

History of Christian Movements and Theology



1. The Apostolic Period

Key Dates

30	Death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ Day of Pentecost
33	Conversion of Saul of Tarsus
44	Death of Herod Agrippa
47, 48	Paul's First Missionary Journey
49	Council of Jerusalem
49-52	Paul's second missionary journey
51	Jewish persecution of Christians in Rome becomes so disruptive that the Jews are expelled from the city
52-56	Paul's third missionary journey
57	Paul's arrest in Jerusalem
57-59	Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea
60-62	Paul under house arrest in Rome
62-64	Paul at liberty again
64	Fire of Rome. Emperor Nero blames the fire on the Christians. He persecutes the church ruthlessly, and uses Christians as candles to light his garden. It is likely that both Peter and Paul were executed during this persecution
65	Death of Paul
68	End of Nero's reign (he committed suicide and was succeeded by four Caesars in one year, with Vespasian taking over in 69AD)
70	Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus (became Emperor in 79AD, when his father Vespasian died); Josephus records the events in detail in <i>The Wars of the Jews</i> ; historians claim more than a million died in the siege and 97,000 were taken away captive
81-96	Reign of Domitian. As Emperor, he persecuted both Jews and Christians; he demanded to be worshipped as "Lord and God"; those who denied his deity were persecuted; his reign degenerated until he was assassinated in 96AD
96	Death of Clement of Rome. He wrote a number of influential epistles to Corinth
98	Trajan becomes Emperor. Trajan eventually instituted a policy toward Christians that stayed in effect until the time of Aurelius. His policy was not to seek Christians out, but if they were brought before the authorities they were to be punished, usually executed, for being Christians
100	Death of the Apostle John
108	Ignatius led to Rome and martyred

These dates are approximate. They are difficult to ascertain precisely, however most historians agree on a range of only one or two years. Note that the birth of Jesus was est. 3-4 BC.

Overview

The Apostolic Period started with the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. It continued through the Day of Pentecost (sometimes called "The Birthday of the Church), establishment of the church community in Jerusalem, the first wave of directed persecution, Christian witness in Samaria, Antioch and other parts of the ancient world. Many of the events of this period were recorded by Luke and published in a letter to a friend, that is known to us as *The Acts of the Apostles* (some prefer the title *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*):

History of Christian Movements and Theology



“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” (Acts 1:1, 2).

The launch of the church occurred at a critical time:

- much of the known world was subject to a single empire, which meant that communications were more viable than during any previous period in history
- a more or less united cultural and legal framework, the so-called “pax Romana” (“Roman peace”) extended across much of the known world from Italy to India
- Greek and Latin unified millions traditionally divided by common, written languages (making mission easier to accomplish)
- Gentile “God fearers” (who lived by Jewish standards but were not circumcised) influenced non-Jewish communities
- international trade flourished and travel was easier than ever before (note the range of cultures described in connection with the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2).

Some first century churches were strictly Jewish, in both composition and praxis, eg the early church leaders in Jerusalem, led by James.

While models for church life in our contemporary world often cite the first chapters of Acts, this can be misleading. Christian communities in the (predominantly Gentile) Empire did not necessarily reflect what church life in Jerusalem looked like structurally or in terms of worship practices. It is important to read and interpret the New Testament contextually.

Acts and the New Testament

Acts depicts events in the life of the early church, the extension of the message to the Gentiles, the intersection between Christianity and the Hellenic/Roman world. It shows us some of the early cultural clashes between the followers of Christ and the other religions of the day (eg Acts 19:27). It points to growing opposition to Christianity, that would lead to widespread, officially sanctioned/motivated persecution. Acts is a record of a tiny slice of Christian mission.

The rest of the New Testament is a collection of letters from Paul, Peter, James, John and others, that address a range of matters concerning faith, doctrine, church life and the future state of the church and the world.

The Apostolic period is so called because of the impact of the Apostles on the establishment and spread of the early church, accelerated in part by persecution of Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). It covers the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It extends slightly beyond the lives of the key personalities of Acts.

Key personalities

- Jesus Christ
- Peter
- James
- John
- Stephen
- Phillip

History of Christian Movements and Theology



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- Saul/Paul and his Jewish/Gentile friends/converts
 - Ignatius (not mentioned in the New Testament, but a contemporary)

Issues

- the spread of Christianity, the message of the suffering/resurrection and ongoing ministry of the Messiah/suffering servant/Son of God
- the impact of the message on Jewish society
- the reach of the Gospel to the Gentiles (non-Jews), starting with the household of Cornelius - this was consistent with God's call to Abraham (Genesis 18:18 and Galatians 3:8, 9) and the last recorded commandment of Jesus (the so-called Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20)
- attempts by Judaisers to retain Christianity as a branch of Judaism
- clashes between Christianity and Hellenic culture and Roman provincial governments
- Gnostic belief and tradition
- the impulse and impact of global mission
- theological matters in individual, diverse church communities/localities
- the humanity/deity of Jesus Christ (this debate continued over several centuries)
- persecution - the Roman historian and senator Tacitus (56-117) called Christianity a "most mischievous superstition"; he accused Christians of all sorts of "abominations" and claimed that they were "put to death as enemies of mankind"
- Apostolic authority and succession; the doctrine of apostolic succession is predicated on the belief that the Apostles passed on their authority to successors. The Roman Catholic Church regards Peter as the leader of the apostles, and that his successors carry the greatest authority in Christendom and the representatives (vicars) of Christ. They believe Peter became the first bishop of Rome, and that Roman bishops who followed him were accepted by the early church as God's authority on earth. Nowhere in the Bible is any of the apostles recorded as passing on their authority. The Biblical teaching is that ministries in the church come from the purpose of Christ alone (Ephesians 4:11-16)

The Council of Jerusalem

The first church was located within the Jewish faith. Jesus was a Jew. Almost all of the first Christians were Jews, who read the Torah (the Law), observed Jewish holy days, went to the temple or synagogue, and celebrated Jesus as the Christ (Hebrew: Messiah). Peter was a strong observer of the Law. It seems he never really broke away from this tradition in the way Paul and many of his friends did. Paul advocated freedom from the Law for as a way of salvation (Romans 8:3). The church at Antioch sent Paul to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the movement and settle the issue once and for all. It is clear from the New Testament that Peter and Paul saw their primary mission calls being to evangelize Jews and Gentiles respectively (Galatians 2:7-10).

At the Council, Paul and Barnabas described what God had done through their missionary work among the Gentiles. Peter described his encounter with Cornelius. Paul persuaded the leaders of the Jerusalem church to exempt Gentile Christians from most Jewish commandments/traditions. Jesus' brother James concluded, on behalf of the leadership (using Old Testament Scripture to do so), that the law was unable to save and that Gentile Christians should not be bound by Jewish traditions; they did not need to be circumcised (in the Abrahamic tradition) or adhere strictly to the Law of Moses in order to become Christians. The only caveat was that (apart from the foundational requirement of faith in Jesus Christ) Gentile believers were to "abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:29).

History of Christian Movements and Theology



Mission

Within just 20 years of the birth of the church, its influence was being felt across much of the empire. In part this was made possible by the (predominantly Jewish) initial wave of Christian leadership aiming first to reach the Jewish diaspora with a Messianic message with which it would have been broadly familiar; this gave them unparalleled entrees to communities that might otherwise have been closed due to cultural differences. It was not long before the number of Gentile Christians outnumbered Jewish Christians. Antioch (an important trading hub between east and west) became the centre of Christianity outside of Jerusalem. It was at Antioch that followers of Jesus Christ were first called Christians.

The fall of Jerusalem in 70AD forced the remaining Christians out of the old city (many recalled Jesus' prophecy about the impending destruction of the city and left before it was too late); as they dispersed they carried the Gospel with them.

Gnosticism

This is the name given to a number of "dualistic" movements that were a threat to early Christian belief. Gnosticism combined Christian teaching with Greek philosophy. Gnostics taught that a perfect God could never have created an evil physical world, or come in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. They believed that flesh is evil, trapping a divine spark in people and that genuine salvation only comes from "knowledge" (superior enlightenment through special experiences with God that most people do not have) and ritual. Gnostics taught that salvation comes through overcoming matter, asceticism, not being contaminated by contact with the world. Jesus, on the other hand, is not ashamed to call us (physical beings) His brothers (1 Peter 2:11).

The New Testament writers taught unequivocally in the following terms:

"Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16).

Ignatius

Ignatius of Antioch is held to have been the third Bishop of Antioch and a disciple of the Apostle John. When he was an old man, he met the Emperor Trajan who was on his way to the Parthian War in 107 AD. Trajan ordered that he be taken in chains to Rome and thrown to the wild beasts for the entertainment of the people. While travelling to Rome Ignatius wrote a series of letters that have been preserved as examples early church life, and role of Christian leaders ("bishops"). He taught the importance of living in the imitation of Jesus Christ. His "Rome Epistles" describe his arrest and journey to Rome. His surviving writings stress the roles of bishops and presbyters, indicating that leadership roles (and the supremacy of particular leaders) in the church were becoming institutionalised. (See *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians*: Ignatius cites the letters of Paul in various places, but also writes that, "We should look upon the bishop even as we would upon the Lord Himself".)

According to Christian tradition Ignatius died in the Colosseum in Rome in 108 AD.

“I am writing to all the Churches and I enjoin all, that I am dying willingly for God's sake, if only you do not prevent it. I beg you, do not do me an untimely kindness. Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which are my way of reaching to God. I am God's wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ.” (letter to the Romans - while the “Epistles of Ignatius” are highly regarded by Episcopalians, for their teaching value, they have never been accepted as Scripture; some historians regard works attributed to Ignatius as forgeries).

Many Gnostics in the first century held that Jesus Christ did not have a real body; he only appeared to be human. John spoke against this heresy in his epistles 2 and 3 John. Ignatius also combatted Gnosticism (and Docetism, which also denied the coming of Christ in a human body) by teaching that Christ was God and that he had truly come in the flesh: “Jesus Christ was of the race of David, the child of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died”.

- If Jesus had not come as a human He would not have been able to be our representative, standing in our place, facing temptation, suffering, separation from God because of the weight of sin; we could never hope to become like Him, following the example of His life on earth. The Epistle to the Hebrews has a lot to say about the implications of the incarnation.

Themes of the New Testament

ROMANS (“The Gospel According to Paul”)

Writing to Christians at Rome, whom he hoped to visit, Paul presents his understanding of the Christian faith: the universality of sin; the powerlessness of the law as a way of salvation; the nature of God's saving grace in Christ, and its application in life.

I CORINTHIANS

Addresses doctrinal and ethical problems that were disturbing the Corinthian church. Writing from Ephesus Paul addresses the significance of the new life in Christ, demonstrated in Christian fellowship. He advises them about the use of spiritual gifts, Christian love, and the implications of the Resurrection.

II CORINTHIANS

Often called “the hard letter”, it recounts the difficulties and hardships Paul has endured in the service of Christ and deals with some difficult character issues in the church. (It is clear a third epistle was written by Paul to the Corinthians, but it has been lost.)

GALATIANS

Paul's great letter on Christian freedom, versus Judaisers who insisted that Gentiles needed to observe the Law in order to be saved. The overall emphasis is similar to Romans. The doctrinal section is followed by instructions in practical Christian living section.

EPHESIANS

One of Paul's four "Imprisonment Letters" - Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon being the others. This letter is generally believed to have been a circular discussing the Christian's position in Christ, the Church as the body of Christ, its relationship to God, and practical outworking of the Gospel and Christian faith.

PHILIPPIANS

A letter of "joy". Paul expresses his gratitude for the Philippians' love and material help. He declares the primacy of Christ, above all things. The epistle presents the humility of Jesus. It is also practical, cf Paul's advice to Euodia and Syntyche.

COLOSSIANS

Known for its doctrine. Paul insists upon the deity and Lordship of Christ. Addresses the impact of non-Christian philosophies, including Gnosticism.

I & II THESSALONIANS

Paul's answers to some basic challenges in the church at Thessalonica. The main themes are the last days and the return of Christ, but they letters contains pithy remarks on successful Christian living.

I & II TIMOTHY

Along with Titus, these two personal letters (to Timothy) are known as Paul's "pastoral epistles", providing teaching on Christian leadership (standards, appointments, roles, ministry challenges and advice). The letters discuss the duties and qualifications of church officers, the inspiration of the Bible, the treatment of widows and others in the church, interpersonal relationships between Christians and the expectation of a future reward in Christ.

TITUS

A letter from Paul to a young Christian leader minister whom he had left in Crete to establish the church and its leadership structure. A practical epistle, it discusses everyday problems faced by leaders in the Christian community.

PHILEMON

Addressed to Philemon, a friend of Paul. Paul asks Philemon, the master of Onesimus, a runaway slave whom he has led to Christ in Rome, to receive him back as a brother. The epistle shows a practical demonstration of brotherhood in Christ that challenged many Roman traditions, biases and the institution of slavery.

HEBREWS

Authorship uncertain. Written to encourage Christians under pressure not to backslide and revert to the law for salvation. Draws heavily on typology in the Old Testament to portray Jesus, who performed the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Defines and exemplifies faith and the finality of the person and work of Christ.

JAMES

Usually identified with James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. Addressed to the "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad", it is the most Jewish epistle in the New Testament. Deals with Christian living and ethics. James insists that works, not words alone, are the true evidence of faith in Christ.

I PETER

Written by Peter. Reflects a time of suffering and trial facing the church everywhere, in the context of widespread persecution of the Christians by the Romans, especially under Nero. Emphasis a life of purity, godly living, faithfulness to Christ.

II PETER

A "reminder" of the truth of the Gospel, against the attacks of false teachers. A call to remain faithful to Him even in times of persecution. God will keep His promises. Christians should be pure as they await the return of Christ.

JOHN I, II and III

Written around 90-95 AD. Focus on the love of God, the certainty of eternal life and warnings against false teaching.

JUDE

A warning against false teaching and backsliding. Also a warning against antinomianism, teachers who used the freedom and grace of the Gospel as licences to sin.

REVELATION

Written by the Apostle John who had been exiled to the Greek island of Patmos because of his faith. Addressed to seven specific churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey). Revelation warns against spiritual complacency and urges believers to remain true to Christ despite false teaching or persecution. Full of symbolism. Not easy to understand (and subject of debate for centuries), but the central message is Christ and His ultimate victories.

What Happened to the Apostles and Other Leaders?

The only apostle whose death is recorded in the New Testament is James (Acts 12:2), whom King Herod "put to death with the sword," (probably beheaded).

History of Christian Movements and Theology



Details of the deaths of most (not all) of the other apostles are subject of church traditions, with little or no contestable evidence:

- Peter - crucified upside-down in Rome in fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy (John 21:18) - there is no conclusive evidence that Peter was ever in Rome
- Matthew - martyred in Ethiopia, beheaded with a sword
- John - boiled in a vat of oil during a wave of persecution; he was saved from death by a miracle, subsequently sentenced to the prison island of Patmos, where he had a vision/s and wrote Revelation; he was later freed and returned to lead a Christian community in Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, where he eventually died peacefully as an old man
- James, the brother of Jesus (not officially an apostle) - thrown from the southeast pinnacle of the temple, then beaten to death with a club
- Mark - died in Alexandria, Egypt after being dragged by horses through the streets
- Bartholomew (Nathanael) - a missionary to Asia; martyred in Armenia, by being flayed to death by a whip
- Andrew - crucified on an x-shaped cross in Greece
- Jude - killed with arrows when he refused to renounce his faith in Christ
- Thomas - stabbed with a spear in India during a missionary trip to establish the church there (Thomasine Christianity is still widespread in southern India)
- Matthias -stoned, then beheaded
- Paul - tortured and then beheaded by Nero in Rome in A.D. 67
- Phillip - crucified

Results of the Apostolic Period

“These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here” (Acts 17:6 - Paul and his companions in Thessalonica).

Unlike Judaism, which was exclusive, Christianity was proclaimed as the message of God for salvation to the entire world. By the end of the first century, the Gospel had spread a long way from Jerusalem. It withstood persecution and false teaching and survived (triumphed) the deaths of the first wave of leaders. It spread to Mesopotamia and Parthia, Gaul and Spain, across the north of Africa, Asia Minor, and southern Europe.

Christianity impacted the entire world. It brought together races of people who had no traditional ties. It brought rulers, merchants, slaves, men and women into relationship as never before. The message was:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28).

“The Christians are not separated from other men by earthly abode, by language, or by customs. They dwell nowhere in cities by themselves; they do not use a different language, or affect a singular mode of life. They dwell in the cities of the Greeks, and of the barbarians, each as his lot has been cast; and while they conform to the usages of the country, in respect to dress, food, and other things pertaining to the outward life, they yet show a peculiarity of conduct wonderful and striking to all. They obey the existing laws, and conquer the laws by their own living.” (Letter to Dignonet, early 2nd century; cited in “General History of the Christian Religion and Church,” Dr Augustus Neander (translation by Joseph Torrey), Vol. 1, sec. 1, p. 69. Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1854.)

History of Christian Movements and Theology

The early Christian community proclaimed God's command to live blameless lives, in preparation for the return of Christ. The Christian message challenged other religions and outlasted them. It proclaimed a risen Saviour and an eternal hope, for all people. This would appeal to men and women in every age, but it would also lead to enduring persecution. Only the Holy Spirit could give men and women the power to proclaim the message and to live it.

Conclusion

The underlying focus of activity and theology during the Apostolic Period was the personal relationship the Apostles and other leaders of the Christian community had with Jesus Christ, during his earthly ministry (many of them had been with Him from the outset), Passion and resurrection life. Many of them were in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost and were foundational to His mission of reaching out to the surrounding world, establishing and building His church. Those who did not know Jesus personally knew those who did. However, by the beginning of the second century Jesus had not returned, all of the Apostles had passed on and the baton had been transferred to a new generation who relied instead on word of mouth and tradition. The various histories of the life of Jesus (the Gospels and Acts) and letters written by his followers to new Christians and church communities (Romans to Revelation) had not yet been assembled into what we now take for granted as the New Testament. As we move from the Apostolic Period to future generations we pass an important watershed. Would the Christian church remain faithful to the Gospel? Would the mission of world evangelism and discipleship continue, cease or be changed?

Additional Reading

Barclay, W - *The Mind of St Paul; The Master's Men*

Renwick, AM, *The Story of the Church*

A Lion Handbook, 1990, *The History of Christianity*, Lion

Miller, A, *Miller's Church History: From the First to the Twentieth Century*



The Fall of Jerusalem



Josephus