

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

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### #24. The Ministry of Jesus, The Apostles, and The Age of Christian Unity

#### 6 BC until 312 AD

As the history of The Church begins, we are awakened to the realization that our faith is unique on many levels.

**First, we believe in the idea of exclusivity.** There is only one way to salvation, and it is through the message of the Gospel of Jesus the Hebrew Messiah.

**Secondly, we are aware that Christianity is the only religion centered in grace instead of works.** Indeed, it is the only religion that centers upon the suffering and sacrifice of its own God.

**Thirdly, Jesus is seen as the faithful servant of God, whereas Israel had in large measure failed.** It was within the context of Judaism that Jesus came, and His world was crossroads of differing cultures and belief systems. The Jerusalem of Jesus' day was more or less dominated by **Pharisees**, a small but influential religious group whose name meant "separated ones." Their claim to fame was counter-cultural holiness that set them apart from those they considered morally unclean. Another group found its identity in political cooperation with Rome, the occupying force. This group was Israel's aristocracy and were known as the **Sadducees**. To this group belonged the control of the Temple and the Sanhedrin, which was essentially the supreme court of Israel. This was a larger group than the Pharisees, but was unable to capture the allegiance of the common folk. The Zealots were a third group, and their energy was directed toward violent opposition to Rome. The **Zealots** longed for a return to governmental autonomy, or at least the reliever of resistance that was seen 200 years earlier in the days of the Maccabees. A smaller, less interactive group known as the **Essenes**, primarily desert dwellers, felt the Temple of Jerusalem to be hopelessly apostate. In monastic solitude, they studied the Scriptures and waited for Messiah to arrive and establish the Kingdom throughout the world.

When Jesus began His ministry, one of His greatest challenges was to explain that His Kingdom was not accurately understood by either of the four groups. His call was to rebirth, not just revolution. Each group understood only a fragment of the true Kingdom message. Messiah Jesus had come to save the people from their sins, not reestablish a fallen government.

**In short, Jesus' message is condensed to seven truths that are essential to orthodox Christianity.**

#1. Jesus was Divine. He was not created, but was eternally existent. He was known as "Emmanuel" - God with us.

#2. He was born without a human father to the Virgin Mary. His arrival was the perfect blending of two natures - fully God; fully man.

#3. He lived a sinless life.

#4. He died a substitutionary death on the cross.

#5. He was physically raised from the dead.

#6. He then ascended to the Right Hand of God in Heaven.

#7. He will come again at the end of the age to fully establish God's Kingdom on earth.

After His resurrection, the Book of Acts tells the stories of the Apostles who were the primary witnesses of Jesus and Resurrection. The Gospel began in Jerusalem, spread throughout Israel, Samaria and then throughout the entire Gentile world. The Apostolic era began with Christianity being understood as a sect of Judaism. But by the end of the third century it was a force unto itself throughout the Roman Empire.

Christian History in its earliest days tells the stories of the spread of the Gospel at the hands of the twelve original apostles, as well as the ministry of Saul of Tarsus (later known as Paul the Apostle), a zealous persecutor of Christians whose dramatic conversion made him the most famous and influential Christian in all of Church history.

The Apostolic Age is usually seen as ending with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD. The siege of Jerusalem began in the winter of 66 AD, and by the time of Jerusalem's capitulation to the Romans in 70 AD, all of the Apostles were dead, except for John. This event signaled not only the desecration of Judaism, but

also the beginning of a new era for the young church. The growth of the church during this time was staggering!

From 70 AD until about 312 AD, Christianity experienced a period of unity and focus that caused her members to eventually undo Rome from its moral and political moorings. The Christian faith came to be the dominant force throughout the Roman Empire and eastward to India.

During this post-apostolic era, the Church began to experience systematic persecution. In the earliest days, persecution primarily was religious in nature and came about because of Christianity's close association with Judaism. Beginning with Nero and his response to the ministries of Peter and Paul, there was sporadic Roman persecution for several decades, but it was not Empire-wide. In the days of John, however, the persecution came primarily from the Roman Government, and by some local governmental systems they supported.

The persecution and ridicule, instead of shrinking Christianity, actually made the faith stronger. Local fellowships strengthened under the leadership of pastors and second-generation apostolic leaders. After the fall of Jerusalem, the center of Christianity moved northward to Antioch of Syria. Antioch in the late 300s had grown to a population of 500,000. It is estimated that at least half of these were Christians. Rome was conservatively estimated to have a population of over 30,000 Christians in 250 AD, and Bishops from France, England, and Spain attended councils during this period of time. It is generally accepted that Christianity was also thriving in India during this time because of St. Thomas' missionary journey there. Some of the greatest churches in history developed in North Africa during this period. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons in Gaul, wrote against the spread of Gnosticism, and other notable writers and leaders such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Melito, Tatian, and Theophilus of Antioch emerged to effectively defend Christian principles.

Inspired by Luke and the book of Acts, it was during this era that Church historians like Eusebius (265-339) continued to document the spread of the Gospel. We find that the message and mission of the first century church was organized, systematized, and put into manageable form that enabled it to effectively spread throughout the whole world. The original Apostles were dead, and this was before the days of Christian Kings. But during these decades, the Church began to understand itself as a universal force that really was fulfilling the commands of Jesus.

It was in this period that the word "Catholic" became attached to the Church. The word meant "universal, world-wide; all-inclusive," and was used because the Church shared a **(1) common mission, (2) a common orthodox beliefs, and (3) a common church governmental form** - and it was spreading throughout the whole world. Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch (50-108), was the first writer to use "catholic" to describe the Church of this era. The term began to be regularly used to describe the Church as united in terms of mission, message, and structure.

By the time of Emperor Constantine's reign (312-337), there were churches in every large town throughout the Roman Empire. Instead of being destroyed by persecution, the churches grew. At first, Christianity was persecuted; and then tolerated. Eventually she became the preferred religion of the Empire. Within a few years, it was the official religion throughout all the Roman lands. The Church seemed unstoppable!

At first glance, the Church of this era seemed unlikely to take down a pagan empire, but the lessons we learn are these:

(1) The Church was motivated by belief in a God-given, Scriptural mission. They believed in the event of Jesus, and they held a high view of Scripture.

(2) The Church made it their priority to care for people. They did not preach a "social gospel," but they did believe the physical and emotional needs of people should be addressed as well as spiritual needs.

(3) The Believers of this era lived as a loving family. In explaining the power of Christianity, Tertullian once said, "See how these Christians love each other!" They were known for their care of the poor, of widows and orphans, of visits to prisoners, to slaves who worked the mines, and to those in need as a result of natural disasters or war.

In our next lesson, we will look closer at how the Church withstood the onslaught of persecution and rose to prominence in the Roman Empire.