned for good later that year, when the Athenian Themistocles exploited Xerxes' impatience to win the naval battle of Salamis.

Immediately afterwards, the courier Pheidippides ran from Marathon to Athens, about 25 miles, with news of the victory. This was the inspiration for the "marathon race" in the modern Olympic Games.

By the middle of the 5th century BC, the Greeks were stronger than Persia; but when not faced with a common threat Greece was consumed with rivalries and hatreds amongst its city-states and their leaders. In the lengthy, wasteful, and foolish Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) between alliances led by Athens and Sparta, Athens finally suffered a crushing defeat, ending its days as a leading power□, but Sparta was also badly weakened. Internal struggles continued into the early 4th century BC, with Thebes also having a brief period of dominance.

□Amongst the long-term internal repercussions in Athens was the execution of Socrates in 399 BC.

Finally, Philip of Macedon exploited and then overcame these rivalries□, and he established Macedonia as the undisputed leader of Greece by 33□BC. And when Philip's son Alexander succeeded him as king, Alexander "The Great" used brilliant strategy and ruthless methods to crush and conquer the Persian Empire by taking the battle right into the heart of their territory.

□Philip developed a simplified common dialect of Greek for use by his troops, since the various Greek cities all had their own distinctive dialects. This new dialect was called "koine" Greek, meaning "common" or "public", and years later it would be the language in which the New Testament was written down.

But Alexander lived a personal life of extreme self-indulgence, which led to his early death in 323 BC at the age of 32. The new Greek Empire was divided amongst his generals, who soon began to fight with each other. All of this had considerable implications for the Israelites.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Daniel □ fit in with the prophecies in Daniel 2 and 7□ What should we learn from the prophecies about these events□ How might the events themselves be significant in the history of God's people□

□nder □ree□Rule

Living under Greek rule brought different challenges. The Greeks always aimed to "Hellenize" peoples from other cultures - that is, to make them become Greeks by persuading them to abandon their own culture and adopt Greek ways instead. Another challenge came when the Jews were caught in the middle of the long-running conflicts amongst Alexander's heirs.

Ancient Greece gave the world many great philosophers and writers whose works still enlighten us today, and they left an example of combining physical and athletic excellence with great learning and education - but the Greeks were also competitive to the point of self-destruction, and they frequently used their abilities to kill or oppress both each other and other nations.

□ntil Philip, Greece was dominated by numerous strong city-states (in Greek, the *polis*). Most of them (with Sparta's monarchy a notable exception) were democracies, with important decisions made by a vote of the people□(in Greek, the *demos*). In some aspects of society, such as the treatment of women, the city-states varied considerably (in this respect, Sparta was ahead of Athens). Competition among the city-states was intense, often resulting in armed conflicts.

□For a time, Athens was a pure democracy, with important decisions made by majority vote of all adult males - and as a result it was one of the world's most oppressive and dangerous places to live. Any resident could be exiled (as the war hero Themistocles was) or even executed (as Socrates was) by a vote.

After Alexander's death, the generals who divided up his empire - called the Diadochi - fought a lengthy series of wars with one another. □nder the original agreement, there were supposed to be five kingdoms: Cassander received Macedonia and Greece proper; Lysimachus got Thrace; Ptolemy Soter received Egypt; Seleucus received the eastern territories including Babylon and Persia; and Antigonus was supposed to have the Peloponnesus, Asia Minor, and Palestine.

But Antigonus's kingdom was quickly attacked and divided up amongst the other four Diadochi, who continued to fight with each other. The Jews were on the border between the kingdom of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the kingdom of the Seleucids of Syria, and for many years these two Greek dynasties ruled over God's people even as they fought continually with each other.

All the Greeks agreed that their culture was vastly superior to any other, and they exerted considerable pressure on the Jews to conform to Greek cultural practices. This was called "Hellenization", and there were a variety of Jewish responses. Many Jews remained separate by resisting even minor Greek cultural influences. These were the forerunners of the Pharisees, who later became an organized party. Others found it expedient to adapt to Greek culture in order to gain favor and advancement - this group eventually developed into the party of the Sadducees. In the New Testament we can see the long-term results of each of these two extreme choices.

□ "Pharisee" comes from the Jewish verb for "to separate", while "Sadducee" is an adaptation of the name "Zadok", a priest who was prominent in David's lifetime.

One positive aspect of Greek rule came from Alexander's interest in other cultures. While strongly believing in the superiority of Greek culture, Alexander taught the Greeks to study and learn from the best of other cultures, including Judaism, and he established the city of Alexandria as a center for the study of international culture. Many Jews settled there, and later the Old Testament and other Jewish writings were translated into Greek so that others could study them.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How do these events fit in with the prophecies in Daniel? How should we learn from this? What other options were available to the Jews in response to Hellenization? How can we learn from their choices?

the last two centuries before Christ

Tensions between the Israelites and the Greek rulers eventually led to a Jewish war for independence that re-established an independent Israel. But the period of independence was neither peaceful nor stable. After a lengthy period of internal division and conflict, Israel was conquered by the Romans. Another prophecy in Daniel foresaw many of these difficulties.

This era is the subject of the prophetic overview in Daniel 11. This prophecy calls all Seleucid rulers "the king of the north" and all the Ptolemies "the king of the south". It recounts in detail how the land of Israel would be caught in the middle of their conflict with each other, and it foretells the Greek provocations that would spark Israel's war for independence in 167 BC.

□ An outline of the prophecy: After conquering Persia, Alexander's empire broke up (11:2-4). Israel was seized by Ptolemy I, who established a strong kingdom based in Egypt despite frequent plots and wars (11:5-8). The Ptolemies gained a false sense of security from defeating a Seleucid attack (11:9-12), but Antiochus III came back with a larger army, supported by many Jews (11:13-14). Antiochus III won large territories, including Israel (11:15-18). But when his successor was murdered (11:19-20), the crazed Antiochus IV took the throne (11:21), defeated the Ptolemies through bribes and deceit, and began persecuting the Jews (11:22-30). He desecrated the temple (see below), provoking the Jews to revolt under the Maccabees (11:31-35). The prophecy ends with a brief look at the coming of the Romans (11:36-45).

For over 100 years, the Jews lived in relative peace under the Ptolemies, but they were among the many conquests of the Seleucid Antiochus III "The Great". Beginning in 190 BC, Antiochus III won a long series of military victories, ending only when Rome, fearing for the stability of the entire region, intervened and defeated him at Thermopylae (192 BC) and Magnesium (191 BC).

□ Ptolemy II "Philadelphus" commissioned the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

For the Israelites, problems arose after Antiochus III's death, when a series of murders and plots led to the cruel, mentally unstable Antiochus IV "Epiphanes" becoming ruler of the Seleucid Empire. Antiochus IV attacked Egypt in 170 BC and became even more oppressive. When Rome again intervened and forced him to back down, Antiochus took out his rage on the Jews. With help from disgruntled Jews, he desecrated the temple by "sacrificing" a pig on the altar and spraying the pig's blood throughout the temple - "the abomination that causes desolation".

□The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah commemorates the subsequent cleansing and rededication of the temple.

This led to an open revolt under the priest Mattathias and his son Judas "Maccabeus" ("Judas the Hammer"). Judas and his brothers, called "the Maccabees", led the Jews in a lengthy guerilla war that wore down the Seleucids, who finally recognized Jewish independence in 142 BC.

But independent Israel was not a success. The last surviving Maccabee, Simon, was murdered by his son-in-law, leading to a chaotic period. Judas Maccabeus's nephew John Hyrcanus was eventually able to rally enough support to stabilize the nation, and he ruled as a military leader for 30 years (134-104 BC). But after his death, a series of poor leaders, concerned only with their own position and power, led the country into division and internal decay.

The Romans were always sensitive to disorder, and in 63 BC they decided that they would no longer tolerate such chaos in a neighboring land. Rome was still a Republic then, but it had long since become the dominant power in the Mediterranean. Roman leaders believed strongly in a stable balance of power, both within their territories and in dealing with other nations.

Roman emissaries found an ongoing dispute between king Aristobulus II and the high priest Hyrcanus. Both sides insulted the Romans, and Aristobulus openly opposed them, leading to a full-scale Roman attack under General Pompey. Hyrcanus assumed authority, and he decided to surrender Jerusalem to the Romans to avoid destruction. Over the next 15 years the Romans re-organized the area, initially putting Palestine under the authority of the Roman governor of Syria.

As Daniel prophesied, this parade of worldly empires shows the temporary nature of earthly strength and power. Now it was time for Messiah, and the only kingdom that can last forever.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we learn any lessons from the turmoil of this period □ Are there any possible parallels to today □ Why were there no Scriptures written during all these years □ Should that affect how we study these events □

Sources □or □urt□er Stud□

Besides the sources given in earlier handouts, two good commentaries for studying Daniel are:

Ronald Wallace, *The Message Of □aniel* (The Bible Speaks Today)

Jim McGuiggan, *The Book Of □aniel*

Two very good books for studying ancient Greece are:

Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks And Greek Civili□ation*

Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story Of Civili□ation, Volume □□The □ife Of Greece*

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, June 2012

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Five: The First Century - Jesus & The Apostles (Isaiah 42 & Acts 1)

When Jesus the Messiah walked on our earth, it was the culmination of many promises and prophecies from the Old Testament. By the time he ascended back into heaven, he left us with an unambiguous perspective on his church - it came about by God's decision, not by human will and it belongs to Jesus, not to any human authority or organization.

Isaiah's Servant Messiah & his Witnesses - Isaiah & Acts

Long before Jesus came to our earth, Isaiah had described his nature as that of a servant, and his ministry as a sacrificial one. The church is called to take on the characteristics of the Servant Messiah, even when this contradicts the logic of the world. When we help others who are seeking God, we should be witnesses for Jesus himself, not for an institution or a theology.

Isaiah's proclamation, "here is my servant" (Isaiah 42:1-9) foretells and describes the ideal servant that God would someday send. Isaiah's "servant" prophecies have meaning on several levels, and the "servant" has multiple identities. In Isaiah's day, over 700 years before Jesus, the servant was God's ideal for the nation, the king, and the people of Israel. To us, the servant is a portrayal of the Messiah and his character, as well as ideal for a believer in any era.

See also, for example, Isaiah 41:16, 44:1-5, 49:1-7, and 52:13-53:12.

The servant is gracious, compassionate, gentle, and persevering. The servant brings justice - not the retributive "justice" humans crave, but the true kind of justice that values giving everyone a fair chance. The servant does not try to get his way by force or manipulation, but instead gives and sacrifices. He does not intimidate or criticize the weak, but encourages them and serves them. The servant brings light to those who are in the darkness, opens the eyes of the blind, and frees the captives. He is interested in offering these blessings without coercion or obligation on their part - and so his ministry, like his nature, reflects the gracious nature of his heavenly Father.

The risen Messiah spends forty days teaching his witnesses about God's will (Acts 1:1-14). They are not to take the initiative, but are to wait until the Holy Spirit gives them power from above. Their ministry is to, "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They are not to promote an institution, methods, or doctrines, but are simply to tell everyone about Jesus. For a short time, the church had no authority structure, no buildings, no official creeds or doctrines, no political agenda. And the New Testament tells us what happened.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What can we learn from Isaiah's "servant" passages? What would his original hearers have learned from them? What is a witness for Jesus? Why did he not want his witnesses to take the initiative to start on their own?

Jesus - the Messiah

Even as a human being, Jesus was unique in history. And as the Son of God, his nature and his message call everyone - believer and unbeliever alike - to set aside preconceptions and earthly loyalties so that we can see him for what he is. No doubt there are countless misconceptions of Jesus in the world, but we can only correct our own misunderstandings.

Most information on Jesus comes from the inspired gospel accounts, yet as a historical figure he is also mentioned by Cornelius Tacitus and Lucian of Samosata, as well as several minor writers. Since Jesus deliberately chose to leave no writings of his own, we must be satisfied with this. There are no legitimate grounds to deny that Jesus of Nazareth lived - yet there is always an element of faith in believing in him as the Messiah. This is as it should be - he was not interested in worldly distinction or influence, only in drawing near to those who wanted to know him.

□ Tacitus was a Roman historian; Lucian was a popular satirist. Both disliked Jesus. There is also a passage about Jesus in Flavius Josephus, but there are questions as to whether the entire passage is genuine.

□ Unlike the founders of human religions, Jesus' coming had long been predicted. His ministry was not a response to immediate conditions. There was no outcry then (or now) for a Savior to forgive sins. And unlike Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed and Lao-tzu and the rest acted on their own authority, laying down teachings that reflected their own personal desires and preferences.

Jesus' identity (John 5:17-24, 10:30-33, 14:9-11) is no less challenging to the religious than it is to unbelievers. He was not a mere teacher of morals - in fact, he showed little interest in what we call morality. □ Yet he was not a detached messenger of an impersonal God. He openly claimed to be God's Son - yet he let humanity judge him and make him a sacrifice for their sins.

Jesus' priorities differ from those of human religion. He aimed not to punish sin but to forgive it, even to the point of dying on the cross. He taught humans not to try to earn their way to God, but to accept God's grace and his desire to know his creations - and to forgive each other if we wish to be forgiven (Matthew 18:21-35). He firmly told the busy Martha, when she criticized her sister for 'only' sitting at Jesus' feet, that "Mary has chosen what is better" (Luke 10:42).

Our expectations of Jesus' church ought to come from his identity and his nature, rather than our own agendas and desires. Because his kingdom is not of this world, he is not interested in territory, political influence, market share, or any other such worldly objective. He is not pleased when we try to coerce or manipulate others into believing in him or following him, since that is alien to his nature. He is pleased above all by humility, love, grace, and other spiritual fruit.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why didn't Jesus leave more permanent evidence that he was here? Why didn't he accommodate the desires of the Jews of his time? Why did he claim so openly to be God's Son? Why is it hard for us to accept these things?

□ **around the Roman Empire in the first century**

By the time the Romans appear in the Bible, they already have a long history. Just before the birth of Jesus, the Roman Republic had become an Empire, and a new line of powerful emperors now slanted the traditional Roman balance of power. Later we shall look more closely at Roman society - here we shall mainly take note of the rulers who affected conditions in the first century.

From its founding in 753 BC, Rome grew steadily. In 509 BC, Lucius Junius Brutus led the revolt transforming Rome from a kingdom to a republic, with an internal balance-of-power that lasted almost 500 years. While Greece's empire splintered, Rome secured control of the Italian peninsula. While the Jews struggled under the Seleucids, Rome won the Punic Wars and became a major power. Not long before Christ, a series of civil wars and assassinations led to Octavian seizing power, calling himself Emperor Augustus Caesar, and declaring Rome an empire.

□ See the chronology handed out in week two (the yellow sheets) for details on these events.

For some time afterwards the old Roman values conflicted with the vast power of the emperors, who were especially keen to use Rome's long-standing military tradition to their own advantage. Augustus (Octavian), the first emperor (27 BC-AD 14), had come out on top during the series of civil wars that had troubled Rome for so long. He adopted the name Caesar to associate himself with the celebrated conqueror Julius Caesar. As a ruler, Augustus was ruthlessly efficient both in establishing his own power and in making Roman power supreme in every possible way.

After Julius Caesar's enormous conquests, there was widespread sentiment to make him king. Caesar's willingness to encourage this ran counter to Rome's long-standing anti-monarchical tendencies, and led to his assassination at the hands of a group of prominent Romans. Later, though, sentiment turned wholly in favor of Caesar's memory, and ultimately made it possible for Augustus to assume absolute power.

Tiberius Caesar (AD 14-37) was emperor during Jesus' public ministry, and was Pontius Pilate's superior during Jesus' trial. Tiberius was an effective and respected official when Augustus offered him a deal: Augustus would make him his successor if he married Augustus's daughter Julia, a woman well-known for her immorality, cruelty, and insensitivity. Tiberius became miserable, and as emperor he was gloomy, paranoid, and bitter. It is no wonder that Pontius Pilate changed his mind about Jesus when the crowd threatened to accuse him of disloyalty.

Next was the bizarre Caligula, whose short reign (AD 37-41) covers the early part of Acts. Caligula was mentally unbalanced, demanding to be worshiped as a god, and he was guilty of some acts of irrational violence. But for the most part he was merely a colorful madman whose influence on Christians was minimal. He was succeeded by Claudius (AD 41-54), a cautious bureaucrat and master organizer, but only mildly effective as emperor. Claudius particularly disliked foreign religions, and he expelled all the Jews from the city of Rome (see Acts 18:2).

For example, he demanded that the Roman Senate appoint his favorite horse to the high office of consul.

This included Priscilla and Aquila, who appear in the Bible after they had left Rome (Acts 18:2).

In AD 54, Claudius's wife Agrippina poisoned him so that Nero, her son by a previous marriage, could become emperor. Nero's reign (AD 54-68) covers the last part of Acts and the period during which most of the New Testament was written down. He was like two different emperors. For several years, he was effective and popular, though intolerant of rivals. Those years were considered something of a golden age, in which Rome had prosperity and peace.

But Nero became increasingly power-hungry, paranoid, and mentally unstable. In AD 59, he ordered the murder of his powerful and domineering mother; and his remaining years were a nightmare for Rome. His best-known offense, the deliberate burning of Rome, is also significant in church history. Nero started the fire but publicly blamed it on the Christians, who were already unpopular in Rome; so there was a short but brutal persecution of Christians in Rome.

The Roman Senate had consistently rejected Nero's requests for huge amounts of money to finance his plan for numerous new lavish public buildings. To get around this, Nero decided simply to burn down large sections of Rome, making it then impossible for the Senate to deny the funds for the rebuilding.

It was during this persecution that Paul was executed. Peter may also have died then, although the popular legend of him being crucified upside down has no historical basis.

Nero's cruelty and weirdness led to his overthrow, but his death left chaos. In what Romans called "the year of the three emperors" (AD 68-69), three inept men (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) each in turn became emperor only to be killed soon afterwards by their dissatisfied subjects.

Some leading citizens pleaded with General Vespasian, who was then besieging Jerusalem, to turn over the army to his son Titus and return to Rome to become emperor. A reliable old soldier, Vespasian (AD 69-79) was frugal and efficient, re-establishing financial and social stability to Rome. He was able to levy heavy taxes because of the respect he commanded.

After Titus successfully completed the siege, the Romans dispersed the Jews and destroyed the temple, permanently ending the Levitical sacrifice system. (For the significance of this, see the Week One notes.)

Vespasian invented many ways of raising extra money for the treasury, including the first pay toilets.

Titus, the conqueror of Jerusalem, became emperor on his father's death. His reign was brief (AD 79-81), but he was extremely popular. While Vespasian was frugal and enjoyed efficiency for its own sake, Titus was a spendthrift and loved fun and excitement. He oversaw the completion of the Colosseum, and he greatly expanded the expensive and lavish (and frequently immoral or violent) entertainments that are one of the enduring images of ancient Rome.

His successor Domitian (AD 81-96) was a rigid moralist, often misunderstood today. Distressed by moral decay in Rome, he imposed harsh penalties even for minor offenses. Emperors were officially gods, but until Domitian this was rarely taken seriously. Domitian thought it would help reform Rome if its subjects were forced to worship the emperor - and this brought him into conflict with Christians. Domitian had several Christians executed, especially during a vicious spree in AD 95, but there were as yet no large-scale persecutions of Christians during his reign.

Pre-millennial commentators often portray Domitian as a persecutor on a larger scale, because of the way that this portrayal would fit in with certain pre-millennial interpretations of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.

Domitian grew insane late in his reign, and his family conspired to have him murdered. The elderly Nerva (96-98) and the dynamic Trajan (98-117) closed out the century. In Trajan's time, Christianity was officially made illegal, but the laws were only enforced when some other consideration made it desirable to use them against a particular person or group.

Roman policy also gave pro-Roman local rulers considerable authority. During the war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, the high priest Hyrcanus had backed Caesar, and as a reward was made ruler of the Jewish nation. But his scheming chief minister Antipater had the real power, and made his son Herod prefect of Jerusalem. During the ongoing Roman civil wars, Herod expertly accumulated power and established his family as local rulers for several generations.

The Herods were Idumeans, descended from Edom and Esau. Because of this, their loyalty to Rome, and the scheming nature of the Herod rulers, there were bad feelings between them and their Jewish subjects.

Herod "The Great" (37-4 BC) was king when Jesus was born. Besides his cruel order to murder the children of Bethlehem, he ordered the deaths of many of his own associates and family members, and committed many outrages - yet his reign was prosperous and it was Herod who rebuilt and refurbished the temple in Jerusalem, which had been neglected and decaying for years. The renewal led to a renewed pride in the temple that we can see in the gospel accounts.

After Herod's death, the Romans divided his territories among his sons, giving Judea and Samaria to Archelaus (Matthew 2:22), and Galilee and Perea to Antipas. Herod Antipas reigned in Galilee from 4 BC to AD 39. He executed John the Baptist and was called "that fox" by Jesus.

Two other Herods appear in the New Testament. Herod Agrippa I was a brother-in-law of Antipas who used his connections in Rome to be proclaimed king over a reunited kingdom of the lands once held by Herod "The Great". He executed James and died suddenly as described in

Acts 12:20-23 and in the writings of Josephus. His son Herod Agrippa II took over his kingdom after a short reign by an uncle - he is the "Agrippa" before whom Paul appeared in Acts 26.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What do these rulers tell us about their times and what it would have been like to live then? In what ways might they have affected early Christianity? What lessons do they hold for us today?

Jesus' Journeys & Stories

The New Testament provides numerous accounts of the ways that the gospel reached new areas in the first century, and even these accounts are by no means complete. The early church and its ministry were distinct from any human-made philosophy or religion or movement. "The Word of God is living and active"; and this is more important than human leaders or human wisdom.

Beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 2; see also Isaiah 2:1-3 and Micah 4:1-2), the gospel soon spread through Judea and Samaria (Acts 7-8). When the good news reached Samaria, it fulfilled an old promise of God, for the Samaritans, the pitiable remnant of the ill-fated Northern Kingdom of Israel, could now be as close to God as any Jew. Soon afterwards Saul of Tarsus, a fanatical opponent of the new church, became a Christian and the future minister to the Gentiles (Acts 9).

God then called Peter to open the doors of the church of Jesus to the first Gentiles (Acts 10-11). After Herod Agrippa I's brutal attempt to persecute the apostles (Acts 12), the first missionary journey from Antioch (Acts 13-14) introduced the gospel to new Gentile areas. After resolving questions about the old law that arose from Gentiles entering the church (Acts 15), Paul's second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16-20) reached new areas of Asia and Europe. Even when Paul was arrested and taken to Rome (Acts 21-28), it provided opportunities to teach the gospel.

Acts follows the missions of Peter and Paul, but many others - both known and unknown - taught and heard the gospel in the early years of Christianity. The church spread in many directions and took different forms, since there was no central planning, no mass of doctrine or theology that had to be kept standardized, no high officials who needed to approve of anyone's activities.

Many churches did not arise from a deliberate mission. In Rome, a church grew rapidly simply from believers ending up in Rome for one reason or another. Churches in Antioch and other cities started almost spontaneously from believers seeking refuge from persecution in Jerusalem.

Once we look ahead beyond the first century AD, certain things will never be the same. Nevermore will the church be as new, as informal, or as free of preconceptions. But though we cannot create a situation identical to the 1st century, we still have much to learn from it.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How completely can the New Testament describe what the 1st century was like? Should this influence our use of it? Are there any ways that we can (or should) parallel the early Christians and the conditions they experienced?

Chronology & Sources for Further Study

See the separate orange handout for a detailed chronology of events associated with the next few classes, as well as some additional references for further study.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2012
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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Wee□Si□ The Early Church □Growth & Foundations (Isaiah 55 & 2 Tim□3)

There are many accounts of the dramatic spread of the gospel in the early years of the church, and there are many stories about individual believers whose ministries and sacrifices helped others to hear the gospel□ But it is God's Word itself that is the true life and true power behind all these good things - not God's Word as mere writing on a page, but as light and truth□

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God's Word is the living and active source of light and truth in a world that badly needs both. The written Scriptures themselves teach us that God's Word cannot be limited to the writings of the Bible, because he can teach us through every aspect of the world he created, and he has left evidence of his love in grace inside every soul to whom he has given birth.

The Word of God, both written and in its broader sense□ brings true life and genuine growth (Isaiah 55:□-13). Isaiah reminds us that God's thoughts, ways, and words are on a much higher plane than ours (v. □-9), and then he elaborates on this with a description of God as the giver of life itself (v. 10-11). God's Word gave life to a world full of creatures, believing and unbelieving alike. His Word brings mercy and blessing by its nature, independent of whether it is believed.

□No concise definition of "the Word" matches the way the term is used in Scripture. It represents any and all expressions of God's nature and will. John uses the Greek term λογος ("logos"□"word", literally "speaking" or "reason") in John 1:1-2, 5:24, 5:3□ □37, □51-55, 10:35, 12:4□ 15:3, 17:6, 17:14 and 17:17, to include written Scripture, Jesus' spoken words, and more. John goes beyond the literal, and also avoids the limited ancient Jewish association of "God's Word" with written Scripture only.

It is God's Word itself, not our faith in it, that has power. God blesses without respect to whether the blessings are deserved, so he can promise that, "my word that goes out from my mouth ... will not return to me empty". To be in joyful harmony with creation (v. 12-13), we do not need to be worthy of the blessings of God; we just need to accept them humbly by grace.

The Word of God connects us with the Creator (2 Timothy 3:10-17; note that "Scriptures" refers here to the O.T.). It has great practical value (see also 2 Timothy 2:15, 1 Peter 3:15-16) because God's nature overflows with wisdom and grace, and thus his Word does too. When we learn from his Word, his grace and wisdom can also bless others. But God's Word is also inherently personal: it was not dictated, enacted, or published, but breathed by God. If we wish to know or use God's Word properly, we should start with the realization that it is personal, not academic. It is not the proper domain of scholars and theologians, but of those who seek God and love God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How can understanding the nature of God's Word help us benefit from it□ How can we learn to remember its personal nature□ Is it possible to devise a complete and accurate definition of everything included in the Word of God□

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By the end of the first century AD, churches of Christ were established throughout large portions of the Roman Empire and other areas. It continued to spread steadily for another two centuries, both as a result of missionary efforts and through the power of the Word to give life by itself. In a short lesson, we can only draw a rough sketch of all the places where the gospel took root.

The gospel often spread unaided by overt human planning - and in the earliest years without a written gospel. The Romans emphasized the need for good communications, good roads, and efficient business - all favorable to the spread of any new idea, product, or group. Many great cities of the ancient world were closely linked, and movement within Roman territory was easy. By the mid- to late 3rd century AD, churches of Christ had been established throughout every region of the Roman Empire. The influence of the early church was concentrated in three major areas; and in each of these the congregations tended to share some basic characteristics.

At the height of Roman power, Rome's authority also brought a lasting period of outward peace and stability, called by historians as the *Pax Romana*. Consider all this in light of Daniel 2 and Daniel 7.

Colossians 1:23 is sometimes misused to suggest that the gospel was preached throughout the world in the first century. That the gospel was, "preached to every creature under heaven" refers to the gospel's universality, not its geographical spread. The gospel was proclaimed "to every creature under heaven" at the cross, because from that time forward the gospel was the one universal way for anyone to come to God.

The church had a strong presence in its birthplace (the "Middle East") and Asia Minor (Turkey). But after the first generation of the church, growth in this area soon stopped. It reached a few areas to the east of Roman borders, but did not penetrate beyond the Tigris and Euphrates. Due to the high percentage of Jewish Christians, congregations throughout the region tended to be conservative and tradition-oriented. They rarely struggled with immorality or pagan influences, but they were often troubled by religious extremism, particularly from Judaizing teachers.

The early church was also strong in northern Africa, with the greatest growth in Africa coming in the second and third centuries AD. In Alexandria, there was already a large Jewish community; but the gospel also reached many areas of Africa where Judaism was never present (such as Carthage). Early churches in Africa tended to be especially zealous and independent. In this region, the main problems the church faced came from perfectionistic teachers whose extreme zeal led them to impose tests of fellowship that sometimes divided and discouraged believers.

Finally, in the first century the church established a foothold in prominent European cities such as Rome, Athens, and Corinth - but it reached the rest of Europe very slowly, with most of the growth not coming until the third century. The earliest European churches were all urban. They were especially resistant to persecution but struggled with immorality and often merged Christian teachings with beliefs and practices of pagan religions. Worse, many were dominated by authoritarian leaders - and often these leaders promoted false teachings or divisions.

Many of these characteristics influenced the later history of the church as well. Yet from the very beginning the church of Christ was a genuinely international and multi-cultural body. This helped it survive both damaging outside influences and also its own internal weaknesses.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What could we learn from studying the geographical growth of the early church? Is it of value to study sources and information outside of the Bible? What can we learn from the regional characteristics of early congregations?

the Scriptures An Important Foundation

To a large degree, the way that the New Testament came together as a unit reflects some of the characteristics of the Word of God. Yet the story of the canon (the list of books that came to be understood as inspired) is the source of many misconceptions, both among believers and among skeptics. As often happens with God's Word, the truth does not fit anyone's preconceptions.

Until about AD 150, the books of the New Testament were usually read individually, rather than being bound together. Yet there was little or no controversy over what constituted divinely-inspired Scripture. The major criterion was that of an apostolic connection - inspired Scripture had to have been written by an apostle or by someone working closely with an apostle (such as Mark, who was closely associated with Peter, or Luke, who travelled and worked with Paul).

At the same time, it was known that some apostolic writings had been lost and/or were not divinely inspired. For example, Paul wrote other letters to the Corinthians that are not part of the New Testament.

The author of Hebrews was already a mystery to early Christians, but the reference to Timothy (13:23) connected it indirectly to Paul and helped overcome the concerns. Sometimes the status of James, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude was questioned because of ambiguous authorship, for in each case more than one well-known Christian had the same name. 2 Peter was occasionally questioned because it was not universally believed that Peter actually wrote it. Authorship, above the content *per se*, was crucial to inspired status. This deliberately excluded works of spiritual value that were edifying in their own right, yet not connected to any apostle.

Until AD 140, though, no one felt any reason to specify which books were included in the list of inspired New Testament works. The 27 books of the New Testament were zealously copied and read; and they were the most widely reproduced books of their time, just as they are today.

Further, the number, quality, and consistency of the surviving manuscripts of New Testament books dwarfs the manuscript evidence for any other book of antiquity.

The Marcionite controversy in AD 140 made it necessary for the first time to specify the contents of the Christian Bible. Marcion was popular and charismatic, but full of pride and ambition. He rejected the entire Old Testament and all Jewish influences, and he published his own "Bible" that included only Luke, Acts, and the epistles of Paul. Because of his widespread influence, the mainline church was forced for the first time to clarify the contents of the "New Testament".

Marcion taught Gnosticism, a common distortion of Christianity that we shall study in a later lesson.

Until this time, it was the custom to circulate collected copies of Paul's epistles (which did not include Hebrews), and combined editions of Luke and Acts, entitled *The History Of Christian Origins* - but the other books were usually read and published individually. After Marcion, the four gospels began to circulate as a unit (with Luke now split off from Acts); and by AD 150 it began to be common to publish the whole New Testament as a unit. Soon this became the norm.

But controversy now persisted long after Marcion himself was discredited and forgotten. For the next 200 years, there was no longer a unanimous agreement on which books constituted the New Testament. We can track the ongoing discussion through several surviving writings. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the discussions were "unofficial", because there was still no central church authority. Yet the importance of having a "canon" - an authoritative list of books to be included, was now universally recognized. While 21 of the 27 books were never questioned, the other 6 (noted above) were sometimes omitted; and on occasion some extraneous books were included.

Literally, measuring stick. It is also used in other contexts to indicate authority and/or authenticity.

The "Muratorian Canon", a list published in about AD 200 in Rome, includes the 27 books we use plus two other works - "The Revelation of Peter" and "The Wisdom Of Solomon" - not considered canonical outside of the church in Rome. On the other hand, the famous Origen (from the mid-200s) was extremely conservative, and accepted only the 21 undisputed books.

When he quoted passages from Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, or Jude, he would invariably point out that their canonicity was uncertain. Origen occasionally wrote statements or lists emphasizing this plus the non-inspired nature of other popular Christian writings□

□The Muratorian Canon mentions another popular book, "The Shepherd Of Hermas", as not being part of the canon, but as being of great spiritual value and thus worthwhile in its own right. Both Origen and Eusebius (see below) also recommend "The Shepherd Of Hermas", but also do not include it in the canon.

Eusebius, the church historian of the early 300s, is our best ancient source for the ongoing discussions on the canon. In his lifetime, the 27-book canon was again generally accepted. He had personal reservations about the 6 disputed books, but he tells us that he was in the minority.

By the fourth century AD, the question was again considered resolved. A letter written in AD 367 by the influential church leader Athanasius indicates that the 27-book New Testament had again become standard. At the church councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397), the topic of the canon was briefly revisited, and both times the councils - which were primarily devoted to other matters entirely - issued routine statements confirming the 27-book canon. (Contrary to a common misconception, church councils played no role in determining the canon.) And so the discussion had in a sense come full circle, back to the same understanding held in the early years.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What (if any) importance is there to having a universally understood canon□ Should it trouble us that there was a time when other books were included, or when some of our 27 books were not□ What does this historical process teach us about the nature of the Word itself□

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From the earliest days of the church, believers in Jesus have also benefitted from writers who were not directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, but who loved God and wanted to teach and inspire others with what they had learned from God's Word. Once more, we shall have time for only a brief introduction to the wealth of material published by ancient believers in Jesus.

Several types of early Christian writings are significant. The non-biblical writers from the first century and early second century are called the "apostolic fathers", as they became Christians in the age of the apostles and then in the following generation were the spiritual "fathers" of the church. These writers are concerned, often obsessed, with stability and unity in the church. It was in this era that the church began to abandon the simple New Testament leadership structure in favor of a more hierarchical model; and the "apostolic fathers" help us see why this happened.

Most of the later writers are classed either as apologists or theologians, although both of these terms are somewhat misleading. An "apologist" simply explains and describes Christianity to seekers or unbelievers□ And in the early church, a "theologian" did not engage in academic or abstract theorizing, but simply described or discussed God's nature or character. Some writers, like Origen, wrote both kinds of material; but most others are usually classed as one or the other.

□The term "apologist" is used in this sense in other contexts as well. For example, Plato titled his famous depiction of Socrates' defense at his trial the *Apologia*; and he certainly did not "apologize" for anything.

The most influential writers among the "apostolic fathers" were Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch. The anonymous □*idache*, a compilation of basic doctrine and worship guidelines widely used as a teaching manual in the early church, also comes from this era. It was often quoted by other Christian writers. Clement is known primarily through a lengthy letter that he

wrote to the Corinthian church in about AD 90. It is interesting because it shows that many of the problems discussed in Paul's epistles to the Corinthians still persist decades later.

□ A letter called II Clement now known not to have been written by either famous Clement.

Ignatius was an elder (then called a bishop) in Antioch who offended Roman authorities and in AD 107 was sentenced to be taken to Rome and killed in the infamous arena games. On the trip, his guards allowed him to send and receive letters, many of which survive, giving us examples of worship, life, and teaching in the churches of his day. Ignatius regularly pleaded for obedience to church authorities and for Christians not to try to persuade the Romans to release him.

□ Unfortunately, many church leaders in this era had become quite authoritarian and conformist. Ignatius, like other leaders of the era, saw this as a necessary way to stamp out false teachings.

Two prominent writers, Polycarp and Justin Martyr, were active in the middle of the 2nd century. Polycarp, a bishop (elder) in Smyrna and one of Ignatius's correspondents, was executed in AD 155, by burning, at the age of 62. He wrote many letters to other congregations, but only one survives, written to Philippi and discussing with alarm some spiritual problems there. A famous description of Polycarp's execution was written by some of the Christians in Smyrna. Justin was an apologist, and he carried on public correspondence with anti-Christian Jews and Romans, including the emperor Antoninus Pius. Justin was condemned to death by Marcus Aurelius, but he had already been nicknamed "Martyr" (which means "witness") for his apologetic activities.

The best-known writers of the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries were Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian. Irenaeus had studied under Polycarp in Smyrna, and had his own ministry in Gaul (France). Most of his writings aim to correct misconceptions and errors. Clement grew up as an unbeliever in Athens. As a Christian in Alexandria, he tried to persuade Greeks to believe in Jesus by careful comparisons between the gospel and Greek philosophy.

Tertullian was an African lawyer who became a Christian while practicing law in Rome. He was extremely influential in his day, but has largely been ignored since then, as his uncompromising style made later generations uncomfortable. He also damaged his reputation late in life when he became frustrated with the mainline church and joined the divisive, Pharisaical Montanists.

In the mid-3rd century Origen, a student of Clement of Alexandria, produced an enormous number of works ranging from commentaries to apologetics to sermon collections to the *Hexapla*, a parallel Bible of the Old Testament. His rigid approach to interpretation often led him astray, but his apologetic works contain many useful ideas. Finally, the history by Eusebius (early 4th century) has a dry style, but contains crucial information not available elsewhere.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What do these writings show us about the early church? Would studying them have any value for us today? How might they compare with books written about Christianity today? How should we use these modern books?

□ or □ *urt* □ *er Stud* □

If you wish to learn more about the way that the New Testament (and the Bible as a whole) was formed, some good sources include F.F. Bruce, *The Books And The parchments*; Philip W. Comfort (editor), *The Origin Of The Bible*; and David Ewart, *A General Introduction To The Bible*. This week's extra (green) handout shows the geographical growth of the early church.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2012

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Seven: Life & Worship In The Early Church (Readings In 1 Timothy 3, 1 Peter 5, Acts 2)

Many aspects of life and worship in the early churches of Christ would seem quite familiar to us. If there is a difference, it is in the noticeable simplicity of the earliest years of the church, when there was no rigid church hierarchy and no lengthy body of traditions to be followed. Things did, of course, change over time, yet such developments in themselves also hold lessons for us.

Life in the household of the Father Acts

The teachings and practices in the New Testament are never arbitrary rules or impersonal expedients. The church is the body of Christ and the household of the living God. Thus it is inherently personal and spiritual. Whether we seek perspective on historical worship practices, or simply hope to make our own what God wishes them to be, this is a good place to begin.

Paul describes his directives to Timothy on organizing and guiding the church as, "how we ought to conduct ourselves in God's household" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). He provides Timothy with more than specific guidelines or methods: he gives him an overall perspective on worship and doctrine. The church is primarily a household or family, not an institution or organization.

Timothy was then in Ephesus, and a large part of his ministry was to help the young, growing church in Ephesus build solid roots for the long term. To Titus, who had similar responsibilities in Crete, Paul told him that his role was to "straighten out what was left unfinished" (Titus 1:5).

One of the main reasons why leadership, worship, and doctrine produce so much insecurity and so many fruitless debates is because we too often see the church as an inorganic structure that needs to be built just so, or as a movement that needs to maximize its results, instead of seeing it as the living body of Jesus, made up of his living arms and legs and heart and eyes.

Gospel leadership thus centers on responsibility and humility (1 Peter 5:1-7). Peter's description of an elder's role echoes Jesus' teachings on leadership (e.g. Matthew 20:25-28), and reminds us that in the church we have to discard all worldly ideas about leaders who accumulate authority and privilege. Peter expands this to explain that not merely leadership roles, but all relationships in Christ, should be based on grace and humility. And the ideal Christian lifestyle is constantly to give and grow (Acts 2:42-47). The gospel teaches a lifestyle based on grace above all else - above self-interest, personal ambition, results, methods, human authority, or material things.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does our view of the church and its purpose affect the other things that we believe? Why are the Scriptures' teachings on leadership so different from the world's? Is it even possible to "lead" as Peter and Jesus describe?

Worship in the Church

Many of the perspectives and practices of ancient worship assemblies were quite similar to our own. Yet there was perhaps an element of simplicity that can never be reduplicated, in that many historical controversies and traditions were as yet unknown. Likewise, the original focus was not on correctness and mechanics, but on praise and spiritual understanding.

The εκκλησια ("ekklesia"□) or congregational assembly was always important in the early church. The minority status of Christianity probably helped the early believers to see the importance of meeting together, and passages such as Acts 2:42-47 (see above) illustrate how joyfully they did so. □et the congregational assembly was also important in other ways as well.

□Often translated "church", this is the ordinary Greek word for "assembly", whether political, religious or social. The word literally means "called out", but it is a common mistake to assume that it means "called out of the world". It simply meant "called out" of individual homes for the purpose of assembling publicly.

The early church met in times and places that often differ from modern practice. The early church always assembled on the first day of the week - the "Lord's Day" (not the Sabbath) - but Jewish believers usually met after sundown on Saturday, while Gentile churches met very early Sunday morning (to use our terms). Throughout the Roman Empire, Sunday was a day of work□ for all but the upper classes, so it was a day of worship but not rest for early Christians. They also met at other times when possible, but the first day of the week held special significance.

□Indeed, there was no "weekend" for the average worker. The Roman calendar called for a very few holidays in an entire year. The Jewish calendar was unique in providing even one regular day of rest per week for the working person - a measure God's grace and compassion towards his people.

Likewise, the practice of meeting in a building devoted exclusively to Christian assembly was a very rare luxury in the early church. Sometimes a well-to-do Christian would be able to donate a residence□(or sometimes a particular room) that would then belong to the local congregation, but in most places the early believers had to rely on public places (often outdoors) or improvised locations - and in times of persecution, they would have to find secluded or hidden locations.

□Note that this is different from what we see in Acts 4:34-35 - there, the homes of wealthy believers were sold to raise money for the poor. The practice of donating buildings for church use arose somewhat later.

In early Christian worship, the Lord's Supper was widely considered the most essential reason to assemble□ It was originally taken by local congregations on the first day of every week, as a re-affirmation of our shared relationship with God through the blood of Christ. Very early in church history, it came to be called the "Eucharist", from the Greek word for "thanksgiving", because in taking the Supper we thank Jesus and the Father for their grace and forgiveness.

□The Lord's Supper was also the one element of early Christian worship with no close analog in Judaism.

A major difference from today's practice was the exclusivity of the Supper. Early churches generally had the Supper at the end of their assemblies, and they would almost always exclude visitors from the Eucharist. (Soon, this practice led to wild speculations on the part of pagans as to the nature of the Supper.) Many early churches also excluded Christians from the Eucharist when they had unresolved conflicts with each other or were behaving in a divisive manner.

Sometimes an "agape feast" or congregational meal was held right after the Lord's Supper, but these were two distinct practices. Another common practice was to share the Lord's Supper early Sunday morning, and then to have an agape meal on Sunday evening, at the end of the workday.

Songs and singing were a large part of early worship; and early Christians wrote vast numbers of hymns and spiritual songs, portions of which appear in some Scripture passages (one example is 1 Timothy 3:16). In the early centuries, singing was always "a cappella", but it is uncertain whether this was an economic expedient, a choice based on preference, or a doctrinal belief□

□That is not to say that they did not discuss the subject. For example, Clement Of Alexandria (see last week's notes) wrote an extended if somewhat contentious explanation of the virtues of "a cappella" singing.

Congregational prayer and public Scripture reading were more prominent in early worship assemblies than they tend to be today. Perhaps the New Testament Scriptures still had a newness that we don't see in them, but in the early churches the reading of lengthy passages of Scripture was often followed by someone making brief comments on the Scriptures, instead of the other way around. Preaching and teaching in their own right were, of course, important too. The vast majority of early church sermons that survive are expository in nature.

As a general note, there is an irony in that one of the best surviving sources for early Christian worship practices is the famous pagan writer Pliny ("The Younger"), who was commissioned by emperor Trajan in the early 2nd century to investigate Christians and their practices. Pliny's reports and his correspondence with Trajan show a careful effort to be objective, although it is quite clear that he dislikes Christianity.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What significance should these early practices have for us? When they practiced something differently, how should we respond? Why aren't the Scriptures themselves more emphatic in providing specific guidelines for worship?

Organization & Leaders in the Early Churches

For a short while, the early churches adopted the informal style of organization that we see in the New Testament. But this was, in fact, one of the first areas in which the early church departed from the teachings of the New Testament. Even in the late 1st century, congregations had started to give more sweeping power and authority to individual persons.

The key elements of early congregational leadership can be seen in the New Testament. We see the swiftness with which Paul urged even relatively new churches to develop elderships, and we see the qualities that the early church sought in their leaders. As 1 Peter 5 illustrates (see above), early church leaders were called to a position of responsibility only, not one of authority. And the New Testament invariably portrays congregational leaders as a plurality, never a hierarchy.

Notice too the persistent informality with which the early church was led and organized. There were no "offices" or "titles". Elders (or overseers) and servants (or "deacons") were believers who accepted certain responsibilities beyond those common to all believers. The words in the New Testament for these roles are just everyday descriptive words, not technical terms.

For the ministry of elders, the New Testament uses three words more-or-less interchangeably. An elder is a πρεσβυτερος ("presbuteros"), simply an "older man", presumably with experience in caring for others; an επισκοπος ("episkopos"), literally an "overseer", who observes carefully; and a ποιμην ("poimen"), a "shepherd" who looks after humans rather than sheep. All of these terms are functional descriptions, not titles or offices. Elders in the very early church accepted these responsibilities without asking for any special privileges or authority in return.

The most widely-used example of this is in Acts 20:13-3, wherein Paul refers to the elders from Ephesus at various times as elders, overseers, and shepherds. 1 Peter 5:1-2 (see above) also combines the terms.

Through its Latin cognate, this later became the word "bishop", which still just means "overseer". The term "bishop" only becomes a problem when it is exalted to the level of an office with privilege and power.

A "deacon" is just the common word for "servant" (Greek διακονος, "diakonos"). This ministry too was not an office, but merely an acceptance of extra responsibility for serving. Set aside from our tendency to turn this into an office, the role of designated servants/deacons in the early church was quite similar to today's practice, as they attended to a wide variety of practical needs.

The early church saw evangelists, preachers, and teachers as slightly different, but they did not make a lot out of the distinctions; and many persons performed all of these roles. All these types of Christian instruction were most likely to be practiced by believers who had other full-time jobs. Paid preachers were rare (perhaps due in part to economic considerations), and those who did preach professionally were more likely to travel, rather than being in one fixed location.

□ An evangelist was a εὐαγγελιστής ("euangellistes"), literally, a speaker of good news. A preacher was a κηρὺξ ("kerux"), literally an announcer or herald. A teacher was just a διδασκῶλος ("didaskolos"), a teacher. Note that all three words, like those mentioned above, were common terms, not technical titles.

Women's ministry in the early church is the subject of many misconceptions, largely due to the insecurity with which such issues are discussed today. Although there were no women elders in the early church, women often served in roles equivalent to that of a "deacon" or designated servant. The only reason we cannot quite say this with certainty is that the very informality of the role of a "deacon" sometimes makes references to "servants" in the church ambiguous.

□ For example, Romans 16:1 refers to Phoebe as "a servant of the church", but we do not know with certainty whether she is a servant/deacon in the sense that it is used in passages like 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

Although in Jewish society women usually did not have as many legal or economic rights as men, things were different in parts of Greece (though not in Athens) and especially in Rome. But on the other hand, close public interactions between men and women, even in groups, were often frowned upon. This could be one reason why, for example, Paul advised Titus to encourage older women to take the initiative in teaching and helping younger women.

□ Women in both Greece and Rome usually had little direct role in politics, but they often filled leadership roles in religion. In Rome, the College Of Vestals, the highest authority on religious teachings and practices, by law consisted exclusively of women.

□ The Christian practice of men and women freely interacting in public often led to charges of Christians being immoral. In actuality, both Greeks and Romans practiced rampant sexual immorality in private.

Women's activities in the church were often separate, and many women were well-known for teaching or for serving. The New Testament also mentions two other practices. Acts 21:9 shows women acting as "prophets", a form of teaching understood to be by a special gift of the Spirit. The special role of widows in the early church is also detailed in 1 Timothy 5:3-10.

□ After the New Testament era, the church no longer recognized "prophets" or "prophecy" in this sense.

□ Until the late first century, all of this was informal and unstructured. But departures from the informal New Testament examples became frequent towards the end of the 1st century, and soon church leadership hardened into a hierarchical structure of "offices" that became increasingly complex. This process also affected other aspects of life and worship in the early church.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the New Testament use everyday words for congregational leaders instead of technical terms or titles? What do we learn from early church practices? Why might the church later have desired a hierarchical structure?

□ *eco* □ *in* □ *A* □ *ristian* □ *n* □ *e* □ *arl* □ *urc*

In the early history of the church, there was never a time when baptism was not viewed as being essential for the forgiveness of sins. On the other hand, practical administration of baptism sometimes varied - yet the issues involved were often different from questions that arise today. Then, in later generations of the church, the role of baptism assumed a much different aspect.

As in Scripture, baptism was originally by immersion for those who acknowledged belief in Jesus Christ. Once again, there was no special word for this practice - the Greek verb βαπτίζω ("baptizo") is simply the everyday word for "immerse". The early Christians strongly preferred "live" water for baptisms - that is, natural water from rivers or streams. But baptisms were often preferred in public fountains, large receptacles, and many other improvised locations. The early church recognized alternate forms of baptism in "special cases"□ In very dry regions where water was scarce (there were as yet few or no 'church' buildings' with permanent 'baptisteries'), repeatedly pouring large amounts of water over a person was considered sufficient. Soon, pouring also became common for crippled, seriously ill, or very elderly converts.

□*The □idache* (see last week's notes) lists the 'special cases' that were recognized as of around AD 100.

Originally only belief in Jesus was required for baptism, but many churches soon required pre-baptismal instruction. As church leaders became worried about false teachings, a convert would often be expected to recite a list of basic beliefs. Then, as church hierarchies became powerful in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, they began to regulate the process of becoming a Christian. Prospective converts often went through extensive teaching before baptism, with specific teachings often reflecting local or regional preoccupations with particular doctrines or methods.

The increasing over-emphasis on the knowledge and spirituality of a prospective believer soon led to an even odder practice, which reached its peak in the 4th century: delaying baptism as long as possible, in order to perfect one's life and knowledge to be more 'worthy'□ of baptism. The opposite extreme, baptism of young children and infants, was first practiced on certain occasions in the late 2nd century, and was regularly discussed and debated throughout the 3rd century.

□Emperor Constantine, for example, was not baptized until he was near death.

Changes in the form of baptism became common in the third century. Pouring and sprinkling were adopted first for children and infants, and then were widely practiced for all baptisms. Debates about all this can be traced through many of the writers discussed in last week's notes. Tertullian, for example, was vocal in opposing all of these changes, while Origen, who was equally influential, usually lent his support to any changes approved by the church hierarchy.

In looking at early church practices, we should continually return to the perspective of grace and humility in the New Testament. The earliest and widest departures from simple New Testament practice arose from the growing hierarchy of leaders and the growing tendency to see the church as a formal institution. Beyond that, the historical record gives any humble Christian both encouragement and also a thoughtful reminder to be a little less certain of our preconceptions.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is it desirable (or possible) for today's church to follow early practices more closely□ Why might the early church have felt it necessary to modify New Testament examples of conversion□ How can we learn from this□

□*or □urt□er Stud*□

Many of the sources on the class overview handout (blue) from Week One cover these topics.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2012

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**THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST:
ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE**

**Notes For Week Eight: The Early Church & The Pagan World
(Readings In Philippians 2 & 1 Peter 3)**

The early Christians were always a minority everywhere in the ancient world, and as a result they constantly had to deal with tensions and persecutions. There are some misconceptions and overly-romanticized notions about persecutions in the early centuries, yet there still is much that we can learn from the kinds of troubles that our ancient brothers and sisters faced.

Reflection Questions: How do the teachings of Philippians and 1 Peter challenge your current perspective on the early church? How do these teachings reflect the cross itself?

There will always be tensions between those who live for this world and those who seek first God's eternal kingdom. As followers of Jesus, we can allow this to discourage us, or we can resent it and become angry, or we can view this as an opportunity to show the world a positive example of gracious and Christ-like living. Our lives can directly reflect the values of the cross.

Paul urges us to "shine like stars" in this present world (Philippians 2:14-16). New Testament believers are called to reflect Jesus' blamelessness, graciousness, and purity. It is more important to be gracious about the world's fallen condition than it is to complain or argue about it.

The apostle also describes a truly positive, spiritual attitude (Philippians 3:17-4:9). Believers should neither be mindlessly optimistic nor reactively critical. Many or most humans around us are living for this world and for themselves - but this should arouse our pity, not our resentment. Moreover, it should remind us not to adopt the world's ways, even when they seem expedient.

The real difference between believers and the world is not factual correctness or even morality, but our source of hope. We focus on the positive and the pure because it reminds us that our true hope does not come from anything in this world. Conversely, the world's fixation on competing to gain short-term results reveals their hopes to be inherently shallow and unreliable. Even their greatest prizes do not last or satisfy. Our graciousness can help them see true hope - and if they reject this, then let us still show them pity and compassion, for they shall need them.

Believers in the gospel are called to be prepared to give an answer to those who want to know what we believe (1 Peter 3:13-17). But Peter reminds us that it is less important to be eloquent or convicting than it is to be gracious. The gospel itself is based on grace, and any proclamation of the gospel that is not based on grace cannot reflect the deeper truths of the gospel.

Peter then leads into a perspective on Christian suffering and endurance (1 Peter 4:12-19). Everyone suffers pain and disappointment - but the worldly response is to measure and compare pain, to see who has been lucky and who seems to be "owed" something. The Christian perspective is nothing like this - we are simply called to endure this world's ills and sins with grace and humility. When others suffer - whether believers or unbelievers - once again grace and humility will go a lot further than fleshly logic, blame, or comparisons.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What do we know about the context of Philippians and 1 Peter? How are their teachings relevant to the history of the early Christians? Did the early Christians always reflect these values? How are these teachings different from the attitudes of our own culture and society? How do they reflect the cross itself?

More About the Romans

The history of early Christianity is inevitably intertwined with the history of the changes and internal conflicts that Rome itself was undergoing during the years when the gospel was first proclaimed to the world. Though Roman society was just as large and complex as its territorial borders, there are a few things about Rome that are especially helpful for Christians to know.

We've noted before the cultural struggle in Rome between the enduring values of the old Republic and the new policies and characteristics of the Empire. The Romans had always been very suspicious of human leaders, and the Republic was built on a complex balance of different offices and responsibilities. But through the first century, the Emperors gradually undermined this system and accumulated huge amounts of power for themselves.

□ In fact, the writers of the U.S. Constitution drew heavily on the Roman Republic, hoping to make it impossible for any one person to accumulate significant power.

The emperors claimed to be gods, but no one really believed this. Indeed, this was the same attitude that the Romans had towards everything - they were purely practical in their approach to society, to religion, to war, and to everything else. They were not innovators or creators, but they were masters at seeing the value in someone else's ideas and using them on a larger scale.

□ A few emperors demanded to be taken seriously as 'gods', but this only caused trouble locally. All the emperors used their legal status as "gods" when it was a convenient way to punish an unpopular individual.

Even in the empire, Roman morality and lifestyle often reflected the older values. Romans were tolerant of all manner of immoral behaviors when they were practiced privately, but they looked with great disfavor on sexual immorality, homosexuality, and the like being made public, where they might encourage disorder. Meanwhile, the extravagance and indulgence of the upper classes was opposed by a large, though steadily dwindling, number of the middle and lower classes. Only in the late first century, when the new Colosseum allowed much larger number of Romans to "enjoy" its bloody and immoral spectacles, were the lower classes won over.

□ The Greeks, by contrast, accepted almost anything, even things Americans would unanimously condemn. Homosexuality, blatant adultery, and even borderline pedophilia were openly practiced and accepted.

Romans viewed all religions as having value only insofar as they kept society ordered. They were remarkably tolerant of other religions, and even tolerated the disruptive Jewish religious leaders for many years until the level of unrest became unacceptable. Christianity became a target because the Romans formed so many misconceptions of it (see below). Ironically, it was the emperors most concerned with morality who most often persecuted Christians.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How is it relevant for us to understand Roman culture? How could we best learn about it? In what ways might Rome's struggles and changes have affected their views of Christians? How could we learn from these today?

Conclusion & Introduction

While the persecutions of the early Christians get the most attention today, there are also many other aspects of the relationship between the church and the world that are significant. We can learn from the early Christians' views of their role in the world; and we can also learn from the pagans' views of the early Christians - since these often help to explain the persecutions.

Although Christians later mistreated unbelievers, early Christian attitudes towards the pagan world are notable for their graciousness. The early Christians were especially known for their benevolence, their willingness to share with and care for others even when they had little of their own. It even became common for con artists to pretend to be Christians in order to exploit the lavish hospitality and generosity of the early churches□

□The well-known satirist Lucian of Samosata was particularly biting in his portrayal of the (in his opinion) gullibility and over-generosity of the early Christians.

One of the remarkable examples of Christian external benevolence was the rescue of "exposed" children. Since the practical Romans considered abortions hazardous and unhealthy, women with unwanted pregnancies would allow the child to be born and then, quite literally, throw the newborn into a trash bin or dump it in a field. The euphemism for this was "exposure", and it was completely legal. Instead of making angry protests, the Christians simply made it a practice to seek and rescue "exposed" infants, raising them in foster homes or improvised orphanages.

Early Christians formed social attitudes from a sense of identity in Jesus - as citizens of heaven, here for only a short time, they were not easily drawn into political or social controversies the way that today's Christians too often are. They valued grace too much to worry whether others considered them liberals, conservatives, traditionalists or modernists. There were always exceptions, and this later changed; but for a time this attitude testified powerfully to Jesus' grace.

Pagan views of Christians were more complex. Pagans who were not unscrupulous or cynical usually admired Christians for their benevolence and for their gentleness towards those who opposed them. Christians who remained brave and peaceful when threatened with violence made quite an impression on the public mind. □et there were many negative stereotypes, too.

Ironically, the most common and damaging charge against the early believers was that of atheism. Christianity was quite rare in limiting its worship to one living God (or even to just three, as pagans often understood Christianity), and the overt gospel teaching denying the existence of all other gods branded them as atheists to most of the public.

Other common charges seem just as odd. Suspicions of cannibalism arose because the early church kept the Lord's Supper exclusively for believers, while referring to it as "partaking of the body and blood of our Lord"□ Early Christians were often accused of practices like free love and open marriage, because of the way that men and women shared affection freely in public.

□Because of the way that they sometimes spoke of Jesus as a child, the early Christians were sometimes even accused of practicing child sacrifice.

Other fears and stereotypes arose similarly and□or developed from these. Christianity came to be seen as weird and antisocial, in spite of its pluses. Because Christians avoided taking sides in secular or political controversies□ they were also seen as potentially disloyal or treacherous. All of these contributed to the various persecutions that the early church endured.

□Many early Christians held administrative positions in the government, and a few were even in the army. But they usually made every effort to present an image of impartial, peaceful service in these roles.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What could (or should) the early church have done to correct these misunderstandings□ How are these criticisms of Christians different from negative views of Christians today□ What can we learn from this□

□*ersecutions* □*f* □*e* □*arl*□□□*urc* □

Persecution of the early Christians began quite early in the church's history. ¶et the worst persecutions came well after the New Testament era. We can learn both from the reasons for these persecutions and from the ways that the early believers responded to them. In particular, we will do well always to remember that persecution comes from insecurity, not strength.

Most opposition and persecution in the New Testament itself is from Jewish religious leaders, who saw Christianity as a threat to their power and influence. A few times secular authorities mistreat Christians, but most of the time their motivations are practical, based solely on maintaining order¶ Nero's persecution after the great fire in Rome (AD 64, see the Week Five notes) was the first large-scale persecution by non-Jews. It did serious damage to the church in Rome, but it was strictly local and had little lasting effect outside of Rome itself.

¶The Roman legal and administrative system was concerned above all with maintaining order. Roman law and authorities were usually dismissive of individual rights, considering public order far more important.

As the first century progressed, the Romans became increasingly suspicious and afraid of the Christians. As the cult of the emperor was promoted more seriously, both Jews and Christians resisted, provoking a response from Rome. The Romans dealt drastically with the Jews by destroying Jerusalem in AD 70, but the church of Christ was a much harder target, since it was not defined by territory. Influenced also by the misconceptions and prejudices described above, isolated persecutions were fairly common; and emperor Domitian¶ (AD ¶1-96) used his power to imprison or exile individual Christians he disliked (such as John).

¶Domitian is often erroneously portrayed as a large-scale persecutor of Christians. This most often comes from millennialist commentators who interpret Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 literally, and whose theories do not work unless Domitian was an especially horrible emperor. In reality, (see also the Week Five notes), he was a rigid moralist who disliked Christianity because it was modern and foreign.

By AD 100, Christianity was officially a capital offense, but the law was sporadically enforced. The reason for the law was that Christians would not take the required annual oath of belief in the emperor's divinity. Everyone knew that this ceremony was fictitious, but most of the early Christians felt that it was blasphemous even to speak the required words, "Caesar is Lord". Around this time many congregations also started to meet in secret locations, as a precaution.

Emperor Trajan (AD 9¶-117) is a key figure in Rome's history. One of Rome's greatest secular leaders, he was also interested in legal reform, and he did not like the fact that the law against Christianity was enforced inconsistently - he felt that it should either be enforced strictly or else be repealed. He commissioned Pliny The ¶ounger¶ (see last week's notes) to make a thorough investigation of Christians, to determine whether their religion should in fact be illegal.

¶His uncle was Pliny The Elder, killed in AD 79 in the great eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

In a famous series of letters, the emperor and his investigator discussed the Christians and determined that, though they were very unpleasant and bizarre, they formed no serious threat to Rome. In the end, Trajan decided that the status quo of selective enforcement was the best policy after all. And so the anti-Christian laws remained on the books through the mid-2nd century. They were conveniently enforced against Christians like Ignatius and Polycarp (see Week Six notes) who had angered Roman authorities, but most of the time they were ignored.

The first sustained policy of persecution took place under Emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-1¶0). While Marcus is remembered for his great knowledge and for his classic philosophical writings, he was a reactionary who lived in the past; and he saw Christianity as a grave threat to

traditional Roman values. He commanded that the laws be enforced more rigorously, and during his reign many more Christians were executed than at any time previously. Marcus stopped short of having Christians hunted down, but known Christians were in great danger.

After Marcus, Rome entered a period of severe decline, which this was a break for the Christians. For several decades, Roman leaders were pre-occupied with constant uprisings, conspiracies, and assassination attempts, so that Christianity became a minor concern. But when Emperor Decius took the throne (AD 249-251), he immediately launched the first full-scale, empire-wide persecution of Christians. For the first time, Roman authorities hunted down suspected Christians, and executed them if they did not renounce Jesus. It was no longer enough to keep one's faith from being known publicly. Among the many victims was the writer Origen.

Not only did this persecution cause many deaths, but it also caused lasting divisions in the church. Those Christians who had stood firm, risking death and often suffering torture or prison, were often indignant and unaccepting of those who had avoided harm by pretending to renounce Christ. Decius had also commanded the destruction of the New Testament, and the subsequent "Novation" controversy in the church concerned Christians who had cooperated with this order.

Fortunately, Decius died after only two years as emperor, and his successors went back to enforcing the laws only against Christian leaders who had offended Roman authorities in some way. Rome was now facing some much more serious problems - bitter internal divisions and powerful barbarian armies on its borders constantly threatened the empire's continued existence.

In AD 284 Diocletian became emperor, and he immediately instituted a wide-ranging series of reforms that saved Rome from collapse and probably prolonged the Empire's lifespan by a century or more. But in AD 303 Diocletian instituted the second systematic, full-scale persecution of Christians. It was by far the worst of all the ancient persecutions, because Diocletian was such an effective administrator. It was also in many ways inexplicable, because Diocletian had previously allowed Christians to hold prominent positions in his administration. It was probably Diocletian's scheduled successor, the shifty Galerius, who instigated it.

Fortunately the worst of the persecution did not last long. Diocletian abdicated in AD 305 and the creepy Galerius stepped up the violence even more, but by this time even pagan Romans had grown appalled by such acts of brutality against a minority that was only strange, not dangerous. Soon Roman officials and soldiers simply declined to enforce Galerius's brutal instructions.

When Galerius died in AD 311, the era of Roman persecution ended permanently. A succession crisis arose, with multiple contenders raising armies and fighting to become emperor. The eventual winner, Constantine, became emperor in AD 312, and soon afterwards he declared that he was a Christian. The church was about to change completely.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What most seems to have caused the early persecutions of Christians? Can we learn anything from this? How does the historical record compare with popular conceptions of early persecutions?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2012

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Nine: Divisions & Problems In The Early Church (Readings In Acts 15 & 2 Timothy 4)

Next we shall look at the internal difficulties that afflicted the early church of Jesus. We would especially like to understand how the New Testament church was eventually transformed into the established church of the Middle Ages. Divisions over doctrines and methods were one of the church's earliest problems, and we see their effects even in the New Testament.

Lessons on Divisions & Doctrinal Roles Acts 15 & 2 Timothy 4

It is a discouraging aspect of human nature that divisions over doctrines and trivial matters seem to be inevitable in the church. But the New Testament provides us positive perspectives as well. It gives us an example of how these problems can be resolved without rancor or permanent harm, and it also provides us with some general perspectives on these inevitable worries.

The controversy over circumcision (see also below) was discussed in a large assembly (not a 'Council!') in Jerusalem, since some believers were aggressively forcing their views on others. The issues are put succinctly (v. 5-10, 19-21). The believers most loyal to Judaism want to require Gentile converts to obey the laws of Moses. Peter points out that since it is so hard for Jews to obey the whole law, it would be even more discouraging for Gentiles to attempt to do so.

Note that many former Pharisees were Christians. They sometimes caused trouble, but it is encouraging - and to their credit - that they overcame their inhibitions and preconceptions by accepting the gospel.

The decision is made by consensus, not authority, and it emphasizes spiritual concerns above legal points (v. 22-29). The Gentiles are asked - not commanded - to observe a few aspects of the law that were of most concern to Jews, but beyond that they do not have to be circumcised or follow any of the law's more arduous requirements. The resolution of the matter is entirely in keeping with the values of the gospel itself, emphasizing grace and healthy relationships.

Three of the four requests involve avoiding food not acceptable to Jews - by following them, the Gentiles would eliminate a major potential barrier in their relationships with Jewish believers.

Sound teaching about Jesus is often less popular than human doctrines (2 Timothy 4:1-5). Let doctrines and methods be rarely if ever the real issue - the root problem is the human desire for importance, authority, or superiority. Rather than trying to refute and punish every false teaching, a godly response is to teach the truth consistently, to endure hardships ourselves rather than inflicting anxiety and guilt on others, and to keep a clear head so that we can keep teaching the good news of Jesus instead of the bad news of human methodologies and theologies.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: When does a difference need to be discussed, as opposed to allowing everyone to keep their own beliefs? How do the criteria used to resolve the circumcision dispute help us with our own problems? Is there anything we can do to prevent false teachings? How does Paul's advice to Timothy apply today?

Early Divisions Before Constantine

Almost from the beginning, divisive influences threatened the church of Jesus Christ. The early Christians often dealt with these ills as well as possible, yet divisions inevitably bring weariness

and discouragement, which in turn lead to other problems. These struggles can teach us a lot, though, as they are often little different in their essentials from contemporary issues.

This was even a problem in the apostolic era. Judaizing teachers (Acts 15, Galatians, Philippians 3:2-11) persistently taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised, and often to obey other laws, to become Christians. This problem slowly faded away - there was a broad consensus to support the perspective of Acts 15, and eventually the Jewish influence on the church began to fade.

Another early problem was influence from pagan philosophies, especially the so-called "mystery religions". Paul refers to these in Colossians: "do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink" (2:16); "(those who) delight in false humility and the worship of angels"; "goes into great detail about what he has seen" (2:18); and regulations that "have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body" (2:23). These all have their counterparts today - the thought of secret knowledge and the hope of arcane emotional experiences always have a strong allure to fleshly minds. The antidote is to remember that the gospel is meant to help real humans with the real problem of getting their sins forgiven.

Several controversies and divisions arose from the late 1st century to the time of Constantine. Even the early Christians found a wide variety of things to divide over, but we shall only track the ones with the most lasting effects on the church and/or the most useful lessons for today.

The Gnostics were a constant plague from the late 1st century through the 2nd century. 1 John was written to deal with the earliest forms of Gnosticism, though the movement was not yet known by that name. John emphasizes the physical reality of Jesus (1 John 1:1-4) because the basis of Gnosticism was that the physical world was inherently evil and irredeemable - and so the Gnostics believed that Jesus could not have been a true physical being, only an illusion.

□ In John's lifetime, the leader of the proto-Gnostics was Cerinthus; and there are a couple of old anecdotes about the mutual antagonism between John and Cerinthus.

□ The name comes from the Greek word for "knowledge" - the movement came to be so named because of its eventual focus on the "secret knowledge" that they believed was necessary for salvation.

Gnosticism took numerous forms. Some Gnostics believed that their bodies were completely evil, and should be denied at all times; so they lived lives of asceticism and complete self-denial. Other Gnostics thought that, since the body was evil to begin with, it made no difference what the body did - these Gnostics indulged their bodies in sin, believing that they were saved by superior wisdom alone. All Gnostics believed in salvation by wisdom and/or works, not grace. Gnosticism reached its peak popularity under Marcion in the mid-2nd century (see Week Five notes), and for 100 years it constantly drained the rest of the church of numbers and energy.

A different problem arose in AD 172 with the rise of the young, dynamic preacher Montanus. Calling his movement "The New Prophecy", Montanus urged his followers to practice celibacy, to eat sparingly, and to provoke deliberate confrontations with unbelievers in the hopes of attaining martyrdom. Montanus called the rest of the church "unspiritual", and he expelled many persons from his movement for committing particular sins. In Montanus' day, the church did have real problems, and Montanus could have been a help if he had taught through love and grace instead of self-righteousness. Montanus attracted a large following, including the famous writer Tertullian, and it lasted in some areas until the 4th century AD before disappearing.

The church's responses to Emperor Decius's great persecution (AD 249-251; see last week's notes) caused two major divisions. During the persecution, Decius had ordered his henchmen to

give Christians one chance to renounce Christ before being executed, and many Christians - especially those with families - outwardly denied Christ and then came back to the church when the persecution was over. Most congregations had no problem with graciously taking them back; but many believers who themselves had risked death were indignant with this.

Novatian, a well-known Christian in Rome where the leaders were lenient, took advantage of the controversy to build a following. Calling his followers "The Pure Ones", he established a rival church that was especially strong in North Africa, Egypt, and Spain, lasting as a separate denomination into the early Middle Ages. Meanwhile, in Carthage the rich, popular "bishop" Cyprian, had fled the city during the persecution, sending orders (usually ignored) from a hiding place. Novatianism was strong in Carthage, so afterwards Cyprian faced severe criticism. Hoping to keep power, Cyprian wrote a book that led to a new and lasting theory of the church.

Cyprian's confused but influential book *The Unity Of The Church* emphasized the need for absolute obedience to the church's designated leaders. He reinterpreted the church's teachings and ministry in light of this new theory, which he called "Catholicism"□ He called church leaders "priests" to enhance their stature, and taught that the effectiveness of baptism and the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) came solely from the authority of church leaders. Cyprian's influence lasted long after his lifetime, with many of his ideas being incorporated into the medieval church.

□From the Greek word for "universal". The "Catholic" church literally means the "universal" church.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Are there any common threads to these problems in the early church□ What parallels are there today□ How can we learn from the historical events□ How can we apply the principles of 2 Timothy 4:1-5□

□ontro□ersies & □i□isions After □onstantine's Accession

After Constantine threw the power of the empire behind the church, it significantly altered the way that divisions and controversies were handled. The use of imperial power to settle disputes favored the powerful and made efforts at consensus pointless. It also affected the kinds of things that became sources of division, as ambitious persons in the church adapted the new situation.

The first major division after Constantine's accession was provoked by Donatus, a popular teacher from Carthage who had sought unsuccessfully to become a bishop. Hoping to fulfill his personal ambitions, Donatus attacked the current bishop of Carthage because he had been "ordained" by someone who had surrendered his church's Bibles□to avoid being beaten during Diocletian's persecution (AD 303-305). Donatus's zeal attracted a large number of followers from the mainline church; but when emperor Constantine became interested in the dispute, Donatus pointedly rejected Constantine's authority over the church. Constantine began using the machinery of the Empire to persecute Donatus; and the Donatists died out within a few decades.

□In some areas, especially Africa, Christians died rather than surrender Bibles. In Europe, most churches just made extra copies, and handed over a few Bibles or other religious books to make the soldiers happy.

From this point onward, Constantine and his successors upheld without question the right of the emperor to intervene and settle all church disputes. Sometimes this headed off false teachings, but many other times it forced the agendas of the politically powerful upon the rest of the church.

The most famous early church controversy involved Arius, his theory of Arianism, and his unrelenting doctrinal opponent Athanasius. Arius, an elder from a town near Alexandria, could

never understand how an immortal God could become flesh - so he decided that Jesus was not God at all, just a created being - a "very good" person who lived a perfect life on his own power.

Arianism proved wildly popular, in part because it held out the possibility of human perfection without depending on grace. Arius was committed to missions at a time when the main-line church had no interest in promoting Christianity outside Roman territory - thus, many of the Germanic and "barbarian" tribes outside the empire's borders (the tribes who later would invade and conquer Rome) included many Arian "Christians". Arianism thus survived as a separate denomination long after Arian and his followers were expelled from the main-line church.

Constantine was unwilling to allow individual believers to make up their own minds on these issues, and he convened the first of the great church councils to rule on them. Powerful church leaders and politicians assembled at Nicaea, in what today is western Turkey. Athanasius, a "deacon" from Alexandria, assumed the lead role in refuting Arius's theories from the Scriptures, while other more powerful persons worked behind the scenes to make sure that the council's decision pleased the emperor. In the end, Arius and his followers were declared to be heretics.

□ Athanasius (see Week Five) is one of the most useful sources for tracing the acceptance of the NT canon during the 4th century AD. Athanasius later became a controversial figure, because after serving the interests of the establishment at Nicaea, he later realized the hazards of having so much political power involved in the church; and he often suffered in his personal life due to alienating powerful individuals.

The Council Of Nicaea (AD 325) is best remembered for the so-called "Nicene Creed", the Council's officially approved statement of beliefs. The church periodically revised it to reflect the approved ways of stating basic Christian beliefs. The versions in use today are generally innocuous, although they all emphasize the same policy that was first made explicit at Nicaea - henceforth, individual Christians were no longer to think for themselves about spiritual matters, but rather were expected to accept the formulas devised by the church's leaders and experts.

Later in the 4th century, controversies arose over the nature of the Godhead, or "Trinity", as the church now called it. Many disputes were merely about words or phrases, and were just a front for political agendas. Indeed, the spiritual relationships amongst the Father, the Son, and the Spirit defy simplistic verbal formulas; and even the most 'scholarly' explanations are inadequate.

There was a reasonably substantive debate about the Godhead at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. Apollinarius, the "bishop" of Laodicea, held concerns similar to Arius's and so proposed the theory that Jesus' human body was not really his, but was merely borrowed. A group of theologians from Cappadocia (led by Basil Of Caesarea) worked out a theory of the Father, Son, and Spirit that they called "one substance, three persons", the basis of orthodox teaching on the Spirit for many centuries. We would probably feel that the truth "won" both at Nicaea and at Constantinople, but the decisions were made for political reasons, a sad precedent.

Note that when the church was threatened and persecuted, its divisions were usually over matters of at least some substance. But once the Empire backed the church, making it safe to be a Christian, the divisions and disputes became increasingly trivial. The trend reached a peak in the series of councils in fifth century, when insignificant details and the phrasing of creeds became the source of bitter and sometimes violent disputes. One of the most pathetic images of Rome's declining years is the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. With tens of thousands of Roman subjects enduring horrible torments from the ravages of the Huns, Vandals, and Goths, the most powerful persons in the empire assembled in security and luxury at Chalcedon to indulge in a series of leisurely disputes provoked by the arcane academic theories of a man named Eutyches.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What do the post-Constantine disputes have in common? Did they justify the use of imperial power to resolve them? Is it good that the empire enforced the "right" decisions in some of them? Are there parallels today?

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Long before Constantine, human nature pushed the church in the direction of a hierarchical institution instead of the living body of Jesus. The allure of human power, conformity, and ritual appeals to humans who seek false security in every era. Our purpose in studying the decline of the New Testament church is not to condemn any group, but to learn from their mistakes.

Early warning signs appeared even in the late first century and early second century. Writings from that time frequently reflect a kind of "fortress mentality", a desperate goal of keeping the church from changing or dividing, rather than the positive, grace-oriented outlook of the New Testament. Much of this had to do with the passing of the apostles and the growing influence of church leaders who had not known the earlier generations of uncertainty and change.

In almost all of the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (see Week Five), he emphasizes above all the need to obey church authorities, even if it means conforming to things that individuals do not like or understand.

The "monoepiscopacy" (one-bishop system) was accelerated by this mood, and the new system in itself created an additional emphasis on conformity. By AD 100 most congregations had appointed one person - usually an elder or a popular preacher - as the sole "bishop" in charge of their church. The hope was that one strong, visible leader would better protect the congregation from false teachings and divisions. Next, churches in smaller towns looked to bishops of larger congregations to oversee them, forming an extra layer of authority. Since most bishops in larger cities were happy to have extra power, the process accelerated through the second and third centuries. Soon, bishops in the larger cities like Rome and Alexandria began actively to compete for supreme leadership - the roots of the church hierarchy that later developed into the papacy.

Nicaea was the first official enforcement of church orthodoxy, but there was already a strong trend towards orthodoxy and formalism. During the second and third centuries, believers often had to recite statements of "correct" belief prior to baptism and in other contexts. After Nicaea, it was important to use the "correct" words in addition to having "correct" beliefs. Worship assemblies had become more formalized, and this trend also accelerated after Constantine. The growing hierarchy had also affected teachings about baptism in the second and third centuries (see Week Seven), and after Nicaea, baptism was now taught as a requirement of the church authorities, having whatever meaning and importance the church assigned to it.

As a general observation, the substitution of human authority for faith in the unseen God both causes other problems and accelerates existing problems. In the Middle Ages, the church hierarchy became far more oppressive, instigating wars, persecuting minorities, and torturing those with alternate beliefs. If we can only learn one thing from this period in church history, it is a caution against ever giving too much spiritual authority to any human or humans.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What motivates believers to grant extra power to human authorities? Is this ever a good thing? What are the most important lessons we might be able to learn from the church's transition to the medieval church?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, July 2012
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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Ten: Turning Points The 4th & 5th Centuries (Readings In 2 Corinthians 10 & Hebrews 10)

In the 4th and 5th centuries AD, both the Roman Empire and the church of Jesus Christ underwent rapid change. In some ways, having the empire suddenly ruled by Christians might seem like a good thing, but it quickly turned the church into something far different. Meanwhile, as the church changed irrevocably, the empire itself was entering a period of terminal decline.

Continuance of the Roman Empire

It is never easy to persevere in faith and grace when easier ways of dealing with our problems seem to offer more in the short term. Worldly methods and perspectives bring worldly results and worldly victories, which can often look spectacular in the short term. If we can remember that God's kingdom is not of this world, it can help us to continue in genuine faith and grace.

When Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Christian's "weapons" are not the weapons of the world, he is urging them to resist human methodologies while at the same time defending his own ministry from the reproaches of the "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 10:1-5). Both then and now, there are those who evaluate Christian ministry in terms of numbers, in terms of fleshly emotions, and in terms of money and authority.

See 2 Corinthians 11:5 and 12:11 - this group of forceful, authoritarian leaders had become more widely admired and respected than Paul was, because their tactics drew attention to their "zeal" and "toughness".

Genuine victories in Jesus are neither won by worldly means nor measured by worldly standards. Spiritual success comes when we "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" - when we re-consider our goals and ideas in light of the grace and spiritual power of the cross.

Daniel's prophecies (see Week Four) teach us that the unfolding of time reveals the hollowness of the world's empires, and also that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world - it is not measured by borders or by numbers. Only God knows when a soul is truly his; and he values one humble soul who lives by grace over thousands who merely profess outward belief, no matter how zealously.

It is better to have spiritual confidence than confidence in fleshly things (Hebrews 10:19-39). Hebrews was written to believers who, out of discouragement, wanted to return to justification by law. But they need only to draw near to God with a clear conscience (v. 19-25). True encouragement comes not from outward results or emotions, but from knowing that our sins are truly forgiven by Jesus' blood, and from the certainty that God knows us and wants to know us.

This is what gives us the hope of better things (v. 32-39). Outward results do not prove that we are right, and trials and disappointments do not mean that we have made mistakes. Rather, when we experience the ills of the world and help others who are also suffering from them, it helps us stay close to the cross. Then we can live in its grace and love, instead of seeking the false allure of worldly distinctions. To shrink back from faith and grace, and to exchange them for worldly logic and human authority, deprives us of blessings greater than anything the world can offer.

The passage between these readings (v. 26-31) is often misinterpreted. It is not a condemnation of those who struggle with sin after becoming a Christian - it is, rather, a warning to those who hear the gospel of grace but then insist on seeking God by their own righteousness, showing disrespect for the blood of Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What "weapons" are appropriate for Christians? What is the standard of Christian victory? How can we help each other to remember that our sins are forgiven? How can we help each other not to "shrink back"?

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(For notes to this section, see last week's handouts - we didn't finish last week's outline in class.)

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Within a few months, the Roman Empire went from being ruled by Galerius, a fanatical persecutor of Christians, to being ruled by Constantine, a new convert to Christianity. At first, the effect on the church included many benefits. But the injection of worldly power into the church's affairs quickly transformed the church in unexpected ways - and not for the better.

Galerius's death in AD 311 touched off a chaotic civil war amongst several persons who each wanted to be emperor. Constantine emerged victorious (AD 312), in part for strategic reasons that do not concern us here, but also in part due to good luck. For some time previously, Constantine had been curious about Christianity and had taken time to learn a great deal about it; so he decided that his victory was in large part a reward from God and Jesus for this interest.

Constantine told his friends that, on the night before the climactic battle at Milvian Bridge, he had a dream in which he saw a gigantic cross and heard a voice say, "in this sign you shall conquer".

There is no way to determine what he actually believed, but there is no doubt that Constantine was sincere in believing that God gave him the victory - there was just nothing to be gained by embracing a religion with such a negative reputation. There is also no doubt that having a Christian emperor brought sudden changes both for Christians and for unbelievers. At first the effect was wholly beneficial, as Constantine eagerly learned all he could about his new faith.

But, as was common at the time, Constantine was not baptized until shortly before his death in 337.

Constantine's original intent was to benefit the church as much as possible without harming unbelievers. The Edict of Milan in AD 313 permanently removed all laws against Christianity and brought an end to persecution of Christians. In 321, Constantine declared "Sunday", the first day of the week, a national holiday. His main intent was to allow Christians to worship on the Lord's Day without having to do so very early in the morning before the work day began, but his decision was also an enormous benefit to working class Romans of all religions.

But, human nature being what it is, Constantine's goal soon changed from helping the church to leading it. After using imperial influence to crush the Donatists, Constantine began using his power to mold the church into what he wanted it to be. The divisive Donatus probably deserved his punishment, and most believers today would probably approve of the main decisions made with Constantine's approval at Nicaea; but the ill-advised injection of secular power into church affairs created a monster. For the sake of more quickly resolving problems in the short-term, the church had reached an ominous turning point of its own. Once the church tasted the "benefits" of using force to solve its problems, its appetite for power and authority would keep growing.

Given Constantine's determination to crush the influence of Arius at Nicaea, the history of his successors is filled with irony. Upon his death in 337, the empire was divided amongst his sons;

but they soon began fighting with each other. One of them, Constantius, emerged as sole emperor - and Constantius was a believer in Arianism. For several decades, Arian emperors alternated with Nicene emperors, with each in turn using his position to benefit his own faction. Meanwhile, both Arians and Nicenes began to persecute Roman subjects who still held to the old religions. There was a brief respite for unbelievers during the reign of Julian "The Apostate" (361-363), the last non-Christian emperor and the only one after Constantine.

□ By the late 4th century, Arians had become a fringe group within the empire, and there were no more Arian emperors. Outside Rome's borders, though, Arianism remained strong.

By the end of the 4th century, the final decline of the Western Roman Empire had begun. We shall study this in more detail later, but for now a brief summary will provide perspective on the church during this period. From AD 100 into the late 3rd century, Rome's growing weaknesses put the empire in constant danger of collapse, both from without and from within. Diocletian's reforms left Rome much stronger, and Constantine inherited this strengthened nation.

Constantine's own contribution to Rome's stability was to divide the administration of the empire into East and West, with the Western capital at Rome and the Eastern capital at Constantinople (Constantine's modest re-naming of the ancient city of Byzantium). As it happened, the Eastern Empire would long survive the fall of Rome itself, providing some stability to the troubled region well into the Middle Ages.

Both Constantine and his successors, though, proved hopelessly inadequate at dealing with the constant threat of invasions from the "barbarian" tribes that lined Rome's borders. Things fell apart completely in the 5th century. Rome itself was attacked several times, and it was sacked and ravaged by the Visigoths in 410 and again by the Vandals in 455. The Western Empire ended once for all in 476. We shall cover all this in much more detail later on in our study.

Throughout the 5th century, as the empire crumbled away, the key question debated by the populace was whether it was all Christianity's fault. Some felt that the old gods were having their revenge, while others simply realized that most of the "Christian" emperors were completely incompetent, and blamed it on their religion. Meanwhile, Augustine's famous book *The City Of God* provided an answer from the church's perspective. The irony of the church's decline being so intertwined with the fall of Rome itself provides much for us to consider today.

Questions for Discussion Or Study: What expectations might Christians have had of Constantine? Were there genuine benefits to him being emperor? Why might he have become so authoritarian in regards to the church? What lessons does this hold for us? What could we learn from the failures of his successors?

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With imperial power now involved in every aspect of the church, the New Testament church quickly became unrecognizable. When believers today dream of using the power of the secular government to enforce "Christian" beliefs, they would do well to consider the ways that the early church so suddenly became more authoritarian and so unwelcoming to the values of the cross.

Throughout the 4th century, the church became more powerful, more wealthy, more authoritarian, and more dominated by a hierarchy of human leaders. In the beginning stages of the final transformation into the established medieval church, a few trends particularly stand out.

Once the imperial government attached its power and influence to the church, the church suddenly became a playground for opportunists. When the church was a persecuted minority, there was no reason to become a Christian other than genuine belief in the cross. But now there were new motivations to be a Christian. Belonging to the emperor's favored religion brought hope of political advancement and financial reward - and conversely, staying out of the church could hurt one's career and even bring the risk of punishment. The church quickly became led and dominated by a new kind of "Christian" that enjoyed power and authority for their own sake.

But even worse, the church quickly went from being persecuted to being the persecutors. In the middle of the 4th century, other religions were increasingly restricted, and those who belonged to them began to lose their legal and civil rights. In AD 391, when Christianity was declared the only legal religion throughout the empire, the government and church authorities began working together to launch a sustained persecution of non-Christians. In their fleshly zeal to force others to adopt "correct" beliefs, the persecutions by Christians eventually became more brutal, cold-blooded, and effective than the persecutions that Christians themselves had endured.

It is a sad spectacle how quickly Christians became eager persecutors, yet this is only human nature at work. It teaches us to curb our own cravings to see our moral or religious beliefs forced on others. After Constantine, the church was numerically and financially stronger, but it lost almost all connection with the cross. This tends, unfortunately, to be a correlation in modern times as well. If we want a church that holds to the grace and faith of the cross, then it would be better even to have a secular government that actively opposes Christian teachings than it would be to have a government that uses its power to force others to accept our beliefs.

In order to justify the sweeping changes in the church in the 4th century, church leaders began to rewrite the past. To justify their increasingly violent mistreatment of unbelievers, the church and the government began exaggerating the duration and extent of the anti-Christian persecutions of the past. They also began the process of mythologizing spiritual figures from the past, by means of relics and concocted legends, many of which are still widely accepted and believed today.

Not every Christian was happy with the church's new-found "success" and power. Some writers from this era began to speak of the "shadow church", or of a "church within a church", referring to the few Christians who wanted to see the church return to the values of the cross rather than seeking worldly power and influence, and who wanted to see the church involved in love and worship of God rather than forcing its beliefs on others. Rather than leave the church, such believers usually tried desperately to work from within to resist the influence of imperial power. But they were powerless, and often endured persecution for their efforts. So even then, there were believers trying to restore the grace and compassionate faith of the New Testament church.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Are there parallels today to the opportunists who entered the church seeking imperial favor and advancement? Are there circumstances in which we might fall into the desire to persecute those who do not share our beliefs? Are there ways in which we desire to rewrite the past? What choices were available to those who were concerned by the changes in the 4th and 5th century church?

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, August 2012*

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Eleven: The Decline Of The New Testament Church (Readings In Revelation 2 & Colossians 2)

We should not try to judge when the ancient church went from "saved" to "lost" - and indeed, it is individuals, not churches, who are saved or lost. We do know that the simple, informal, living church of the New Testament transformed into an authoritarian, hierarchical institution that aggressively suppressed dissent and individuality. This in itself holds many lessons.

Old Testament & Colossians

Though we tend to become pre-occupied with making distinctions between saved and lost, strong and weak, correct and incorrect, the Scriptures instead exhort us to keep our focus on Jesus and the cross, not on evaluating others through human wisdom. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21) - what we love ultimately determines how we live and serve.

In John's letters to the churches in Asia, he exhorts them to keep their "candlesticks" burning (Revelation 2:1-5) - that is, to continue in faith and grace. He praises the church at Ephesus for many things they have done, yet he warns them that they have lost their first love - because actions alone, no matter how worthwhile or zealous, cannot prove that we know God.

Revelation was written in about AD 95; and thus the mini-letters to the churches give us a picture of them at this time, when (as we have studied in earlier lessons) certain difficulties were becoming common.

Jesus himself taught us that the "greatest commandment" is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. We can always save ourselves a lot of trouble if we remember to keep Jesus and God themselves as our "first love", over and above the things we do for them or learn from them. This is by no means a denigration of the other things that God teaches us - in fact, when we make Jesus our first love, so many other things come naturally.

Living in Christ calls us continually to distinguish the values of the cross from those of the world (Colossians 2:6-12). Paul bluntly describes the world's foundations: "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ". We should not condemn the world for thinking this way, as they have nothing better. The gospel simply calls us to resist building on fleshly logic or outward results.

When we build instead on the foundation of the cross, then we stay close to the cross. We trust Jesus' grace more than we trust human logic; and we value Jesus' compassion more than we value human approval or achievement. To have been buried with Christ in baptism is not just a doctrine - it is a change of identity that brings with it a change of perspective.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How can a church do all the Ephesian church had done, and still 'lose their first love'? What do "hollow and deceptive philosophy" and "the basic principles of this world" mean? What should we replace them with?

Use & Misuse of the Scriptures in the Ancient Church

In the ancient church, the Scriptures were constantly used and their importance emphasized. But the use of Scripture changed considerably during the first few centuries of church history,

leaving important lessons for us. It is possible to use and study Scripture humbly, yet it is also possible to use Scripture as a mere tool to accomplish human agendas or prove human opinions.

Though Scripture is always going to be used in a variety of ways, we can note some general trends. The use of Scripture in the 1st and 2nd centuries stands out most of all for the importance attached to having every individual believer study Scripture for himself or herself. The early Christians were extraordinarily diligent in copying and re-copying the Bible, even before the New Testament was circulated as a unit. The number and quality of manuscripts of the New Testament books dwarfs the manuscript support for even the greatest works of antiquity.

□ See Week Five for a historical survey of how the New Testament books came to be assembled as a unit.

□ See the notes to the Autumn 2009 class, "The Living Word Of God" for more complete details.

There are also some patterns in the ways the earliest believers used Scripture. They usually approached the Old Testament in a stylized or even allegorical fashion. Many did not even insist on the Old Testament being literally true, aside from its most straightforward narratives. Instead, they emphasized its references to Jesus, both direct and thematic. Early Christian commentaries on the Old Testament are filled with types or shadows of Jesus' life, ministry, and sacrifice.

□ See again the notes to Week Five for examples of Christian writers through the early centuries. The sources given periodically also mention other Christian writers we have not mentioned in our studies.

In contrast, early use of the New Testament was quite straightforward, emphasizing a thorough understanding even of less prominent passages. Yet there was less emphasis on commands, even where today we would see a clear "command". The earliest writers sought to explain how God's words come from his nature and character, emphasizing our new life and identity in Jesus, with our actions and thoughts being consequences of this rather than direct commands.

Knowing God, not pleasing church leaders, was the goal of studying Scripture. Only as the church gradually created a hierarchy of human leaders (see Weeks Nine and Ten) did the concept of "what the church teaches" come into being. The approach to teaching and studying was usually expository in nature, seeking to adapt the church's beliefs and practices to Scripture, rather than using Scripture to support pre-existing methods and doctrines.

Some of the early divisions in the church also reveal different perspectives on the use of Scripture. The most obvious example is the Judaizing teachers, who for a time continued to use the Old Testament as a source of commands, methods, and patterns rather than as a foundation of the gospel. Then, in the late 1st century and the 2nd century the Gnostics (see Week Nine notes) reversed the usual practice of the main-line churches. The Gnostics interpreted the Old Testament with extreme literalism, while interpreting the New Testament entirely figuratively, believing that the events in Jesus's life were an allegory or an illusion rather than reality.

Overall - as even the divisions show - in the first two centuries the church understood that Scripture supersedes all church authorities, results, methods, traditions, and practice as a source of what we can know about God. The earliest generations of the church generally had the patience and prayerfulness to go through the time-consuming process of using the Scriptures to discuss, and when necessary debate, issues and questions that arose.

By the third century AD, there was now a strong pattern of systemization, with distinct schools of interpretation competing for allegiance. The two primary approaches were represented by Alexandria and Antioch, two churches whose leaders had accumulated considerable authority

over other churches, and also where large groups of influential academics or 'scholars' had assembled. Both approaches were expository, and both emphasized the authority of God's Word itself, not the church; but beyond that the approaches showed two very different perspectives□

□In studying this topic, you might encounter the terms "exegesis" and "hermeneutics". "Exegesis" is really just a fancy word for "interpretation" - that is, a study of what a passage's meaning in its original context. "Hermeneutics" is just an elaborate term for "application" - that is, how we should apply or be influenced by a passage of Scripture. The terms can also be applied to fields other than the Bible.

The Alexandrian approach, largely developed and pioneered by Origen (AD 1□5-253; see Week Five), took the early church's allegorical approach to the Old Testament and extended it to the New Testament as well. Alexandria was a noted center of Greek influence, and this shows the influence of Greek philosophy, especially Neo-Platonism□ Alexandrian commentators tended to see all of Scripture as poetical or allegorical, with a minimal emphasis on literal meaning.

□Neo-Platonism was quite trendy in the mid- and late 3rd century AD, and was most associated with the Egyptian philosopher Plotinus. Neo-Platonism explained the existence of human beings in terms of souls that arose from the "One" in the "realm of ideas", with some of those souls descending further to occupy bodies. Christian variants of the philosophy persisted into the Middle Ages.

Meanwhile, Antioch had become a stronghold of Eastern Church traditions; and the Antiochene commentators swung towards an even more literalistic approach about the same time that the Alexandrian commentators were using a more allegorical approach. Antiochene interpretation de-emphasized all allegorical and typological interpretations, and often it even tended to de-emphasize spiritual principles in favor of specific applications or "how-to's". Although this is somewhat over-simplified, it can provide a basic understanding of the trends in biblical usage in this era (and it also helps to explain some of the later divisions between east and west).

As with other aspects of the ancient church, after Constantine the use of Scripture changed abruptly. The church was suddenly flooded with ambitious politicians and social climbers who had little motivation to study Scripture, and who were quite happy to claim belief in whatever the emperor wanted them to believe. Church leaders often felt it necessary to simplify spiritual teachings and de-emphasize study, if they hoped to retain the attention of this new group.

Moreover, the church's goals were changing too. With the growing power of the emperor and of the church councils, the church soon began to adjust its usage of Scripture to make sure that it matched their decisions. Thus the proof-text approach quickly began to replace the expository approach□ Instead of studying a passage of Scripture with an eye towards learning what it might teach to the church and believers, teachers instead began to study the Scriptures in search of "evidence" for things that the emperor or the Councils wanted church members to believe.

□Another slightly different distinction is also made in discussing Bible usage. Writings or lessons that take a book or long passage of Scripture and seek to explain and apply it as written can be called commentaries, and these were even more popular in the ancient church than they are today. Writings or lessons that instead seek to drive home a point or points, using various verses of Scripture to support those points, can be called homilies. Homiletic teaching is valuable if done carefully, observing the context of each Scripture. But when done without care or objectivity, it becomes proof-texting.

All this produced a gradual but decisive shift in how Scripture was used. Increasingly, emphasis shifted to backing up the approved teachings of what was beginning to be called the "catholic" (universal) church. The Councils decreed that uniformity was now the most important criterion for Scripture use and interpretation, over and above abstract search for truth. The church also now openly assumed for all believers the task of interpreting and applying Scripture, relieving the average believer of the "burden" of trying to understand spiritual truths for himself or herself.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: To what degree should we be influenced by the ways the early church used Scripture? What general lessons do we learn from the early history of biblical interpretation? What parallels to their different perspectives are there today?

Substitute ait

It is human nature to find things other than the cross in which to put our faith. Often without realizing it, we put our faith in our emotions, our knowledge, our actions, persuasive humans, and other things besides God. This is only a real problem when we do so deliberately, rather than inadvertently - yet this is exactly what the church began to do in the 4th and 5th centuries.

The powerful Councils, with their sweeping authority backed by both church and imperial authorities, enforced orthodoxy through use of creeds, formal statements of beliefs with which believers had to agree to remain in good standing. This put an emphasis on expressing "correct" beliefs with "correct" words. We would find little fault with the wording of most ancient creeds, such as the Nicene Creed or the "Apostles' Creed", but they had the effect of encouraging believers to put their faith in outward forms and in the authority of church leaders. Thus in this era the church began actively discouraging believers from trying to study the Scriptures on their own, assuring them that church leaders would tell them whatever they needed to know.

The Apostles Creed originated about AD 400, and was based largely on a formalized statement that the church in Rome required from new converts prior to baptism. The basic wording of the Roman baptismal statement went back the late 2nd century, but it had nothing to do with the apostles. A similar creed called the "Old Roman Creed", which also had origins in the late 2nd century, was also once quite popular.

Since many newer members had little interest in seeking spiritual truth on their own, church leaders also made use of tactics such as rituals and relics. Rituals and formalized worship let believers evaluate themselves in terms of whether they had followed the proper forms, but at the expense of encouraging them to know God personally. Relics, which are personal objects or mortal remains purported (often falsely) to have belonged to famous religious figures, also provided something tangible, which many both then and now desire. Even today, popular relics such as the "Shroud Of Turin" attract far more attention and faith than they warrant.

The use of relics was supported by the practice of hagiography, the popularization of idealized biographies of "saints". Not only did these fanciful biographies encourage the veneration of relics, but they also provided a more 'accessible' kind of faith, by encouraging believers simply to imitate the deeds of a famous "saint", instead of trying to grasp deeper spiritual teachings. The most well-known example of hagiography is the collection of imaginary facts about Jesus' mother Mary, but there were countless other examples as well. The practice originated as a mere motivational tool, but over time it evolved into worshiping and praying to the "saints".

Hagiography often involved manufacturing history. Often the church invented particularly lurid or brutal persecutions that saints were said to have endured, because this gave more legitimacy to the increasing persecutions that were now directed at those who still followed the old non-Christian religions. Church authorities also began to devise "just-so stories" to back up many other new practices, inventing historical incidents or crafting fictitious documents as needed.

Perhaps the most famous forgery is the "Donation Of Constantine", an alleged imperial decree in which Constantine transferred complete authority over all of his territorial possessions to the Pope.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Are councils and creeds bad in themselves□ Are relics and rituals bad in themselves□ What parallels do we have to these□ Why is it easier to worship something tangible□ Is it ever good to indulge or encourage this□

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It is quite easy both to see the mistakes the ancient church made and also to see the mistakes that other churches are making today. It is harder to see our own shortcomings for what they are - but fortunately, there is no real reason for us to dwell on our own faults either. Our real need is to keep our eyes on the grace of the cross, and to endure whatever else comes our way.

When we fix our eyes on Jesus himself, we can remain faithful despite our weaknesses (v. 1-3). Look beyond the things he gives us or teaches us, to see Jesus himself - the Son of Man and Son of God who is the real basis of our faith. Only the Jesus "who for the joy set before him endured the cross" can clear our minds of the extraneous things in which we so often put our faith - for we do indeed have our own parallels to the human devices that played a part in derailing the ancient church of Christ. When we know Jesus, we can simply cast aside these hindrances.

By fixing our eyes on Jesus we can also endure hardship as discipline, rather than allowing it to derail us□(v. 4-11). Notice how the writer specifies that his readers have not had to shed their blood - that is, the hardships he is talking about do not involve physical discomfort. Times when we lack the outward results or the excitement that we seek do not mean that we are missing something or doing something wrong - they are simply part of our spiritual discipline.

□Recall that the book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish believers who were considering a return to the old law because of their discouragement with Christianity.

Even in our daily lives, we know that discipline is sometimes necessary; and in God we have a perfect Father whom we can always trust. Given how easily (too easily, sometimes) we place our confidence in human expertise or authority, it is possible, if often challenging, to learn to place our faith in the unseen but living God. We do not need to put our faith in methods or traditions or results - these may seem easier, but in the long run their flaws will be revealed.

Focusing on Jesus himself is also the best means of strengthening the weak (v. 12-13). Jesus did not discourage or crush the weak with reminders of their inadequacy or lack of accomplishments, the way that humans too often do. When we focus above all on the grace and compassion of the cross, it brings healing, not disabling or discouragement, to the struggling parts of the body.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus□ How does it differ from focusing on actions□ How does it help us to endure discipline□ What kinds of discipline are we likely to endure□ How does focusing on Jesus help the weak□

□or □urt□er Stud□

Here are two good sources for studying the use of Scripture in the ancient church:

Donald McKim (editor), *Historical Handbook Of Major Biblical Interpreters* (covers all eras)
Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation In The Early Church* (1st-6th centuries)

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, August 2012*
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THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH OF CHRIST: ITS ORIGINS, GROWTH, & DECLINE

Notes For Week Twelve: Transition To The Established Medieval Church (Readings In 2 Timothy 2 & Romans 11)

By the end of the 4th century AD, both the Roman Empire and the church of Christ had changed beyond recognition. As the Western Empire fell apart completely, the church completed the process of being transformed into the institutionalized, established church we see in the Middle Ages. Our purpose is not to assign blame or guilt for any of this, but to see what we can learn.

Lesson 12: Race Saved by Grace & Romans

If studying church history teaches us nothing else, it should convince us how badly we all need grace, in every time and place. Every Christian and every church makes mistakes; and it is only by God's generous grace that any of us are saved. And by grace there are always those who seek God for his own sake and who humbly accept his grace - a "remnant chosen by grace".

The Lord knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2:19-21); and the rest of us can never really know for certain. This is inherent in being saved by grace - there is no such thing as 'doing enough' to be saved, and conversely there is no such thing as doing 'too many bad things' to be saved. But we do not need to worry about this, since it is enough to know that "God's solid foundation stands firm", or as he told Paul, "my grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). God's grace, not our righteousness, cleanses us from sin and makes us all holy - and all equally so.

The idea of a "remnant chosen by grace" combines two key points (Romans 11:1-6). Regardless of appearances, there is always a remnant faithful to God. Elijah thought that no one else in Israel had remained faithful, but God told him that there were 7,000 others - a small fraction of the nation, but much larger than Elijah realized. And there has always been a remnant in every era - there are always humans who have heard God's call of grace and have responded in faith.

This was when King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were trying to kill Elijah (the full context is in 1 Kings 19).

"And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." The remnant cannot be identified by anything but grace - it is not identified by its accomplishments or its knowledge, but by its humble acceptance of the grace of the cross.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why doesn't God let us know more clearly who is lost and who is saved? Can we know for certain about ourselves? What is a "remnant"? Can we know if we are part of it? What does it mean that it is chosen by grace?

The Fall of the Western Roman Empire

The story of the declining years of Rome is worth knowing for several reasons, both historical and spiritual. From a historical viewpoint, it is a necessary foundation for explaining much of subsequent history, both secular and religious. From a spiritual viewpoint, it teaches some important lessons about the fragility of human power and achievement.

From the death of the capable and disciplined Trajan (98-117) to the reign of the reformer Diocletian (284-305), Rome underwent a long, slow period of decline during which the empire was in continual danger of collapse from internal rivalries and decay, as well as from the threat

of invasion from beyond its borders. Diocletian's reforms left the empire stronger internally; but his successors, including Constantine and the other Christian emperors, proved completely incapable of coming up with an effective plan for dealing with Rome's aggressive neighbors.

Constantine did, like Diocletian, see the practical value of dividing the administration of the empire into an eastern capital (Constantinople) and a western capital (Rome). Although this did not prevent the fall of Rome, it did allow the large eastern portion of the empire to survive well into the Middle Ages, long after the Western Empire disintegrated.

For decades, with Roman armies stretched thin and several 'barbarian' tribes exerting increasing pressure on Rome's borders, Roman leaders dithered about what to do. The Christian emperors settled on a policy of gradual appeasement, making lavish promises while inviting selected groups of barbarians inside their borders in return for extra military service in Rome's army.

□ Many of the tribes along Rome's borders were themselves being pressured by other tribes moving into their territory. For example, the Goths who defeated the Romans at Adrianople (see next paragraph) were in need of new territory because the Huns were attacking them on the other side of their own territory.

The disaster at the battle of Adrianople (378) made it clear that this policy was inadequate. Gothic forces angry over Roman territorial policies crushed the Romans with surprising ease, permanently ending any illusion of Roman military superiority. The ultimate fall of Rome may have already been inevitable after Adrianople, and in any case it was only during the brief reign of Theodosius "The Great" (392-395) that the final decline was even slowed at all.

□ The Goths were among the groups promised territory within Rome's borders in return for their military loyalty and other concessions. But in the areas near Adrianople, the Roman authorities dealt with the Goths in a deceitful and manipulative manner, eventually provoking a military confrontation.

Rome itself was sacked in AD 410, the first time in centuries that the city itself was invaded. Fearing this, in 404 the imperial authorities had moved the official capital of the Western Empire to Ravenna, a secluded and heavily fortified city along the Adriatic coast. The Visigoths under King Alaric had already begun chipping away at Rome's home territory in 401, and they reached Rome in 410. The Visigoths destroyed much of the city, carried away its wealth, and killed or abused most of the city's residents, all while the emperor and his court hid safely in their new retreat. Only Alaric's death soon afterwards prevented further destruction.

The first sack of Rome was a worldwide sensation. Alaric's victory emboldened other barbarian tribes by showing Rome's new vulnerability. Over the next thirty years, Germanic tribes conquered large parts of the Western Empire and set up their own kingdoms, with the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Huns, Vandals, Suevi, and Franks all taking a share. The Picts and Scots began to overrun Roman Britain, but themselves were then pushed back by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.

Within the empire, the disaster called into question everything in which the Romans had put their security. In particular, there was widespread sentiment either that God had let them down (among Christians) or that the old gods were having their revenge (amongst non-Christians). Old divisions re-opened, and recriminations were widespread.

In response, Augustine of Hippo wrote his famous book *The City Of God*. Though the book was overtly written to defend the viewpoint of church and imperial leaders, it was based on the sound premise that God's agenda does not always revolve around the things that believers desire in this world. Although wordy and sometimes superficial, *The City Of God* offered at least some spiritual understanding for distressed Christians during Rome's last few troubled decades.

By AD 430, large portions of the Western Empire were gone, but the worst was just beginning. In 433 the Huns, a previously minor tribe, made Attila their new leader. Attila's extreme brutality and cruelty terrified Roman leaders to the point of inactivity. As the Huns slaughtered their way towards the gates of Rome, church and imperial leaders retired safely to Chalcedon in 451 to indulge in a lengthy series of arcane debates about the nature of the "Trinity".

The Huns reached the gates of Rome in 452 but did not take the city. Unbeknownst to the Romans, Attila's army was now ravaged with disease and hunger (senseless destruction is unhealthy even for the destroyer). So when Leo, the bishop of Rome, bravely entered the Hun camp telling Attila that God had used him to scourge his sinful people, begging for mercy, and offering gifts, Attila agreed to depart instead of making an attack. Attila died soon afterwards, and the incident made Leo's reputation (see more below).

But the relief was very short-lived. A different tribe, the Vandals, sacked Rome in 455, performing the usual traditions of random and frequent murder, robbery, and rape at the expense of a helpless population - this time all their 'leaders' were hidden away in the imperial court at Ravenna. This second sack essentially ended any real existence of the Western Empire, as the barbarian tribes now fought each other for the remaining Roman territory.

The Roman leaders maintained the fiction of an empire for another 20 years, as 10 more "emperors" ruled a tiny kingdom from Ravenna. In 476, the Germanic chief Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor, and formally ended the Western Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire survived for almost 1000 more years, but that is a story for another time.

Odoacer did not hold Ravenna for long, as the more powerful Ostrogoths took it from him. Ravenna's defensive capabilities were so strong that the Ostrogoths besieged it for three years before it finally fell.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Ancient Rome is often compared with the USA - are there any valid aspects to these comparisons? What general lessons could we learn from Rome's history and fall? What spiritual lessons should we learn?

historical perspective of transformation of church

No one except God knows when he might have "taken away the candlestick" from the early church. And of course, different congregations in diverse areas - not to mention different individual believers - often followed different paths. But, oversimplifying just a little, there are some historical mileposts at which we can take stock of the state of the ancient church of Christ.

Before Constantine (AD 312), the church was troubled but almost surely faithful, if only because it made little sense to be a Christian unless one truly believed the gospel. Authoritarian leaders and an increasingly rigid hierarchy were the biggest problems, but even the more authoritarian leaders seem to have acted on what they believed - rightly or wrongly - to be spiritual motives. There were now many variant practices of conversion, but it was still generally understood that repentance and baptism were a response to God, not to the church's requirements.

The Council of Nicaea (325) began a permanent transformation, laying the foundations of denominationalism (establishing the church as an institution with its own requirements and agendas). The abrupt end of persecution was good in itself, but it was replaced by new, artificial motivations to become a Christian. The use of secular power to enforce church doctrines, initially to minimize division, soon led to all questions of doctrine or practice being decided by

the politically powerful. Individual believers were actively discouraged from studying Scripture or pondering spiritual truths on their own, and conformity soon began to be enforced.

In Augustine's era (early 5th century), the Pelagian controversy (AD 400, a heated and high-risk debate over "original sin") and the varying responses to the first sack of Rome in 410 show us that there were some new doubts as to where the church was headed. Since Nicaea, it was assumed that the church would provide a successful and prosperous life in return for the outward obedience required by its leaders. The church and imperial leaders still had no doubts about the validity of their methods and assumptions, but others were beginning to ask questions.

□The doctrine of "original sin" essentially states that every human being is guilty of sin from birth, because we all inherit the sins of our ancestors (back to Adam). It had become part of approved church teaching by this time. The Pelagians correctly rejected this idea, but they took free will to an equally wrong extreme - they believed that it was possible to live a morally perfect life without grace or divine help of any kind.

By this time, orthodoxy was entrenched, and the church emphasized conformity in belief and ritual. There was as yet no one supreme authority, as a handful of powerful bishops still competed for supremacy. It is interesting to note that the mainline church had by now completely ceased any mission or evangelistic work (unless you count the government's attempts to convert unbelievers by threats or force.) Only outcast groups and false teachers such as the Arians (see Week Nine) were interested in taking the gospel outside Rome's borders.

Further change is obvious by the time of Leo I, bishop of Rome from 440-461, and the first true Pope. Leo used his famous confrontation with Attila, his own undeniable personal strengths, and the widespread fear and insecurity to ask for and receive absolute authority over the Western church. Leo used his enormous power and popularity to enforce a rigid orthodoxy, showing no tolerance for believers who would not accept and practice the letter of the church's teaching. Throughout Europe, the church was now recognizable as the established institution of the Middle Ages. Only in the East (see below) and parts of Africa did the church not conform to Leo's will.

Leo came on the scene during an awful time. Other visible 'leaders' were either brutish thugs or laughable frauds; and Leo had some fine qualities - intelligent, engaging, not tempted by money or material things (but a lover of power for power's sake), and willing to take personal risks. In a happier time, he may have been a different and less authoritarian leader. And he did perhaps provide others with a kind of security in a terrifying world. During his time the church completed its metamorphosis into the medieval monolith, but perhaps this was always inevitable.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What underlying factors may have affected the church's transformation into something so different? How much of the change might have been inevitable? How much of the change would an individual believer have noticed at the time? What can we learn from the changes in the ancient church?

□□e □□urc□At □□e □□innin□□f □□e Middle Ages

By the time that Rome fell, the early church had also become something completely different from what we see in the New Testament. Throughout the Middle Ages, there would be two powerful established churches, one in the West and one in the East. □et there were, and always have been, believers who sought a church that would return to its simple New Testament roots.

By AD 500, the era of the early church was over, and the world of ancient times was gone. The early Middle Ages are often called the "Dark Ages", because the world in general took a big step backwards in terms of security, learning, and quality of life. Huge areas where Rome's rule or

influence had kept peace for centuries were now overtaken by chaos; and large parts of the world were affected either directly or indirectly□ It would take centuries before science and technology returned to the level practiced by the Romans.

□There are many exceptions, of course. One example is North and South America - little is known (or will ever be known) about their history at this time, but they were still hardly affected by events in Europe. China is a different example. China already had a long-standing civilization that was little affected by Rome's fall - unfortunately, China's long and interesting history is outside the scope of our study.

In the West (Europe and North Africa), the leaders of the church were the only remnants of the familiar Roman world, and consequently they inherited a powerful sense of loyalty and moral authority. In the years from Leo I to Gregory I (590-604), the institution of the papacy grew in power and prestige, and under Gregory the Western or Roman Catholic Church was ready to become the world's most powerful and influential institution for centuries of medieval history.

In the East (what we would call western Asia), church leaders still had to share power with the strong "Christian" political leaders in Constantinople. This difference, along with long-standing distinctions in doctrine and practice between Asian and European churches, led to the Eastern or Eastern Orthodox Church taking its own distinctive path through the Middle Ages.

The choices of these names is interesting and revealing. The Western church called itself "Catholic", meaning "universal", insisting that as the only true church it must be correct in all its teachings and practices. The Eastern church called itself "Orthodox", meaning "correct", and insisted that because it was the church that did things correctly it must also be the only true church. Both churches had similar power structures and had by this time adopted many practices different from New Testament examples; and for centuries they carried on a heated rivalry.

Remnants of the New Testament church (or independent churches) were always present. As the Western Empire collapsed, the bishops of Rome found it impractical to retain authority over the more remote areas of the empire. In distant areas such as Britain and Africa, the remnants of the church became highly independent - some returned to simple New Testament practice, while others pursued even more wildly divergent agendas. In some cases it would be many years before one of the established churches re-established authority in these areas.

Even where the established churches assumed firm control, some individuals and groups called for a return to the earlier church. Some of these attempts are well-known to history, and we shall study them this fall; others did not succeed in leaving any historical traces. But they all remind us that God always has a remnant of believers who seek him, not an institution, and who live by the grace of the cross, not the rules and rituals of religious authorities.

In itself, the concept of restoring the New Testament church of Christ is as familiar to us as it is to history. But what does it mean□ Those who have this desire have taken many different paths.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How do the established medieval churches reflect their circumstances and times□ How can we learn from this□ What might we be able to learn from studying the early efforts to restore some of the aspects of the New Testament church□ What are some specific things that these groups may have wanted to change□

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, August 2012*
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