

# An Overview of Church History

## MOPC Adult Sunday School

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## Part 1

*From the close of the Old Testament Period  
to the determination of the Canon.*

## Why study church history?

### Course Objectives:

To provide a basic overview, so that we would...

- Better appreciate God's sovereign hand in growing and preserving the church
- See that many problems of today have challenged the church in the past and learn how others persevered
- Value more the sacrifice of others who have gone before us
- Better appreciate what we now enjoy as Christ's church in the end days
- Better evaluate the church of the 21st century

### The Close of the Old Testament Period

- Israel defeated and exiled to Assyria - 722 B.C.
- Judah defeated and exiled to Babylon - 605, 597, 586 B.C.
- Exiles return under Sheshbazzar & Zerubbabel - 537 B.C.
- Exiles return under Ezra (458 B.C.) & Nehemiah. (445 B.C.)
- Temple Rebuilt - 536-516 B.C., 445 B.C.

### The Inter-Testament Period

- Persian Period- 539-330 B.C. (Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes)
- Hellenistic Period- 330-166 B.C. (Alexander, Ptolemy, Seleucus)
- Hasmonean Period- 166-63 B.C. (Maccabees)
- Roman Period- 63 B.C. (Caesars)

### Early Roman Emperors

- Julius Caesar
- Caesar Augustus (27 B.C. – 14 A.D.)- emperor when Christ was born
- Tiberius Caesar (14-37 A.D.)- emperor when Christ was crucified
- Caligula (37-41 A.D.)
- Claudius (41-54 A.D.)
- Nero (54-68 A.D.)
- Galba, Otho, Viotellius (69 A.D.)
- Vespasian (69-79 A.D.)
- Titus (79-81 A.D.) conquered Jerusalem
- Domitian (81-96 A.D.)
- Nerva (96-98 A.D.)
- Trajan (98-117 A.D.)

“When the time had fully come, God sent his Son...” (Galatians 4:4)

What was particularly advantageous about this time in history?

- Common language (Greek)
- Roman peace (“Pax Romana”)
- Roman law and order
- Roman road system (some still useable today)
- Jewish dispersion (“Diaspora”)

Beginning of the Christian church  
(described in the book of Acts, 30-64 A.D.)

- The death & resurrection of Jesus Christ
- The coming of the Holy Spirit
- The preaching of the gospel to the Jews in Palestine and to Jews/Gentiles throughout the world

The writing of the New Testament: 50-100A.D.

- Gospels: 50-60 A.D. (John 85A.D.?)
- Acts: 63-70+ A.D.
- Romans: 57 A.D.
- Epistles: 51-95 A.D.
- Revelation: 95 A.D.

Period of Martyrdom (64-311 A.D.)

- Early Opposition from Jews: Pharisees, Common People Desiring a Liberator, the Rich
- Emperor Nero (54-68 A.D.)- Rome burns (64A.D.), Nero blames Christians
- Romans oppose Christians:
- Emperors opposed to “unrecognized” gods,
- Christians preached One who was ruler over all the earth and aimed at extending his kingdom into every part... a dangerous concept,
- Christians didn’t join pagans in worshiping idols (unsociable), met secretly, became viewed as a secret society, easily accused of plotting against the state,
- Christians viewed at threatening the financial, political and religious interests of various classes of people- priests, makers of idols, livestock merchants, etc.,
- It was popularly believed that Christians aroused the anger of Roman gods

## Persecuted Believers

- Martyrs
  - Ignatius
  - Justin Martyr
  - Polycarp
- Roman coliseum
- Roman catacombs

## Persecuted Believers

- Met in secret ...
  - “ICHTHUS” password (means fish)
    - I esus
    - CHrist
    - THEou (of God)
    - U ios (Son)
    - S oter (Saviour)
- Satan’s work:
  - Rev. 2:13; 12:1-6, 17; 6:9-11; 17:6
- The blood of the martyrs of Jesus was not shed in vain
  - Purified the church
  - Strengthened the church
  - Grew the church

## The End of Persecution

- Constantine the Great (311 A.D.)
- End of persecution, beginning of corruption

## Early Heresy

- Gnosticism- one of the most dangerous heresies of the first two centuries; central teaching was that spirit is entirely good and matter is entirely evil
  - Man’s body is evil; God as spirit is good
  - Salvation is the escape from the body, not by faith in Christ, but by special knowledge (gnosis)
  - Christ’s true humanity denied; either only seemed to have a body or joined to Jesus the man at his baptism and left before his crucifixion
  - Since body is evil, it should be treated harshly
  - Breaking of the Law (evil) had no consequence for the spirit; Antinomianism (“opposed to law”)
- Addressed in Colossians and John’s letters; still an issue today (“we’re under grace, with no obligation to the law”)

## Early Heresy

- Arius disputes the divinity of Christ;
  - Athanasius refutes; Council of Nicea (Constantinople) in 325 A.D.
- Docetism (“to seem”)- Christ was not really a man, only seemed to suffer; instead was a heavenly ghost
  - Rejected by Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.
- Pelagian Controversy- Pelagius, a British monk, denied original sin and asserted that Adam’s sin did not affect the entire human race
  - Augustine was chief opponent; condemned by Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D.
- Christ’s human nature absorbed by the divine; didn’t maintain both natures
  - Refuted by Council of Chalcedon in 481 A.D.
- Revering of Mary as God-Bearer, Mother of God emerges in 400’s

## Early Church Fathers

- Ambrose (339-397 A.D.)
- son of Roman governor in Gaul
  - educated in law
  - became Bishop of Milan
  - withheld Lord’s Supper from Emperor Theodosius for his massacre of 7000 in Thessalonica until he repented
  - wrote hymns still used by the church today

## Early Church Fathers

- Augustine (354- 430 A.D.)
  - born to pagan father and Christian mother in North Africa; studied in Carthage; yielded to worldly temptations;
  - eventually came to Milan, where he heard Ambrose’s preaching;
  - became a Christian at 31, an answer to his mother’s prayers (“A son of so many prayers cannot be lost”... so said a friend of Augustine’s mother);
  - wrote Confessions & The City of God; opposed the Pelagian heresy (man not born sinful, able to do all that God requires);
  - became Bishop of Hippo Regis
  -

## Early Church Fathers

- Jerome – (??- 420 A.D.)
  - a chief scholar in early church;
  - translated Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin in 386 A.D., commonly known as the Vulgate;
  - also opposed the Pelagian heresy

## The Closing of the Canon of Scripture

- The Canon of Scripture is the collection of writings recognized as inspired and authoritative or normative for faith and practice in the church. This use of the term canon emerged in the mid-300's A.D. (e.g. Council of Laodicea)
- "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule (canon), even to the Israel of God." (Gal. 6:16) ... as used here means the standard by which one would know if someone was a Christian, i.e. the Christian truths.
- Canon = God's truth for us; our standard for faith and life.

## Canonicity

- Questions of canonicity are usually focused on a few books. The measure of unanimity and agreement in the entire history of the people of God should be even more striking.

## The Closing of the Old Testament

- Closing of the Old Testament Canon- complete by the time of Christ (see Luke 24:44), but likely recognized by the 200's B.C.
- Books disputed by some included Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Esther.
- The Hebrew canon contained the present Old Testament books. Jews of the Dispersion also included some of the books of the Apocrypha.

## The Apocrypha

- Mostly written from 200B.C. to 70A.D. (InterTestament Period)
- For the first three centuries, the apocryphal books were used in the church to varying degrees.
- By the 4th century (300's), canonicity of the apocryphal books was disputed (Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, Epiphanius, Jerome).
- Although viewed as questionable, the apocryphal books were used in liturgy throughout the Middle Ages.
- Apocrypha finally rejected as Scripture by the Reformers in 1500's, while Council of Trent (1546) and the Vatican Council of 1870 imposed their acceptance upon all Roman Catholics.
- Apocrypha is a source of Roman Catholic teachings on purgatory, praying for the dead, praying to saints, etc.

## Statements on the Apocrypha from Reformation Days

- Luther Bible (1534). Title to Apocrypha:
  - "APOCRYPHA, that is, Books which are not to be esteemed like the Holy Scriptures, and yet which are useful and good to read."
- Coverdale Bible (1535). Title to Apocrypha:
  - "APOCRYPHA: The books and treatises which among the Fathers of old are not reckoned to be of like authority with the other books of the Bible, neither are they found in the Canon of Hebrew."
- Decree of the Council of Trent (1546).
  - "The holy ecumenical and general Council of Trent . . . following the example of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates all the books of the Old and New Testament . . . and also the traditions pertaining to faith and conduct . . . with an equal sense of devotion and reverence . . . If, however, any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have by custom been read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be accursed."
- Geneva Bible (1560). Preface:
  - "The books that follow in order after the Prophets unto the New Testament, are called Apocrypha, that is, books which were not received by a common consent to be read and expounded publicly in the Church, neither yet served to prove any point of Christian religion save in so much as they had the consent of the other scriptures called canonical to confirm the same, or rather whereon they were grounded: but as books proceeding from godly men they were received to be read for the advancement and furtherance of the knowledge of history and for the instruction of godly manners: which books declare that at all times God had an especial care of His Church, and left them not utterly destitute of teachers and means to confirm them in the hope of the promised Messiah, and also witness that those calamities that God sent to his Church were according to his providence, who had both so threatened by his prophets, and so brought it to pass, for the destruction of their enemies and for the trial of his children."
- Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1563). Sixth Article:
  - "In the name of Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church. . . And the other books (as Jerome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners: but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine."
- Westminster Confession (1647). Chapter 1 § 3:
  - "The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings."

## The Closing of the New Testament

- First 100 years- Scriptures were individual books well recognized
- The elders received apostolic writings as authoritative.
- Lists of books are ratifications of the decisions of the majority of churches from earliest days
- Gradual and independent definition of the canon by elders.
- Minor disagreements in earliest days largely settled by end of 4th century.

## The Closing of the New Testament

- Early recognition of the 4 Gospels and the 13 Epistles of Paul (by 130A.D.).
- Hebrews, James, Jude, II Peter, II and III John, and Revelation doubted by some.
- Other writings, such as the Epistle of Barnabas, Apocalypse of Peter, or the Shepherd of Hermas, used by a few churches, but largely rejected.
- Athanasius's listing in 367 A.D. is the first complete listing of the New Testament; confirmed by Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397)
- "These are the wells of salvation, so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the sayings in these. Let no one add to these. Let nothing be taken away." (Athanasius)

## Basis for Canon Recognition

- Roman Catholic: The canon itself and the canon as it concerns us is determined by the church. The Scriptures and the church are infallible.  
>>>>> The church is canon.
- Reformation Position: Scripture is canonical because it comes from God, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and is the norm for faith and practice.  
>>>>> God is canon.
  - Grounds for recognition include evidence of Scripture itself and inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.
- Enlightenment Position: Only those elements which can stand the the test of criticism and which yield evidence of true religious knowledge have authority for us. The religious consciousness of enlightened man is the final judge in matters of faith and life.  
>>>>> Canon is based on human discernment/autonomy.
- Existential Position: Individual experience is most decisive. Scripture is authoritative in so far as God speaks to me.  
>>>>> Canon is what is relevant to me.

## Basis for Canon Recognition

- The New Testament is a self-establishing, self-validating entity,
- ... not just apostolicity
- ... not just antiquity
- ... not public lection (popularity)
- ... not claims of “inspiration” (can’t be demonstrated)
- ... but by the integrity of the Scriptures and the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit

## The Canon

- Tertullian: "For against all heresies equally let this now be our presumption: whatever is earliest is true, and whatever is later is corrupt."
- Guiding theological principles relating to the canon:
  - The ancient teachings and practices are to be preferred over the medieval.
  - In questions that are not answered by Scripture itself, we inquire into the earliest available evidence for the teachings and practices of the churches.
  - When ancient canon lists are examined, we find that the earlier ones omit the Apocrypha, and that the later ones (beginning at the end of the fourth century in the West) include it.
- The Apocrypha began to be put on the same level as our canonical books at about the same time as many other “innovations” entered into the Church.

## Why Not New Canon?

- The progressive character of God’s revelation and redemptive activity,
- ... its climax in the coming of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,
- ... no evidence of other redemptive works until the second coming of Christ, and
- ... the relationship between redemptive event and redemptive words in Scripture,
- ... leads the believer to conclude that God has ceased to reveal himself in new ways beyond the existing Scriptures.