

## EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Term 2 2023

### Unit 4 - Christian Life: 2nd and 3rd centuries

- What has been useful so far?
- Why 'early church history?...'
- The Epistle to 'Diognetus' (c150 AD)  
 "For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind by country, or by speech, or by dress. ...  
 They marry like the rest of the world, they breed children, but they do not cast their offspring adrift. They have a common table, but yet not common. They exist in the flesh, but they live not after the flesh. They spend their existence upon earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. ...  
 they love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown, and they are condemned; they are put to death, and they gain new life. They are poor, and make many rich; they lack everything, and in everything they abound. ...  
 The Jews war against them as aliens, and the Greeks persecute them; and they that hate them can state no ground for their enmity. ..."

(cf. Pliny's letter to Trajan (manual p 71); 1 Peter 1)

#### Creating Unity (Eph 4:3)

##### (a) The 'Catholic Church'

'Avoid divisions, as the beginning of evil. Follow, all of you, the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father; and follow the presbytery as the Apostles. -----  
 - Wheresoever the bishop appears, there let the people be, even as wheresoever Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church.' (*Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnaens*)

NB: This is the first example of the expression 'the Catholic Church'... meaning ?

##### (b) The New Testament

It has been a popular hypothesis that the Hebrew canon (our Old Testament) was finished at the Council of Jamnia late 1st century in response to the rise of Christianity. This has been strongly disputed more recently.

The New Testament (as we know it) wasn't fixed until 400 AD. Iranaeus (c 130 - 200 AD) quickly established the authority of the four gospels, though his arguments for there being only four are certainly unusual!

AD 200 - No Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, 3 John - add Revelation of Peter, Wisdom of Solomon. The Shepherd of Hermas for private use only.

AD 250 (Origen) - No Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude. Also disputed: The Shepherd of Hermas, Letter of Barnabas, Teaching of Twelve Apostles, Gospel of the Hebrews.

AD 300 (Eusebius) - No Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude (though these are well known & considered useful). Excluded: The Shepherd of Hermas, Letter of Barnabas, Gospel of the Hebrews, Revelation of Peter, Acts of Peter, Didache

The Council of Carthage (397) agreed to include James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John & Jude and so the New Testament canon was fixed.

### (c) Statements of faith

If in the church of 2nd century the word used to denote the worldwide church was c\_\_\_\_\_, the word used to denote the overwhelming acceptance of true belief was o\_\_\_\_\_.

So catholic Christianity is orthodox!

Creeds, with a set form of words, weren't formulated until later but earlier confessions included a baptismal statement described by Hippolytus using an interrogatory style (*manual p 76*), and various versions of the 'Old Roman' creed - was always in an attempt to correct heresy:

I believe in God Almighty  
 And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord  
 Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
 Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried  
 And the third day rose from the dead  
 Who ascended into heaven  
 And sits on the right hand of the Father  
 Whence he comes to judge the living and the dead.  
 And in the Holy Ghost  
 The holy church  
 The remission of sins  
 The resurrection of the flesh  
 The life everlasting.

Origen described the *Rule of Faith* (*manual p72-3*) as: 'the teaching of the church preserved, matured and handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles.'

**(d) Gathering**

Flexible leadership, with missionary preachers, evangelists and prophetic teachers gave way to 'static' leadership quite early so that by the time of Ignatius churches in Asia were led by the 'three-fold ministry.'

- bishop (one)
- presbyters (several)
- deacons (several)

A church gathering comprised Scripture readings, an exposition, prayers, the kiss of peace - open to enquirers and converts under instruction. This led into the 'eucharist' (communion) which was restricted to baptised communicants.

This led to some serious misunderstandings and accusations:

- cannibalism (eat the body, drink the blood)
- sexual orgies (love-feast ... kiss of peace)

The secrecy of the meetings and slander of a pagan public led to a headache for Roman authorities (remember Pliny's letter to Trajan).

Christians were also accused of atheism! Can you think why?

**(e) Easter**

A common understanding of when to celebrate Easter could not be reached, though a measure of uniformity was achieved at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).

**Major Centres of Christianity****(a) Rome:**

Mainstream Christianity moved West. Alfred Harnack calculated that by 250 AD, 30 000 Christians lived in Rome and comprised mostly Greek speakers from the lower classes. Beyond this we know of a church in Lyons (France) and there were bishops and churches in Spain by 400 AD. Three bishops from Britain attended a church council at Arles in southern France in 314 AD.

**(b) Carthage:**

Carthage, now a residential suburb of Tunis, was the major city of North Africa during this time. Every town and most villages had their own bishop. The church was predominately Latin speaking and upper class. It hosted the prestigious Council of Carthage in 397 AD. Augustine lived and studied there for several years.

**(c) Alexandria:**

Early Christians claimed John Mark as the church's founder. The church there was particularly influential during the third and fourth centuries.