

# A Short History of Christianity

Text: Stephen Tompkins, *A Short History of Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2005)

Other sources: Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (2 vols.)

Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*

Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in Hist. Of Christianity*

Bettenson and Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*

Introduction: why study history

- A. Learn lessons from the past
- B. Helps explain the present
- C. See God at work in the church and society
- D. "That is now, this was then"

## Part One: The Early Church

- I. The Church in the Roman Empire: the context of the early Church
  - A. The Roman Political world: city-state, republic, empire
    1. Rome kept the fiction of a city-state while ruling over all
    2. Allowed much local expression, with imperial overlay
    3. Never an easy transition of power
    4. Pax Romana, 27 BCE-180 CE
  - B. The religious context: pluralism
    1. State religion: the Greek/Roman pantheon; inclusive
    2. Mystery religions: secret knowledge; exclusive
    3. Emperor worship: seeing the emperor as god-like; not a constant
    4. Miscellaneous: magic, astrology, oracles, local deities
  - C. Prevailing philosophies
    1. Epicureanism: materialist; pleasure the highest good
    2. Stoicism: logos (reason) permeates the universe (macrocosm) and humanity (microcosm)
    3. Neoplatonism: revival of Plato's thought, e.g. in Plotinus ((205-270 CE)
      - a. One (or God) is at the summit; unknowable
      - b. Divine Mind (Nous, Intelligence); contemplates Forms; knowable
      - c. Soul: radiation from the DM; human souls two-sided
      - d. Matter: a receptacle, not evil in itself
      - e. Evil? - the absence of good
  - D. Persecution
    1. Christianity an illegal religion until the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century
    2. Local and empire-wide persecution done sporadically

## II. Hellenization and heresy: the Church relating to and clashing with its context

### A. The hellenization of Christianity

1. The idea: gradual introduction of Greek philosophic concepts into church thinking, with the result that by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries the "primitive" understanding of the faith had been replaced by a "Greek" understanding; *however*:
2. Platonism
  - a. No sharp creator/creation distinction
  - b. No need for grace
3. Greek thought was not monolithic: Greek religious and philosophic thought was far from being a unity
4. Paaganism's campaign against Christianity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries and revival of pagan religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> belie a clear hellenization
5. Use of "Greek" language by Christian is not a telling argument

### B. Illustration of "hellenization": Justin Martyr, late 2<sup>nd</sup> century apologist

1. Truth of the philosophers
  - a. On some points, teaching is similar to Christianity
  - b. Explained: demonic inspiration, loan theory (from OT), operation of the logos
2. Christianity the criterion of truth
  - a. Xn claims do not depend on agreement with philosophy
  - b. Philosopher's apprehension of truth is always partial; no borrowing, but a sanction of correct Greek ideas
3. The Logos
  - a. Logos spermatikos: sowing, not sown (anti Stoicism)
  - b. Parable of the sower: transcendence of the Logos maintained; the seed is from the outside
4. Intellectuals only?
  - a. Need the crucifixion: hidden from both phils and demons
  - b. All levels of persons can comprehend the Gospel

### C. From orthodoxy to heresy

1. Justin says that Xnty began with an original orthodox teaching, then divergent views came along from outside Xnty; their teachings are the heresies; from demons
2. Irenaeus (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century) says orthodoxy was the standard teaching of the churches; heresies are separate and later; origins in philosophy schools and from demons

### D. Gnosticism

1. Major contention: orthodoxy is only one of several competing systems of Xn belief, no closer to apostolic belief than its rivals; won out by late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, laid claim to "orthodoxy"; rivals labeled "heretics"
2. Difficulties: the time factor, heresy already a component in the NT, the feminine factor inconclusive

### III. Inside the Church

#### A. The Christian life

1. Occupations
  - a. Not approved
  - b. Variety of occupations
2. Clement of Alexandria (fl.190-210) on wealth; analysis of the rich ruler in Matthew 19
3. Hippolytus (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century) on Christian living

#### B. Use of the Bible

1. Canon as an approved list
  - a. Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, 1972: approved list necessary; OT books were the Scriptures; there was an oral vs. a written tradition
  - b. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, 367; synods at Rome, 382, at Hippo, 393, and at Carthage, 397
2. Canon as the texts in use
  - a. Allusions made in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century
  - b. Not an oral tradition vs. a written tradition
  - c. The important question is authority, not listing
3. Tertullian (fl. C. 200) on the Bible and tradition

#### C. The Council of Nicea, 325

1. Trinity in the New Testament (handout)
2. Ecumenical councils (handout)
3. Councils before Nicea: North Africa, 3<sup>rd</sup> century; Arles, 314
4. Conciliar theory (fully developed later): when handling matters of dogma (doctrine), the Holy Spirit keeps the council from error
5. The work of councils: on *doctrine*, to answer the question, "What does the Bible (and rule of faith) teach about...?"; *canons* are pronouncements made on a variety of topics, but do not have the force of dogma
6. Why was Nicea so late?
  - a. Not so late: baptism formula; worship of Jesus
  - b. Provoked by the Arian heresy
  - c. Principle: can "get along" with inchoate understandings, but need to be precise at times
7. Bernard Lonergan's analysis
  - a. Objective: the use of reason
  - b. Subjective: differentiated consciousness
8. Terminology (handout)

#### D. Apostolic succession

1. Cyprian of Carthage, 250: succession of office; "the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop"
2. Tertullian: succession of teaching; "we are in communion with the apostolic churches; there is no difference of doctrine"