

Today we are going to talk about the Early Christian Church, the origins of Christianity until the First Council of Nicaea in 325. This discussion will create the foundation for the conversations we will have regarding various Christian religions on future calls. Understanding a little about the early church will help to clarify some of the beliefs of today's Christian religions.

So, as we know...all Christian faiths center on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although Christianity started as a small group of followers, many historians regard the spread of Christianity throughout the world as one of the most successful spiritual missions in human history – especially considering that Jesus' ministry only lasted 3 years.

The word Christian is mentioned in the Bible:

- **Acts 11:26:** ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.
- **Acts 26:28:** ²⁸ Then Agrippa said unto Paul, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.
- **I Peter 4:16:** Yet if *any man suffer* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

So, what happened after Jesus died? According to the Bible, the first church organized itself 50 days after Jesus' death on the cross: Pentecost – when the Holy Spirit was dispensed to the Disciples of Christ.

- Most of the first Christians were Jewish converts
- The early church was centered in Jerusalem, where the first congregation came into being
- Persecution caused many believers to flee Jerusalem and they proclaimed the word of the Lord in their new locations (like Philip did in Samaria)
- Early Christians considered it their calling to teach/spread the Gospel of Christ (This was the great commission given to the Apostles: to go into all the world in order to proclaim the gospel and make disciples of all human beings.)
- One of the most important missionaries was Apostle Paul (which ironically coincides with this morning's text word.)

Many historians believe Christianity would have never taken hold and spread without the work of Paul. In addition to preaching, Paul is believed to have written 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament. Paul preached the gospel and established churches through the Roma-Empire, Europe, and Africa.

- In a vision, God showed Apostle Peter that the gospel was also intended for the Gentiles, and so more work began outside of Jewish communities, and many Gentiles embraced Christianity due to the teachings of the Apostles. Apostle Paul and Barnabas travelled to the Gentile countries (Paul claimed the title of "Apostle to the Gentiles"), while Peter and James primarily proclaimed among the Jews.
- Other Apostles brought the gospel to Africa and Asia and established congregations there.

At the Apostle's council in Jerusalem, the first decisive questions about the position of the mission to the Gentiles and the significance of the Mosaic Law in relationship to the gospel were discussed and clarified. (Acts 15: 1-29)

Early Christians were persecuted for their beliefs by both Jewish and Roman leaders. In 64 AD, Emperor Nero accused Christians for a fire that broke out in Rome. With this sentiment, many early Christians were brutally tortured and executed. Under Emperor Domitian (AD 81 – 96), Christianity was illegal. A person was killed for confessing to be a Christian.

The last Apostle to die was Apostle John around 100 AD. By the end of the first century, Roman persecutions were dogging God's people from the outside, and false teachings from people who claimed to be Christians were hounding the church from within. By this time, the apostles and most of the eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus had passed away, so it was becoming increasingly difficult to determine which traditions about Jesus were true. Faced with such challenging circumstances, Christians asked several crucial questions: Which writings should be seen as authoritative? How was Jesus fully God and fully man? What are the necessary beliefs that every Christian must embrace?

These were not heady debates, limited to Bible colleges or theological seminaries. These were deeply practical struggles in local churches among men and women whose goal was to maintain the truth about Jesus at a time when proclaiming the gospel could cost Christians their lives. For a while, it didn't look good for this young religion. Within the community of Christians, there were strong disagreements (variations called heresies) and confusion about the Nature of Christ's Divinity, the Nature of the Trinity, and the Sacrament of Baptism.

In 303 AD, Christians experience the worst persecutions to date under the co-emperors Diocletian and Galerius. (This time was so severe for Christians, it has become known as the GREAT Persecution.)

It wasn't until Roman Emperor Constantine the Great converted to Christianity and the religious tolerance shifted in the Roman Empire...this was a true turning point for Christianity. In 313 AD, he lifted the ban on Christianity with the Edict of Milan. During this time, there were several groups of Christians with different ideas about how to interpret scripture and the role of the church. It was Constantine that tried to unify Christianity and resolve issues that divided the church by establishing the Niceane Creed.

So, the activity of the Holy Spirit continued after the death of early Christian Apostles, and next month we will learn more about how the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical canon of the Old and New Testaments; as well how HS inspired the Church Fathers in the first ecumenical councils to formulate important principles of Christian doctrine.

Fun fact: A period of 40 years separates the death of Jesus and the writing of the first gospel.