

THE EARLY CHURCH

By Jimmie Eaton (Redbank Church of Christ)

About one year before leaving this earth Jesus promised his disciples, "I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18.) This promise was fulfilled in Jerusalem some 50 days after his crucifixion on a Jewish feast day called Pentecost.

The details of this great event are given in Acts, chapter two. Verse 41 reads, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them". Who were these people? Verse 47 answers this question. "And the Lord added to the church those who were being saved" Thus, the first Christians.

This same chapter also shows us what people did in order to become Christians. As a result of Peter's sermon the Jews came to believe in Christ. Realizing they needed to repent of their sins they were then baptized for the remission of their sins. This resulted in their being added to the church Jesus had promised. (Acts 2:38)

The New Testament church was very simple in its make up. Each congregation was independent with Christ as its only head. (Ephesians 1:22+23.) As "King of kings and Lord of lords" Christ reigns over His Kingdom (the church) at the right hand of God in heaven.

In each local church there were a plurality of elders and deacons. (Philippians 1:1) The elders, sometimes called "bishops" or "pastors," oversaw the activity of the local church. The deacons were special servants who assisted them in their work. (See 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 1 Peter 5:1-5)

They also had evangelists who preached the gospel. Often they would go into areas which had not been evangelized and establish new churches. They also worked with established churches. (See Acts 21:8, 20:31, 2 Timothy 4:5)

The worship that God authorized for these early Christians was very simple. It consisted of prayer, singing, giving attention to the teaching of the scriptures and observing the Lord's Supper every first day of the week (Sundays). They were also commanded to give as they had been prospered on that day. (See Acts 2:42, Acts 20:7, Colossians 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 16:1+2) Secular history verifies these New Testament descriptions.

Christians were instructed to go into all the world and preach the gospel. (Matthew 28:19+20) They were also commanded to help those with physical needs. (See James 1:27, Galatians 6:10.) Specific instructions were given to them about how to conduct themselves as Christians (Please read 1 Timothy 3:15) Most of the New Testament epistles deal with Christian living.

The history of the Lord's church in the first century is given in great detail in the book of Acts, along with additional information gathered from other books of the New Testament. However, most people are unaware of what happened to the church after the first century. The historical notes in this booklet will take you through each century noting the many major changes that took place within the church.

After the first century there would follow unauthorized departures from what the Lord had decreed through the apostles and the written word, the New Testament. The changes would be gradual but the end result would be a church entirely different from what the Lord established in the beginning and intended to be perpetuated until the end of time.

Warnings were frequently given by the apostles that there would be a "falling away," a departure from the truth (See 2 Thessalonians 2:3). Note the following Scriptures.

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith." (1 Timothy 4:1, 2.)

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4.)

"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ?" (2 Corinthians 11:13)

"For I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things." (Acts 20:29+30)

"But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you." (2 Peter 2:1+2)

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

DEPARTURES FROM THE FAITH

As we enter this section please keep in mind that none of the doctrines or practices mentioned were taught by the Apostles nor are they found in the New Testament. They were added by men.

FIRST CENTURY

Before the end of the first century the church was already confronted with false teachers called Judaizers who attempted to bind part of the Law of Moses on Christians. Some of the New Testament letters (**Romans, Galatians and Hebrews**) were written to offset the teachings of the Judaizers.

In the second half of the first century there arose the doctrine of **Gnosticism** which denied that Jesus had come in the flesh. This doctrine was to be a source of irritation for many years. The apostle John refutes this false teaching in two of his letters.

THE SECOND CENTURY

Around 130 a man named Papias advocated some elements of today's popular doctrine (**Dispensationalism**) that Christ will return to earth, set up a kingdom and reign for 1000 years in the city of Jerusalem. The New Testament clearly teaches that Christ's Kingdom (**the church**) already exists. (See **Revelation 1:9 and Mark 9:1**)

The first observance of **EASTER** occurred in **155** although it had never been commanded in the New Testament nor observed during the first century. Christians did observe the Lord's death, burial and resurrection through the Lord's Supper every first day (**Sunday**) of the week (**Acts 20:7**).

God's plan for each congregation was to have a plurality of elders who served as overseers or shepherds of the local church with each congregation being autonomous. (See **1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Acts 20:17, 28**.)

About the middle of the second century we see this being replaced by the rule of a single bishop. Ignatius, a single ruling bishop of Antioch, was eager to promote his new form of government among the churches of Asia Minor. He wrote letters to these churches about this. "**Bishop**" became an exclusive title while "**elder**" was considered an inferior rank.

In the New Testament the terms elder, bishop and pastor all refer to the same office.

Thus by the end of the second century already the seeds for the Roman hierarchical system were already being sown. With Jewish converts slow to give up many practices of Moses' law the three ranks of high-priest, priest, and Levite were carried over into the church as bishop, priest and deacon.

Holy water used by the pagans at the entrance to their temples is one of many practices brought over into the church during the second century. Cardinal Baronias justified such by saying, "It is allowable for the church to transfer to pious uses those ceremonies which the pagans employed impiously to superstitious worship, after they have been purified by consecration."

With the violent persecutions against Christians in the second century many were killed. It became a custom to celebrate the memory of these heroes. Their bones were given a new burial. Each year on the date of their deaths Christians would celebrate their memory.

This annual commemoration was called the day of their birth into heaven. This would be done at their tombs. No religious worship was rendered at first. Eusebius expressed the feeling of that time. He said, "We are taught to worship God only, and to honour those blessed powers that are about him with such honour as is fit and agreeable to their estate and condition." In time however, this would lead to praying to them.

THIRD CENTURY

By the year 240 mutual agreements were made that he who should first die should remember the Christian survivors on earth and implore God in their behalf. Martyrdom was considered the highest level of Christian virtues.

According to Origen and Cyprian, their petitions before the throne of God were very effective for the church left on earth. In the Catacombs of Rome there are inscriptions where the departed were requested to pray for their living relatives and friends left behind on earth.

Infant baptism appears in the third century although no exact date can be given. It is mentioned by a number of writers during this period. It was opposed by Tertullian of North Africa. Cyprian differed with him. It seems there was no question whether the children of Christian parents should be baptized. Rather it was whether they should be baptized the second or third day after birth, or according to Jewish circumcision, on the eighth day.

Cyprian and a council of sixty-six bishops decided on the earlier time. This shows the Bible ignorance of that age. Infants cannot believe, repent or confess. All of these precede baptism. Romans 10:9+10+17 refutes this doctrine. Later, as the doctrine of "Original Sin" becomes crystallized, infant baptism became common.

The DIDACHE, a kind of church manual, appears with instruction to "pour water upon the head in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Thus we begin to see a complete departure in the mode of baptism from immersion to pouring of water upon the candidate. Romans 6:4 clearly shows that baptism is a burial (immersion) in water.

At first this was allowed where there might be a scarcity of water but later it was applied only to sick persons. Some felt the water had magical powers to cleanse the polluted souls of men. It was believed to contain the whole forgiving power of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The first known case we have knowledge of, was a man by the name of Novatian (A.D. 251), who was "baptized by effusion in the bed as he lay." This became known as clinical baptism. In immersion a person was dipped three times. Pouring and sprinkling remained exceptional to the ninth century. Exorcism, the expulsion of demons before baptism, became a common practice. It was said that demons traversed through the air over the earth and took possession of men.

The effects of baptism were thought to cover only sins committed in the past. Hence baptism was often delayed until sickness or the approach of death. They would rather risk dying unbaptized than to be baptized early in life feeling no sins were forgiven after baptism. This shows an ignorance of **1 John 1:7-9**.

FOURTH CENTURY

Constantine is considered to be the first Christian Caesar. He would have a profound influence on the future of the church and its departure from the faith. From the year **313** he placed himself in close connection with the bishops. Christianity appealed to him because of the conduct of the Christians which he saw as far superior to the pagans.

The story is told that together with his army, in clear daylight towards evening, there appeared a shining cross in the heavens with the inscription, "**By this conquer.**" He relates that the following night Christ appeared to him while he slept and directed him to have a standard prepared in the form of the cross and proceed in battle against his enemies.

We would suppose however, that if Christ really did appear he would have exhorted a pagan Caesar to repent and be baptized rather than to construct a military ensign for a bloody battle. Constantine while claiming to be a convert made the decision as did so many in that age to put off baptism until it would appear that death was near. Notice the contrast in **Acts 16:33**.

After a military victory at Rome, Constantine published an edict of religious toleration granting full freedom to all existing forms of worship with special reference to the Christians. Roman Emperors previously had been persecutors of the Christians. From this time on Christianity received a favoured status.

He abolished various customs and ordinances that were offensive to the Christians. He contributed liberally to the building of edifices and the financial support of the bishops. This resulted in the union of church and state. He even considered himself to be a divinely appointed bishop over the external affairs of the church while the internal affairs belonged to the bishops. In later centuries this led to secular rulers trying to oversee the church and then the reverse, the church trying to dictate to the state.

Wanting to see the church united, Constantine called a counsel of **318** Bishops to settle the Arian controversy over the full divinity of Christ (**Gnosticism**). It was held in Nicea, a city near Constantinople in **325**. The Emperor himself presided over the assembly and guided its work. Out of this council would come the first written creed which would be given universal recognition.

It would be the beginning of many creeds and councils; each one introducing and adding new and false doctrines. To this day the Nicene creed is incorporated and expounded in all the Orthodox Greek and Russian Catechisms. In time creeds would become the official law of the church, ignoring and bypassing God's word.

With the union of church and state, it was only natural that the church would begin to take on a similar form of government as the state, a pyramid form of government. The city bishops towered over the country bishops. Those who lived in the larger cities were appointed over the rural bishops in their province. They were styled **Metropolitans** in the east and Archbishops in the west. **(See God's plan in 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)**

Superior to the metropolitans later on were the five Patriarchs. They lived in five major cities of that time. They ordained the Metropolitans, rendered final decisions in church controversies, presided over councils and published the decrees of the councils and church laws of the emperors.

By the end of the fourth century Rome was ranked first; Constantinople second; Alexandria, Egypt third; Antioch fourth; and Jerusalem as the fifth and smallest. Later a power struggle developed between Rome and Constantinople. This would lead to the rise of the papacy.

The first traces of relic worship appear as early as the second century. The church of Antioch kept the bones of Ignatius, preserved as a priceless treasure. In Smyrna the half-burnt bones of Polycarp (said to be a disciple of the apostle John) were considered "more precious than the richest jewels and more tried than gold."

Toward the middle of the fourth century the veneration of relics simultaneously with the worship of the saints assumed a superstitious and idolatrous character. Highly revered were such things as pieces of cloth alleged to have been worn by Christ or some well known saint. There were countless splinters supposedly taken from the cross of Christ to be cherished and revered by the living.

The signing of the cross upon the forehead was in universal use in this period. This was practiced so much that the pagans nicknamed them "cross-worshippers." Toward the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century crosses were no longer bare but had the figure of Christ fastened to them. They were called **crucifixes**. In contrast the Orthodox Churches of the East prohibited all images and crucifixes, tolerating only pictures of Christ and the saints.

A man who would have a profound effect on the apostate church was Aurelius Augustine (354-430). In his early life he was not a Christian. He embraced Christianity in 387 and was ordained a bishop in 391. Augustine developed the doctrines of **original sin** and **predestination**. He actually took the idea from Tertullian who coined the phrase "original sin," a term which is not found in the Bible.

Augustine incorporated the idea that the taint of sin is transmitted from generation to generation by the act of procreation. Thus one is born with the sins of his forefathers. The doctrine of predestination implies that the destiny of a person is predetermined by God's unchangeable decree before he or she is born.

The Catholic Church softened this latter doctrine somewhat, but later on the Swiss reformer John Calvin became its best known exponent. He wrote: "We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he determined within himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others."

Calvin's position would profoundly influence many Protestant churches. Martin Luther the German reformer and John Knox of Scotland were very much attracted to Augustine's teachings. **Acts 10:34+35 and Hebrews 5:9** clearly disproves this doctrine.

FIFTH CENTURY

It is during the fifth century that we begin to see the exalting of Mary which would eventually lead to the Catholic doctrine of Mariolatry. Mary was certainly the "highly favoured one." However, the Catholic and Orthodox churches did not stop at this point. They began to transform the "mother of the Lord" into the "Mother of God," the humble "handmaid of the Lord" into the "Queen of heaven." She became the primary intercessor between man and God, violating **1 Timothy 2:5**.

Peter Gnapheous, the patriarch of Antioch (470) was the first to order that "Mother of God" should be named in every prayer. It would be a number of years later that the doctrine of Mariolatry would be fully developed, but it had its beginning in the fifth century. Again we see further departures from the word of God.

The system of saint worship developed itself at the same time with the worship of Mary. An incident of the invocation of a saint can be found when the body of Chrysostom was transported to Constantinople. The Emperor Theodosius knelt down before it, prayed for it to forgive his parents, who had persecuted him while living. Although his action was rebuked by many, yet it would not be long until it would be adopted and became a common practice. (See 1 Timothy 2:5.)

The New Testament nowhere supports such actions. The word "saint" was a term that was applied to all Christians. Please read 1 Corinthians 14:33 and Romans 1:7. Unfortunately the word "saint" became a title and was restricted to bishops and to departed heroes, especially the martyrs of the first three centuries.

Almost all Catholic saints were from the higher degrees of the clergy or monks. The monks were the chief promoters of the worship of saints. At the head of this group of saints stands Mary, crowned as queen. Next come the apostles and evangelists who died a violent death and finally the martyrs of the first three centuries. In time angels would also be added. This is clearly contradicted in 1 Timothy 2:5 and makes us realized how little attention was given to Scripture.

SIXTH CENTURY

At the beginning of this century images began to be used in the churches. At first they were used as historical memorials only but would precipitate image worship. Processions are noted around 535. These were of definite pagan origin.

Earlier Chrysostom, in order to counter the processions being conducted by the pagans in behalf of their gods, ordered processions in which the clergy and people marched by night, singing hymns and carrying crosses and torches. Thus the custom of processions was introduced into the churches. We find no authority for such in the New Testament.

In 538 Vigilius, bishop of Rome, ordered that the priest, standing at the altar, should turn his face to the east which was an old pagan practice. Altars were placed to the east of the chapels. It is clear from 1 Peter 2:5+9, that all Christians are now priests.

Monasticism developed rapidly during this period. It went through four stages. The first three were completed in the fourth century; the remaining one reached maturity in the middle ages.

The first stage was a simple ascetic life of an individual, not yet organized as a body of men separated from the church. The second stage was hermit life. It arose in the beginning of the fourth century. It took the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist as models for this kind of life.

The third stage was cloister life, a monastery with monks under a superintendent or abbot. They spent their time in devotions and manual labour and devoted their surplus provisions to charity. The fourth stage produced monastic orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans. At the same time women would form themselves into orders of Nuns.

These orders looked upon themselves as a struggle to gain perfect dominion of the spirit over the flesh. They made a distinction between two grades of morality: a common and lower grade and a higher grade. The higher order is obtained by special merit. It demanded the entire renunciation of sin, property and marriage.

The life of the apostles and early Christians was anything but the life of a hermit. One reason for the rapid spread of the gospel in the beginning was the fact that the early Christians mixed and mingled with the masses of people bringing them the message of salvation. (Acts 8:4; Matthew. 28:19.)

There is nothing in the New Testament that remotely suggests monasticism. An early famous monk was Jerome. Religious art represents him as a penitent, in a reading or writing posture. He is known for translating the Bible into Latin.

Near the end of the sixth century public worship centred on the celebration of the Mass. The Mass was the repetitious symbolical enactment of the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world. Both the Orthodox and Catholic churches surrounded the Mass with great solemnity and mysterious symbolism. Gregory changed the Latin liturgy, and gave it the shape which it substantially has in the Roman church today.

When the priest offers the **un-bloody sacrifice** to God, it is said that the heavens are opened, the angels are present, and the visible and invisible world unite. This is a clear contradiction of **Hebrews 7:27, Hebrews 9:28**. Gregory also introduced masses for the dead in association with Purgatory which he developed and popularized. Very few were supposed to be prepared for heaven; therefore masses were often ordered beforehand for dying friends and relatives.

THE SEVENTH CENTURY

It is difficult to establish a specific date for the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church. Its doctrines evolved over many years. However, there are certain events that set it forth as crystallized in doctrine and make it a separate and distinct form of religion.

Gregory I, who served as bishop of Rome from **590 to 604**, was the last of the Latin fathers and first of the popes. Interestingly he declined and even denounced the use of the title, "**Universal Bishop.**" He wrote, "**I, indeed, confidently assert that whosoever either calls himself, or desires to be called, Universal Priest, that person, in his vain elation, is the precursor of Antichrist, because, through his pride, he exalts himself above the others.**"

When the Emperor Maurice and his family were murdered by the tyrant Phocas, Gregory hastened to congratulate him and his wife Leontia in most enthusiastic terms calling upon heaven and earth to rejoice at their accession to the throne. Phocas repaid the favour by acknowledging the Roman church to be "**the head of all churches.**"

It is no wonder then that the successors of Gregory, who were less humble, had no scruples to the employment of the title of Universal Bishop. Boniface III around **607** assumed this title. Thus we use this date as marking the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church as a distinct religious organization. It would now move on to develop in a more complex form the many doctrines instituted in earlier centuries.

It is said that in the year **666** Pope Vitalius introduced the organ in the worship. However, it was opposed. It would not become common in the Catholic Church until the tenth century. It was never employed by the Orthodox churches in the east even unto this day. **Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16** explicitly teach that in our worship to God we are to sing. Instrumental music was never authorized in the New Testament.

THE EIGHTH CENTURY

At a council held in Rome in **769**, a decree was passed that images should be honoured. The Second Council of Nicea **787** established the use of images. This same council developed the doctrine of the "**real presence**" of the body and blood of Jesus in the emblems used in the Lord's Supper.

They declared, "**Nowhere did either our Lord, or his apostles, or the fathers, call the unbloody sacrifice offered up through the priest, an image, but they call it the body itself, and the blood itself.**" This would be the forerunner of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

In 795 Leo III ordered incense to be used in the services of the Latin Church, an obvious carryover from the Jewish Temple but not authorized by the Lord for His church. In 754 a civil ruler Pepin handed over to the Pope the administration of the territory of Ravenna and other provinces. For the first time the Pope is raised to the rank of a temporal prince.

NINTH CENTURY

One of the most interesting developments during this period in church history was the formation of the Russian Orthodox Church. In Russia a man by the name of Ruric was chosen by the tribes as their chief (Czar). He is regarded as the founder of the Russian Empire in A.D. 863. Russia was pagan in its religion at the time. In 955 Ruric's mother the grand-duchess, Olga, went to Constantinople and was so impressed with the Greek Orthodox Church that she was baptized.

When she returned to Russia, she was unable to convert her son. Later her grandson Vladimir would visit Constantinople where he met the Emperor's sister Anne and married her. The Emperor insisted if he married her he would have to submit to baptism.

So on the same day of his marriage in 988 he was baptized. Upon his return to Kiev, men, women and children, were required to descend into the Dnieper River and while the priests read prayers on the banks, a command was given for all to immerse themselves in the river. Kiev was converted in wholesale style by an emperor's decree.

Soon Orthodox churches would spread in every direction in Russia. Two monks from Constantinople translated the Scriptures into the Slavonic language creating the Slavonic alphabet in quaint Greek characters. Thus the people had the Bible in their own language contrary to Rome which permitted the Scriptures only in Latin. Many think this contributed to the fast growth of the Russian Orthodox Church.

For a long time the Russians were under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople. After the fall of that city in 1452 the Metropolitan of Moscow became independent. In January 1589 he was raised to the dignity of Patriarch, equal in rank with the other Patriarchs. Later in 1703 St. Petersburg would become the ecclesiastical capital, then later the Patriarch was re-established in Moscow.

The Bible is very clear that there is but one head of the church, Christ, who now reigns as "the blessed and only potentate, King of kings and Lord of Lords" (1 Timothy 6:15). Also God has "put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:22). There was never any earthly capital for the church of the New Testament.

Down to 869 the Scriptures alone were accepted as authority in the church. In this year the Fourth Council of Constantinople passed a decree recognizing written traditions being as valid as Scripture. Tradition could now be used to justify doctrines not found in the Scriptures. Paul declares that Scriptures alone thoroughly furnishes us "unto all good works," thus there is no need for any human traditions. (2 Timothy 3:16+17)

TENTH CENTURY

It is in this century that the Greek Orthodox Church becomes a separate entity from the Catholic Church. With the fall of the Roman Empire there began what has been called The Dark Ages. It was during this period of time that the Roman church came to dominate both European politics and culture.

However not everyone bowed to the wishes of Rome. Before the appointment of Boniface III as "Pope" the powers of the church had centred around Constantinople and Rome. The Patriarch of Constantinople had always claimed authority over his area (eastern churches) and the Bishop of Rome had claimed authority over the west. The eastern Patriarch never accepted the appointment of Boniface as Pope. Eastern churches began to drift away from the West.

There also developed a great controversy over the use of icons. The result was that the eastern churches employed only pictures while the western churches employed images. There were other differences. The East practiced immersion whereas the West substituted pouring of water in baptism. The East did not use instrumental music whereas the organ was introduced in the West.

The formal separation between them came in 1004 when representatives of Pope Leo IX had a document of excommunication of the Patriarch, Michael Cerubarius, placed on the altar of St. Sophia church in Constantinople. From that time the two went their separate ways. Since then Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe and Russia are under separate Patriarchs with no connections to the Catholic Church.

THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

About 1000 the modern form of absolution, "I absolve thee" takes shape. The form used in Rome was "Almighty God have compassion on thee and put away thy sins." Later this would change to the present form "I absolve thee." Only one person can forgive sin, God. No human priest ever had this authority. (Ephesians 4:32: 1 John 1:9)

The Council of Worms, 1022 undertook to legalize the granting of freedom from penance for money. "He that can not fast for one day on bread and water, shall sing fifty psalms on his knees in the church, and shall feed one poor man for that day and for which period he shall take such nourishment as he likes except wine, flesh and grease. One hundred genuflections shall be accepted instead of the fifty Psalms, and the rich may redeem themselves for money."

In 1059 a council in Rome declared the bread and wine are the very body and blood of Christ; and that Christ is sensibly felt, broken and torn by the teeth of the faithful. If they are the literal blood and body of Christ, this would be a form of cannibalism also violating the decree of Acts 15:29 which prohibits drinking blood.

By 1070 Purgatory was being vigorously advocated by the priests. Prayers for the deliverance of souls out of purgatory were in use by the end of the previous century. Purgatory is never mentioned in the Bible.

Celibacy of the clergy was being enforced at this time. It was declared that married priests should not be permitted to celebrate the Mass or to discharge any duties of the regular officials who served at the altar. Popery rose to its zenith in the eleventh century. It culminated in Gregory VII, surnamed Hildebrand. His power was so great he once took it upon himself to anathematize and depose an emperor.

TWELTH CENTURY

The seven sacraments are announced and defined in the early part of this century. Lucius II was elected Pope by the Cardinals alone. Previously the clergy and people had a voice in the election.

THIRTEENTH & FOURTEENTH CENTURY

In 1215 a confession of sins to a priest was required of all persons. It was to be made at least once a year. In the Council of Trent of 1215 it was declared that the mass was not to be celebrated in the (common) language of the people. Mass was to be celebrated only in Latin. It was in this council that the bread was declared to be transubstantiated into the body and the wine into the blood of Christ.

In 1229 the Bible was forbidden to the "laity" by the Council of Toulouse. This is in conflict with James 1:21+22: 1 Timothy 3:15; 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV).

One of the most interesting doctrines to come out of this century was the so called "Treasury of Merit." It assumed that there was a super-abundance of good merits (works) done by Christ and the saints, all of which had been placed at the disposal of the Pope, who could apply them to

any sinner to make up for any good that was lacking. This was done by way of indulgences. This would be the beginning of the sale of indulgences. The fear of purgatory increased the desire of the people to possess them so they could escape its punishment.

From the beginning of the fourteenth century on, there were those who were persistent in their denunciation of the priesthood. One historian describes the condition in his time as follows. "I see that we can scarcely get anything from Christ's ministers but for money; at baptism money, at marriage money, at bishoping money, for confession money—no, not extreme unction without money. They ring no bells without money, no burials in the church without money; so that it seems that Paradise is shut up from them that have no money."

As early as 1173 Peter Waldo began preaching in Lyons, France against the authority of the Pope, purgatory and other practices of the Catholic Church. His followers were excommunicated in 1884 but still survived in the Alps.

John Wycliffe, popularly called the "Morning Star of the Reformation," was one of the first to distinguish himself in fighting against the supremacy of the pope. In Wycliffe's later writings, he declared that the Bible, not the church, was the authority for Christian beliefs. He repudiated the doctrine of transubstantiation.

During 1378 Wycliffe and certain Oxford, England associates defied church tradition by undertaking a translation of the Latin Bible into English. In 1382 he was declared a heretic and was expelled from Oxford. Some years later the Council of Constance reviewed his heresies and ordered his body disinterred and burned.

The works of John Wycliffe greatly influenced John Huss (1369 - 1415) a Bohemian who lived in Prague. He began preaching fiery sermons in Prague. He attacked the morals of the clergy and the selling of indulgences. He called for reform in the church. Huss was looked upon as a heretic and was excommunicated in 1412. He was then burned at the stake. His reform movement was carried on for several years after his death by followers known as Hussites.

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The primacy of the bishop of Rome was announced in no uncertain terms in this century. It was defined by the Council of Florence in the following words: "Also we decree that the Holy Apostolical See and the Roman Pontiff has a primacy over the whole world; and that the Roman Pontiff himself is the successor of St. Peter, the prince of the apostles, and is the true vicar of Christ, and the head of the whole Church, and the father and teacher of all Christians; and that to him, in the person of the blessed Peter, our Lord Jesus Christ has committed full power to feed, rule and govern the universal Church, according as is contained in the acts of the General Councils and in the holy canons." This doctrine defies Ephesians 1:22 that there is but one head of the church, Christ.

One of the interesting problems of this time was the debate within the Catholic church over the matter of the immaculate conception of the virgin Mary. So strong was the debate that it created division. The Dominicans combated the new dogma while the Franciscans vigorously supported it.

The horrible Inquisitions took place in this century under Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain beginning around 1478. Thousands including a great number of Jews were burned at the stake during this period. This action had the blessings of the Pope.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

In the years 1515-17 there took place the grand sale of indulgences by Pope Leo X which became one of the immediate causes of the Reformation. Money was sorely needed to complete the church of St. Peter, and it was through these indulgences that the Pope hoped to raise the money.

One of the persons selected to sell indulgences was a very enterprising priest named Johann Tetzel. He attracted much attention as he travelled throughout Germany speaking. The people with great excitement flocked to hear him speak concerning the merits of the purchasing of these pardons of sin.

THE REFORMATION

Brave and scholarly men disturbed over corruption within the church would put forth efforts to reform many of the abuses that were being practiced. In the beginning they were loyal to the church but as abuses continued in spite of their efforts of **protest** and **reform** they would leave the church. It is from these two words that we get the phrase, "**Protestant Reformation.**"

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the most prominent leader of the Reformation. He was ordained a priest in 1501. The first controversy in which Luther became involved concerned **indulgences**. The church had developed these as a means of releasing sinners from the penalty of sin.

In **October 1517**, Luther sent a letter to his superior denouncing their sale. He enclosed a list of **95 articles** for debate. Tradition says he posted his ninety-five thesis to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, which served as a bulletin board. The news spread rapidly.

About the time of the indulgence controversy Luther came to believe that people are justified solely through faith in God's promise that Christ died for their salvation. When men have this kind of faith Christ takes their place before God's judgment seat and God finds them "**not guilty**" for Christ's sake. H

e said people cannot earn faith, God gives faith as a gift. Once justified by faith, believers are led by the Holy Spirit to be more loving toward God and their neighbour and to do good works. But these works are the result of justification, rather than the means by which people are justified.

So strong were his feelings about justification by faith that, in translating the Bible into German when he came to **Romans 3:28** he added the word alone to the passage. The passage was made to read, "**Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith alone without works of the law.**"

In defence of this he once wrote, "**As to Romans 3:28, if the word "alone" is not found in the Latin or Greek texts, yet the passage has that meaning and must be rendered so in order to make it clear and strong in German.**"

This insertion would colour succeeding religious thought. In later years his "**faith only**" doctrine would be watered down to mean giving mental consent to the fact that Christ is our Saviour.

Because of the emphasis that the epistle of James places on works (see **James chapter 2**), Luther was furious in his denunciation of the epistle, insisting that it was not canonical and did not belong in the New Testament as inspired writing.

Speaking of this epistle he once said, "**Let us banish this epistle from the university, for it is worthless. It has no syllable about Christ, not even naming him except once at the beginning. I think it was written by some Jew who had heard of the Christians but had not joined them. James had learned that the Christians insisted strongly on faith in Christ and so he said to himself: 'Well, you must take issue with them and speak only of works,' and so he does.**"

Although Luther had never intended to form a new church, he spent the last 20 years of his life doing just that. In 1529 he issued the **Small Catechism**, a work designed to bring Lutheran Christianity to the people of Germany.

The **Augsburg Confession** is generally recognized as representing the beliefs of Lutherans. It was written by a close friend of Luther, Philip Melancthon. Melancthon would later alter the

confession due to his change in thinking from that of Luther. In later years there would follow controversy and division within the Lutheran movement over the freedom of the will and the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

Zwingli (1484 – 1531) is unique among the reformers. His eyes were opened by reading the Greek New Testament. Zwingli broke more rapidly and radically with the Roman Church than did Luther. He boldly abolished all doctrines and usages not taught in the Scriptures whereas Luther retained what was not clearly forbidden.

Zwingli died at age 47. One wonders how much further his thinking would have developed had he lived longer. He came closer to restoring New Testament Christianity than most of the reformers. He debated Luther on the real presence of the body and blood of Christ, maintaining the bread and wine represented His body and blood.

He was the first to eliminate infant baptism declaring it was for those who were old enough to understand and believe. He considered baptism as a symbol or sign that one had been saved rather than it was "for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38).

John Calvin's (1509–1564) conversion to the Reformation seems to have taken place about a year after the death of Zwingli. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* would greatly influence religious history. His doctrine of predestination was at the core of his beliefs. He defined predestination as the eternal and unchangeable decree of God by which men are foreordained to eternal salvation or eternal punishment. Later this would lead to the idea that one cannot fall from grace or "once saved, always saved."

A break with the Pope occurred in England during the reign of Henry VIII (1492–1547). He considered himself a well-trained theologian and accepted without question the Catholic Church. However, difficulty between Henry and the Pope came about when Henry desired an annulment from Catherine of Aragon so he could marry Anne Boleyn, with whom he said he had fallen in love.

He appealed to the Pope in 1527 to set aside his marriage, but when the Pope refused he broke with the Pope and appointed himself as the head of the Church in England. Many of the priests went along with him. He made Thomas Cranmer Archbishop in 1533. Cranmer pronounced Catherine's marriage to Henry void and the marriage with Anne legal. Cranmer became the leader of the anti-papal movement in England. In 1534 Henry was made "Supreme Head" of the Church of England.

William Tyndale (1492–1536) was educated at Oxford, ordained a priest in 1515, and then went to Cambridge University. There he determined to translate the Bible from the Greek into English in order to combat corruption in the English church. Later he moved to Cologne, Germany, where in 1525 he began the printing of his English version of the New Testament.

He was taken into custody at Antwerp and after 16 months of imprisonment, he was tried and then was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536. The translations of Tyndale and Wycliffe would later form the foundation of the *King James Version of 1611*.

The reformation in Scotland was more radical than in England with the establishment of Calvinistic Presbyterianism. While in England politics controlled religion, in Scotland religion controlled politics. John Knox (1505-1572) became the Luther of Scotland.

Although four years older, he sat at the feet of John Calvin and became more Calvinistic than Calvin. He returned to his homeland of Scotland where he would devote the remaining years of his life establishing Calvinistic Protestantism.

Methodism was one of the most successful of all the offshoots of the Reformation. John Wesley (1703–1791) was the organizer and founder although he remained a member of the Church of England until his death. His independent evangelistic career however would lead to the establishment of the Methodist Church.

Unlike many other Protestant movements, Methodism kept aloof from politics and confined itself to the sphere of religion. It was however the daughter of the Church of England. In America the Methodist became an independent organization with an Episcopal form of government.

Wesley was greatly influenced by the Moravians, some of whom he met on a voyage across the Atlantic to the Colony of Georgia. After his return to England he conversed with them in London. This led to his **second conversion** doctrine. He came to the conclusion that there had to be some kind of religious experience whereby you would know if you are saved.

He reported that he had such an experience on **May 24, 1738**. Later this thinking would lead to the mourners bench, testifying of your experience of salvation, and the doctrine of sanctification. Eventually Pentecostalism would evolve out of this movement. Subjective experiences in time would come to mean more than the commands of the Bible. Truth, not feelings, is our only authority we are governed by. (See **John 8:32**)

The Puritan movement was a movement within the Church of England in the latter part of the **16th century**. Puritan theology is a version of Calvinism's doctrine of predestination. No one can be certain of his or her eternal destiny except that an experience of conversion would be some indication that one is of the elect. The experience of conversion was therefore central to the Puritans. A number of groups came out of this movement including the Quakers, Congregationalists and Baptists.

The various branches of the Baptist family differed widely and had little or no connection except that they agreed in rejecting infant baptism believing that baptism is an immersion. They were greatly influenced by the doctrines of predestination and premillennialism (**1000 year reign of Christ in Jerusalem**).

The American Baptists trace their origin chiefly to Roger Williams the founder of Rhode Island. Most have adopted Zwingli's position on baptism (**an outward sign of an inward grace**); an interesting conclusion in view of **1 Peter 3:21**, "Baptism doth also now save us." Over the years they have divided over doctrinal issues.

OBSERVATIONS

The Reformation was a vast stride away from Roman Catholicism. We owe much of our present day religious freedom to those brave leaders of the Reformation period. Many lost their lives because of their opposition to Catholicism. Many of the abuses and false doctrines of Catholicism were removed. Truly they did us all a great service. It is difficult for us to appreciate how all the imprisonments, tortures, and executions of that period contributed to our religious and civil freedom today.

However these men did not go as far as to restore the simple Christianity of the New Testament. Unfortunately the reformed churches that resulted from the Reformation would retain many of the false doctrines that were introduced during the centuries of apostasy.

Also additional doctrines would be introduced. Hundreds of new religious groups would be formed, each having its own peculiar approach to Christianity, thus a very divided Christian world. Such division is contrary to what Christ and the apostles taught. (See **John 17:20-21; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; Ephesians 4:3-6**)

The history of Christianity is not always pleasant to read about. It was very ugly at times. When we look back on all the corruptions that came into the church, the struggles for power, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, etc., we can find no justification for these things. But it explains why the Christian religion has ended up in the confused state it is in today.

Many are disbelievers because of its history. This condition no doubt contributed to the "higher criticism" (liberalism) of German and English scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries, who attacked the inspiration and validity of the Scriptures.

The results of the apostasy is a tragic story. We see a complete change in the structure of Christianity. So complete was this change that one does not recognize the Christianity of today as being at all the same as that established by the authority of Christ and His Apostles, which He intended to be perpetuated until the end of time. Please read [Jude 3](#), and [Ephesians 4:3-6](#).

Five things stand out in the changes that were made. **First**, there has been a complete change in the organization of the New Testament church. The independence of the local church vanished in most places. It has been replaced by man-made hierarchical systems with authority residing in some pope, bishop, patriarch or president.

It has led to church councils, creeds, headquarters, etc. It has replaced the New Testament teaching that Christ is seated at the right hand of God reigning as "King of kings and Lord of lords," over his church. This is the only headquarters the church has. The recent emergence of community churches are in part due to the desire to have independence from some higher controlling earthly authority.

Second, the universal priesthood of every believer was replaced by a special class of men called the "clergy" placing them between man and God. This has led to special clerical garments, titles, ordinations, and authority that Christ has never bestowed on any human being.

Third, the simple worship of the early church has been replaced by altars, candles, burning of incense, crucifixes, religious relics, veneration of image, instrumental music, infrequent observance of the Lord's Supper, observance of special religious days, sacraments, massive ornate cathedrals, and pilgrimages. Most of these are considered sacred ordinances, yet none of them were ever authorized by our Lord.

Fourth, the conditions given by the Lord for salvation have been completely changed. The [book of Acts](#) gives **nine examples** of what people did to be saved from their sins. They all heard the gospel. Believing the gospel message, they repented of their sins and were willing to confess the name of Jesus before men. As an act of faith they were immersed in water where the blood of Christ cleansed them of all their past sins. They arose from the watery grave of baptism to walk in newness of life. (See [Mark 16:15+16](#); [Acts 2:38](#), [Romans 6:1-6](#))

Today, unbelievers (**babies**) are christened. Baptism has become a religious rite. Sprinkling and pouring has replaced immersion. People are instructed to pray the so called **sinner's prayer**, "Lord Jesus, come into my heart" which cannot be found in God's word.

In the Protestant world baptism is often scoffed at. It has no connection with the forgiveness of sins, which is contrary to Peter's declaration that, "baptism doth also now save us" [1 Peter 3:21](#) and Ananias' command, to Paul, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins" ([Acts 22:16](#)).

Fifth, all the changes, additions and subtractions made by men are a scary thing. They have replaced the truths of the New Testament. Most are dangerous and misleading, causing people to engage in false practices that contradict plain scriptural teaching.

EFFORTS TOWARD RESTORATION

Were there those who continued to practice the simple New Testament Christianity of the first century in spite of the "falling away?" History does not reveal all that we would like to know about these past centuries but Jesus assured his disciples in **Matthew 16:18** that the "gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

Therefore we are assured it did continue to exist. There is also historical evidence that there have always been men in every century who have sought to return to the original pattern of New Testament Christianity.

In spite of the great apostasy predicted by the apostle Paul in **2 Thessalonians 2:3**, a significant part of the church remained faithful to the pattern laid down by the apostles for several centuries. There were faithful churches in many places. It was only when the hierarchy developed enough power to control churches over a wide area that basic changes occurred.

From the first generation of leaders after the apostles until several centuries later, there were those who saw the departures from the faith and called for a return to "The faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Polycarp (69-156) of Smyrna, said to be a disciple of the apostle John, called for a restoration of apostolic doctrines. "Wherefore let us forsake the vain doing of the many and their false teachings, and turn unto the word which was delivered unto us from the beginning."

A contemporary, Ignatius of Antioch urged Christians to be "inseparable from Jesus Christ and the teachings of the apostles."

In the **second century**, Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp waged a courageous struggle against Gnosticism by appealing to the "will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures."

Tertullian of Carthage (160-230) denounced heresies of every kind. He said, "We, however, are not permitted to cherish any object after our own will, nor yet to make choice of that which another has introduced of his private fancy. In the Lord's apostles we possess our authority; for even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to nations of mankind the doctrine which they had received from Christ."

Athanasius of Alexandria (293-373) wrote, "Concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures for this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures."

Vincent of Lerins who died around 450 said "The canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything and more than sufficient."

In **660** a man named Constantine after receiving a copy of the Greek New Testament investigated the doctrines of first century Christianity and proposed to restore the primitive Church.

History reveals that in Europe, Russia, England, Wales, Scotland, India, and America and in other nations and islands there has always been and continues to be efforts to restore New Testament Christianity. Restoration will always be an ongoing effort by those seeking for truth. The simple and pure Christianity of the first century is a precious thing that all truth seekers will always thirst after.

Righteous men will always yearn for that hidden treasure of **Matthew 14:44**. There will always be those who will "earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3.).

A SOLUTION TO RELIGIOUS DIVISION

Old Testament books of **Ezra and Nehemiah** are all about restoration. The Jews had been in Babylonian captivity for seventy years. They were allowed to return to their homeland to restore the Temple, the walls of their beloved Jerusalem, even the Law which they were no longer familiar with. God blessed them in their efforts of restoration.

Today with the help of the Lord and His inspired Word it is possible to restore the Christianity of the first century. In **Galatians 6:7** Paul writes, "Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." This well recognized natural law also applies to the spiritual realm.

The parable of the sower in **Luke 8** reveals that the seed of the kingdom is the Word of God. When planted in any nation in any age it will reproduce exactly what was produced in the first century, the Kingdom, the Lord's church.

Today that seed is still being sown Churches of Christ are a result of such efforts. We do not claim to be perfect or that we have some inherent right to boast or become self righteous. We humbly plead with Paul, "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). **Does this apply to us today?**

Jesus prayed, "I do not pray for these alone, (His disciples) but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one.....that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20+ 21). **Do we respect His prayer today?**

Paul admonishes us to, "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:3-6). **Do you believe this?**

Perhaps you have a desire to be a part of the New Testament church. You can! If the Lord's church exists in your community then become a part of it by becoming a Christian. When you become a Christian the Lord takes care of your membership. He will at the same time add you to His church which he established on the day of Pentecost around **33 A.D.**

Please read **Acts 2:36-47**. If the Lord's church does not exist where you live then you yourself can initiate efforts to restore it wherever you live. Write to us and we will help you.