

CPC Church History 1: Historical Introduction

1. What is this course about?
 - a. Junius and I have designed a series of discussions and readings that will take us through the institutional and theological developments of the Christian communities from the sub-apostolic age to the mid-fifth century. My focus will be on the social background of the church, its structure and spread, and the relationship of believers to the cultures that they encountered and transformed.
 - b. Junius will focus on theological developments.
2. Why begin this course at around the year 100AD?
 - a. Eusebius, the first church historian, began his history of the church with the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus. Others say that church history began with Christ's ascension and the great commission in Matt. 28:18-20.
 - b. The NT era was the era in which Christ's apostles were writing the NT and this era came to a close at about this time.
 - c. What does it mean to distinguish between biblical history and church history?
3. The church was founded in and spread primarily through the Roman Empire. What did this empire look like at the turn of the century?
 - a. Military and politics
 - i. Rome was at the height of its military expansion (see accompanying map). The boundaries set by Augustus before the birth of Christ had been strengthened and in some cases expanded.
 - ii. Unbroken trade across the entire Mediterranean was possible without fear of hostile powers or pirates and the exchange of ideas and culture flowed in wake of trade and governance.
 - iii. Rome governed harshly but in relative fairness through its magistrates and legions, as is amply demonstrated in the gospels. Many cities took down their walls and did not rebuild them for centuries, an extraordinary phenomenon in the pre-modern world.
 - b. Culture
 - i. Greek and Latin became the universal languages for spreading Greek culture and Roman law to the upper classes of the entire empire. The NT, documents written for a movement originating in the Middle East whose earliest members spoke Aramaic, was written in Greek.
 - ii. Roman religion was public, communal, and tolerant up to a point. The traditional gods of the early republic were seen as having guided the legions to victory but the willingness of Romans to venerate the gods of conquered peoples was seen to add strength to their ambitions. Veneration of the emperor was seen as both a civic and a religious duty.

4. What did the church look like in this period?
 - a. Sources
 - i. Christian – the Apostolic Fathers, a collection of documents written by Christians in the first generations following the apostles: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Hermas, Polycarp, Papias, the authors of the Epistles to Barnabas and Diognetus, and the Didache.
 - ii. Non-Christian – Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus.
 - b. Structure
 - i. The earliest churches were based in cities, often cities with an existing Diaspora Jewish population. They met in houses or in fields; buildings dedicated to worship came later. There was a mix of men and women, slaves and free people, rich and poor.
 - ii. Their services were marked by the singing of hymns, instruction in the faith, and, above all, celebration of the communal meal that Christ instituted at the last supper.
 - iii. They communicated with one another by sending letters (i.e. the letters of Paul, Clement, and Ignatius) and messengers or ordained clergy and missionaries who carried the letters with them. The written gospels that we know were beginning to be used widely alongside authoritative oral traditions of Christ’s words.
 - iv. Prophets still existed and moved between congregations and the early literature (*Didache*) gives some instruction on how to identify and treat them. Church hierarchy is in the process of changing from apostles, prophets, and teachers (1 Cor. 12:28) to bishops, presbyters, and deacons (Ignatius). Missionary ministry transitions to a local, pastoral ministry.
 - c. Relationship to Judaism
 - i. The earliest church, as recorded in Acts, worshipped in the temple and Paul made it his habit to preach first in a new city’s synagogue. The most important elements of Christian continuity with and distinction from Judaism were worked out in the NT. What form did this process take?
 - ii. The first Jewish Revolt against Rome (66-73AD) and the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem further differentiated the two groups. Christians said that they were not Zealots, interested in political independence from Rome, and did not support the revolt. Meanwhile, Christianity spread faster and faster among non-Jewish people who began to see Jews that did not follow Christ as being more separate from the church than Jesus’ disciples had seen them.
5. Suggested further reading: The Apostolic Fathers. ed. Bart Ehrman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.