



Sabbath Service
Saturday, April 14, 2007
**“What Did the Early Church Believe and
Preach After Jesus’ Death?”**



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(If you are meeting in a small group, select a leader for the day. The leader reads the text printed in regular face. The rest of the group reads the text printed in bold face and wherever it states "In Unison." If you are worshipping as a single individual, read all the parts.)

CALL TO WORSHIP

Worthy is the One who calls us now to worship.

Blessed is His Son who rose from death's strong bonds.

Glory be to God, Glory to God on high.

Worthy is our God, who lives within our lives.

Blessed is the One whose Spirit gives us strength.

And glory to the Lamb, the Risen Christ of life!

INVITATION *(In Unison)*

God of the dance and of our lives, we come to you this day, inviting you to lead our dance. Let your wisdom guide our steps, your hope fill our songs. Let your joy fill our days, the resurrection of your Son restore our lives. Establish us as your people, strong and sure in our steps. Inspire us for works of love, filled with joy and laughter. In thanks and praise, we pray in the name of your righteous Son. Amen.

OPENING HYMN #160

"To God Be The Glory"

Fanny J. Crosby, 1820-1915

William H. Doane, 1832-1915

To God be the glory, great things He has done;
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life gate that all may go in.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory, great things He has done.

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice!

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory, great things He has done.

Great things He has taught us, great things He has done,
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
But purer, and higher, and greater will be
Our wonder, our victory, when Jesus we see.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory, great things He has done.

OPENING PRAYER *(In Unison)*

Amazing God, speak to us in clarity and power, as you once descended and spoke with our ancestors of old. Clear the cloudiness of our vision, and open our ears to receive your Word. As we receive your Spirit, grant us courage to answer 'Yes!' and send us forth to serve the world and one another. In the name of Jesus the Christ, Amen.

MOMENTS OF SILENCE

PERSONAL PRAYER *(In Silence)*

HYMN #203

"I Will Sing to the Eternal"

Exodus 15
Dwight Armstrong

I will sing to the Eternal; He has triumphed gloriously!
He has stretched out His right hand and hurled the foe into the sea!
O Eternal, You are my strength, my song, my great salvation!
O Eternal, You are my God and I will glorify your Name.

"I will chase them and overtake them, catch them and divide the spoil;"
Said the foe, "My hand will destroy them," but the foe drowned in the sea!
O Eternal, at Your blast the waters gathered, depths congealed!
O Eternal, who can be like You, glorious in holiness?

People heard and nations trembled; dread and terror on them fell;
Chiefs of Edom all were amazed, and they all trembled in their fear!
Pharaoh's horsemen and his chariots sank into the churning sea!
O Eternal, You led Your people over dry land through the sea.

PRESENTATIONS BEFORE GOD *(Not monetary offerings)*

Time for any in attendance to offer a musical or instrumental piece, a reading, comments, or anything they would like to present before God.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Time for groups to make any necessary announcements relating to their own group.

COLLECT *(Preparing for the lesson. In Unison)*

God of our lives, to whom our stories are as important as those of persons who have gone before us, help us to learn from their experiences and to value our own. Help us to understand that your Word is one of communion and not of domination, of liberation to new life, and not of oppression in old roles. Help us to see the message in the lesson today and take from it exactly what you want us to receive. We thank you that in Christ you have given us this good news of hope and release from bondage and despair. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who is our freedom. Amen.

THE LESSON

(Use the lesson provided here, or conduct a study of your own selection.)

What did the early church *Believe and Preach* after Jesus' death?

(Part 1)

Suppose you could invite one of the original twelve apostles to a modern-day church service. Can you imagine what it would be like to entertain Peter in one of these worship services? *How do you think he would react to what he saw?*

Would this apostle approve of that denomination's practices?

Or is it just possible that he would say that some of their most cherished beliefs were in error? How would you feel if he stood up and loudly proclaimed that **your** church was a promoter of heresy? What if he said that your religious practices were *totally contrary* to those of the primitive church formed immediately after the death of Jesus Christ?

Is this a startling thought? Of course it is. Yet if any of the very men who served Jesus during His earthly ministry could witness the teachings of Christianity today, they would express almost total disagreement with its doctrines and beliefs! And this goes for many of the Churches of God also.

How has this all come about? Unfortunately, for centuries the world had little access to historical information on the early church. Most Christian churches had to rely on the *teachings of men* who lived at least a century after Christ's death. These men became known as the "church fathers," whose writings wielded an enormous influence on Christian belief. They undermined the influence and authority of the true founders of Christianity such as James, Peter, and John. The

character of the church from the second century down to modern times was set by Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, and many other uninspired men.

Fortunately, the past four decades have seen a plethora of **new** information on what the primitive church was really like. It is amazing what scholars and historians have found!

This new information coupled with what is in the pages of your Bible clearly shows that there is a great difference between the church led by the original apostles and the modern “Christian” world. Read for yourself how a great apostasy took place and how it affects your life, your beliefs, and even your salvation!

In the first part of this two-part series [both parts included here], we will trace the development of early Christianity as recorded by history. Prepare for some shocks along the way. You are about to discover that the Christian legacy left by Jesus the Messiah is definitely not the Christianity of today!

The Apostolic Church

We should begin our search by noting that historians and theologians alike agree that primitive Christianity began as a sect within Judaism. At the time, however, Judaism itself did not consist of a uniform set of beliefs. Rather, there were several major religious parties such as the Sadducees and the Pharisees, both mentioned in the New Testament, and the Essenes, whose teachings were later unearthed by the Qumran discoveries. These three groups existed simultaneously in Palestine. Although the Sadducees were the descendants of the priests and controlled the Temple, the Pharisees had the greatest influence among the Jewish people.

Josephus describes how the Pharisees and the Sadducees debated the concepts of fate, free will, and other issues over which they were at odds. Doctrinal differences were the order of the day in ancient Palestine.

In addition, the Jews living in other parts of the Roman Empire were influenced by Gnostic philosophies. Gnostic ideas were introduced in the Mediterranean lands in the first century B.C. Because of the Gnostic appeal to reason and secret knowledge, Hellenistic Jews felt they could accept these new ideas without being disloyal to the law of Moses. Thus, a variety of religious ideas and doctrines was freely circulating within Judaism.

When Christ began His ministry, He had to combat many of these false teachings. As pointed out by Charles Guignebert, a well-known Roman Catholic scholar, Jesus emphasized loyalty to God and His law and clarified how that loyalty was to be expressed. But He did **not** overthrow the law given at Mount Sinai.

In Guignebert’s words,

“He did not come bearing a new religion, nor even a new rite ...Nor did he aim at changing either its creed or its Law or its worship. The central point of His teaching was the Messianic idea, which was common property to nearly all his compatriots as much as to him, and only his conception of it was his own” (*Ancient Medieval and Modern Christianity*, p. 44).

Jesus taught the Samaritan woman that “**salvation is of the Jews.**” He dispatched His disciples to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He boldly proclaimed that He came to magnify the Law. Since the religious parties could not accuse Him of breaking the higher laws of God, they focused on his rejection of the traditions of the elders and his claims of being the Son of God. They had to manufacture evidence before they could condemn Him to death.

After Christ’s resurrection, His disciples continued to remain within the fold of Judaism. The small community of believers was later called a sect by the Jews (Acts 24:5, 28:22), but it was still purely Jewish. Although their teachings were highly unpopular, day after day Christians went to the Temple to worship and to preach the Gospel (Acts 2:46-47, 3:1, 5:20).

The Jews in power seem to have tolerated their teachings until Christians began to attract large numbers of converts, including priests. The Temple officers, who were Sadducees, wanted to kill the apostles not for their abrogation of Judaism but because they were stirring people up over the death of Christ.

According to Hans Conzelmann,

“The first Christians are Jews without exception. For them this is not simply a fact, but a part of their conscious conviction. For them their faith is not a new religion which leads them away from the Jewish religion” (*History of Primitive Christianity*, p. 37).

Rather, the Christians are both ethnic and spiritual Jews. Jesus is the Messiah, and the church is the true Israel.

“Since the Christians still know themselves to be Jews, they appear to have continued to participate in the Jewish worship in the temple and the synagogue. But this participation now has acquired a new sense. It documents the fact that the Christians hold to their membership in the chosen people and confess the God of Israel” (Conzelmann, p. 49).

The early Christians did not reject Judaism. They continued as its faithful supporters despite persecution from other Jews.

Some of the early followers of Jesus also lived outside of Palestine. The first conversions after the resurrection included Jews who were from far-flung areas of the Roman Empire (Acts 2). Christian communities of Greek-speaking Jews were soon established.

What did these Jewish Christians believe? *Did they immediately begin to worship on Sunday, the supposed day of Jesus' resurrection, in place of the seventh day Sabbath?*

Our only contemporaneous account is the book of Acts, which presents church history in barest outline form. Max B. Turner discusses several relevant points on this question in his essay in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*.

According to Turner, eight accounts of events that happened on the Sabbath can be found in Acts, but there is only one mention of an event that happened on Sunday. Acts describes Christian teachings, fellowship, temple worship, and growth of the Church, **but nowhere is there evidence that the apostles instituted Sunday as the Christian day of worship.** This is a rather startling admission from a scholar who supports Sunday as the Christian day of rest!

Christ's message was soon taken outside the realm of Jewish believers. After it was revealed to Peter that the Gentiles were to receive the Gospel, Peter, Paul, and other apostles began to preach the message to people who were not of Israelite descent. Note, however, that Paul and Barnabas typically gained Gentile converts who were already observing the Sabbath (Acts 14:1, 17:1-4).

A new controversy then arose. Were the Gentiles to enter the new community of Israel through the ancient rite of circumcision? Were they to practice ritual observances?

A council in Jerusalem decided the matter. The Gentiles were to abstain from meats sacrificed to idols, from fornication, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. These were the four proscriptions found in Leviticus 17-18 which had applied to non-Jews living in Israel. Physical circumcision was not a requirement for those who wished to enter spiritual Israel, the Church.

The judgment of the apostles is stated in Acts 15:21, then repeated in verse 29 and Acts 21:25. These decrees were intended to smooth relations between Christian Jews and Gentiles—to make it possible for a mixed community of believers to remain in harmony.

The account in Acts shows that Paul and the Jerusalem apostles were in agreement over the Gentile mission. Later, James and the elders in Jerusalem asked Paul to take charge of four men who were going through purification rites to complete vows. Their purpose in doing so was to stop rumors that Paul disbelieved the law (Acts 21:21-26). James and the elders are presented in Acts as a mediating group between Jews who were zealous of the law and Gentile believers.

With respect to Paul's doctrines, an important point needs to be mentioned. As a result of ecumenism and efforts to free the New Testament of a perceived anti-Semitic bias, scholars have modified their view of Paul's teachings on the law over the past 30 years.

Now they speculate that Paul objected to Gentiles having to obey the law but not to Christian Jews subjecting themselves to rituals. The Paul of Acts "never polemicizes against the law and often observes the requirements of Jewish ritual, including circumcision" (Shave J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 167).

The End of the Apostolic Age

By this time, the apostolic age was rapidly drawing to a close. Historical events would shatter the mother church at Jerusalem, and Christianity would begin to take on a new character. By 70 A.D., James (the brother of Jesus), Peter, and Paul would all be dead. Jerusalem would be in total ruins. As the only living apostle, John was to be found in exile far from Palestine.

Following the death of James, Simon, who was a cousin of Jesus, had been unanimously chosen to be James' successor. Then, as the destruction of Jerusalem loomed frighteningly near, the entire Church fled to the nearby town of Pella.

After the Roman army razed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Christians returned to help rebuild the city. Two church historians, Eusebius and Epiphanius, tell us that the Church there remained under the control of converted Jews. The Church continued to exist peacefully in Jerusalem until the time of emperor Hadrian, with the kinsmen of Jesus playing an important role in it.

During the second Jewish war in 135 A.D., however, Jewish Christians were persecuted by the leader of the Jewish revolt. All racial Jews were subsequently expelled from Jerusalem by the Roman government. Thereafter, the church in Jerusalem was ruled by Gentiles, and other cities began to gain prominence as centers of Christian teachings.

It was about this time that Jewish Christianity became "stamped as heretical" (Conzelman, p. 134). Although these Christians held fast to the teachings of the apostles, they were seen as retaining a narrow and false legalism.

The weakening of the mother church in Jerusalem meant that there was no longer any one to decide on questions of doctrine. There was no apostle or prophet. The issue of which church could lay claim to having a true "apostolic succession" became a very important one.

At the beginning of the second century, most of the larger churches in major cities were *autonomously* ruled by local bishops, who had replaced the council of

elders mentioned in Acts. Some of the more important bishops were from the churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3, as well as from Rome, which also had a long history of Christian fellowship. No single bishop had preeminence during the first two centuries of Christianity.

Nonetheless, the church at Rome was beginning to be held in high regard by the second century because of its supposed association with two apostles, Peter and Paul, its many converts, and its wealth.

The epistle to the Romans, written around 56 A.D., indicates a thriving primitive Christian community. Like many others, this congregation was first composed of Jews, such as Priscilla and Aquila, who had been forced by civil authorities to leave Rome (Acts 18).

The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that in 50 A.D. emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. The expulsion was due to their rioting over “the instigation of Chrestus.” Historians consider this reference as an erroneous transcription of the name of Christ. The early Church in Rome was further decimated by Nero in 64 A.D. The influence of Jewish Christians had come to an end in the chief city of the empire.

Without the spiritual leadership of Jerusalem, the change in Christian beliefs was a fairly rapid one, arising predominantly in areas outside of Palestine.

“The ritual development of Christianity advances step by step ... It began with very simple practices, all taken from Judaism: baptism, the breaking of bread, the imposition of hands, prayer and fasting. Then a meaning more and more profound and mysterious was assigned to them. They were amplified, and gestures familiar to the pagans added ... It is sometimes very difficult to tell exactly from which pagan rite a particular Christian rite is derived, but it remains certain that the spirit of pagan ritualism became by degrees impressed upon Christianity, to such an extent that at last the whole of it might be found distributed through its ceremonies” (Guignebert, p. 121).

For example, around 110 A.D. Gnostic followers of Basileides began to celebrate a festival commemorating Christ’s baptism on January 6 or 10. This festival was later worked into the Christian festal calendar as Epiphany, despite the fact that it was also the date of a pagan feast celebrating the birth and growth of light.

In the early second century vague references to observing the “Lord’s Day”—Sunday—began to appear. Then the voices for Sunday worship grew more strident. Ignatius of Asia Minor and Barnabas of Alexandria both condemned Sabbath-keeping. Although considered Gnostic heresy, Marcion’s anti-Sabbath views were widely promulgated throughout the churches. By 150, Justin Martyr clearly indicated that the day of the sun was the day of rest for Christians. Sunday worship had become a widely accepted practice among these people who professed to follow Christ.

Paganism began to be grafted into every aspect of Christian life. In Roman cemeteries, for instance, the figure of a young man carrying a sheep on his shoulder was a common theme of funerary art. A much later Christian tradition identified this figure as Christ the Good Shepherd (Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, p. 81). Another typical portrayal of Christ as the Shepherd was obviously modeled on a statue of Mercury carrying a goat. The earliest known mosaic of our Lord (240 A.D.) shows him with a disk or nimbus at the back of his head. Yet this was also a common pictorial representation of the sun!

By the end of the second century the Mass had taken shape.

“Based partly on the Judaic Temple service, partly on Greek mystery rituals of purification, vicarious sacrifice, and participation through communion in the death-overcoming powers of the deity, the Mass grew slowly into a rich congeries of prayers, psalms, readings, sermon, antiphonal recitations, and, above all, that symbolic atoning sacrifice of the ‘Lamb of God’...” (Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 599).

Overcome by the society around it, the religion that was now known as Christianity threatened to fragment into scores of uninspired and misguided creeds. One writer counted 80 heresies circulating among these so-called Christians. Wave upon wave of new doctrine and heresy inundated the churches.

Montanists rushed to Roman authorities begging for persecution. The Roman proconsul Antoninus is famous for his scorn of these would-be martyrs:

“Miserable creatures! If you wish to die, are there not ropes and precipices?”

The Theodotians considered Christ only a man, while the Docetists believed He was a phantom. Other groups taught that the Christian was free to do anything he desired since grace covered all sins. It was a period of great religious confusion.

The Consolidation of Church Authority

But some of the churches launched a counteroffensive. The second and third centuries marked a time when the church became “*catholic*” (in the sense of what was universally accepted) in doctrine and solidified its power and authority. Beset by groups which claimed to represent Christ, the bishops in leading cities sought to protect their flocks by hammering out a uniform dogma.

The “catholic” church became the standard-bearer of orthodox doctrines as opposed to heretical ones. In reality, few of these doctrines were actually based on New Testament teachings. Rather, they represented a synthesis of pagan, Gnostic, and popular church beliefs of the time.

The first meeting of bishops took place in the middle of the second century. A hierarchy of churches soon developed, with Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch acquiring the most power and the councils emerging as major decision-making bodies.

The controversy over when Passover was to be celebrated is a compelling example of how doctrines became catholic. Although the book of Acts describes Christians observing annual High Days such as Pentecost and the Day of Atonement (see Acts 2:1, 27:9), the bulk of the churches which professed to be Christian had rejected nearly every Old Testament holy day. Passover was the last to be retained according to the Jewish practice.

Irenaeus wrote that the celebration of this day among Western churches was changed during the bishopric of Sixtus of Rome (between 120-135 A.D., roughly the same period when the influence of the Jerusalem church waned). Thereafter, Christianity was divided as to whether Passover should be celebrated on a Sunday in honor of Christ's supposed resurrection, or on the 14th of Nisan in honor of His death.

At this time, all referred to the day as the Pascha. It was not until centuries later that the day became known as Easter. (Note: The King James Version of Acts 12:4 incorrectly uses the word *Easter* for the Greek word "*Pascha*." Other translations render it "Passover.")

The churches of Asia Minor, particularly those mentioned in Revelation 2-3, continued to follow the New Testament observance of the 14th of Nisan. Melito, a bishop of Sardis, traveled to Rome to discuss the Passover and other topics with Anicetus, bishop of Rome. Although they did not agree, neither was willing to let a quarrel arise between them. Melito continued to follow the practice left by the apostle John, while Anicetus felt obligated to follow the practice established by the four presbyters before him.

Several more rounds of sharp dissension took place in what has become known historically as the *Quartodeciman* controversy. A new element in negotiating the dispute was interjected when the emperor Constantine made peace with Christians. He called the council of Nicea, which finally settled the questions regarding the Passover by decreeing that it was to be celebrated only on Sunday.

This edict was not well received by the Christians who kept the Passover. A group known as the Audiani made a separation in the church and were consequently banished by Constantine. In 341 Quartodecimans in general were condemned as heretics. Later laws by Theodosius I and Theodosius II subjected them to severe penalties and even capital punishment for their religious beliefs.

The final consolidation of catholic Christianity as a force in the Roman empire can actually be attributed to Constantine. Up to that time, believers had been sporadically persecuted by Roman emperors. In fact, during the second century,

practicing Christianity in any form could be a capital offense. Intense persecution was especially common in Asia Minor during the late third and early fourth centuries.

After allegedly seeing a cross in battle, Constantine abruptly ended religious persecution. For the first time, a Roman emperor recognized catholic Christianity as an official state religion. In 321 Constantine passed a law making Sunday the official day of rest in the Roman empire. He also established the celebration of Christ's birthday on December 25, traditionally the feast of the sun god.

Under Constantine's protective wing, catholic Christianity experienced a period of mass conversion of pagans. This flood of pagans had a great impact on the catholic system of worship. New customs brought over from paganism included "devotion to relics, the use of the kiss as a sign of reverence for holy objects, the practice of kneeling, the use of candles and incense, and an increased use of ceremonies patterned on those used in the imperial court" (Barrie Ruth Straus, *The Catholic Church*, p. 36).

Worship of angels, martyrs, and Mary also began to arise during the fourth century as new converts transferred to them some of the reverence they had felt for pagan deities. The converts believe that they could offer prayer to any of these personages, who would then make intercession for them. By the end of the fourth century, *the catholic believers were not the bride of Christ as they claimed to be, but a fallen woman!*

The New Sun Worshippers

The changes in the church over the first four centuries were bound by a subtle but common thread: the incorporation of the symbols and imagery of sun worship. Though Christ was never referred to as a "sun" in the New Testament, the early church writers adapted the comparison in order to appeal to pagans. Tertullian, for example, urged pagans to worship the true Light and Sun, while strongly refuting the charge that Christians were sun worshippers.

By 150 A.D. professing Christians were praying toward the east. Clement of Alexandria claimed this was done because the birth of light came from the East and because some ancient temples existed there. The Apostolic Constitutions, an early document on church customs, stated that the church building and the congregation were to face the East (2, 57, 2 and 14).

A long-time sun worshipper, Constantine saw numerous similarities between catholic Christianity and sun worship. He made every effort to accommodate the two.

Why was sun worship so intriguing and influential a concept? To understand, we need to look at a cult that enjoyed an immense popularity in the Roman empire. **Mithraism**, the worship of Mithra the god of light, was brought to the

empire by Roman soldiers. The first day of the week was held sacred to Mithra, and his followers celebrated his birth on December 25.

Around 150 A.D. Justin Martyr recognized the similarity between Christianity and Mithraism but maintained that these sun worshippers had imitated Christianity. Yet Mithraism was introduced in the Roman empire in the early part of the first century A.D., and converts to this cult spread throughout the civilized world just as quickly as did converts to Christianity. A number of the Roman emperors were followers of Mithra, with the cult of the *Sol Invictus* (the invincible sun) dominant in Rome and other parts of the empire from the second century A.D. Mithraism was a rival of Christianity, with the competition most intense during the third century.

In his condemnation of pagan sun worshippers, Tertullian described a Mithraic priesthood ruled by a “high pontiff” and made up of celibates and virgins, the partaking of consecrated bread and wine, and the climax of a ceremony ending with the ringing of a bell. He recognized the parallels between the sun cult and the Christianity of his day but refused to admit their common source.

What is historically interesting about Mithraism is that nearly every physical remnant of this religion was destroyed by Christians. After Constantine made Christianity a state religion, Mithraism was doomed. Christian mobs soon sacked and burned Mithraic temples and slew the priests. Intent on obliterating an ancient rival, church authorities turned a blind eye to the very same type of persecution that they had once endured. Believers went to great lengths to show their hatred of this cult. For example, in Rome the prefect Gracchus promised to destroy a Mithraic crypt to show his readiness for baptism.

“Nevertheless, the conceptions which Mithraism had diffused throughout the empire during a period of three centuries were not destined to perish with it ...Certain of its sacred practices continued to exist also in the ritual of Christian festivals and in popular usage” (Franz Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 206).

As historian Will Durant points out,

“Christianity was the last great creation of the pagan world” (*Caesar and Christ*, p. 595).

The alluring sights and sounds of ancient rituals were blended with Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophical thought. With its emphasis on brotherhood, probably no more appealing religion than Christianity has ever been presented to mankind. **Yet it was never established by Christ!**

As this massive apostasy from His teachings was taking place, what happened to the group labeled Jewish Christians? Part II will tell the fascinating story of how this small band of true believers survived the first four centuries. It will show how

they remained faithful despite mounting persecution from Jews, professing Christians, and Roman authorities.

(Part 2)

As startling as it may sound, the religion the world knows as Christianity was not founded by Jesus Christ! Within the span of three hundred years, this religion had become a vast organization with a clergy presiding over rites taken from pagan mysteries and Judaism. It had borrowed the best elements of Greek philosophy and had formed a dogma appealing to human reason and emotion. This religious organization had become a powerful political force in the Roman Empire. ***But it was not the Church established by Christ!***

“Contemplate the Christian Church at the beginning of the fourth century, therefore, and some difficulty will be experienced in recognizing in her the community of Apostolic times, or rather, we shall not be able to recognize it at all” (Charles Guignebert, *Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Christianity*, p. 122).

The congregations that adhere to the teachings of the apostles and their Jewish disciples are scattered and poor. They live in Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and possibly even in Rome, where they are nearly overwhelmed by the large churches filled with converts from paganism. In the first part of this series, you read how catholic Christianity rejected its Judaic heritage. Now let’s look at some of the forces that influenced this repudiation.

Judaism in the Roman Empire

Jews were widely dispersed throughout the Roman Empire in New Testament times. Because Judaism had a long history as a religion, the Romans allowed the Jews to continue their practices. Julius Caesar granted them the right to observe the Sabbath and to meet in synagogues, exemption from military service, and the freedom to follow their own laws.

Outside of Palestine, Jews were allowed to exist as independent communities of resident aliens within larger cities. They were subject to their own political structure as well as to that of the Roman Empire.

In New Testament times, probably as many as 5-7 million Jews lived in the Roman Empire, with roughly a million in Egypt, another million in Syria, and close to one million in Palestine. At least 10,000 Jews lived in Rome; Jewish colonies also existed in the large trading centers of Asia Minor. As Josephus remarked, “There is not a community in the entire world which does not have a portion of our people.”

Judaism had long been viewed favorably by pagan writers; Jews were thought to be a race of philosophers, much like the Brahmins of India.

“Throughout the Roman Empire various practices of Judaism found favor with large segments of the populace. In Rome many gentiles observed the Sabbath, the fasts, and the food laws; in Alexandria many gentiles observed the Jewish holidays; in Asia Minor many gentiles attended synagogue on the Sabbath” (Shave J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 55).

The gentiles venerating Judaism were no doubt the people whom Acts called those who “**feared God**” (Acts 13:16, 26; 16:14; 17:4, 17;18:7). They were not converts to Judaism, but they were appreciative of its doctrines. The major obstacle to their conversion was circumcision, which was looked upon as self-mutilation by Romans.

It has been argued by some scholars that one of the reasons that Jews wrote in Greek was to attract gentile believers. While Judaism had no official missionary work, individual Jews actively sought converts. Christ hinted at this effort when He said: “**Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte...**” (Matthew 23:15).

Judaism continued to gain converts and remained a viable religious movement within the Roman empire until the end of the fourth century.

Freedom of worship, however, did not mean there was an absence of tension between Jews and Romans. The Jews living as resident aliens in cities throughout the empire wanted both tolerance from and equality with their neighbors. They asked for the continuance of their autonomy as well as full rights of citizenship. Many cities refused, and disturbances broke out in Alexandria, Antioch, and Asia Minor during the first century A.D.

The tension was particularly acute in Alexandria, which became a center of anti-Judaic propaganda. “*If the Jews wish to be Alexandrians, let them worship the gods of the Alexandrians*” was the common sentiment.

It is easy for us in the twentieth century to underestimate the role that religion played in the political life of the Roman Empire. The worship of local gods was considered a vital aspect of assuring civic peace and prosperity (Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, p. 58). Ritual and government were closely intertwined, and the cities that rejected the Jews’ petitions were merely acting on long-standing beliefs.

Religion at that time was not a matter of personal conviction; it was a civic duty. Nonetheless, the Roman government chose to be somewhat tolerant of differing creeds provided their adherents could prove that their beliefs were based on tradition.

Anti-Judaic sentiment was intensified by the wars which the Jews waged against Rome. From A.D. 66-70, Palestinian Jews sought to expel the Roman legions from their homeland. The war ended with the burning of the Temple and the

death of more than 500,000 Jews. Palestine was decimated of half of its population. Surprisingly, Jews in other parts of the Roman Empire suffered no repercussions from the hostile acts of their kinsmen. Yet they too later fought against the Romans in a major uprising in 115-117 A.D. Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrene launched a revolt which brought destruction for both themselves and their gentile neighbors (Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, p. 67-68). The causes of the war are still unclear, but the result was devastation.

The final war between Romans and Jews was waged in Palestine in 133-135 A.D. Led by Simon Bar Kochba, the Jewish rebellion was caused by Roman actions which are also historically uncertain. Again, hundreds of thousands of Jews were slaughtered and so many sold into captivity that their price fell to that of a horse (Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 548). All Jews were expelled from Jerusalem, which became a city of gentiles.

In the context of these uprisings, it is easy to see how anti-Judaic feeling could develop in the Roman Empire. Resentment toward Jews in Rome became so strong after the first Jewish War that crown prince Titus, who had participated in the sack of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., was forced to give up his desire to marry Berenice, sister of Herod Agrippa the Younger.

One of the common complaints voiced by Roman writers during this time was that Judaism was a superstition. In the Roman view, a superstition was a religious practice that neither honored the gods nor benefited mankind (Wilken, p. 60). The Romans could see no value in the cults of the Jews, Celts, Egyptians, or Germans because they did not honor gods in the manner that Romans thought appropriate. Influential writers such as Quintilian, Plutarch, and Tacitus singled out Judaism as a superstition that was harmful and degrading to Roman society. Yet eventually these feelings subsided and Judaism peacefully coexisted with most religions for several centuries thereafter.

The Rejection of Judeo-Christianity

But another storm was brewing. As they continued to reject the Judaic roots of their religion, catholic Christians increasingly viewed Jews as a problem. The conflict between Judaism and catholic belief became sharper from the second century onward. Instead of accepting their common heritage, the church fathers sought ways to reinterpret the Scriptures and to show the superiority of their new religious movement.

Some of them saw the destruction of the Temple as proof that God had rejected the Jews. Justin Martyr scornfully mocked the Jewish sacrificial system. The heretic Marcion claimed that the God of the Old Testament was evil and that only Paul's doctrines of love represented true Christianity. Although he was noted for his keeping of the Passover on the 14th of Nisan, Miletus of Sardis denounced the Jews as Messiah-killers and criminals. The invective against Judaism was

continued by Origen, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Ambrose, and other misguided men.

Tertullian in particular wanted to “dissociate the Christian message from its Jewish trappings in order to give it a truly Latin expression” (Jean Danielou, *The Origins of Latin Christianity*, p. 139).

He was not content to confine himself to Judaism, however. He also attacked Jewish Christianity not only in its heterodox forms, but as it existed in the Christian church during his lifetime. His reaction against the Judeo-Christian element, became more pronounced in each of his writings, which influenced a new generation of church leaders.

Ironically, the major criticism leveled at the emerging catholic church was its rejection of Judaism. Around 180 A.D., the Greek philosopher Celsus charged that Christians had deserted the Jewish law. They wantonly disregarded the points that were most clearly set forth—***the keeping of the Sabbath, the festivals, and the dietary laws***. The fact that church fathers were writing rebuttals 80 years later shows the impact that Celsus had.

But even more devastating were the arguments of Porphyry, a well-known biographer, and philosopher. Several generations of churchmen were unable to answer Porphyry, whose works were finally put to the torch by Constantine. Intimately acquainted with the Scriptures, Porphyry showed that the Christians of his day had abandoned the teachings of Christ and had introduced a new cult in which Jesus Himself was deified. Since they were unable to counter his accusations, the church fathers grew even more vehement in their attempts to allegorize the Bible.

By the end of the third century, the Jews had become an embarrassment. They represented a large and unpopular group that should have but would not accept catholic norms. Under the emperor Theodosius, when Christian uniformity became the official policy of the empire, Christian mob attacks on synagogues grew common. This unlicensed violence was contrary to Roman public policy, since Jews were regarded as valuable and respectable members of society for their general support of authority.

In 388 A.D. the Jewish synagogue at Callinicum on the Euphrates was destroyed at the instigation of the local bishop. Theodosius decided to make the incident a test case and ordered it rebuilt at Christian expense. The bishop Ambrose hotly opposed the decision, and Theodosius withdrew his orders. This event marked an “important stage in the construction of a society in which only orthodox Christianity exercised full rights” (Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 104-105).

The Survival of the “Faith Delivered to the Saints”

An even greater embarrassment to the church was the continued existence of Jewish Christian congregations—the element that Tertullian wanted to extirpate. In their efforts to disavow the influence of Judaism, Catholics soon viewed these Christians as heretical.

“Yet what was Christian heresy? And for that matter, what was the Church? Most of our knowledge of early Christian history comes from the writings of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century. Eusebius was in many ways a conscientious historian, and he had access to multitudes of sources which have since disappeared ... He wanted to show that the church he represented had always constituted the mainstream of Christianity, both in organization and faith. The truth is very different ... A dominant orthodox Church, with a recognizable ecclesiastical structure, emerged only very gradually” (Johnson, p. 43).

The apostle Jude, the brother of Christ, urged Christians at the end of the first century to **“earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.”** His epistle is regarded by some modern scholars as one of the literary remains of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, written after the fall of Jerusalem. What is significant is that the primitive Church was already being threatened from within. True Christians were forced to begin to defend the faith against men who called themselves brothers in Christ.

Christianity did not follow a smooth evolutionary path after the mother Church in Jerusalem was scattered. It divided and re-divided. Gradually, a group of people who called themselves Catholics agreed to accept certain doctrines—not the plain and simple doctrines of the New Testament, but doctrines which had been allegorized and reconfigured to their ideas and values.

By the end of the second century, the way of life transmitted by the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem was in grave danger. A few historians believe that it actually perished. Historical information about the groups that followed the apostolic traditions, unfortunately, is sketchy and comes almost exclusively from the writings of the church fathers. Under Theodosius and a later emperor named Valentinian, all writings hostile to the Catholic church—including Christian works deemed heretical—were burned.

Yet a few historical traces have been preserved. After the fall of Jerusalem, a certain group of Jewish Christians remained faithful to the apostolic traditions, while another began to incorporate elements of legalism, Essenism, and even Gnosticism into its religious thought. Justin Martyr was the first to point out the difference between the two groups. Some Jewish Christians wanted to impose ritual laws on Gentile converts, but others did not.

Jewish Christians who maintained the apostolic legacy were accepted by neither Jew nor professing Christian. They were occasionally viewed as a political threat

by authorities. Several Roman emperors examined their leaders, who were the descendants of Jesus' family, to see if they were a potential menace to the empire. From 90 A.D. the Jews banned them from the synagogues, and from the middle of the second century catholic churchmen strongly condemned their beliefs as unworthy of Christ.

Very likely the group known historically as the *Nazarenes* represented the Jewish Christianity taught by the apostles. The term "Nazarene" is first mentioned in Acts 24:5 where it is used to refer to true Christians. Later Jewish writings also referred to Christians as Nazarenes. Two catholic writers, Epiphanius and Jerome, stated that the Nazarenes of their day dwelt in Berea, Pella, and in other cities in the hill country of Judea and Syria. Julius Africanus corroborates that Jewish Christian leaders included offspring from Jesus' family. These Christians had a complete gospel of Matthew in Aramaic, as well as commentaries on the Old Testament, which Jerome himself used. They followed the law of Moses along with the teachings of Christ.

Augustine of Hippo was acquainted with such groups as late as 400 A.D. In Antioch, "the synagogue on Saturday, the church on Sunday" was a familiar summary of practice. John Chrysostom lamented the fact that some catholics had begun to observe the Jewish holy days and Sabbath; he admitted that many had high regard for the Jews and believed that their way of life was holy.

In the 430s, the Christian Council of Laodicea ruled in detail against Christian observance of the Jewish Sabbath, their acceptance of unleavened bread from Jews, and their keeping of Jewish festivals (Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 482). The truth left by the apostolic Church was not easily extinguished.

Did this truth perish after the fourth century? The answer is no. As the catholic church moved into the Middle Ages, what it called Judaizing never ceased to exist.

"In the decrees of the Church councils, the term gained currency from the time of the Council of Laodicea in the fourth century onward. It was used by Christian ecclesiastics like Agobard, who charged Christians at Lyons (in the ninth century) with Jewish inclinations and habits. In the historical literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the term 'Judaizer' won frequent place, and came to designate either individuals or groups, who, as in Lombardy, adopted a Jewish outlook on life, and Jewish forms of ceremony and conduct. It was employed to designate certain heretical groups which challenged papal authority. Papal bulls during these centuries when heresies flourished are filled with references to Judaizers and 'Re-Judaizers,' the latter term being applied to Jewish converts to Christianity who later returned to their original faith" (Louis Newman, *Jewish Influence on Christian Reform Movements*, pps. 1-3).

Is Modern Christianity an Anachronism?

The truth has never been lost, but it has been ignored. Only within this century have scholars attempted to reconstruct early Church history apart from the writings of the church fathers. A few of them have been provocative in their reevaluation.

Whether or not they agree with his conclusions about the divinity of Christ, most Biblical scholars recognize that Hugh Schonfield made a significant contribution to our knowledge of church history. Along with S.G.F. Brandon and Robert Eisler, Schonfield clearly demonstrated that the early Church was a sect within Judaism, not a new religion.

In his book *Those Incredible Christians*, Schonfield presents an interesting thesis. The religion known as Christianity is an anachronism—an institution out of its proper time. By adopting the trappings of paganism, Christianity reverted to an ancient past. Yet paganism as a religious movement had been slowly dying out among the educated classes of the Roman empire. In a curious twist of fate, educated Romans were moving toward the monotheism that Judaism had embraced for centuries. By converting to Catholicism, they fell back into a form of polytheism evidenced by belief in the trinity.

Schonfield challenges the reader to examine his or her own religious beliefs. He concludes his book with an invitation to Christians to “go back to the beginning and search out anew in the context of the Jewish vision, which the Church forsook, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God” (p. 225).

In this age of intellectual enlightenment, it is amazing that the modern Christian clings to outdated myths and practices. The one area of life—religion—that a Christian should consider of supreme importance is based on **fallacy**. One television evangelist has even gone so far as to admit that a certain holiday is pagan in origin, yet he claims it for Jesus just the same.

Is that what Jesus Christ wants? Christ placed a great deal of emphasis on knowing the truth. Remember that He had to combat the false doctrines and ideas of His time. He said, “**You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free**” (John 8:32).

He also said, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit, and in truth” (John 4:24).

Now it can conceivably be argued that He was referring to “spiritual” truth—not truth based on historical evidence.

But twenty centuries later we are faced with a unique dilemma. To understand spiritual truth, the modern Christian must understand historical truth. It is difficult to separate Christian theology from Christian history, because they had

an enormous impact on each other. Modern Christianity was shaped by key events and trends in history, as well as by the long process of doctrinal development.

If you believe you are a Christian, it's time to ask yourself some hard questions. ***Do your beliefs agree with those of primitive Christianity, or have they been accommodated to the society around you?*** If your church has, not been built on the foundation of Christ and the apostles as described in the New Testament, your faith may be a hollow shell—a relic of ancient religions far removed from the God of the Bible.

May God guide you in answering these questions!

Written by: Wesley White

CLOSING HYMN #106

“We’ve a Story to Tell the Nations”

*Colin Sterne, 1896
H. Ernest Nichol, 1896*

We’ve a story to tell to the nations that shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy, A story of peace and light, A story of peace and light.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning, And the dawning to noonday bright,
And Christ’s great Kingdom shall come on earth, The Kingdom of love and light.

We’ve a song to be sung to the nations that shall lift their hearts to the Lord,
A song that shall conquer evil And shatter the spear and sword,
And shatter the spear and sword.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning, And the dawning to noonday bright,
And Christ’s great Kingdom shall come on earth, The Kingdom of love and light.

We’ve a message to give to the nations, that the Lord who reigneth
above hath sent us His Son to save us And show us that God is love,
And show us that God is love.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning, And the dawning to noonday bright,
And Christ’s great Kingdom shall come on earth, The Kingdom of love and light.

We’ve a Savior to show to the nations, Who the path of sorrow hath trod,
that all of the world’s great peoples Might come to the truth of God,
Might come to the truth of God.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning, And the dawning to noonday bright,
And Christ’s great Kingdom shall come on earth, The Kingdom of love and light.

CLOSING WORDS *(In Unison)*

Blessing and glory be to our God.
Wisdom and thanksgiving be to our God.

Honor and power and might be to our God.
Forever and ever.
Amen.