CHURCH HISTORY
Week Two: The Spread of the Faith (100–324 AD)

The Roman Empire in the Second Century

During the earliest days of Christian history, the only real political, economic, and military superpower in the world was the Roman Empire. Geographically, the empire encompassed almost the entire Mediterranean region and included most of Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa. Linguistically, although dozens of languages were spoken in the empire, the two official languages were Latin (spoken in the West) and Greek (spoken in the East). By the second century, Roman religion centered upon emperor worship, but remained polytheistic and syncretistic—the gods of conquered peoples were incorporated into the state religion. The cultural centers of the empire were the imperial cities, which enjoyed considerable autonomy so long as they paid taxes and were loyal to Caesar.

Church Life during the 2nd and 3rd Centuries

By the turn of the second century, the church was primarily a gentile movement. The earliest centers of Christian growth were the cities—this is evident even in the New Testament. Though critics claimed Christianity was a religion for women and slaves, the evidence indicates the early church was fairly socioeconomically diverse. By the early second century, many churches were setting apart special buildings for corporate worship gatherings—typically houses that had been bequeathed to the congregation. When churches gathered for worship, they sang hymns, recited creedal statements, prayed, read the Scriptures, listened to teaching from a biblical text, and celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

Local churches were led by elders or bishops, though there was a debate as to whether a church should have only one bishop or a plurality of bishops. Clement of Rome (died ca. 100) argued for a plurality of bishops who could share shepherding responsibilities. Ignatius of Antioch (died ca. 110–115) argued for a single bishop—plurality leads to factions, while one man can preserve the church’s unity. All bishops were men, though in many churches both men and women served as deacons. By the third century, bishops and elders were considered two different positions. Elders, who were increasingly called priests, provided pastoral care to particular congregations. Like the first century apostles, bishops exercised oversight over all the churches in a particular city. The most important bishops served in the key imperial cities such as Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch; over time, they exercised authority over other bishops in smaller cities and rural areas.

By the second century, church membership had been divided into a two-step process: catechesis and baptism. Those who came to faith in Christ became catechumens who were instructed (catechized) in basic Christian doctrine and ethics, often for a period of at least a year. (It was three years by the third century.) After the catechesis period came to an end, catechumens were baptized by immersion, typically at sunrise on Easter Sunday. Following their baptism, the new church members celebrated their first communion, which in the early second century was a full meal following the worship gathering. By the end of the second century, the Lord’s Supper had been separated from a meal and incorporated into the worship gathering. Also by the turn of the third century, some terminally ill infants were being baptized on the presumption that baptism...
would guarantee their salvation. In Christian families, infant baptism became increasingly popular over the next three centuries, though adult converts were still baptized by immersion.

There was no comprehensive missions strategy during the Patristic Era—typically, the faith simply spread with merchants, soldiers, and immigration. Beginning in the third century, some individuals began to indicate a special calling to intentionally spread Christianity to unreached places. Typically, the bishop would give his blessing to this calling and send the missionary out with his endorsement. One early missionary was Gregory Thaumaturgus (210–265), a gifted evangelist who allegedly performed miracles and established the first permanent Christian witness in Cappadocia, a region in eastern Turkey that became home to several important Christian leaders in the fourth century.

**Defining and Defending the Faith**

By the second century, several heresies were beginning to threaten the church. For our purposes, a heresy is a theological error that arises from within the church and threatens a core teaching about God, Jesus Christ, or salvation—heresy is damnably incorrect doctrine. Other errors weren’t necessarily damnable, but were still spiritually dangerous. We might think of dangerous, but not necessarily damnable beliefs as heterodox, but not heretical. One notable heterodox group were the Montanists, a second century sect that claimed the gift of prophecy and imposed legalistic moral requirements on all members. As a general rule, when heresy or heterodoxy threatened the faith, God would raise up key thinkers to clarify what the church had believed since the time of the apostles. We call these thinkers the Church Fathers, and we call their beliefs orthodoxy.

By far the most influential heresy was Gnosticism, an umbrella term used to describe hundreds of pagan religions in the second and third centuries. As a general rule, Gnostics believed that the spiritual is good and the material is bad, the physical world was created by an evil or ignorant being, and salvation comes through believing a secret oral tradition that had been passed down by the apostles. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–200) argued against the Gnostic belief in a secret oral tradition, countering that there was a public oral tradition that was consistent with the Scriptures and that was known to the whole church. Irenaeus also argued that Jesus had “recapitulated” or reenacting Adam’s history, but without sin—only those who trust in the perfect obedience and atoning death of the Last Adam will be saved.

Other Church Fathers made key contributions to the faith. Tertullian (ca. 160–220) agreed with Irenaeus that there was a public oral tradition that dated to the time of the apostles. In response to those who argued the Son or Spirit weren’t fully divine, he coined the Latin term *trinitas* to explain God’s triune nature. Tertullian was very pessimistic about Roman culture, especially traditional pagan philosophy, famous asking “what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) took a more optimistic view of philosophy, arguing that God had communicated real truth through the greatest Greek philosophers; they even hinted that some of them (particularly Plato) might have even been saved as pre-Christians. They also were gifted apologists and evangelists who provided rational arguments for the Christian faith against Jewish and pagan critics.
Clement’s student Origen (185–254) straddled the fence between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. On the one hand, he defended the faith against critics and wrote what was arguably the first systematic theology. On the other hand, he preferred allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament over more literal interpretations, he argued that human souls preexisted in heaven before they were placed in bodies at birth, and he at least hoped that all rational beings, including the demons, would eventually be saved. Though his views on preexistent souls and universal salvation would be rejected by the church, his allegorical interpretation greatly influenced the medieval church.

The Canon of Scripture

One important early heretic was Marcion (ca. 85–160), who argued that the God of the Old Testament was wrathful and only loved Jews, while the God of the New Testament was merciful and loved all people. He thus rejected the Old Testament completely and argued that Jesus wasn’t really a Jew. Marcion circulated his own canon of Scripture that rejected all of the New Testament writings except the letters of Paul and an edited version of Luke’s Gospel. Marcion’s anti-Semitic canon created the need for Christian leaders to determine which New Testament books seemed to be inspired in the same way as the Old Testament Scriptures.

By the second century, virtually all Christians agreed on the core of the New Testament canon. All agreed there are only four true Gospels, even though the second century witnessed a proliferation of “Gospels” written from a Gnostic perspective. All agreed that the letters of Paul are inspired, though the Church Fathers debated whether or not Paul wrote Hebrews. All agreed that Acts was written by Luke and is inspired. But some of the other books weren’t universally accepted, particularly the non-Pauline epistles and Revelation. Furthermore, some books sounded similar to the New Testament writings, especially the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, both of which date to the turn of the second century.

Though there was never any formal vote as to which books were inspired and which weren’t, several criteria became important in the canonization process:

1) Apostolicity – only those books that were written by apostles or those closely associated with apostles were authentic Scripture

2) Catholicity – only those books that were widely accepted by most mainstream Christians were authentic Scripture

3) Orthodoxy – only those books that accurately represented the mainstream beliefs of orthodox Christians were authentic Scripture

For the most part, the canon was settled by the third century, though it wasn’t until the fourth century that the debate completed ended. The point to remember is this: no books included in the New Testament were widely doubted to be inspired, and there are no other books not in the New Testament that were widely considered to be inspired. Consensus about the canon emerged relatively early in church history.
Persecution

During the first century, persecution was sporadic, was never empire-wide, and was typically the result of mob violence. By the early second century, Christianity was an illegal sect that was punishable by death. As a general rule, the scope and ferocity of persecution increased from generation to generation until the legalization of Christianity in 313.

In 111, Emperor Trajan argued that Christians shouldn’t be systematically sought out, but if one was discovered to be a Christian, he should be executed if he refused to worship Caesar. Bishops and other Christian leaders were often targeted. Around 115, Ignatius of Antioch was martyred in Rome. In 155, Polycarp of Smyrna was martyred. Polycarp was an elderly bishop who had been discipled by the Apostle John. When Polycarp was led into the coliseum and commanded to renounce Christ, he responded, “Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Justin Martyr earned his surname in 165 when he was executed during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the famous philosopher-emperor and a harsh enemy of Christianity.

By the turn of the third century, persecution was becoming more common. Many emperors wanted to return Rome to its former glory, seeing Christianity as a threat to traditional Roman religion and values. In addition to church leaders, new converts were tortured and executed. The most famous martyr (and most famous woman) during the Patristic Era was Vibia Perpetua, who was executed in the coliseum in 202. In 249, Emperor Decius decreed that all citizens must offer sacrifices to a statue of Caesar. All who complied received certificates; after a grace period, anyone caught without a certificate was tortured or killed, including many Christian leaders. Some Christians purchased certificates on the black market. Many Christians offered the sacrifices and worshiped Caesar.

After the Decian persecution ended in 249, many of those who had offered sacrifices applied to rejoin their churches—they claimed that they privately still worshiped Christ, and that their worship of Caesar was merely outward and insincere. Some church leaders, such as Cornelius of Rome, argued that these “lapsed” believers should be allowed back into church membership if they sincerely repented. Novatian disagreed with Cornelius, arguing that the lapsed had abandoned Christ and forfeited their salvation. Novatian led a breakaway movement called the Novationists that claimed to be the true church. Cyprian of Carthage rejected the Novationist claim by arguing, “he cannot have God as his Father who doesn’t have the church as his mother” and “there is no salvation outside the church.” During the Middle Ages, the writings of Cyprian would be used to argue that the Catholic Church is the institutional embodiment of the universal church.

Persecution affected Christians in a variety of ways. First, it forced them to worship in hiding—a popular place was the catacombs under the major Roman cities. Second, it led to a great reverence for martyrs that sometimes bordered on worship. Many Christians collected relics that were in some way tied to a martyr, while others prayed to martyrs. Third, and most important, persecution led to growth. No matter how bad persecution became, the church continued to grow—historians estimate that by 300, between twenty-five and forty percent of the Roman Empire had become Christian. Tertullian argued that, despite efforts to destroy the church, “the blood of the martyrs is seed.”
The Legalization of Christianity

In 284, Diocletian became emperor. The Roman Empire was rapidly declining, and two consecutive Caesars had been assassinated prior to Diocletian taking the throne. To facilitate renewal, in 293 Diocletian divided the empire into a tetrarchy. Diocletian remained the primary ruler, but he appointed three generals to help him rule. Diocletian also instituted the worst persecution of the church to date, ordering that all Christians be systematically executed. He also seized all Christian property for the state. His successor, Galerius, succeeded in almost wiping out Christianity in North Africa.

After Diocletian had to step down for health reasons in 306, a young general named Constantine became one of the members of the tetrarchy. Constantine refused to continue to persecute the Christians in the area of the empire he controlled. Perhaps he was lenient because his half sister was a Christian. Maybe he believed that Christianity was the way of the future. Whatever his reasons, Constantine intentionally cultivated loyalty from the Christians at the very time he began moving to consolidate imperial rule back into the hands of a single emperor.

In 312, Constantine launched an invasion of Rome. He met his rival Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, about five miles North of Rome. In the ensuing battle, Constantine defeated Maxentius and drowned thousands of his soldiers in the Tiber River. According to the early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, the day before the battle Constantine received a vision from the Christian God commanding him to conquer in the sign of Christ and his cross—in response to the vision, Constantine had the chi-rho symbol put on his soldiers’ shields. Constantine marched into Rome on October 29 and was declared the sole emperor in the western half of the empire.

In 313, Constantine reached an accord with Licinius, the emperor in the eastern half of the empire. Because they met in Milan, their treaty has been called the Edict of Milan. The treaty included three provisions: Constantine and Licinius wouldn’t go to war with each other, Licinius would marry Constantine’s half sister, and Christianity would be granted legalized status and all confiscated property would be returned to the church. Despite the agreement in Milan, Licinius and Constantine battled for full control of the Roman Empire off and on for a decade until Constantine finally became sole emperor in 324.

A Christian Emperor?

After the Edict of Milan, Constantine continued to publicly favor Christianity. Under his leadership, destroyed churches were rebuilt and Christian clergy were exempted from paying taxes. In 330, Constantine relocated his throne to the newly built city of Constantinople, which was meant to be both the new Rome and a Christian city. However, despite his partiality toward Christianity, Constantine maintained strong ties to traditional paganism. For example, he retained the title of Pontifex Maximus, which made him the official high priest of the state pagan religion. The first coins he issued contained images of pagan gods and not Christian iconography. When he declared the first day of the week a public holiday in 321, he named it in honor of the sun rather than the Christian God. The sun was the sign of Apollo, one of the most important gods in the Roman pantheon—many scholars speculate that perhaps Constantine conflated the Christian God with Apollo, assuming they were two ways to speak of the same deity.
Despite the ambiguities surrounding his Christian commitment, Constantine played a crucial role in legalizing Christianity and putting it on the road to becoming the official imperial religion. Like earlier emperors, Constantine wanted to restore Rome’s ancient glory; unlike his predecessors, Constantine wanted to base this renewal upon Christianity rather than paganism. Constantine did receive baptism near the end of his life, which may have indicated a final break with traditional paganism as well as his personal confidence in the superiority of the Christian faith. It’s perhaps best to think of Constantine as one who, for whatever reasons, was favorable to Christianity during his reign and perhaps finally embraced the faith at the end of his life.