



# CAPITOL COMMISSION

## What Is the Church? (Acts 2:42-47)

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Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church <sup>1</sup> and He told His disciples that the gates of Hell would not prevail against it <sup>2</sup>. Yet, at times, it seems that the Church has become irrelevant and ineffective. How did this happen? Has God really preserved the Church like He said?

We need to understand that there is both an invisible and a visible church. There is the great body of believers which constitutes the Church. However, this, in a sense, is not visible. What we see are the local congregations which make up the body of Christ. Whereas the invisible church is made up of only true believers, the visible church is composed of believers and unbelievers.

Since believers are not perfect, they don't always agree in spiritual and religious matters. As a result, as we look at the Church through the ages it is sometimes hard to identify the true church within the visible church. But God always has a remnant of true believers.

Many people know little about history and could care less. As a result they have no perspective for making wise decisions about national issues. But Christians are also negligent in their knowledge of church history. Why does this matter? Not only because it is part of our heritage and an inspiration; but also, because it helps us to have a better understanding of the Church today. The issues we face in the Church today are not new, only the technology has changed.

### WHAT WAS THE EARLY CHURCH LIKE?

In this study we are going to look at the first 300 years of the Church. One of the most amazing events in history is the tremendous expansion of Christianity during the first five centuries. It started as a seemingly obscure movement, one among many in the Roman world, but it was carried by the apostles to the known world. Rome first tried to contain Christianity and later to destroy it through severe persecution, but Christianity eventually grew to the extent that being a Roman citizen was almost identical with being a Christian. So what was the early church like?

*Acts 2: 42-47 - (42) And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. (43) And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. (44) And all who believed were together and had all things in common. (45) And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (46) And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, (47) praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

We see from the very beginning the pattern of Christian worship and life. They were taught the Word by the apostles, they had fellowship, they celebrated the Lord's Supper, and they prayed. Initially they met in the colonnaded porches of the Temple which makes sense since these early converts were all Jews. In fact it says they met daily. This was probably where the main teaching took place. Since there were 3000 converts on the day of Pentecost, a large area was needed to meet. But they also met in each

others' homes. This is where they gathered in smaller groups to pray, have communion, and stimulate each other to righteousness and obedience.

Outside of Jerusalem there was no special place like the Temple where Christians might meet and feel close to God. Early Christians met in homes for worship and teaching of God's Word. Paul makes specific reference of this in Romans 16: 3-5 and 1 Cor. 16:19. You read nothing about any church buildings in the Bible, nor for the first 200 years of the church.

One of the things we see as we look at Church history is that a hierarchy developed among the clergy. But such was not the case in the early church. What was the organization of the church at that time? Paul uses several terms for church leaders: elders <sup>3</sup> (*presbuteros*) bishops or overseers <sup>3</sup> (*episkopos*), and pastors or shepherds <sup>3</sup> (*poymane*). These three terms all refer to the same office but different functions. Essentially, they are titles for the teachers in the house churches. This is made clear in 1 Peter 1:5 where Peter is addressing fellow pastors. So they were essentially Bible teachers in the house churches. He doesn't consider himself higher than the other elders despite being one of the most famous apostles.

During the first 30 years or so of the Church, the gospel truth was taught by the divinely empowered apostles as well as a large number of people who had personally walked with Jesus. You would think that with all this sound Bible teaching, there would be no false teaching. But such was not the case. Paul, Peter, John, and Jude all warned of false prophets and teachers. In Acts 20:17 & 28-30 Paul warned the Ephesian elders about this. Here we see Satan's two-pronged attack – from without with persecution and lies and from within with false teaching. People that get saved tend to bring some baggage with them in the area of religious ideas. These ideas sometimes begin to color what they are being taught.

### PERSECUTION OF BELIEVERS

During the first thirty years of the Church, there was no official governmental persecution of believers. By and large Roman officials were tolerant of Christianity and did not try to suppress it. But during the reign of Nero the situation began to change dramatically. In 64 A.D. a fire broke out in Rome and spread throughout much of city. A rumor got started that Nero had set the fire on purpose so he could rebuild Rome. The rumor caught on and Nero had to find a scapegoat. He turned to an already suspicious group in the eyes of many Romans – the Christians. Nero launched a severe persecution on the Christians in Rome. This would be the first of 10 periods of persecution by the Empire.

So, what were the reasons for the terrible persecutions that the Christians suffered at the hands of the Roman Empire? Basically, Christians were seen as a threat to the status quo. The Christian faith preached that there was one God over all the earth. It said that the heathen gods were idols and it denounced idolatry. This certainly would arouse the anger of those who worshipped these gods. The emperor in particular expected everyone to acknowledge him as a god. The worship of the various gods and goddesses in ancient Rome was a very public and social activity. Shrines were everywhere in the cities and towns, and festivals of all sorts were held to

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appease the gods. Refusal to take part in these was looked on with great disfavor. In fact, failure to worship the emperor became a capital offense.

Furthermore, Christianity aimed at extending the kingdom of Christ to all parts of the earth. The emperors considered this a dangerous program. Christians were regarded as threatening the economical, political, and religious interests of various classes of people. We see an early example of this in Acts 19:23-27.

### MAINTAINING THE FAITH

It was probably during the second persecution that John was exiled to Patmos where he wrote Revelation. From Chapters 2 and 3 we get a picture of what the church was like following the Apostolic age. The picture John paints is one of complacency and defection of the churches in the Roman province of Asia – now western Turkey. These churches were strong and spiritually healthy 30 years before when the Apostle Paul ministered there.

To keep the Church on the right path, God raised up men that we call the church fathers. The ones that lived and wrote in the last part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. are called the apostolic fathers because they were taught by some of the Apostles. They are distinguished from other Christian authors of this same period in that their practices and theology largely fell within those developing traditions of Christianity as taught by the Apostle Paul. The traditions they represent hold the Jewish Scriptures to be inspired by God and that the Jewish prophets point to the actual flesh and blood of Jesus through which both Jew and Gentile are saved. Furthermore, they represent the idea of an organized Church made up of many different cross-cultural, sister churches sharing one apostolic tradition.

The picture we get from the letters of that time is that the churches were striving to follow the teachings of the Apostles. Believers continued to meet in houses, often secretly in times of persecution. It does not appear that the bishops were any more than senior pastors.

### ESTABLISHING THE FAITH

The Church continued to grow in the second century after Christ despite the persecutions; yet it was a turbulent period for the Church. Little or no doctrinal consensus existed among the various churches and in this environment various heresies flourished. In addition there began to be a laxness in Christian morals and more interest in comfort than commitment. The Apostolic fathers were followed by a new group of leaders who continued to contend for the faith – men like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian. In one of his works, Tertullian addresses the Roman magistrates regarding their treatment of Christians.

**WE ARE NOT A NEW PHILOSOPHY BUT A DIVINE REVELATION. THAT'S WHY YOU CAN'T JUST EXTERMINATE US; THE MORE YOU KILL THE MORE WE ARE. THE BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS IS THE SEED OF THE CHURCH. .... BECAUSE THOSE WHO SEE US DIE, WONDER WHY WE DO. FOR WE DIE LIKE THE MEN YOU REVERE, NOT LIKE SLAVES OR CRIMINALS. AND WHEN THEY FIND OUT, THEY JOIN US.**

**TERTULLIAN, APOLOGETICUS**

How true this is and has been throughout history. Persecution does not destroy the church, it makes it grow.

Beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, questions concerning the proper way to live the Christian life were raised, since there appeared a relaxation of Christian standards and a widening gap between the ideal and the actual Christian.

During this period, Christianity faced several perils. There was a belief in the sharp disjunction between the spiritual and material worlds, followed by a temptation to regard Christianity as a philosophy, somewhat similar to Greek philosophy.

We see that the Church was developing a visible organization in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. No longer were bishops similar to pastors. Now they had positions of authority which they sometimes abused. Pride of position and a desire for control of church machinery began to characterize some church officials. We see Tertullian's reaction to this when he called the church "the church of a lot of bishops" 4.

But despite these issues, bishops, pastors, and laymen were sincere believers. Many went to their deaths during the various persecutions. In fact a number of the bishops of Rome whom the Roman Catholic Church calls popes were martyred. No one who was just pretending to be a Christian would be willing to die for a faith he didn't really believe.

One last thing that came out of this period in Church history was a statement of faith which we call the "Apostles Creed."

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,  
And in Jesus His only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy universal Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Despite many disagreements among believers in the centuries to come this was and is a statement that unites all true believers.

1 - 1 Corinthians 3:11

2 - Matthew 16: 15-18

3 - Titus 1:5, 7 and Ephesians 4:11

4 - Tertullian, *De Pudicitia* (On Modesty), Chapter 21