

# Early Christianity: Challenges That Shaped the Church

*Some important challenges and lessons from the early years of our Christian movement*

## Introduction

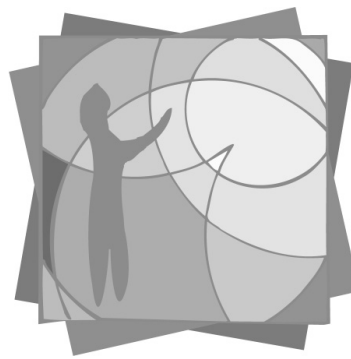
When Presbyterians think of important moments in the history of the church, the events and people who shaped and passed on both the content of our belief and the practices by which we live, we turn first, of course, to the New Testament. From there we tend to jump to the Protestant Reformation and the contributions of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Unfortunately, in making that jump we lose sight of some of the most important moments of our heritage, because much of what we take for granted in the church today emerged during those early centuries in response to the challenges the church was facing. Examining some of those challenges and the ways in which the church responded can provide a frame of reference for considering our own faith and practice and the challenges we face as Christians today.

## The Spread of Christianity

Pentecost is often referred to as the birthday of the church. Acts 2 tells us of the gift of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost after the crucifixion. That gift unleashed the missionary work that continues into the present. Initially, the Palestinian Jews who had been followers of Jesus preached to other Jews in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church, which emerged from that preaching, consisted not only of Palestinian Jews but also of “Hellenists,” Greek-speaking Jews who had been shaped to some degree by the Greco-Roman culture outside of Palestine. This first missionary effort of the church began the movement toward ever-wider circles of conversions.

## Beyond Jerusalem

With the beginning of persecution in Jerusalem, some Christians scattered about Palestine; others found refuge among a network of Hellenist synagogues located throughout the



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Roman Empire. Although Christians encountered resistance in some of these Greek-speaking Jewish communities, they also found there Jews who were receptive to the message of Jesus. Another group proved to be receptive as well: devout Gentiles, i.e., non-Jews, who had been attracted to the ethical standards of Judaism and even worshiped the God of the Jews, although without submitting to the whole of the Jewish law. The Ethiopian converted by Philip (Acts 8:26–40) and the Roman Cornelius converted by Peter (Acts 10) are examples of devout Gentiles who were receptive to the gospel.

## Beyond Judaism

The spread of the gospel in the next hundred years may perhaps be thought of as occurring in concentric circles: Palestinian Jews, then Hellenist Jews, then devout Gentiles, and finally people throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Of course, the movement was hardly orderly, but there does seem to have been a sense in which the gospel appealed to ever wider audiences, each progressively more distant from Palestinian Judaism. This missionary impulse of early Christianity repeatedly forced the church to reconsider its identity, primarily its Jewishness. Was the message of Jesus intended only for Jews? If not, did non-Jews who wished to convert have to observe the Mosaic law, including such requirements

as circumcision for males and a kosher diet? The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) officially opened the door to Gentiles. Significantly, it also dropped the requirement for circumcision as well as most dietary restrictions.

Although Paul is the missionary about whom we know the most, the message of Jesus spread throughout the Greco-Roman world and beyond not only through missionaries but also through immigrants, merchants, other travelers, and, of course, people telling their neighbors. One effect of this multi-pronged missionary work was that over time the proportion of Jewish Christians declined in relation to Gentile Christians. In the second century, the leadership of the church was distinctively Gentile. Paul's message that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28) opened the door of the church, potentially, to everyone.

It is difficult to establish the number of Christians at any one time. Acts speaks of about 120 believers immediately before Pentecost and larger numbers afterward. By the year 350, there would seem to have been approximately 33 million Christians, more than half of the empire's total population of 60 million.<sup>1</sup>

## The Challenge of Gnosticism

The astonishing growth of the church brought challenges. New converts with new perspectives questioned established Christian identity. What elements of faith and practice were essential and what could be altered or even dropped? The answers were not obvious.

One of the most important challenges arose in the second century: Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge). That label is used to cover a variety of religious systems that existed both inside and outside the church. In general, gnostics taught that there is a fundamental antagonism between spirit and matter. Spirit is good and has its source in a supreme deity previously unknown. Matter, in contrast, is inferior, even evil, and has its source in the creator God of the Old Testament. The human dilemma is that we are all spirits trapped in material prisons, most specifically our bodies. Thus bodily entrapment, not sin, is the source of all human ills. What is needed is a savior who comes from the supreme God and provides secret knowledge enabling the escape of spirit from matter and a return home to the spiritual realm.

Those gnostics, who considered themselves to be Christians, believed that Christ was the revealer who had brought secret knowledge making escape possible, but only for a few. Because he was entirely spiritual, he could not have been born of a woman or have had a real body, although he may have made use of a body while on the earth. Finally, because he had come

from the previously unknown God, he had no connection with the God of the Old Testament or the material creation.

Gnosticism was attractive in that it provided a satisfying explanation for human ills: My true self is spirit and good; yet I am trapped in a body that not only fails me but also engages in evils for which I as spirit cannot be held accountable. However comforting it may be to believe that the "real me" is pure, the gnostic opposition of spirit and matter entailed a rejection of fundamental elements of the Christian message: monotheism, the Old Testament and its God, the goodness of creation, the reality of the incarnation and crucifixion, and the need for forgiveness of sin. It also limited the possibility of salvation to the spiritual and intellectual elite.

## Safeguarding the Faith of the Apostles

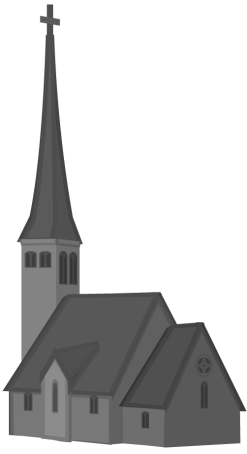
In the late second century, three effective lines of defense against Gnosticism developed. The goal was to ensure that the teaching and preaching of the church were in continuity with the teaching and preaching of the apostles. This three-pronged defense against Gnosticism continues to shape the church today.

### Canon of Scriptures

One line of defense against the gnostics was the establishment of a canon, i.e., an official set of Christian Scriptures. The basic criterion was that these documents should be traceable either to the apostles or to their immediate associates. The four Gospels and the Epistles that we have today were believed to satisfy this criterion. The Old Testament also met the criterion in that it had been, generally speaking, the text sacred to the apostles and even Jesus himself. Having such a collection of texts had the effect of disallowing later additions by gnostics. The union of Old Testament and New Testament also ensured that the church would insist on a connection between the God of the Old Testament and the savior proclaimed in the New.

### Creed

A second defense against the gnostics was the use of a statement of faith similar to our creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed. Called Rules of Faith, they affirmed the one God, who was not only the creator of the material world but also the source of the incarnate Son. These summaries of the faith were believed to have originated with the apostles, who had intended them as a lens through which Scripture was to be interpreted. Reading the Scriptures through such a lens served as a protection against gnostic speculation about multiple deities.



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mary concern was that the Christians refused to make sacrifice to the gods of the empire on whom, the Romans believed, the empire's safety depended. Christians were guilty of treason.

## The Church as an Alternative Society

The offense of the Christians went even further, however. Because much of Roman civic life, including the theater, sports, the military, governmental service, and even taking an oath, entailed some form of idolatry, Christians, when possible, dissociated themselves from these activities. In so doing, they appeared indifferent, even hostile, to basic structures of Roman society.

Mistrusted by their neighbors, Christians constructed an alternative society based on exclusive fidelity to the one God and love of neighbor, especially those neighbors within the Christian community. Preparation for full membership in this alternative society regularly consisted of several years of pre-baptismal instruction in Scriptures, doctrine, and way of life. Those seeking admission, called catechumens, had to show evidence that they were conforming to the habits of Christian life, including almsgiving, visiting the sick, living in chastity or, if married, in fidelity. Their commitments were not to the empire but to Christ and his church.

## From Persecuted Minority to Favored Majority

The irony, of course, is that after the first decade of the fourth century, the church, with the support of the Roman emperors, moved from being an alternative to Roman society to a force within it. The Emperor Constantine was critical to this shift. He was convinced that the God of the Christians had granted him victory in a decisive battle in 312. A year later, he and his co-emperor issued the Edict of Milan, which granted freedom of worship to adherents of all religions in the empire. After Constantine became sole emperor in 324, his involvement with the church grew. He was even more convinced that he owed his position to the favor of the Christian God.

As previous emperors had seen Rome's ancestral religion as a means of unifying the empire and securing the favor of its gods, Constantine and all but one of his successors saw Christianity as necessary to imperial unity and to the favor of this powerful God. Accordingly, Constantine did a multitude of things to strengthen the church. He insisted that any properties that the church or individual Christians had lost during persecution were to be restored to them. He gave bishops the right to serve as judges in civil cases. He gave to the church, and thus to its bishops, grain to be distributed to the clergy and the poor. He subsidized the building of enormous churches in major cities and at locations considered to be holy, such as the

## Apostolic Succession

A third line of defense against the gnostics was the notion of apostolic succession. According to this view, the apostles had appointed and instructed their successors, known as bishops, who in turn had instructed and appointed their own successors in an unbroken line. This line of defense protected the church against self-appointed gnostic teachers who taught whatever they pleased.

As Presbyterians, we may choose to dispute the second-century claim that our sacred texts, the content of our teaching, and our ordained teachers all can be traced to the apostles. Yet we do use a canon of Scripture that corresponds to a great extent to the books used by Christians at the end of the second century. We also interpret the Bible through the lens of the Apostles' Creed, which affirms that there is only one God, who is both our creator and redeemer. Finally, although we do not have bishops, our presbyteries preside over the certification of persons invested with the teaching authority of the church. Candidates for the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament must demonstrate that they accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as interpreted through the lens of the ancient creed. We, too, want the church's teaching to be in continuity with the teaching of Jesus to the apostles.

## The Church and the Roman Empire

Gnosticism was not the only challenge faced by the church. From the late first century into the early fourth, Christians were subject to sporadic persecution by the Roman government. Their suspicious neighbors accused them of cannibalism, incest, and atheism and blamed them for assorted disasters: floods, droughts, famines, and plagues. Whatever credence the Roman government gave to these charges, its pri-

sites of the nativity and the ascension. He showed preference to Christians in his hiring practices.

Moreover, in 325, Constantine convened and financed a council of bishops at Nicaea (near Constantinople, today's Istanbul) to deal with a heated dispute over the relationship of the Son to the Father in the evolving doctrine of the Trinity. What little information that we have about this council, which came to be known as the First Ecumenical Council, suggests that Constantine was involved in its deliberations and may have contributed to its outcome. The principle of imperial involvement in the operation of the church had been established. Even more important, the doctrinal decisions of the church now had the police power of the state behind them. Finally, in 392 the emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be the only legitimate religion of the empire.

## The Church within Roman Society

The increasing imperial favor shown the church had a variety of effects. Church rolls grew dramatically, because it was not only legal but also advantageous to be associated with the church. As noted above, by the middle of the fourth century, more than half the population of the empire was identified as Christian. As churches became the beneficiaries of imperial and private generosity, bishops, especially in large cities, became the administrators of growing ecclesiastical resources, including prominent real estate. Many of those resources were used to care for the innumerable poor, especially widows and orphans. Moreover, some bishops employed their moral authority to denounce abuses of power; yet the church did little to challenge grave social injustices, such as slavery.

In effect, over the course of the fourth century the church lost its position as an alternative society. If not yet coextensive with Roman society, it had become a pervasive and prominent force within it. Neither the imperial government nor the

ecclesiastical hierarchy could imagine its own existence apart from the other. Nevertheless, in the development of Christian monasticism there arose an alternative not only to Roman society but also to church, which had become identified with that society.

## The Challenge to the Church Today

Some observers of the church today claim that Christians in the West are moving toward a pre-Constantinian status in relation to the state. Although the claim is an obvious exaggeration, the point would seem to be valid: The church in the West does appear to be moving toward a status in which it can no longer expect the state or the broader culture to reinforce its faith and values. Many believe that the change in status provides an opportunity to reconsider what it means to be followers of Christ. What forms of faith and practice would compose such a life? What of our present social entanglements might need to fall away? What would need to be strengthened? As Presbyterians, historically we have believed that our vocation lies within the structures of society; yet our theological ancestors also believed that within those structures our vocation is to be conformed not to society but to Christ. What might it mean to pose an alternative to society within society itself?

## About the Writer

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## Endnote

- 1 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press 1996), 4–9.