

The Brief History of Church

A Christian should have a considerable understanding of the Bible and of Christ; and likewise, he should also have a considerable understanding of the church. We know that before the Lord Jesus was born, there was no church; it was only after the Lord Jesus was born, crucified, resurrected, and ascended that the church began. When the Lord Jesus was on earth, the church had not yet come into being, because in Matthew 16 the Lord Jesus said that He would build His church; the word “will” clearly indicates a future sense. At the time when the Lord Jesus spoke this on earth, there was still no church.

When did the church come into being?

The church began on the day of Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down, and the church was produced; from that time onward, the church began. Before the birth of the Lord Jesus, Judaism, according to the Old Testament, was already serving God. God had given this Old Testament to the Jews, asking them to serve Him according to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Therefore, whatever belongs to the Old Testament belongs to the Jews.

The origin of Judaism

We must go back about 1,500 years before Christ, when the ancestors of the Jews were still slaves in Egypt. One day, God raised up a man named Moses; God sent Moses to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. At that time, the Jewish population was at least two million. After they were brought out, they came into the wilderness, and God gave them the law, that is, what is recorded in the Five Books of Moses, instructing them to serve Him according to it.

Later, God raised up judges among the people of Israel, and then He also raised up kings. Among these people, many were spiritual, with God being with them; they wrote many books of poetry. There were also some prophets who wrote the prophetic

books. In this way, up until the book of Malachi, the entire Old Testament was completed. Throughout this history, only the Israelites served God according to the Old Testament Scriptures; that kind of service is Judaism.

The Lord Jesus concluded the Old Testament and brought in the New Testament. Therefore, before the Lord Jesus was born and before Christianity existed, Judaism was already present. However, when Christ came, from God's perspective, a new age began, and Judaism should have come to an end. Because the Lord Jesus came to fulfill everything spoken and prophesied in the Old Testament. All the ceremonies, ordinances, and prophecies of the Old Testament speak of the Lord Jesus; and when the Lord Jesus was born, all that was written in the Old Testament was fully fulfilled.

The Old Testament all Passed Away when Jesus Came

The Old Testament having been fulfilled, the Old Testament age and its service naturally should also cease. The Lord Jesus is the One who ends what was before and begins what is after; in the language of the Bible, the Lord Jesus fulfilled everything in the Old Testament and also began the New Testament service. Those who served God according to the Old Testament were in Judaism; the Old Testament has passed, and all things in the Old Testament that spoke of the Lord Jesus were fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Himself. Therefore, when the Lord Jesus came, the Old Testament all passed away and came to an end.

The church was produced on the day of Pentecost

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, the church had not yet come into being. The Lord Jesus preached the gospel and saved many people, but among all those who were saved, not every one of them truly served God well. It is just the same today. Many acknowledge the name of the Lord, but few are those who wholeheartedly serve the Lord.

As a result, after the Lord Jesus ministered for three and a half years, He gained only twelve persons. After the Lord Jesus ascended, these twelve sought God together with one accord; they forsook everything, because they had seen the Lord's

resurrection. Such a vision caused them to abandon earthly things and to follow the Lord wholeheartedly and serve God. Later they increased to one hundred and twenty persons, and for ten days they prayed in one accord.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven, and all these one hundred and twenty were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they became greatly empowered in Jerusalem, speaking with greater boldness and performing signs and wonders, just as the Lord Jesus had promised. In this way, they shook all Jerusalem. On that day, when they preached the gospel, three thousand were saved; and after some time, when they preached again, five thousand more were added.

Judaism: The 1st Enemy of Church

From that time on, the church came into existence while suffering persecution from Judaism. However, it immediately encountered an enemy—Judaism. Judaism strongly persecuted the Christians because they did not understand God's intention. God's intention was that all the prophecies and types in the Old Testament pointed to the Lord Jesus and ended with Him. When the Lord Jesus came, the Old Testament should have come to an end and ceased. But the Jews did not recognize this, and at the same time, they did not recognize the Lord Jesus. Although the Lord Jesus accomplished redemption, fulfilled what was prophesied in the Old Testament, and thereby brought the Old Testament to an end, the Jews still continued to serve God according to the Old Testament. The disciples of the Lord Jesus, however, were not like this; they served God according to the New Testament and set aside the Old Testament. It was at this very time that the Jews began to persecute the Christians on a large scale, and countless Christians became martyrs.

The church multiplied and increased in the midst of persecution

History tells us that many brothers and sisters, who were originally also Jews, were persecuted by Judaism to such an extent that they became wanderers. Their property was completely confiscated, they were driven out, and some were even killed. However, the fact that Christians were persecuted and could not remain in Jerusalem

also contained God's intention. Because of persecution, they were scattered and fled. Geographically, the land of Palestine is at the center of the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. These Christians, under the persecution of the Jews, were scattered abroad: some went to Asia, some to Africa, some fled to Europe, and others went to even more distant places. Very quickly, in all directions—east, west, south, and north—the footprints of Christians were found everywhere.

These Christians were like a “plague,” carrying the gospel “germs.” Wherever they went, they could not but preach the gospel, because each one of them was filled with the Holy Spirit. For the sake of the Lord, they were driven out, their property was confiscated; yet they remained fervent in spirit and preached the gospel everywhere. Wherever they went, people believed in Jesus. Very quickly, within the surrounding regions of Judea, believers were raised up, such as apostles like Paul, Barnabas, and Philip, who were sent by the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. The gospel spread from Asia to Europe. In a short time, churches were established in those regions, such as Ephesus and Galatia, which are in Asia Minor. Then it spread to Macedonia, which is the northern part of present-day Greece. After a little more time, it reached Corinth and Athens.

At this time, most of the disciples of the Lord Jesus had already left the world. Within about one hundred years, around the Mediterranean Sea—east in Palestine, north in Asia Minor—almost all the cities in these regions had Christians and churches.

The Reason for the Church's Persecution

Within less than one hundred years, the apostles all passed away, and those who succeeded them were the ones trained by the apostles, known in history as the “Church Fathers.” Although they had not personally seen the Lord Jesus, these Church Fathers were very faithful. One of them mentioned in Philippians 4 is Clement; another was Polycarp, who was martyred for the Lord and was a disciple of the Apostle John. They faced severe persecution, namely the persecution of the Roman Empire.

At the very beginning, the church was persecuted by the Jews when it first arose; and when the church spread among the Gentiles, it faced not only the persecution of Judaism but also the persecution of the Roman Empire.

From an outward perspective, there were several reasons for this:

First, the gospel they preached was different from the customs of Rome.

Second, the gospel they preached caused people to love the Lord and love God, and to disregard this world; it focused on seeking the future and seeking eternity. Such a gospel was in sharp contrast with the culture of the Roman Empire, and therefore a conflict arose.

The third and most severe reason was that the Roman emperor, Caesar, demanded that people worship him and acknowledge him as a god. At that time, when Caesar of the Roman Empire demanded that people worship him, he not only required recognition as a ruler but also insisted on being worshipped as God. Christianity, however, declared that idols must not be worshipped, while the Roman emperor made himself into a god; anyone who did not worship the Roman emperor as god would be in danger of losing their life. Because Christians refused to bow to the image of Caesar, the Roman Empire killed many Christians. During this period, there were at least eighteen waves of persecution against Christians in the Roman Empire, among which seven or eight were extremely severe. The Roman Empire deliberately sought to exterminate all Christians. Both Peter and John eventually died under the Roman Empire's rule. Peter was crucified by the Roman Empire; when he was being crucified, he said, "I am not worthy to die in this way; crucify me upside down." As for John, it is said that he was first sentenced to be thrown into boiling oil, and later exiled to the island of Patmos.

Such persecution lasted for nearly three hundred years. Therefore, the history of the church can be said to be a history of the blood and tears of Christians, especially the testimonies of those who were martyred for the gospel, which are truly sorrowful. For example, in Rome there was an arena where persecutors would release wild beasts, and then say to the Christians, "If you do not believe in Jesus, you will be released; otherwise you will be thrown in to be eaten by the beasts." Many Christians were willing to be thrown in and meet the Lord early, rather than deny Him.

The testimony of the elderly brother Polycarp is especially moving. When he was eighty-six years old, he was taken by the Romans. The Roman official said to him, "Old man, why suffer like this? Just say one sentence, 'I am not a Christian,' and you

will be released.” He replied, “To persuade a Christian to turn from good to evil is absolutely impossible.” They asked him, “What is your name?” He answered, “I am called a Christian.” He said, “I am a Christian, nothing but a Christian.” The official said, “I pity you.” He replied, “The Lord Jesus has never failed me even once; how can I not believe in Him and confess Him?”

In the history of the church, there are many such stories. There is also an account of someone who was responsible for executing Christians on behalf of a Roman governor. He said to the governor, “The more you kill, the more people believe.” The governor saw that something was seriously wrong and reported to the emperor, saying that if the killings continued, there would be no one left in the city of Rome. They discovered a remarkable fact: throughout the world, the more Christians were killed, the more they multiplied; the more they were killed, the more they grew.

The life of Christians is truly marvelous. When it is exalted, it does not grow; but when it is trampled underfoot, it grows instead.

The Origin of the Roman Church

By the fourth century, Emperor Diocletian of Rome had died, and two generals were competing for the throne. One of them was a historically well-known figure: Constantine. In order to gain the throne of Rome, he went to war with the other general. One night, he had a dream in which he saw a cross, and on it was written, “By this, conquer.” From that time onward, he used the cross as his military banner, and he gained great power and won the battle.

Afterwards, Constantine accepted Christianity. Whether his conversion was sincere or not is uncertain, but one thing is true: he made Christianity the state religion and ordered the whole nation to believe in Christianity. Originally, the Roman Empire was persecuting Christianity; now it turned around and welcomed Christianity, even giving Roman citizens who believed in Jesus money and a set of white clothing. As a result, many Roman citizens, without any repentance or true faith in the Lord Jesus, became Christians. Many false believers entered the church, and Roman politics became mixed with Christianity. The once-persecuted Christianity became a politically powerful institution.

Very quickly, corruption, degeneration, and heresies were all mixed into the church. The original purity and holiness of the early church were lost. Roman customs and ways of life all entered into Christianity, and thus the church became more and more distorted, and gradually lost its heavenly character. By around the sixth century A.D., the Roman Church had officially come into existence.

In the beginning, churches were locally responsible; one local church could not govern another. The church in Ephesus could not control the church in Corinth, and the church in Corinth could not control churches in other places. But when Christianity became a state religion, the church was corrupted and lost its original practice. Roman political power spread into the church, and the original church practice was replaced by human organization, human methods, and human regulations.

Thus, the system of regional bishops appeared, and from among them one man was selected to be called the Pope, who governed all the churches. In this way the papacy was formed. In addition, there were cardinals, and below them priests, monks, and nuns. Ordinary believers were not allowed to participate in the service of God, and even reading the Bible was restricted. Only those in the clerical hierarchy were allowed to do so. This is the Roman Church.

The Division of the Roman Church

Later, the Roman Empire was divided into the Eastern and Western empires, and Christianity in Rome also split as a result. The capital of the Western Roman Empire was Rome; the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire was Constantinople, the former capital of Constantine the Great. This later produced the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church.

The Eastern Orthodox Church was mainly located in regions such as Turkey and Russia. Between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the East, there were both similarities and differences in practice; for example, baptism: the Catholic Church used sprinkling, while the Orthodox Church used immersion.

Francis of Assisi

Around the seventh century, after the formal establishment of the Roman Church, authority gradually fell into the hands of the Pope. The Pope's power increased day by day, to the extent that he not only governed the church but also influenced nations. By the twelfth century—often called the darkest period—almost every king in Europe needed the approval of the Pope to ascend the throne. As papal authority rose higher and higher, spiritual darkness deepened.

At this time, God raised up a response on earth through Francis of Assisi. He was the son of a wealthy merchant with great possessions, but under the Lord's leading he abandoned all his wealth and chose voluntary poverty, going everywhere to preach. In church history, he can be regarded as the first person who voluntarily embraced poverty. Because that age had become so corrupted and overly focused on material enjoyment, his rise attracted many people to follow him and live in the same way.

Martin Luther and Justification by Faith

As the Roman Catholic Church became more and more corrupt, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it had almost completely departed from the truth. It became so dark that the Pope issued indulgences in order to raise money—people could purchase forgiveness of sins by buying indulgences, and these could be bought in any church. Moreover, the churches were filled with idols. They worshipped images of Mary, Jesus, Paul, and other apostles, and even declared certain people to be “saints” and worshipped them.

At the darkest moment of this age, God raised up a monk named Martin Luther. At that time, within Catholicism there were many ascetic practices. One day, while Martin Luther was engaged in ascetic discipline, a voice suddenly sounded within him: “The righteous shall live by faith,” or “Man is justified by faith.” He immediately awoke to the realization that a person is saved not by his own works or religious practice, but by the Lord Jesus. From that day on, he read the Bible, especially Galatians and Romans, which clearly present justification by faith. He boldly preached this truth without regard for his life.

Martin Luther declared everywhere: “Indulgences are from the devil; do not buy indulgences. A sinner must come before the Lord Jesus to confess and repent in order to receive forgiveness.” He courageously exposed the darkness of Catholicism and posted his writings on the church door. Although he was German, his message quickly spread in Germany, Norway, and France. As a result, he suffered severe persecution from the Catholic Church, yet he continued to publish his findings and print the truth he had discovered. Thus, the Reformation arose, known as the Protestant movement, while the Roman Church became known as the Old Church.

Expansion of the Church to Europe and America

Before Martin Luther’s Reformation, the Bible was not publicly available; it was illegal to distribute it openly. After the Reformation, the Bible became accessible to all. At the same time, the invention of the printing press greatly promoted the spread of the Scriptures.

The discovery of the New World by Columbus in the sixteenth century was also within God’s arrangement. In northern Europe, many people rose up to serve God according to a clean conscience. Among them were the Puritans, who, under persecution, heard about the discovery of the New World and left everything to go to America; they became the ancestors of modern Americans. In this way, Christianity spread to America.

Expansion of the Church to Asia

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the advancement of maritime transportation, Christians were found on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. God raised up men like Charles Spurgeon and John Wesley in England, who actively preached the gospel everywhere. At the same time, with the development of sea travel, missionary work reached China, less than two hundred years ago. The first Christian missionary to China was Robert Morrison, who first arrived in Guangzhou. Thus, the church began in China, and soon after, churches also began in Japan and on the islands of the Pacific Ocean.