

Church History

Unit 2

The Early Church and the Roman Empire

Manuscript



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Church History

Unit Two: The Early Church and the Roman Empire

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THE APOSTOLIC ERA

What is the value of studying the time of the apostles?

Dr. Joseph D. Fantin

I don't think we can undervalue or underestimate the importance of studying the first century world. The more we know about the history, the more we can know about what the biblical authors and readers understood, the better we can understand that cognitive environment, if you will, the better we will be able to understand the various nuances of the biblical text. So, for me, I think that would be one of the most important tasks for anyone interested in the Bible, is to try to understand the history, but as well as the culture and the values of that time period, and that, in turn, will make it much easier to understand the biblical text when we can share those values.

How reliable are historical accounts from the early church fathers about the early church?

Dr. Paul Sanders

One of the limitations of history is that we are tributary to documents. We depend on the documents that we have to reconstitute what has taken place in the past. Those documents are sometimes written, they're also sometimes archeological. Different kinds of traces and there. It's both a strong point and a weak point. We do have a relative abundance of documents from the period of early church history. We could wish we had more. One of the difficulties is that the adversaries of the ones who have written are portrayed by those who have written. And so, the view that we have of certain people and certain events and certain movements in church history, in the early church history in particular, are partial. They are biased or slanted. So, we have

to recognize that as we look at that bigger picture. So, we do have an abundance of documents. I think particularly, of course, as we look at the documents of the New Testament, we're very confident of the diversity, the ancient nature of those documents, all of these things. As we move into the first three or four centuries of the church, we are very much dependent on the church fathers and their particular view of what has taken place. It's not modern history from the sense of a critical standpoint. It's more of a theological history. It's a history that talks about our heritage from a different standpoint than, let's say, someone who's sitting down to write a dissertation in a modern university today. So yes, we do have good information, but we have to recognize that it is not complete information, and we could wish we had more. And as we discover more, then we could better reconstitute history.

How did Christianity spread to the Gentile world?

Dr. Danny Akin

Christianity going to the Gentiles was initially launched by God calling and saving the apostle Paul. And I don't think there's any way to overstate the value of Paul in the Gentile mission. He went where the Jews had not yet understood they were supposed to go. Jesus had made very clear in the Great Commission that they were to make disciples of *all* the nations, but they still had a restricted view of that, I think, primarily applied to Jewish persons among the nations. Paul understood, no, every tribe, tongue, people and nation included Jew and Gentile alike. Once Paul began that mission and planted churches, those churches had that DNA in them, and, therefore, it was a natural thing for them to seek to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles, and by God's grace, we're here today because of that.

Dr. Todd M. Johnson

Christianity spread to the Gentile world largely because the Mediterranean was this bustling area of trade, so that little Jewish kingdom in which Christianity began with Jesus and his disciples was actually a place where lots of people from all over the Mediterranean were coming and hearing what this good news was. So, initially, it spread through contact that the Gentiles had with Christians, new Christians mainly of Jewish background. But once it spread beyond Jerusalem and into the surrounding areas, then it spread through families. And one of the great examples is actually the Celtic peoples who stretched all the way from Galatia, which is in modern-day Turkey, all the way up into Ireland. And that set of families was the main means by which the gospel spread, from one cousin to the next over a long period of time. And we see that throughout the whole world at the time.

Prof. Mumo Kisau

Jesus Christ, before he departed to go back to heaven to the Father, he promised in Acts 1:8, and he said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and to the ends of the earth," of the world. And this, end of the world, he meant that to everyone, including

the Gentiles. And it is the apostle Peter who begins by being called in the dream, and in his dream, he's almost like sleeping, he sees a vision, and in the vision a man is calling him. This is Cornelius, and Cornelius was a Gentile. And he goes to him, and when he is speaking, this Cornelius then, that family began to speak in tongues. That meant they have already received the word of God and they have received Christ. And once they speak in tongues, he says, "Look, these Gentiles, they speak like we did at Pentecost. Who can refuse water from them?" And it's at that point then that they get baptized, and the word gets back to Jerusalem. People are complaining, "How can you go to eat with the uncircumcised people?" And Peter says, "No, this word of God has come to the Gentiles just like it's come to us." And there then we have, Saul gets converted, and Saul and Barnabas then are sent through prayer and fasting at Antioch. God says, please set apart this Paul and Barnabas to go to the Gentile world to bring the word of God to them. Because when Paul had been converted, if you'll remember in Acts, you'll remember he is told that, "You will become my instrument to bring the gospel to the kings, to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth." This is then how God opens up the way, because, otherwise, the Jewish apostles were just visiting the Jewish homes, were not to go to the Gentile homes, until Peter breaks through, and then now Paul takes over, and he's about, then, to go to the rest of the world, all the way even to Rome.

Dr. Joseph D. Fantin

Christianity spread to the Gentile world through, obviously, Jesus and especially Paul, but most importantly the message itself has a universal nature to it. Jesus came to Jews generally, and yet within the Old Testament we have outreach to Gentiles... According to Paul, who through revelation as written in Galatians, talks about this gospel that he can bring to the Gentiles, which is really revolutionary to Jewish people at that time. So, I think the gospel itself being universal is what ultimately led to the spread of Gentile Christianity. And then, of course, it was appealing to them. They saw something in that, in the midst of a culture where their needs weren't being met that the gospel itself was able to meet.

What gifts did Paul have that made him so important in spreading the gospel to the Gentiles?**Dr. Danny Akin**

You know, I often say that the greatest Christian theologian and missionary who ever lived was the apostle Paul, and I think that God uniquely gifted him as a person, but then also uniquely gifted him spiritually. As a person, he clearly had a great intellect; he had a great mind. He clearly was passionate about whatever it was that he was after. He was a passionate Jew for the law, and he was a passionate Christian for the gospel and the nations. God, of course, gifted him supernaturally as an apostle, and so that apostolic gifting also uniquely equipped him for the mission to which God had called him. But Paul also had an incredible confidence in God's sovereignty and providence, and he never doubted that God had saved him. He never doubted that God had called him, and he never doubted that God, in particular, had given him a

mission to the Gentiles. You put all that together, and you have this remarkable — I'll say it this way — missionary-theologian, because Paul was a missionary before he was the great theologian that he was.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

The Apostle Paul, or Saul, had a thorough knowledge of the law and the Old Testament. He was a Pharisee. He was proud of knowing the law and of being faithful to and zealous for the Old Testament. With his knowledge, he would express his loyalty to God by persecuting the Christians. Such background made others marvel at what had turned the life of this person upside down to become a Christian and to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul became a strong testimony about how God's power can change a person through the gospel. Later, Paul spoke about his qualifications in Philippians 3. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee of Pharisees, and blameless — which means that he lived adhering to the strict path stipulated by the Jewish laws. Then, he said, when he knew Christ, all these credentials became nothing. He called them rubbish compared to knowing Christ and being found in him, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” — on Christ. You can see here that he was granted this righteousness through Christ's work on the cross. His background testifies to the gospel, that all qualifications are worthless without the work of God in the heart. We also see how Paul was extremely zealous to proclaim the gospel — through his abundant labor, the fatigue of travel, the diseases, persecutions, pains, lashings and prisons he faced. Yet he persisted to spread the gospel... And, Paul's teachings are incredible! He took the teaching of Christ and clarified it to Gentiles, especially the doctrine of justification by faith. Justification is no longer through the deeds of the law, but through the work of Christ, justification by faith became the core of the message of the gospel. This is what defines Paul as the role model for all those who serve the Lord.

Prof. Mumo Kisau

The apostle Paul — as he was called Saul before — he was a brilliant man, a theologian. He studied under the feet of the teacher Gamaliel. And then, as a theologian, he did not like what was happening in Jerusalem and began to persecute the church, because he believed very strongly in Judaism. He says himself, if you have time to read you can read in Philippians 3, you see how he describes himself being a Benjamite, being a Pharisee, observer of the law, and he was, therefore, a very brilliant and gifted man who studied the law very carefully. And when, then, the Lord had him converted on the way to Damascus, he is able to use his brilliance to be able to defend the gospel and spread the gospel. That is gift number one. He was a brilliant theologian, who then was able to very quickly explain every part of the law because he understood it. But also, he was gifted in dual citizenship. He was a Jew but also was a Roman citizen, meaning it was a passport. He could go anywhere. He could speak in Hebrew, perhaps in Aramaic. He could speak in Greek. He was bilingual. And therefore, because of that, then he could even turn around and speak in Hebrew to the Hebrews. He could speak to the Greeks. And remember, Paul says “I

became all things ... to all people," because he was able to go up and down. He understood the geography of Palestine, he understood the Jewish law, but at the same time, now that he has got converted, was able to write, was gifted as a writer. He has, if you will, thirteen letters to the churches, and it's because of that writing, the church of Christ is blessed with this gifted theologian, and we are able to read about many doctrinal statements and practical matters of Christian living through this gifted man called Paul.

What was the significance of Pentecost in the founding of the early church?

Dr. Vuyani Sindo

The significance of Pentecost in the founding of the early church, I think, is one of those momentous occasions in biblical theology, and it's best at times to look at it in light of what happened at Babel. There you see humanity united against God, wanting to build this tower that reaches to heaven, and God comes down to judge humanity, and he scattered and confuses the languages. But now one thing significant in Acts is you see humanity coming together. God enables these people to speak in tongues, in different languages, proclaiming his praises. So you see here the languages being united around what Christ had done, and proclaiming the glories of the Lord Jesus. I think that's one of the first significant things. Within the book of Acts, for example, especially after the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we find the apostles scared, but as the Holy Spirit comes down on them you see them receiving this power, being bold. You have Peter, who denied the Lord Jesus Christ three times, now boldly preaching to many, and over 3,000 giving their lives to the Lord.

Rev. Canon Alfred Sebahene, Ph.D.

Pentecost is a very, very important event in the history of the church, and like the call of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the cross and resurrection — although these belong each to a particular period of history — but these are the events that shed light on some dealing, on how God dealt with man throughout history. With regard to Pentecost, this is the great turning point in history. Here, with Pentecost, we have the truth that the Christian era is distinctly the age of the Spirit. At Pentecost the disciples received power, and this power was meant to enable them to preach the gospel and extend the kingdom of God, and men were brought together for the fulfillment of God's mission in the world. Its significance can be seen as that which is demonstrated in the whole plan of God... So, Pentecost is the fulfillment of what was promised, the coming of the Spirit, and its significance can be seen as that ... is that which demonstrated the plan of God. So, Pentecost set the pattern or direction of the church on what was to come for the church age as a whole.

Dr. Mark Saucy

The significance of Pentecost in the founding of the early church comes in the person of the Holy Spirit and, really, following his story as Scripture unfolds it from the Old Testament. I'm thinking particularly in terms of the new covenant that the prophets

spoke about. In the time of Israel's apostasy, they predicted that there would be a new movement from God, that it would be ultimately encapsulated by the pouring out of his Spirit, and this would have effects on the nation itself, and it would have effect on the individual heart, it would have effect on a new society, and the cosmos in general. And so, it would also be borne along by a spirit-bearer, and he's called by various names in the Old Testament — the Suffering Servant, in particular, in Isaiah. And so, Jesus comes as he is, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, portrayed as a man of the Spirit. He's conceived by the Spirit, he is led by the Spirit, he's anointed by the Spirit, his ministry is empowered by the Spirit, the Spirit drives him to the cross even, and God the Father raises him by the Spirit after his death. And so, he goes in his ascension to the right hand. In Acts 2, Peter's first sermon about Pentecost, telling us what it is, he says he has been exalted to pour this forth, to pour the Spirit forth. And so, we're really seeing the fulfillment of the story that the prophets started when they predicted a new age, and the age of kingdom — “the age to come” in language that they would use too — and the New Testament writers knew. So, we're seeing the beginning of the new movement of God's story unfold, and so there's where I would say the beginning of the church is, at the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost from the hand of the Spirit-bearing One, Jesus, the Exalted One.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The Day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the risen, ascended, enthroned Lord Jesus has incredible significance for the life of the early church. It really marks the climax of Jesus' redemptive work, which he accomplished through his obedience, his sacrifice and death, his resurrection, his ascension. And now, from his throne at the Father's right hand, he pours out the Spirit on all of his people... As the prophecy that Peter quotes from Joel makes clear, God's pouring out his Spirit on all his people, young and old, men and women, so that they can speak his mighty deeds. This is Jesus really fulfilling the mission that John the Baptist announced for him, that he would baptize with the Holy Spirit. And fulfilling even older prophecies, not only the prophecy of Joel but other announcements that God would give his Spirit in the last days. And even the longing of Moses all the way back in Numbers 11, when Moses said he longed that God would put his Spirit on all of his people. In the Old Testament only a few leaders received this empowering of the Holy Spirit — prophets, priests, judges, kings — but now all of God's people will be empowered by the Spirit to serve in some particular way. And we see that going on throughout the book of Acts, all of God's people serving in a variety of ways to gather the nations to faith in Christ and to build up the body of Christ.

Why did Paul base his missionary journeys out of Antioch instead of Jerusalem?

Dr. Vuyani Sindo

So why did Paul base his missionary journeys in Antioch instead of Jerusalem? I think we have to answer that question in two ways. First, in Acts 13 we see that the Lord revealed to the church, “Set apart for me Paul and Barnabas,” meaning that the

church in Antioch served as a base for Paul. It was a sending church. Like a missionary, for example, to a different country, will have their own sending church. And you see that through all his missionary journeys Paul kept on going back to the church in Antioch to report. But also, there's something significant about Antioch. Because it's a port city, it also made traveling in Asia and Asia Minor very easy for Paul and convenient for Paul.

Rev. Joseph Handley

So, Paul was based in Antioch for a reason. Many would ask, why not Jerusalem, you know, the center of what you would think the faith would be at that time? However, the reality is, Antioch was a better sending place. It was the place where the elders laid hands on Paul and sent him out, and so he had a strong sending church there. But more importantly than that, Antioch was closer to all the key cities of the Roman world, and so, Jerusalem is much further away. Antioch, a port city, allowed him to travel to many places. And so, not only did he have a strong sending church behind him, but he also had access, access to the key cities of the world of that day, and was able to go out from there all across what is now Turkey and what was, you know, today, Italy. So, Paul was based in this city for the purpose of the most strategic means of reaching the world at that time.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The book of Acts doesn't precisely tell us why the apostle Paul based his missionary journeys out of Antioch in Syria rather than from Jerusalem, but I think we can infer some things. About what we know about Antioch in Syria, it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and after Alexandria in Egypt. It was a cosmopolitan city, the mixture of East and West. And it was near a port which was also very significant for access to the Mediterranean Sea and ports west across and around the Roman Empire. More significant, I think, is the fact that in this city, as we read in Acts 11, God planted a church that was not only composed of Jewish believers, but for the first time in the narrative, really composed of a lot of Gentiles coming from a pagan background. And we know that in part because they came to be known as Christians first in Antioch, which is the language that non-Christian pagans would use to describe this group. An unbelieving Jew would not call them Christians because that would be to grant that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. But we've got a pagan background city recognizing this particular group as distinct, as belonging to the Christ. Then we go to Acts 13 when Paul and Barnabas are first sent out and there's a list of leaders there, and they themselves are cosmopolitan and international — Barnabas from Cyprus, another from Cyrene in North Africa, one is called Niger, black, perhaps a black African as well, and of course Paul from Tarsus in Cilicia, outside of the Promised Land. So, here's a church and a leadership that is already exposed to international, intercultural evangelism, and a very natural launching place for the gospel to spread to the West.

Dr. Charles L. Quarles

It is a little bit surprising that Paul based his missionary work out of Antioch rather than Jerusalem. We would have expected Jerusalem to be the hub of missionary

activity, but the fact is that the Christians of Jerusalem began outreach to the Gentiles only begrudgingly. Initially God had to use persecution to disperse the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem throughout the Gentile world. After the martyrdom of Stephen, they fled to Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea, Cyrene — modern day Libya — in northern Africa, Antioch of Syria. But Acts 11:19 says even then those Jewish believers only shared the gospel with fellow Jews. But ultimately, some of the new believers in Cyprus and in Cyrene traveled to Antioch of Syria and began to evangelize the Gentiles, and a large number of Gentiles in Antioch were converted. Soon Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem up to the city of Antioch to strengthen the faith of those new Gentile believers, and ultimately, he traveled over to Tarsus to solicit the help of the apostle Paul. And Paul and Barnabas co-taught the Gentile believers in Antioch for about a year, and then the church sent them out on the first missionary campaign. Antioch's an interesting city; third largest city of the world at this time, only behind cities like Alexandria and Rome. It was a cultural melting pot, and so it was really an ideal place to serve as the great mission-sending center of the early church. It's at the church of Antioch that we find a multi-ethnic leadership where, in the elders of the church, we have Jews, we have Gentiles, we even have an African, Simeon, called Niger, which means in Latin "black-skinned one." And the different ethnicities and cultures in that church really served as a springboard to carry the gospel to all the nations.

What were the issues resolved in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15?

Dr. Vuyani Sindo

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is very significant for Gentile Christian identity, because the question was, since Christianity began with Jesus Christ, who was the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, meaning the whole story took the more Jewish story and a Jewish identity, what do you do with the Gentiles who are not part of that story? Do they first need to convert ... to Judaism, or can they receive Jesus as their Lord as the Gentiles? And what we see in the Jerusalem Council is that now the Gentiles can receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and the equal footing as the Jews. The Council makes it clear that if they have received the forgiveness of sin, they have been baptized; therefore, they do not need, for example, to be circumcised to be Jewish. And therefore, for me the Jerusalem Council is significant because it means that now Gentiles are not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

Rev. Timothy Mountfort

Acts 15 begins with the question of what do the Gentile converts need to do with respect to circumcision. Do they need to be circumcised? Do they not need to be circumcised? So, this becomes an issue of debate and eventually reaches the Jerusalem Council. And in Acts 15, it then really gets addressed by saying, we don't want to make it too difficult for the Gentiles to follow God. So, they lay out some very simple guidelines for the Gentiles. And so, whereas in the beginning the whole issue of circumcision is kind of the occasion for the question to be addressed, in the

end what really becomes sort of the core issue is... how can we make it in a sense easier for the Gentiles to follow God?

Dr. Alan Hultberg

Scholars read Acts 15 in a number of different ways, but it seems to me the primary issue that is being resolved, well, first what's being resolved, is whether or not the Gentile converts need to be circumcised in order to be a genuine part of the church. And the basic answer to that question was, no, they do not need to be circumcised. That is, Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to be a part of the church. The church is something beyond Judaism. And yet, they're required to avoid blood and things strangled, to avoid things offered to idols, to avoid sexual immorality. And so the question becomes, why those particular elements that are emphasized for the Gentiles to retain? And I believe those are the sorts of things that would make a Gentile repugnant to a Jew, why a Jew would not have table fellowship, for instance, with a Gentile, why a Jew wouldn't go into a Gentile's house, etc. They're afraid of ritual impurity. Within the early church, there are still Jews who practice the purity laws of the Old Testament... So, the Jerusalem Council determined that the Gentiles would need to avoid practices that would unnecessarily offend their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 resolved, really, *the* crucial issue. When a Gentile comes from a non-Jewish background, he's not been converted to Judaism as a proselyte, but he's coming from paganism, what must he do to become a member of the people of God now under the new covenant? Must he, especially, submit to circumcision, which is the first of several elements that a Gentile would be required to participate in, in order to become a member of the Jewish community? And, of course, the answer that is given by the Council, through Peter's reminding the elders and the apostles of what God had done through Peter in Cornelius' house, through Paul and Barnabas reporting on how God was adding the Gentiles in, and through James' putting it all in Scripture, was that the Gentiles must not be required to be circumcised or keep any of the other ceremonial distinctions that had set Israel apart from the other nations. Now, along the way the Council also urged Gentiles that they must separate themselves from the religious practices of paganism, from meat offered to idols and consuming blood or things strangled, all a part of pagan religious worship, sexual immorality as well, and in general ... the Council offered the advice that everyone, Jew and Gentile, needs to use their liberty in Christ in ways that build up the other members of the body of Christ.

How did the apostles (other than Paul) help to spread the gospel outside of Jerusalem and Judea?

Dr. John Hannah

Well, what we have within the corpus of the biblical literature are clues. We have the clues of Peter, who obviously carried the gospel to Cornelius. The data is sparse —

the data in the New Testament geographically is sparse. Certainly, we have John the apostle residing in Ephesus, exiled to Patmos. We have his book to the seven churches, so we understand something about that spread. And then you fall into tradition, and tradition tells us, for instance, that Peter and Paul, while we would say were not founders of the church of the Rome, certainly were prominent in the Church of Rome early... Tradition says that Thomas carried the gospel to India. So, in reality, we have very little, but we have a movement that's massive. My own theory is that the emphasis in the New Testament on Roman soldiery is not idle. These men would travel the world and, I think, carried the gospel that way. So, there's a wonderful story that none of us will ever know till we get to heaven.

What practices of the early church brought unity to the body of believers?

Dr. Danny Akin

If you want to see a united body of believers go to the book of Acts and look at, again, the Day of Pentecost in chapter 2, and you will see that following Pentecost they came together around the apostles' doctrine, that is, they were teaching the Word. They came together for the breaking of bread which certainly included the Lord's Supper, and I would think, baptism as a corollary, but also fellowship. They were also caring for one another, ministering to one another, and they were exercising the gifts that God had given them. Of course, I'm tapping into Ephesians 4 as well. So, the Word, the gospel, the ordinances, mutual love and concern for one another is what brought the body together as a family. And of course, if you want to think what unites a family, look at that. The same thing as what unites the body of Christ as well because we are a big family.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

At the outset, we can see the great joy among the believers of the early church for what Christ did through the message of the gospel, for what Christ did on the cross, and the common, tremendous reverence among the church towards Christ. Their eyes were turned from the horizontal view to the vertical view towards Christ. This unified them in a tremendous way... Another example was that they were concerned for the people of Samaria. The apostles went to the people of Samaria to affirm that the people of Samaria were part of the body of Christ, the church. Without this visit, we would have had two bodies — Jews and Samaritans. There would have been a division... So, the unity was around the message of the gospel. And, of course, there were other practices that came from this unity. For example, the early church had all things in common between them. There was honesty, openness, and they identified with each other in suffering. Those who were not suffering prayed for those who suffered, and they were all taking care of one another. They lived as one body and one team. This teaches us that today, even if we have many denominations, we actually are one body, and we have to focus on the common things between us — on Christ and the gospel. When we focus on this, we will put things in the right order. This is the example of the early church.

Dr. Las Newman

The practices of the early church which brought real unity to the body included a number of things. First, we read in the Acts of the Apostles that the believers gathered around the apostles' teaching. So, Peter, as an apostle, stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached a sermon. His sermon had a textual base. He started, "Well, this is Joel," and he goes back into the Old Testament, he picks up from there, and he links it to the experience of Pentecost, and then made an application because he began to say, "This is what Joel said, this is what is happening, and you've got to do something about it." And they were pricked in their consciences, and, "What should we do?" And Peter said, "Well, you've got to repent; believe the gospel." He kind of nailed it right there, you know? So, the preaching, apostles' preaching, was one thing which achieved unity. They gathered around the apostles' teaching... Fellowship, what is called, you know, the Greek word *koinonia*, the coming together, the fellowship of the apostles. Food was important. There was always a meal. They met in homes, in each other's houses, and they had food, they celebrated, they sang, they listened, they prayed together. So, fellowship, fellowship brought unity in the church, and the fellowship was around the teaching, around the commitment of each other to Jesus as the Messiah. And that was a unifying thing, that they're here as a body of people, as a group gathered together, as a nucleus, a community around a common cause, a common purpose, and a common person — the person was Jesus. I think the death, the burial, the resurrection of Jesus, *and* Pentecost, I think those significant phenomena made people convinced that this was real, and this is something supernatural, and this is something remarkable. And if we're going to identify with it, if we're going to believe in it, we've got to stay together.

So, the teaching, the fellowship, but then thirdly, baptism was very important — repent and be baptized, every one of you. That's what Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the remission of your sins." So, baptism as a public act of identification with these people, this community, this new institution, if you like — the church. That's your entry point, it's your belonging point. You are baptized into this community. And that was a unifying thing. If you're not baptized, you're not fully part of us. If you don't believe in the apostles' teaching, you're not fully a part of us. These were kind of benchmarks that united the early church. And prayer. In everything they would pray, they would open up to God and thank him and ask him and request from him, trust him. So, prayer, the prayer life of the Christian, was very, very important. And these created unity... Of course, as time progressed one of the important things that created unity in the church was the election of leaders — apostles, bishops in the church, deacons, presbyters. Eventually, from Acts 6 onward, as things grew and the numbers increased, problems occurred, and you need leaders to make decisions, you need leaders to organize. And so, the leadership of the church became important as a unifying factor in the early church.

Dr. Charles L. Quarles

The early church had a number of practices that brought unity to the believers. These included things like studying Scripture together, praying together, praising, singing

hymns together, as we read about in both Acts and the epistles of Paul. But some other special things like the sharing of the Lord's Supper and the agape feast — the focus of the agape feast was Christian unity — sharing resources with one another in times of need. And this would relate to things like the sharing of possessions in the early chapters of the book of Acts, but also other things like Paul's collection of the relief offering among the Gentile churches to assist Jewish believers in Judea during a time of famine and great, great need. That kind of sharing built solidarity in the church and made two groups of people who were very different in many ways, Jews and Gentiles, become one. Surprisingly, I would also suggest that church discipline contributed to the unity of the body of Christ. Paul told Titus, "Warn the divisive person once; warn them a second time; after that have nothing to do with them." And he had stern words of condemnation for those who were continually divisive and seemed to not be content unless they were stirring up trouble in the family of God. And the apostle Paul said we simply can't afford that. The unity of the body of Christ is too important to turn the other way when a person acts divisively. It also included a vigilance on the part of Christian leaders. Paul urged the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 to be on guard for the savage wolves that would attack the flock. And the savage wolves would not only harm the flock through their false teaching, but they would fragment the flock as well. And Paul urged leaders to be protective of the family of God and keep them together as a unity.

How reliable are the writings of Eusebius in understanding the early church?

Dr. Scott Manor

Well, Eusebius is a church historian, and he's a church historian who has a particular angle that he's taking on the events that have happened prior to his time in the early fourth century. And he says at the beginning of his work that he's wanting to write the history about God's faithfulness. He's wanting to write a history about the success of the church despite conflict with Rome, despite theological conflict from heresies. And so, he sees history and his writing of history as a telling of the story of the victory of God, and, as such, he's biased. He does so in a way that is unapologetically Christian. And so, as scholars today look at Eusebius, and you look at some of the things that he says, they will get frustrated because he's clearly taking a particular angle. So they say, "Well, he's only telling his side of the story, and so therefore, he's completely untrustworthy." And so, I think there's something to be said for wanting to make sure that we approach Eusebius and his writings in a way that takes account of the fact that he is talking from one particular perspective — one which I would agree with — but perhaps take the approach of "trust but verify." What he says, just because it's being told from a particular point of view, isn't necessarily wrong. A lot of what he says is accurate. It's verified by other writings from either other Christians or even non-Christians over the course of the history that he's telling. And then, there are also moments where you can see Eusebius manufacturing information to fill gaps in his knowledge. And the hard part, of course, is the fact that he doesn't tell us when he's doing that, and so, as scholars of someone like Eusebius and his writings, we

have to go and treat what he says in his writings as though we take them at face value. If there's a reason to doubt something that he says, we can section that off. But a lot of what he says has been proven to be true; it's been proven to be accurate. And so, Eusebius is the first chronicler of church history. He is the father of church history, and as such, whether you are a person of faith or a person who has no faith, he's immensely valuable for our understanding of what happened in the early church.

Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin

The first major historian in the church after the New Testament period — we would probably want to consider Luke an historian — is the figure known as Eusebius of Caesarea. Born in the 260s, he dies in the 330s. He writes an ecclesiastical history, or a church history, which encompasses an enormous amount of information regarding the early church in its development in the second and third centuries and includes for us a lot of primary sources that, if he hadn't included them, we wouldn't have. One of the questions that has come up in recent years, especially during the twentieth century, is whether or not his recording of events that took place prior to his time are reliable. Like every historian he has interests, he has focuses, he has emphases, he has things that he wants to bring forward to the reader, and so he has asked questions of his sources. He's cited various sources and not cited others. And so there is a bias there. He has a perspective that he wants to promote. But having said that, where Eusebius can be checked, where his quotations, where his citations from authors can be checked with independent sources, he tends to be very reliable. And so, most historians working with the early material in the second and third century, when we don't have primary sources for the material, we tend to rely upon Eusebius, and he is, generally speaking, a reliable source.

How were the first converts to Christianity viewed by the Jewish ruling leaders?

Dr. John Hannah

Well, the Jewish leaders saw the early Christians as anti-Judaistic, and they defined Judaism as a set of rules and laws founded in the Old Testament, and so they would be “unfaithful.” So, the earliest Christians, Jewish Christians particularly, were progressively, not instantly, but ostracized over time. This is where you get the book of the Hebrews which exhorts Christian people to endure in the faith because of Jewish hostility and not return to the Jewish temple synagogue system. So, initially, there's hostility, I think, all the way through to the great *Bar Kokhba* rebellion in 132 in which the nation is destroyed by the second war with Rome.

Dr. John E. McKinley

The relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century starts out okay and then deteriorates from then on. Initially, all the first Christians were Jews. We have the apostles and many of them after that, they see themselves as fulfilling Judaism with belief in Messiah. This wasn't a huge problem for the synagogues and that sort of thing initially, but then, as time goes on, you have places in the Greek

world where synagogues had been established. They had won converts among the Gentiles, called proselytes or God-fearers. Often, it would be the case where a whole family would become attached to the synagogue. The wife, mother, and the children would become Israelites because there isn't so much of a commitment to get circumcised as a child — women wouldn't need to be circumcised — and they would accept kosher diet, and that was considered an extension of Israel to them. But the men would not. They would remain God-fearers. So, when the gospel comes through, Paul's preaching to people, this is not only the more accurate way to follow God and know God through Christ, but it is a much easier and more appealing way because now there is no need for circumcision, there is no need for Jewish cultural forms like kosher diet, and so it's not just the father who leaves the synagogue, but it's the whole family that leaves. And so, this causes a lot of irritation for the Jews where they are seen as losing their people to the Christians, and so, the jealousy of that loss on top of the Jews thinking that the Christians are preaching blasphemy that the Messiah is God the Son. So, that sort of thing raises a lot of tension between Jews and Christians, and in addition, the Jews had a protected status under Rome as an ancient religion, and they didn't like that Christians were living off of that status. So, they wanted to distance themselves from the Christians, and that would open the Christians to persecution. And so, this action of not working together and competing with each other made relations really deteriorate. And finally, when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., Christians came to interpret that in some times and places as God's judgment on Israel, that he'd rejected the Jews, and that's probably a reaction to their own hostility experienced from the Jews. So, it's just history and culture and changes that all kind of conspired together to rip apart Jewish groups and Christian groups from the beginning.

How widespread and severe were the Roman persecutions of Christians in the first century?

Dr. Donald Fairbairn

When one speaks of early Christian persecution in the Roman Empire, sort of the background for people's understanding is what you might call the "Sunday school version" of the story. And in the Sunday school version of the story, the Christians were always and everywhere persecuted severely and forced underground. That Sunday school version is not wrong, but it is a bit misleading because persecution in the first century was generally very sporadic. It took the Romans quite a while to recognize that Christians were something different from Jews. And Judaism was a protected religion in the Roman Empire. So, much of the time, Christians did not face very severe persecution from the Romans.

There were two major exceptions to that, though. The first is the persecution under Nero from the year 64 to 68. In the year 64, there was a great fire in Rome which destroyed much of the city and most of the imperial palace. Nero was rumored to have started the fire himself because he wanted to rebuild his palace on a more grandiose style, and in order to combat those rumors, he needed a scapegoat. He

blamed the Christians, and he had the Christians in and around Rome persecuted very severely. This is the persecution during which both Paul and Peter lost their lives. But we need to recognize that that was not an empire-wide persecution. It was confined to this area in or around Rome.

The second major persecution came in the 90s under the emperor Domitian. Domitian was the first emperor who actually demanded that people worship him as a god in his lifetime. Previously, emperors had asked that after they died you worshiped their spirit as being one of the spirits of the gods, but Domitian demanded worship of himself as a god in his lifetime. And he persecuted the Christians who refused to do so. The Domitian persecution was very severe only in the western part of Asia Minor where the seven churches of the book of Revelation were, where John was living at the time in Ephesus, and so, during that persecution, according to the most common understanding, it was during that persecution that John was exiled to the island of Patmos off of the coast of western Asia Minor.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

In the book of Acts we read about individuals facing persecution at times, but the large-scale persecution of Christians really started under Romans with Nero around the year 64. There was a fire in Rome. People suspected Nero of doing it. Whether that's true or not — you know, it's easy to blame the leaders — Nero needed a scapegoat, and the Christians were a small enough group, but yet a large enough group that they made a suitable scapegoat. So, Nero began burning Christians alive to light his imperial gardens at night, feeding others to animals, and so on. So, hundreds, maybe thousands of Christians were being butchered by Nero at this time. You can read about it in Tacitus' *Annals* 15.44. But also, there was another major wave of persecution under Domitian. Now, in the book of Revelation we read about two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, that were facing persecution. We read of another church in Pergamum in Revelation 2:13 where one person had been martyred. But for the most part, the majority of the churches were facing, not persecution, but the dangers of assimilation, of compromising with the values of the same world system that was killing their brothers and sisters elsewhere. So, the persecution wasn't everywhere all at once, but it's interesting that the persecuted churches are the ones that receive the commendation because, I think, when we pay a price for our faith, we have to be zealous to maintain that faith. And if we're not being persecuted, we can learn a lot from our brothers and sisters who are.

Dr. Todd M. Johnson

Roman persecutions of Christians in the first century were actually quite focused in one or two areas, especially if you think of Nero's persecution of Christians. This was actually only happening in a very small corner — perhaps the most important corner — of the Roman Empire. What's interesting and what makes the story more difficult is that, in successive waves over the next couple of centuries, the persecution of Christians spread wider and wider and wider so that by the time we get to Diocletian in the third century, it's empire wide.

What was Gnosticism?

Dr. Ken Keathley

Gnosticism could be said to be the first significant heresy that the early church faced. It was a mixture of Christianity, Greek philosophy, and eastern mysticism that ended up denying, first off, it denied the goodness of creation to the point that it denied that Jesus Christ really was truly a man. In fact, they taught that he was a docetic phantom. It denied the goodness of creation to the point where many of the Gnostics denied that the God of the Old Testament, who created the world, was the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament. And so, in Gnosticism we have this attempt to make Christianity palatable by incorporating it with Neo-Platonism, and the way they do this is by a complete reinterpretation of the Bible. They believed that there was this secret meaning residing on top of the text that only those who had the secret knowledge — hence “gnostic” — those who had the secret knowledge were the ones who would be able to understand truly what Jesus is all about.

Dr. Steve McKinion

Gnosticism is a term that's applied to a number of different worldviews that all come under a large umbrella. It's quite diverse. But they're called “gnostic” because of one common theme, and that is, they believe that the apostles misunderstood the message of Jesus, and that what is in the canonical gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — and in what we have as the New Testament, is a misrepresentation of the message which Jesus came to preach... And that when the apostles preach that Jesus was fully human, they're misrepresenting him, because, for them, God could not have union with that which is material, that which is physical. And so, God is a spirit who is so good that he couldn't touch anything that was physical because physical things for the Gnostics are evil. As the result of this then, they had to dismiss the message of the New Testament where Jesus is God living a human life, and he's truly human. He's walking. He's riding in a boat. He's getting hungry. He's getting tired. These are all things that the Gnostics, these various groups that we call Gnostic, were unwilling to accept. But they still wanted to preach a version of salvation, and they wanted to call themselves Christians. And so, what they did is to establish a way of being saved, being made right with God, not through Jesus but through a secret message which Jesus had preached, and that only some people were privy to this message, and they had passed it on. And the Gnostics were the ones who had what this secret message was, like a passcode that they could use to get into heaven. Well, the apostolic Christians — as opposed to the Gnostic Christians — the apostolic Christians, they preached that we were saved through Jesus' death and his burial and his resurrection from the dead, all of which were bodily, which were physical, and that our salvation is physical as well, that our bodies will be raised up. We'll have glorified bodies one day in heaven. But the Gnostics and Gnosticism preaches that our bodies are irrelevant to salvation. In fact, they stand in the way. Salvation for Gnosticism was freedom from these bodies which are like jail cells, and we're freed from them in order to have our souls or our spirits go to heaven. So, Gnosticism is a false religion claiming to be Christian, preaching a different gospel, presenting a different Jesus than the one that the apostles preached and that we find in the canonical gospels.

Dr. Gordon L. Isaac

The Gnostics were very interesting folks. On the one hand, they loved Jesus, and they loved portions of the New Testament anyway, but they weren't so sure about the God of the Old Testament. The God of the Old Testament, they were convinced, was not the one true God. Jehovah, God of the Old Testament, seemed to be a little bit angry, they thought. And besides, he was a God who had to do with matter, and the Gnostics were convinced that the one true God would have nothing to do with matter. So, in their attempt to set forward their own understanding of what true faith was about, they excluded the idea of the God of the Old Testament. Marcion, who was a rather wealthy ship owner, was one who took the Scriptures, took his scissors to them, cut out the entire Old Testament, left a purgated form of the Gospel of Luke and just the Pauline letters and said, "Those are our Scriptures." And on the basis of those Scriptures he proceeded to set up his own churches. Over and against that, the Christian church had quite a number of things to say. Irenaeus said, first of all, these are not your Scriptures, and you've misused them badly. The second thing is this: The God whom we worship is the God who created heaven and earth. And then over against the Gnostics' teaching on Jesus he said, we know all of our teachers regarding Jesus from the very beginning until now, so there is no secret knowledge about Jesus to be had ... and that's where we get apostolic succession. "We know all of our teachers from the very beginning." And that was a hedge against any of their ideas regarding this notion that they had secret knowledge. No, the church knows Jesus, and he's presented in the four Gospels and the New Testament letters just fine... Christians understood that the faith that we hold is one which affirms the God who creates heaven and earth. Christians knew that salvation is not salvation from the body or from the earth, but rather, we look forward to the redemption of our bodies. We look forward to a new heavens and a new earth. And so, the contrast between Christianity and Gnosticism is really stark.

Dr. Stephen Bagby

What Gnostics wanted to emphasize was the intellect, the mind, the intellectual life. And they saw salvation in very intellectual terms, and so they were going to emphasize the immaterial, the nonmaterial realm over the material realm. They sort of had a... you can describe it as sort of an over-spiritualized understanding of Christianity... And so, there were great teachers in the Christian church like Origen of Alexandria and Clement and others like Irenaeus who were challenging the Gnostics and rebutting the Gnostics in their writings and really trying to challenge them to think about the Christian faith in more wholistic terms — not just immaterial but in understanding how we need to embrace creation. So, a lot of what this challenge of Gnosticism was over was how to interpret the Bible correctly. Interestingly, the Gnostics saw the Bible as authoritative. They saw Scripture as authoritative for their lives. But a lot of it came down to how to interpret Scripture — a correct interpretation of Scripture. And so, what the Gnostics were doing was taking certain biblical passages, and they were taking those biblical passages out of context and not looking at the whole. And this is what someone like Irenaeus in the second century does is challenge them to think about what he calls the whole mosaic, the

whole picture, the whole story of Scripture and how the Gnostics rearrange, what he says, is the tiles in that Mosaic. And so, when passages are taken out of context, they can mean sort of anything you want them to mean. And this is what the Gnostics did in the second and third centuries. And Irenaeus was trying to put them back into context in light of the whole story, and he was very successful at doing that, and in the process really established in many ways the foundations for what we know of as biblical theology, understanding the unity of the two Testaments, the Old Testament and the New Testament, understanding the story of the Bible as one... A lot of people think about biblical interpretation in very individualistic or inductive ways at times, and they often take certain verses out of context. And I think it's a lesson to us to think about how biblical interpretation and biblical authority really go hand in hand in many ways. And so, we need to be thinking about how we're interpreting the Bible because you can have a high view of Scripture, but you can have the wrong hermeneutic, the wrong way of interpreting Scripture, and you can really go down a road much like the Gnostics did in the second and third century if you're not careful. And so, Gnosticism is a very difficult and challenging phenomenon in the early church, but it was something that should provide lessons for us today.

Dr. James D. Smith III

Gnosticism, many would say, was an impulse in human nature to ask the question, "How do body and spirit relate?" And so, Gnosticism basically was dualist, that is to say, body and spirit don't have equal value and they prioritized what they saw as the spiritual realm, and the physicality was put there as lesser and oftentimes as evil. So, when it came to a so-called "Christian Gnosticism," we have a Jesus whose feet never touched the ground. We have a spirit-only Jesus, not incarnation, the Word was not made flesh, and this spirit Jesus comes and imparts secret knowledge. So, for example, you get to an apocryphal work called The Acts of John, and in that there is a presentation of the apostle John up in a cave overlooking Calvary, and the spirit Jesus appears to him with no body but sort of a form and imparts to him the fact that he himself, Jesus, is not being crucified, none of this is happening to him, and in fact, John should stay tuned because there's secret knowledge coming. And at the end of that section it says John went down from there and laughed at everyone else because he realized that he had the real knowledge, the secret knowledge of how to be spiritually attuned to the different levels of ascent that would lead him to glory. That's a powerful kind of movement. It wasn't unique to Christian forms, but it was an impulse that was seen in Judaism, for example, and in other religions as well.

What are the religious and philosophical roots of Gnosticism?

Dr. James K. Dew, Jr.

Gnosticism was an early church heresy that has its roots back into the ancient world with the ancient philosophers, in particular back with Plato. Plato entered into a debate between two different types of subjects. Number one, the materialist and the immaterialist. Some people said that reality was nothing but physical, and then some

people said that reality was nothing but immaterial. And then there was also a debate about whether or not things were changing or whether or not things were constantly staying the same. So, Plato answers these questions by positing two different kinds of stuff. You have your immaterial things called the “forms” and you had your physical things like tables and chairs. And tables and chairs represent or reflect those forms, and so he says there’s two levels to reality — physical things and nonphysical things. And for Plato, the physical stuff was bad, and the nonphysical stuff, the spiritual perhaps, was very good.

Now, in the first century of Christianity, Gnosticism is basically an amplified and perverted form of platonic ideas, where the Gnostics said precisely that — physical stuff is bad and the spiritual is good. And so then, when they came to the man Jesus Christ, they applied that doctrine to him, and they said things like, Jesus couldn’t have been fully human because that would have implied physicality, and physicality is evil and bad. And so they were denying those types of things. And we see Gnosticism present in the first century, the second century and into the third century. We see it being debated in some of the early church debates, and we even see it being addressed in some of the first books of the Bible, like the book of Colossians, for example, and 1 John for example, where they had to make very clear that Jesus, the man, in this physical body was the fullness of God, and you could touch him, and you could hear him, and you could see him. And so, Gnosticism is that idea that physical stuff is bad, and they apply it to Jesus Christ, and they apply it to us. And then, of course, when it applies to us, Gnosticism says things like, it doesn’t matter what you do with your body because the body really doesn’t matter. It only matters what’s happening in your soul, your spiritual side of you.

Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin

Gnosticism is a term that is built from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge,” and in one sense, those who held this perspective argued that salvation was by knowledge. Gnosticism was a radical cosmological dualism. It’s differentiated between that which was good, intrinsically good — namely that which was spiritual, immaterial — and that which was intrinsically evil and incapable of salvation — namely the material realm. So, physical books, rocks, my body, they’re all material, and they’re all ultimately destined for complete destruction. And the Gnostics argued that that which was capable of salvation was the soul and only the soul. And so you find them denying, for instance, the reality of the incarnation. We see evidence of that in 1 John, 2 John... By the time you get into the second century you’ve got full-blown Gnosticism in which the argument was that that which is saved is the soul. And for the Gnostics there were certain people — themselves — who had these divine sparks within them. They had created this kind of mythology in which, at some point in the past, portions of God had got broken off from God and lodged in human bodies, and that was their souls. And at a certain point, the Gnostic became aware of the divinity within them. They became aware that they had this divine spark or this divine soul, and this knowledge in itself then is saving. So, they can use the language of Christianity. They can talk about salvation, they can talk about a conversion, but

they mean very different things. For the Gnostic, salvation is the knowledge that they have within them, a divine spark, and that at death that divine spark will go back to be reabsorbed into God, as it were.

For most Gnostics... And when we're using the phrase Gnostic or Gnosticism, we're thinking of a large number of groups, many of whom wouldn't have seen commonality between each other, but from the historical vantage point we see them as basically broadly accepting the same sort of presuppositions. For most Gnostics, the person who illuminates them or gives them knowledge is Jesus, and so what becomes important about Jesus' ministry is not his death and resurrection, his death for sin and his resurrection for believers, but his role as a teacher. And so, Jesus becomes the prime example of a teacher. And so, for many Gnostics then, in their thinking through the gospel accounts, they actually deny the incarnation. In some Gnostic accounts of the life and death of Christ they denied the reality of the death and actually argued that the real Christ, the real Jesus was spirited away from his body before his death and somebody else was crucified in his stead. It's very interesting that there are remnants of this Gnostic belief in the Qur'an, for example... The discovery of a number of Gnostic documents, papyrus, in papyri at a place called Nag Hammadi in Egypt in the late 1940s, has spurred a contemporary interest in Gnosticism. And for many in the western world these documents have fit very much with the kind of evolving, amorphous spirituality that many in the West have embraced. And so, you see that there is this amazing resurgence in some respects of this very, very major error that we call Gnosticism.

What was Montanism?

Dr. Scott Manor

Montanism is the name that we use for what is a heresy in the early church. It's a later title. During the time that they were active they were known as the "New Prophecy." And I think that helps us understand what Montanism is. The New Prophecy is driven by a guy named Montanus, which is where we get the name Montanism, and two prophetesses that worked with him, Maximilla and Priscilla. And so, they originated in Asia Minor, and they claimed that the Paraclete had come and descended on them, and as such they spoke these utterances; they spoke these prophecies in very sort of physically unique ways. They would roll around on the ground, they would utter things and say that these words are actually the words of God being spoken through them. They are the words of the Paraclete. And so it raises the interesting question, "Well, I thought the Paraclete came about at the time of Pentecost?" And so, what they would say is that actually there is a distinction between the Paraclete and the Holy Spirit. They would say, now the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, but the Paraclete is actually this new dispensation of truth, this new dispensation of prophecy that is now finally being revealed through Montanus and his prophetesses.

So, this caused a great stir within the early church for a number of reasons. It forced them to think through their own understanding of God's revelation of himself. It

forced them to think through the nature of prophecy, for example. Is prophecy still active? One of the reasons why Montanism, one of the main reasons why Montanism gets condemned as a heresy, is because the nature of prophecy that is happening with Montanus and his prophetesses is very different from the nature of prophecy that you see in the Old Testament. So, the way God would speak through prophets of old is no longer the case with someone like Montanus. And not only the nature of the prophecy, but also the words that Montanus would use also ran in conflict at times with what Jesus said about himself. And so, both the nature of the prophetic word and the content of the prophetic word is ultimately what would cause the church to say that Montanism, the New Prophecy, is not something that we would accept as orthodox, but rather as something that's heretical.

Dr. Ken Keathley

In the latter half of the second century there was a man by the name of Montanus who claimed to be a prophet. He would receive ecstatic utterances. In fact, he would go into a trance and convulse, and during this time he would give what he considered to be prophecies. And there were two women who also prophesied along with him, Prisca and Maximilla. They made a number of prophecies and predictions saying that Jesus Christ was going to return imminently. He was going to set up the New Jerusalem where they lived, which was at that time Asia Minor, today modern-day Turkey. And so, it was a movement that attracted a great deal of attention and a significant number of adherents, not the least of which, I guess the most significant one would be, Tertullian, eventually became a Montanist because he was attracted to their rigid moralism, and the idea that Jesus Christ is coming back any day is always an exciting prophecy to hear. This was known as Montanism, and it died out not long after Montanus himself passed away. It kept on for just a few years. One of the things that Montanism did for the early church is it made them address the question, is the canon still open, and are we still receiving additional revelation? And the consensus of church was, no, we're not.

Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin

Montanism was regarded as a heresy by many of the early Christian authors. Contemporary historians are not as convinced as early Christian authors that it was heretical. The differences between Montanism and more mainstream Christian figures had to do with the whole area of the nature of the Spirit's work and the Spirit's activity. Montanists maintained that in the 170s God, as it were, poured out afresh the Spirit... Nearly all of the material that we have from that very early period of Montanism — and it really amounts to maybe twenty or so sayings or prophetic statements — most of them have to do with ethical issues. They're not pronouncements about doctrinal issues at all. They have to do with things like fasting or how to face persecution. The Montanists glorified martyrdom and denied the possibility of ever fleeing from the reality of martyrdom or ever fleeing from persecution.

The figure who picks up Montanism and develops it is the North African theologian Tertullian. And Tertullian's attraction to Montanism would seem to be very much an

ethical issue, and so you find him making statements like, “The Montanist New Prophecy demands that one never flee from persecution.” Or that — and this was an innovation in the Latin world, not so much in the Greek world — that Montanists, Montanism demands that women who are married when they go outside of the home wear a veil. That would have been true in Greek culture. It wasn’t necessarily true in Roman culture. In Latin-speaking North Africa, Tertullian argued this was now a requirement; this is what the Spirit required. What is very interesting, I think, about early Montanism, especially as it appears in the writings of Tertullian, is it exacerbated or furthered his own interest in the Holy Spirit. And Tertullian is a key figure in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, and in my mind there’s no doubt that his interest in the work of the Spirit gave him an interest in the person of the Spirit and, therefore, helped him formulate in his own mind and his own writings, what we know as the doctrine of the Trinity. And so, Montanism is theologically problematic because it is adding to Scripture; the statements are mostly ethical issues. But in the providence of God, what you have here is a crooked pen that God uses to write a straight line, as it were, because Tertullian is a very, very key figure in the development of what we’ve come to know as the doctrine of the Trinity.

Dr. John Hannah

Montanism is what we would call a primitive restoration movement that emerged in the second and third centuries. Its name is derived from its principal leader Montanus, a Phrygian from Pontus. The point of the Montanists was the assumption that the original beauty and glory of the church had declined to moralism, inactivity, lethargy, so Montanism is an attempt to go back to the New Testament and restore the early life of the church.

Dr. James D. Smith III

Montanism was a distinctly Christian movement that grew up in the second century, many would say about the year 150. It gains its name from an individual named Montanus, and he, along with a couple of other followers, Priscilla and Maxmilla, two Christian women, became convinced that a new prophetic age was beginning, and in that, a gift of prophecy would be revived, that the kingdom would flourish and be seen more fully, and somewhat centered on their own community — they were from the Roman province of Phrygia, above the Mediterranean — became convinced Phrygia would somehow find the center of all this. But what’s described in the writings, and that includes some excerpts in Eusebius, the first major church historian in the fourth century, are descriptions of over-the-top, if you will, worship services, prophetic utterances, displays, colors, movements, and that in itself was disturbing to people, the manner of the worship, but also the question of whether these Montanists oracles or prophecies would be held by them to rival, or to be on a par with, some of the apostolic words, some of the early Christian writings that already were being identified as authoritative. Is a prophetic word on a par with an apostolic word? So, there were real significant questions there. Some would say that the biggest issue had less to do with orthodoxy and more to do with orthopraxy — more to do with the issue of how this was all lived out. One of our best cues I think comes from Irenaeus in the late second century, who is very much against the Gnostic movement. When he

comes to the Montanists, there is lingering there the sense, “Don’t quench the Spirit.” So, he, in a sense, in his literature is weighing which is the greater danger — to have people around that are worshiping in over-the-top ways and doing utterances, or quenching the Spirit and having the Spirit be grieved in the life of the church? And Irenaeus took the path of giving much more latitude, more of an embrace to the Montanists than he had to the Gnostics, for example. And it’s interesting that, I think, one of the great Christian writers in the turn from the second to the third century, Tertullian, actually becomes a Montanist, probably around the year 206. One of the earliest martyrdom accounts is of Perpetua, a marvelous woman in North Africa around the year 203. Many would say she was a Montanist as well. So, very much centered on Christ, and the biblical witness would suggest, but very different in terms of some of their practices, in worship for example.

Why were some early church writers like Tertullian so opposed to philosophy?

Dr. Lin Yuan I, translation

The early church had a lot of opinions about the philosophical ideas of its time because in that Hellenistic era philosophy was very popular, and there were many different schools of thought. When Christian theology began to develop, the philosophers also developed an interest in it and had a lot of criticisms and thoughts about it. Some of those thoughts in turn influenced the church, such that the church had some misunderstandings of truth. So, in the apostolic and church father eras, they had to explain or critique those philosophies in order for the church to understand whether or not they conformed to the Bible. Tertullian opposed philosophy as a reaction against these mistaken theological ideas. The modern definition of philosophy may differ slightly from the ancient one. Today, we speak of philosophy as a way of thinking. But what Tertullian opposed were the philosophical thoughts that included wrong teachings about Christian theology. It’s the same in the modern era. If any philosophy is in conflict with the Bible, we will oppose it because it’s not in accordance with the truth of the Bible.

How should we understand Paul’s apparent opposition to philosophy in Colossians 2:8?

Dr. Tim Foster

In Colossians, Paul is dealing with a young church that’s been impacted by false teaching, and we see as we read the passage what that false teaching is about. And one of the things it’s about is trying to take these people, who I think were formerly pagans — although this is debated — had become Christians, and now these Judaizers have come in and said, “You need to move on from Christianity to its fulfillment in Judaism,” rather than seeing Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism. And so, they were being lured into this belief. And it’s with that background that we need to read Colossians 2:8. Paul writes: “See to it that no one takes you captive

through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world, rather than on Christ.” That word “elemental,” that’s translated “elemental spiritual forces,” is one word in Greek. It’s called *stoicheia*. And there’s some discussion about what that means, but literally it means “basic elements.” And the thinking here, as Paul describes a hollow and deceptive philosophy and basic elements, is a worldview that is the worldview of the prevailing culture, the worldview of the pagan culture, the worldview of the Judaizers. And so, what Paul is doing here is challenging them not to be sucked into their worldview, but rather to hold on to the worldview of Christ that they have been taught. So, he’s not speaking here about philosophy in general. He’s not talking about elemental spiritual forces in the sense of demonic forces floating around in the universe, but rather, he’s just quite simply talking about the basic elements of their worldview, the basic elements of how they see life, and he’s saying, there are different worldviews, there are competing worldviews, but hold on to Christ, which, of course, is a very important lesson for us today because we live in a pluralistic world. That is, there is a plurality or a multiplicity of worldviews, and increasingly those worldviews come up and challenge our allegiance to Christ just like this worldview had come up and was challenging the allegiance of this church to Jesus.

Dr. Lin Yuan I, translation

Paul was doing God’s work in the Hellenistic era, an era where there was a great development of philosophical thoughts. So, in Paul’s letters, especially Colossians 2:8, he refers to these philosophies as “hollow and deceptive.” These references are to how those philosophical ideas are not in accordance with the Bible, and are not attitudes or thoughts that look at human life from God’s point of view. They especially have different opinions on Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, even criticizing or attacking it. In order to protect the church so that she can have pure, true teachings, Paul critiqued those philosophical thoughts. This is what apologetics does. Modern societies are also full of philosophical thoughts, mostly post-modern ones, so a very important work of contemporary Christian thinkers is to critique and guide the church and people back to the way of truth.

Dr. Charles L. Quarles

Actually, I don’t believe that Paul opposes all philosophy in Colossians 2:8. That would be a difficult position to sustain given the fact that at other points like Titus 1, Paul actually favorably quotes Greek philosophers like Epimenides. When Paul opposes philosophy in Colossians 2:8, he has a very narrow sense of philosophy in mind that he goes on and explains in context. This is a philosophy that’s based on deception, it’s based on the elementary forces of the world, which I actually believe means a philosophy that’s demonically inspired, and it’s not based on Jesus Christ and his gospel. What is that philosophy in context? Well, shockingly, I actually believe that he is referring to Judaism, which we don’t normally conceive of as a philosophy, but first-century Jews did. Josephus’ writings, for example, describe Judaism as a philosophy and he argues that it’s a philosophy that actually rivals the Greco-Roman philosophies of his day, and packaging Judaism as a philosophy was a way of marketing it to an audience that might not be very receptive to the Jewish

faith. And the reason I think the philosophy there is Judaism is because Paul goes on to say that this is a philosophy in which circumcision is important, in which Sabbath observance is important, new moon feasts, dietary rules and regulations and so forth. So, later on in the letter his description of the Colossian error, or philosophy, fits perfectly with Judaism and really with nothing else... Now, that doesn't mean that there aren't philosophies alive and well today that share a lot in common with this demonically-inspired, anti-Christian view. They are still alive and well, and we are to reject them just as forcefully as the apostle Paul rejected non-Christian forms of Judaism.

Dr. Bruce Little

Colossians 2:8 has often been brought up to philosophers and as a way of saying, "You shouldn't be involved in philosophy because, after all, look what Paul says. Paul says you are to avoid vain philosophy of deceit after the traditions of the world." And so, they say that means there should be no philosophy. And of course, it's not been a recent discussion. We can go all the way back to people like Augustine, and even before that, and there was a great discussion: what's the relationship between philosophy and theology? So, there was even then a recognition that philosophy had a place. It's only been rather of late, I think, that we have had this complaint, even amongst evangelicals, thinking, "You know, philosophy is really bad, and we shouldn't do it, and here's a good reason why we shouldn't — because Paul says you ought to avoid it." Well, there are two things about that text. Well, first of all, Paul doesn't say that we should avoid doing philosophy. He said we should avoid particular philosophies. So, he's not objecting to the discipline of philosophy but rather to what particular kinds of philosophy we might have. And then he classifies, or he categorizes, he clarifies when he says, "Well, the kind of philosophy I'm concerned about is that philosophy that goes after the traditions of the world, and it intends to deceive you." So, when we think about that text, and I often get that, we have to say, well, wait a minute, Paul is not saying that we should not do philosophy. He said we should not buy into the philosophies of the age. So, today we should say, maybe, we shouldn't buy into the philosophy of postmodernity, or something like that, but not to say we should avoid philosophy at all, because I would argue philosophy is quite important to the work of theology, and for years they were kind of seen together — you did philosophy; you did religion. But it's really a rather new idea that philosophy and theology should have nothing to do with one another.

Why is it important for at least some Christians to be engaged in philosophy in our current time?

Dr. Lin Yuan I, translation

In the contemporary era, we evangelize to many different kinds of people, including philosophers and those who are highly educated. Often, we're unable to convince these kinds of people to believe in Jesus Christ using regular means. So, how do we convince them? Philosophical methods then become a kind of tool, because what philosophy explores is the language of logic. What we say so that people can clearly

understand our reasoning, our prepositions, the gist of our arguments — it all has to be logical if it's going to be considered meaningful dialogue in the situation. If we don't use philosophical methods to prove our ideas, then these philosophers or educated thinkers will feel that we're anti-intellectual or illogical, and we'll lose the chance for dialogue. If a Christian thinker or theologian has philosophical training, we have a chance to dialogue with these people and clearly explain the truths of the gospel in a reasonable way to them. That way, they can also understand what the Bible teaches and what Christian theology is. Philosophy remains a very useful field of study, so we should encourage Christians to learn philosophy, and then use philosophical methods to clearly explain the truths of the gospel.

Dr. Bruce Little

A question might be raised is why would it be important for at least some Christians to be involved in philosophy? And I think we can answer that question by maybe a couple of ways, maybe even three. Well, the first would be there was a missionary, he was a pastor, he was a philosopher, by the name of Francis Schaeffer who wrote twenty-five books and said that ideas move from, first, a starting philosophy, and then they are revealed in the arts, and then they go to general public, and then they eventually go to theology. And I think he's quite right about that. However, that little trip that it makes from philosophy to theology is a little shorter these days because of all the electronic devices that we have... The second thing is about that is, I think it's necessary for Christian philosophers to be in conversation with Christian theologians because it goes both ways. Our philosophy must be solely grounded in theology. I think theology comes first before anything else... I studied my theology before I studied my philosophy — a question which I often get. But having said that, we need for philosophers to converse with theologians to make sure that their philosophy comports with theology. But then it also works the other way around. We need philosophers to engage the theologians to make sure that theology that's been created — some of it is created by what we call inference, it doesn't state it explicitly in the Bible — and so the philosopher can come along and say, "Have you thought about what the logical implications of this theological position would be?" And it would lead you right to a point where it will conflict with something that we think you can't give up in Christianity. So, they really help the theologian to think through logical extensions of some of their theology that we build, what I say, from inference. And the third reason we ought to have Christians in philosophy is the same reason we ought to have Christians in every other discipline of life. They need to be there as a witness of Christ. They ought to be there to have a testimony and to be salt and light, just as we would say it's good to maybe have a politician who's in politics to bring salt and light. So, that would be very much of what Dutch Reformed people have believed in the days gone by, which we've kind of gotten away from, I think, a little bit at least in the West. And so, I would answer that question at least on those three ways: One, ideas begin in philosophy, and they'll eventually find their way into theology. And the second thing is, theologians need philosophers to help them to see the logical extensions of the theology. Philosophers need theologians to make sure that what they're saying isn't contrary to clear teaching of Scripture. And then, of course, thirdly, just to have a witness in a legitimate discipline of life.

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