

*Church
History for
The Curious*

A Story of Trial and Triumph

Dan Beaty

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Preface

In our day, there seems to be a renewed interest in things historical. Speculations abound regarding incidents in both recent and ancient history, suggesting that the “real, untold story” has finally been uncovered.

Many conspiracy theories have become the basis for best-selling novels and big-budget movies. Television archeologists regularly fascinate the public with new theories based on new discoveries from the dirt. While it is understandable that sensational and entertaining ideas help to generate interest and financing for scientific studies, there is a definite downside to this phenomenon.

Behind the wild revisions of history that are so popular today, motives exist that go even beyond crass desires for wealth and fame. Some representations of history are actually designed to damage the faith of believers and to confuse unbelievers. Often, even in the Christian's zeal to get to the bottom of myths, legends, and ecclesiastical traditions, errors can be generated and circulated as well.

What drove me to writing this book and attempting to get it into the hands of today's Christians, is the desire to counter some of the more harmful errors that threaten us today. Many of these errors result from an unfair judgment against people and events of the past. They can even be found maligning the character of God. One does not have to be an authority in church history, but to simply invest some time in research and study before becoming aware that many of the sensational exposés being thrust upon Christians today are clearly distortions of the truth.

My challenge to the reader would be this: Do your own detective work. Investigate for yourself to determine if what you are reading here or hearing from any other source is reasonably accurate. This book will not include many technical details. It attempts mainly to give you as close and fair overview of the story of Christianity as possible, and a starting point for your own research. More than that it hopes to inspire clear thinking regarding the life and death issues that are dealt with in the Christian Faith.

Introduction

The purpose of this writing is to help the modern Christian better understand how the Christian movement became what it is today. In attempting to make the story I am about to tell as accessible to as many as is possible, a lot of time must be compressed into a very small space. Many people and events will be left out that deserve attention. It is therefore my hope that this brief introduction will stimulate further research on the part of the reader to gain additional understanding and perspectives other than my own. You may find the resource list near the end of this book to be helpful in this pursuit.

At the outset let me point out that to understand does not necessarily mean to agree with or condone the actions of individuals. Some actions might be judged to be wrong or immoral while others might be praised. In either case events transpired as they have. Today we have the privilege of looking back and attempting to learn something from the past that hopefully will help us in pleasing our Lord and Savior.

The perspective of this writing, which was the perspective of those whom God used in recording the history and teachings of the Scripture, is one that views God as sovereign. That is, nothing in this universe escapes His authority.

His infinite wisdom allows for things that are difficult to understand but which in turn accomplish His great purpose. Of all Biblical stories, the greatest example of course is the Crucifixion of Christ. Peter explained in Acts 2:23-24 how God permitted wicked men to crucify Jesus in order that He could triumph in His resurrection. Elsewhere in the New Testament, it is told again and again of how that horrible event set in motion the transformation of the world. That transformation began with simple trust in the hearts of His children whom He has liberated from sin, darkness and death!

This is the mysterious wisdom of God, to which Paul exclaims in Romans 11:33-36:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!

For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Or who has first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?

For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

In spite of all the failures of people on all sides of the disagreements and conflicts of Christian History up to the present, the words of the apostle Paul remain true, that Christ will present to himself a radiant Church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. She will be found holy and blameless before Him. (Ephesians 5:27).

May that same afore mentioned trust abide in us as we undertake this overview of the history of His workings in His Church.

1

THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

From Despair to Hope_____

The first century (as we mark time today) began for the people of God in Israel much like several of the previous centuries. While being allowed to live in the land of their forefathers, they were not free as before. They had already been subjugated by the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now by the Romans.

The magnificent Temple in Jerusalem built by King Herod the Great still stood, but their spiritual life had long been stifled by political and religious authorities. Yet, deep within the consciousness of the nation the words of the prophets from Moses to Malachi had kept alive the promise of the greatest deliverer of all time—their Messiah.

So when a man appeared on the scene wearing the garments of the desert prophets, many took notice. This man, John the Baptist had a simple message: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!” Things were about to drastically change, and they were not ready, therefore he called them to come into the Jordan for a great ceremonial cleansing. His preaching bore the marks of a true Old Testament prophet, for here was one who was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb! The fire of his passion and the truth of his words were highly effective on the multitudes, much to the chagrin of the status quo.

He also told them that his work was a preparatory one. A greater one was to come, who he came to recognize as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus soon took up where John left off, preaching repentance, faith, and the nearness of the Kingdom of God. But not only did He teach them how to prepare for and to live in the Kingdom, He also demonstrated its power to liberate them from all sorts of bondage. His miracles of power over nature and deliverance from sin, sickness, demon oppression, and even death brought their hopes to an all-time high.

This hope was to be mightily crushed. Religious and political authorities seeing Jesus as a threat to their order had Him put to death by crucifixion.

But you know the rest of the story.....

As He had promised, Jesus did rise from the dead. Then He appeared to His closest followers, and set them up for the plan of the ages – His Church – that the gates of Hades would not prevail against! All that remained after giving them His Word was for them to receive His Spirit within. Acts chapter 2 records the manner in which the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit exploded in their midst, sweeping thousands into the Kingdom of God!

The Early Church

The best record we have of the early decades of Christianity is of course the New Testament book, the Acts of the Apostles. There the physician Luke, who was the apostle Paul's traveling companion and with him during his trial and execution, recorded many events of that time in exciting and amazing detail.

From Acts, and several of Paul's letters to the churches we can get a general picture of what the early Christians believed and practiced. Admittedly, the Gospels give us little of Jesus' concept of church organization. Certainly we can trust, however that He made sure the leaders He had chosen possessed some idea of what He had in mind.

Jesus revealed no disapproval of the synagogue system of that day; in fact He used it to promote His message of the Kingdom. This system had developed when they were captive in foreign lands. Having no temple or official priesthood while in Babylon, they kept in touch with their heritage and the faith of their fathers by these familial gatherings. In the synagogue prayers were offered, the

Scriptures were read, hymns were sung and the needs of the congregation were considered. It was natural that the early Jewish Christians would build on and modify that pattern as directed by the Holy Spirit.

Later we will look at this simple form of worship that God so beautifully used as a testimony to the presence of His Kingdom in this world.

The Gospel Expands

In the Providence of God, Christian missionaries in the first century would be aided by the political and cultural conditions of that day. Centuries earlier, Alexander the Great conquered most of the then known world, and spread the Greek culture throughout those areas. Eventually Greek became the common language of the Mediterranean world. Later, the Romans were able to consolidate the empire, making travel safer than ever before, and on the best road system in the world. Earlier conditions would have not allowed for this easier travel and communication. Truly, the times were ripe for the Gospel in more ways than one.

In a few years, the Church in Jerusalem was well established. The next major center of Christianity would be in Antioch of Syria, some 325 miles north of Jerusalem. But instead of being predominantly of Jewish descent, many in this assembly were Gentiles. Generations earlier, when Israel was scattered across Europe and Asia, they took the synagogue system with them. Eventually synagogues were established in every major city.

This may seem coincidental to you, but it looks like God had a plan in this. These groups of people who were basing their lives on the God-breathed Scriptures were a testimony to their Gentile neighbors of a better lifestyle. Realizing this, the Jews allowed those interested to either be circumcised and become full Jews (proselytes), or simply sit in the meetings to learn about the Hebrew God. The latter were known as the God-fearers.

It was these God-fearers, like Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 that were the first Gentile converts and who made up many of the churches started by Paul. You see, they were already primed and prepared for the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, by the teachings they heard in the synagogues! As time progressed, things became more difficult when more uninitiated

Gentiles began to fill the churches. As can be seen in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, more lifestyle issues had to be dealt with than before.

The third major Christian community would be in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. During a season of fasting and prayer in Antioch, the Holy Spirit spoke through one of the prophets that Paul (then known by his Hebrew name Saul) along with Barnabas should be separated and sent forth as missionaries. Over a period of about 10 years they covered Greece, Macedonia, Galatia and Asia Minor. Their pattern was to locate the local synagogues, which were open to visiting Rabbi's. When Jesus was preached, the controversy most often led to the Gentile God-fearers becoming interested in the Gospel. These later became the core of the church in that city.

Whether by design or out of necessity, the time they spent in each city was short. Often they were driven out of the cities by their religious persecutors. Later when the heat died down, they returned to check on the new converts and appoint elders in every city.

It was in Ephesus, a large and important city at the time, that Paul was able to invest the most time. The two years he was there could be part of the reason that this church eventually became prominent. Early church historians also recorded that the apostle John became later connected to Ephesus and the churches in Asia, which he addressed in the prophetic book, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. One could imagine the memories the believers in that region shared of their quality time with these two devoted servants of the Lord.

If we attempt to look at the Acts of the Apostles and the other New Testament epistles without reading in the concepts of the later centuries, we would likely get a clearer picture of New Testament Christianity. There seems to be a wealth of spontaneity in the ministry and worship. The Holy Spirit was relied upon for direction and for the power to live up to their glorious calling as sons and daughters of God. The Word of God was found in what we now call the Old Testament Scriptures, but also in the oral teachings of Jesus and the apostles. As these teachings became written down, copied and circulated, they were eventually combined with the Old Testament canon of Scripture.

Supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit were the qualifications for ministry, and godly character for positions of responsibility in

leadership. Freedom was characteristic in their worship of God, and sacrifice was an ordinary part of their community life.

The Didache and the Kerygma

What, you may ask, are the Didache and the Kerygma? Well, these two Greek words embody two of the foundations of first century Christianity. The Didache is the body of Christ's teachings, and the Kerygma is the proclamation of His Good News. The apostles made it their business to preach repentance from sin, faith towards God, and believing the Good News of God's Kingdom as revealed in Jesus. But they also made it a priority to fulfill Jesus' command to teach His principles and to build the believers' faith.

With the authority given to them by Jesus, from whom all authority in heaven and earth proceeds, the apostles gladly, and at great personal risk, told the world that Jesus was in the process of taking over the planet!.... But in a good way, of course! First, He would deliver from the bondage of sin those who submitted themselves to Him. Then He would instruct them in His wisdom and use them to manifest His righteousness to others.

This is the very heart of the Church that Jesus is building to crash down the gates of hell! The Gospel of Jesus Christ is “the power of God unto salvation to them that believe, to the Jew first but also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16). If you want to know the secret of the success of the early Church, here it is! Yes, love is pre-eminent, and by which all would know that we are His disciples, but the power to love comes from receiving the very Word of God contained in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“I Never Promised You a Rose Garden”_____

In the time Jesus spent with His disciples, they witnessed many wonderful things and heard many wonderful words. One could imagine the state of euphoria which they experienced in those days, and even later when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all the “servants and handmaidens” of the Lord at Pentecost. But Jesus did not neglect to warn them of the downside of His ministry, and of their participation in it.

While infused with grace, love, and power, the Church of Jesus Christ was not void of conflict. Neither was it always basking in

material peace and prosperity. (Its riches were to be found in His abiding presence, which is promised to all those who love Him). Previously He both plainly warned that divisions would arise because of Him, and that those who hated Him would hate them as well. He also warned of the danger of false prophets arising and claiming to represent Him.

All of these elements will be found in the next 2000 years of Church History.

There would be times of relative peace, and of course great effort should be made to preserve that peace. But two kingdoms have been at war with each other from the beginning. Christ had won the final victory in the heavens, but the Church, His Body must now accomplish the same in the earth.

After His resurrection, during His last days on the earth with His disciples, He challenged Peter specifically to the purpose for which he was chosen. Peter, whose name means, “Rock,” was one of those chosen to shepherd the Lord's flock. The former fisherman evidently shrunk at first from this task, because he knew the implications. This is not a relaxing pastime, but one requiring extreme diligence.

The duty of the common shepherd was not only to see that the sheep are fed, but also protected from diseases, wild animals, accidents or any other danger. All Christians have a spiritual enemy whose soul objective is to steal, kill and destroy—and to in any way possible thwart God's good intentions for them. Therefore He has provided shepherds, whom He Himself has prepared and equipped for this task.

Not so among you!

In his first New Testament letter, Peter challenged others in the same manner that Christ had challenged him. As a fellow elder/shepherd/overseer, He charged the mature believing men in the churches to likewise selflessly take on this responsibility. This echoed the earlier words of Christ when He told His disciples to become the servants of all, rather than Lords over His flock.

The darkest days of Christianity would come, not because of persecution from the religious and civil authorities, but when those

given the responsibility to protect and care for the people of God became users who sought their own gain and power instead. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus instructed the future leaders of the church concerning the way in which the worldly authorities wielded their power. He commanded that it would *not* be so among them, but that the greatest among them would be those who were the servants of all. For the first several hundred years, thankfully the leaders, though not perfect, were for the most part devoted to Christ and His Bride. Their task was not easy. The spiritual forces of wickedness fought from both within their ranks and from the worldly systems of that day. The persecution Jesus promised came first from their rivals, the Jewish religious aristocracy who accused them of heresy. While Jesus and His apostles were accused of betraying God, in fact they were only exposing the traditions that were piled upon the Truth of the Word of God. In fact, they were more loyal to the essence of the Holy Scriptures, which taught them to love and please the Heavenly Father, while benefiting mankind.

When in Rome.....

As Gentiles began to fill their ranks, the Christian community was less and less seen as a sect from within Judaism, which happened to be protected by Roman law. Now as Christians began to be on their own from Rome's point of view, they were required to offer tokens of worship to the gods of the empire, namely the emperors. This they could not in good conscience do, as they only knew of One God worthy of worship. However, their Lord expected them to be model citizens in every other way.

The *Pax Romana*, or the peace of Rome was a highly valued possession for its inhabitants, and many saw the Christians as subverting that peace and security. Their private gatherings and their resistance to emperor worship led to many false accusations, which in turn led to persecutions by the authorities. As previously mentioned, there were relative periods of peace and security, but when the persecutions did come, they were extremely severe.

Christianity would not become fully legal in the empire until the fourth century, when Constantine became emperor. Until then, the pressures of persecution would offer the true and mature believers in Christ their greatest opportunities to demonstrate unshakable faith in their triumphant God.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

While pressure was bearing upon the Church from without, other problems were arising from within. This danger to the health and well being of the congregations was that of false prophets and teachers. Already in the first decades, we see in Acts, and in the letters of Paul and John that internal battles were fomenting. The first crisis in doctrine came when teachers from Jerusalem came to Antioch to see that the Gentiles were conforming to the laws and traditions of the nation of Israel. Peter and Paul both knew that a New Covenant had come, and they were in the process of working out what that actually meant.

While it was okay for Jewish Christians to continue in the lifestyle they always knew, it was to always be understood that Christ had fully and completely satisfied the need for atonement of sins. The Gentiles had received the very same atonement from the Cross of Christ to which nothing could be added.

The root of the problem is known today as *legalism*. There will always be the tendency to think we can satisfy God by some religious act or practice in place of pure and simple trust in what He has done and is doing for us and through us in Christ. Paul foresaw what would eventually be the loss of spiritual vitality in the Church if they began to trust more in forms and rituals than in the very power of Christ Himself working within them.

To settle this issue of requiring the Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses, Paul and Barnabas met with the other apostles in Jerusalem. After a very heated discussion, Peter stood with Paul and convinced James and the others that circumcision and the Law of Moses would not be required of the Gentile believers. They did, however, give a short list of things to avoid. (Acts 15:1-31).

Ironically, another danger to the faith tended to drive the emphasis away from the simplicity of Christ alone and further in the direction of forms, rituals, and legalism. That danger was also from within and was known as *Gnosticism*.

In the Know

The Hebrews were taught that God created the heavens and earth, and that He saw His creation was good. Yes, evil did enter in and bring great calamity and suffering, but the creation itself was the result of a good and loving God.

Other religions and philosophies in the first century saw it differently. These saw only the non-material as good. The rest was brought about by an evil and lesser god. Some began to bring these ideas into Christianity with little difficulty. Remember how even Paul contrasted the flesh with the Spirit. Yet, he saw the human body as becoming eventually restored to its glorious incorruptible state. The Gnostic Christians, as do many today, saw the body as an enemy, a prison house from which they longed to be released.

The material body became so repulsive to them that they came to deny that Jesus indeed did come in the flesh (John 1:14, 1 John 4:3). They proposed that He only appeared to have a human body. Both Paul and the Apostle John countered this error, each understanding the implications of such an idea. Why concern ourselves with praying for God's Kingdom to come, for His will to be done IN EARTH as in heaven, if the entire material world is evil and to be destroyed? This could lead to escapism. The goal then would be just to become internally focussed, gaining that secret knowledge that was for the predestined alone and separating ourselves from the lower humans.

The exact opposite of what Christ commanded His people to do.

God meant it for Good

The Gnostics (Greek for “those who know”) were so eloquent and intelligent that many were persuaded to their views. This forced the Christian thinkers of the early centuries to think more deeply about the past, present and future workings of God in the earth. They began to probe more deeply into the Old Testament to find the promise of Christ, and also began collecting the writings of the first generation of Christians to build on their legacy. By now, however, there was a fairly large chasm between the Jewish people from whom Christ came, and the Gentiles who now claimed Christ as their own.

Paul explains in Romans how the majority of Jews could not understand the concept of the suffering Messiah. Outwardly, life did

not change for them since Christ's appearance. In fact, it became even worse. After some zealots rebelled against Rome and fought for their independence, the Roman general Titus was sent to crush the rebellion, fulfilling predictions made by Jesus in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. came the end of an era. However, Paul remained committed to his fellow Israelites, believing that ultimately God would wake them from their spiritual slumber, revealing Christ to them more fully—in his words, “life from the dead!” (Romans 11:15).

Over the course of time, Gentile Christianity began to move further and further from its Jewish roots. For better or worse, Greek and Roman influence gradually began to creep into the thinking of the people. It is this writers opinion that influences from Greek, Roman and even Jewish philosophies over time did weaken the Church. Not only that, but influences from our modern cultures tend to do the same.

This is part of why we study history – to observe and learn what God would teach us. From Adam and Eve in the garden, to David and Saul, to Mary and Martha to Martin Luther, to Billy Graham – God would reveal to us His wisdom through all the triumphs *and* failures of the past. And most wonderful, is that we still have the pattern shown to us in the Gospels, Acts and the New Testament writings to keep us centered on the foundation of Christ – the Christ Who transcends history, and yet entered history to transform it.

No matter how far off course Christianity has come, every renewal, revival, or reform movement has always come from returning to that firm foundation!

Has the Glory departed?_____

Even before the New Testament writings were completed, evidence arose that indicated the beginnings of spiritual decline among the followers of Jesus. The persecution, the heresies, and the struggles against the temptations of the flesh all were taking a heavy toll. The original apostles were gradually dying off. However great faith was still found everywhere, and great sacrifices were still being made for Jesus Christ, the lover of their souls. In addition, their numbers were increasing all over the then known world. Yet, the original glow seems to have worn off. It is at this point that attitudes among observers of history begin to vary widely over the manner in

which the succeeding generations of leaders handled the problems of their day.

What had started out as the very simple proclamation that the Kingdom of God had come in the Person of God's Son Jesus Christ, was becoming more and more complicated. First of all His crucifixion had to be understood. And why the delay for the transformation of the world? It was to be through Christ, Abraham's Seed that all the families of the earth would be blessed! Again, we must be reminded that Jesus had already given us the basic plan.

Jesus explained in Matthew 13 how the Good News of the Kingdom was like seed being sown in all sorts of places. Depending on the condition of the soil and the surrounding environment, some of the seed would produce, and some of the good growth would not survive and come to maturity. But the healthy growth would reproduce itself some 30, some 60, some 100 times again! This all takes time.

Just like the yeast "hidden" in three measures of flour, the Kingdom of Heaven must for a time be hidden in the world, secretly growing and expanding its influence from pole to pole. (Matthew 13:33). By the end of the first century A.D., the Gospel had been presented in countries as far east as India and Syria, as far north as Asia Minor, south into Egypt and as far west as Rome, today's France and possibly Spain and the British Isles. The details of the last third of this century may be sketchy, but as the second century begins, we can see the result of those last 30 years. What had been "hidden" was about to be given greater notice than ever before.

First Century Time Line

(Many early dates are approximate)

5 BC The Birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem.

29 AD Jesus crucified, resurrected, and ascended.

On the day of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends on 120 disciples in Jerusalem. 3,000 people are added to the Church.

- 41** Gentiles are converted and accepted into the Church. They are first called “Christians” at Antioch. (Acts 11:26).
- 47-49** The Council at Jerusalem described in Acts 15 rules that circumcision should not be required of Gentile believers.
- 49** Paul writes to the Galatians, and later his other New Testament letters.
- 64** Nero persecutes the Christians in Rome.
- 65-69** Mark writes his Gospel, followed by Matthew and Luke.
- 68** Peter and Paul martyred in Rome.
- 70** Titus crushes the Jewish revolt and destroys the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians flee and are spared, having heeded the warnings of Jesus.
- 80-90** The rest of the New Testament writings are completed, the last probably being the writings of John.
- 81** Persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian. John sent to Patmos.
- 85-150** The early church fathers, Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp write to the churches.
- 90** The rise of the Gnostics.
- 100** After returning to Ephesus, the apostle John dies of natural causes. It is generally believed that the other original apostles died as martyrs.