

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

Pastor Stephen Chitty

### #3. Summary of The Church in the Second Century

The era of the second century church (circa 100AD until 199AD) is marked by persecution and false teaching. Concerning false teaching, Paul gave warnings to Timothy that there would be a defection from sound doctrine, and the church must ever be on guard to preserve the Truth (1 Timothy 4:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:2; 3:1-10; 4:3-4).

Jude's letter is a warning to the church to remain devoted to the faith that has "once and for all been delivered to the Saints" (Jude 3), and decries the efforts to false teachers to pollute the purity of the Christians.

A look at the history of the church in Ephesus reveals the tendency of Believers to drift away from true faith. We read in Acts about the founding of this church in chapters 18 and 19. In the following chapter, Paul warns the Elders of Ephesus that false teachers, described as "savage wolves" (20:29-30) would not only infiltrate the church from outside, but would also arise from within the church itself. Even with the teaching ministry of Paul, Apollos, Timothy, and the Apostle John, by the end of the first century the church at Ephesus had lost its spiritual passion and was in danger of losing its place of influence in the region.

In the Greco-Roman world of the second century, there was a tendency to think in terms of the spiritual realm as good, and the natural world as inherently evil. These assumptions began to distort the teaching of Scripture. In the minds of that ancient culture, if God (spirit) was good, then there is no way He would have created a world (physical) that was evil. The conclusion was that some lesser being created the natural realm. If that was true, then it would also follow that Jesus would never have taken on our own flesh and blood nature. The new teaching was that Jesus only appeared to be flesh and blood. It would also follow that if He wasn't truly flesh and blood, then there was no true resurrection.

The response of the church was admirable. They formulated Confessions of Faith that asserted the realities of Christianity for a new generation. The strong teaching to arise in the second century is that God was indeed creator of the cosmos; that He is indeed the Father of Messiah Jesus, who was fully God and fully man. Jesus also was raised physically from the dead. We will discuss these documents in later chapters.

Apologists like Justin Martyr would defend the faith, though it cost them their lives to do so. Ignatius of Antioch tied false doctrine and persecution together when he said, "If Christ be not fully human, and if He did not really die, why am I suffering for the Gospel and prepared to die for it?"

The second hallmark of this century was the expansion of overt persecution. At first the persecution of Christians was primarily by Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah. But in his warnings to the disciples, Jesus pointed out that persecution would not only be in the synagogues (from the Jews), but also by the Roman government (Mark 13:9; Matthew 23:24). So by the days of Nero in Rome, formal persecution was waged against the church. Thirty years later, the persecution was beginning to spread throughout the empire. Roman law began to recognize the Emperor as divine, but Christians would have no part of such syncretism. They would render to Caesar what was his, but worship belonged only to Jesus. As persecution intensified, men, women, and children were slain because they followed Christ. An old pastor in Smyrna named Polycarp was arrested in 156AD, but was told he could go home and live in peace since he was so old. The only requirement was to worship Caesar as Lord. The Bishop chose to die with the men, women, and children of his congregation. "I have known and served Christ these 86 years. He has done me no harm. Why then, should I deny my Lord and Savior?"

As the third century began, the church would answer the question of how we should deal with persecution and those who abandoned the faith. There would also be a powerful ground-level defense of the Gospel to a culture that denied its power and efficacy. Teachers like Origen and Tertullian would lead the way.