

A GLORIOUS INSTITUTION

THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

20th Anniversary Edition

Dr. Stanford E. Murrell

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A Glorious Institution: The Church in History

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“Therefore let us repent and pass from ignorance to knowledge, from foolishness to wisdom, from licentiousness to self-control, from injustice to righteousness, from godlessness to God.”

*—Clement of Alexandria,
Theologian of the second century*

Introduction

In 1998, when Bro. L. R. Shelton, Jr. (1923–2003) asked me to write something on Church history for his own interest and understanding, I had no idea that twenty years later the work he had Chapel Library in Pensacola, Florida publish would still be in circulation. I am very grateful to Bro. Shelton for promoting this project. Appreciation is also extended to Steven Frakes for his extensive editorial counsel and correction of the manuscript and to Mike Snyder who was the general manger of publications at the time. In the providence of God, this work on Church history has found wide circulation in many churches, prisons, schools, and centers of learning in America and abroad. Because there is an independent Study Guide, Sunday school classes, and home schoolers have learned a little more of the history of the Christian Church. Professor Leonardo Galanza Jr., a teacher at the Center for Biblical Studies Institute and Seminary in Calabarzon, Philippines, has been using this work on Church history for more than a decade. For all of these venues I am grateful for the study of Church history, which is essential for a vital Christian faith. The Psalmist said, “We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old” (Psa 44:1).

Consider several important reasons why Christians should devote time to studying the past in general, and Church history in particular.

First, the past is a great stimulus to faith. When David faced Goliath, he did so because he had already seen God’s faithfulness and power. David carried in his soul the memories of some dramatic moments when the Lord delivered his life from the mouth of a ferocious hungry lion and the jaws of a ravenous bear. When the lion carried away a lamb that was entrusted to David, the “Sweet Singer of Israel” went after that lion. And when the lion dropped the lamb and turned to devour David, the Shepherd fought back and slew him (1 Sam 17:32–36). In like manner, Christ

protects His own by dealing with the Great Lion who spiritually seeks to destroy the sheep.

Time passed and another enemy came forth. The enemy was an uncircumcised Philistine named Goliath (1 Sam 17:38–51). Standing over nine feet tall, Goliath had been trained in fleshly warfare since childhood. But he was no match for David because this soldier of God had been trained in spiritual warfare since childhood. Goliath might trust the strength of the carnal weapons he possessed, but David would rely on the mighty arm of the living Lord. God had always been faithful. And so David remembered the past in order to face a present ordeal.

Not only is the study of the past a stimuli to faith, *but the study of history pleases God*. Many times in Scripture God reminds His people of His great exploits on their behalf and bids them to remember. “Remember the former things of old: For I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me” (Isa 46:9). And, “Seek the Lord and His strength, seek His face continually. Remember His marvelous works that He hath done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth” (1 Chron 16:11–12).

There are particular truths God wants His people to remember.

Christians are to remember the works of creation for “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork” (Psa 19:1).

Christians are to remember the Sabbath day. “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exod 20:8).

Christians are to remember the commandments of God. The Law was given “That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God” (Num 15:40).

The church is to remember the general mercies of Divine favor in being delivered from the land of bondage. “And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt: and thou shalt observe and do these statutes” (Deut 16:12).

Christians are to remember the Lord’s death until He comes (1 Cor 11:26).

It is in the study of history that the greatest story ever told is reviewed. The heart remembers the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the world is invited to authenticate or discredit Christianity on a simple historical question: “Who moved the stone?”

If the Disciples of Christ moved the stone to steal the body of Jesus, then Christianity is a lie and the most monstrous of all religions because it sets itself up to be the most moral. However, if an angel rolled the stone away from the tomb, not to

let Christ out, but to let the world in, then Christianity is vindicated and we serve a risen Savior. There is a Man in the heavens, and His name is Jesus.

As the study of history stimulates faith, pleases God, and validates the Christian message *it also encourages the Church to contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.*

There is such a faith as per Jude 3. “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

In every generation the body of truth has been divinely preserved and protected in order to be passed on and preached afresh. Unfortunately, one of the great challenges to the truth are men and women, filled with good intentions, who think they have to add to, or improve upon the gospel, rather than receive and proclaim it. And a lesson is learned: good intentions can kill!

I tell you a true story. A number of years ago a young female college student went to Mexico City with a friend on vacation. Just as they were ready to come home, one of the girls spotted what she thought was a wounded little Chihuahua. Moved with compassion she took the little animal and was determined to nurse it back to health. After returning home she took the creature to a veterinarian for advice. As soon as the doctor saw the creature, he took it from the girl and put it in a cage.

“Do you know what you were holding so close to you,” asked the doctor.

“A Chihuahua,” replied the young lady.

“That was no Chihuahua,” responded the doctor. “That was a Mexican gutter rat dying of rabies.”

Doctrinally, millions of religious people are holding a gutter rat to their heart. Not having a sense of the historical faith of the church, new ideas and concepts are constantly being presented, in sincerity, but with the voice of authority of the ancient prophets. And that is wrong.

It is more than wrong—it kills souls. The truth of the matter is that much popular thinking finds no support in the creeds of Christendom or in the writings of the Church: Self-esteem theology; Health and Wealth Gospel; Liberation Theology; certain forms of Dispensationalist; Rationalism; the gospel of Sophia; the Cults etc. Our generation needs to heed the biblical exhortation of Jude 1:3. “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me

to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

What will happen when God’s people seriously begin to study church history?

First, there will be a greater appreciation for the saints that have gone before. I think of the young people in particular now. Christian young people need heroes to believe in. Role models are important. Therefore study the lives of the saints.

Let me suggest to the young people one person in particular. His name was William Borden, and he was the heir to a large American fortune. Having graduated from Yale and attended Princeton Seminary, Borden was committed to being a missionary for Jesus Christ. Despite an upper-class upbringing, his travels around the world had challenged him to the needs of the lost to hear about Jesus Christ. He wanted to make his own life count for Christ. As William Borden trained for a life of service to the Kansu people of China, his heart and labor went out in practical ways to the widows, orphans, and cripples, in the backstreets of Chicago. A quiet yet powerful young man, William Borden sought to win other young college men for Christ and His service. In 1913, Borden finally fulfilled his dream to move towards the mission field. He arrived in Egypt and was soon battling cerebral meningitis. William Borden understood there were risks to serving the Savior—and he accepted those risks. Nearly every newspaper in the United States covered his untimely death at the age of twenty-five. William Borden made a great decision. Like Moses he forsook the pleasures of this world to lead others to a better world to come. Though his life was waste, in the eyes of the world, his life and death have been a testimony and a challenge beyond his own generation to “keep eternity’s values in view.” *Those who study history will be challenged* by other such stories.

Second, in the study of history there will be a greater confidence in witnessing for there will be no apology for the Church. One of the dangers of modern thinking is that the Church is a corrupt institution living in the last days—and this is taught by those within the body of Christ. We are not of that persuasion. We believe the Church is the most glorious institution. To know her story is to invite others to come to the only kingdom that will never end.

Third, there will be the enjoyment of great stories. There is, for example, the dramatic narrative of men such as John Wycliffe (1320–1384) and John Huss (1369–1415). John Huss, as a servant of the Savior, remained uncorrupted during the dark ages of human history when the glory of the gospel was darkened by the superstitions of the Church. John Wycliffe who preceded Huss had tried to turn the

minds of the common people away from the vain superstitions of the Church by placing the Scriptures into their hands. Official opposition to Wycliffe by the Church was so severe that he had to flee to Bohemia.

While the “Morning Star of the Reformation” continued to criticize the sale of indulgences, the doctrine of transubstantiation (the magical turning of the communion elements into the literal body and blood of Christ), and papal hierarchies, darkness continued to descend the Church.

Another voice was needed to carry on the work of Wycliffe in Bohemia. That voice was found in the ministry of John Huss. John Huss was bold enough to criticize churchmen who rode on horses with brilliant tassels trailing behind in order to beat their fellow citizens with silver clubs. For his cries against injustice Huss was hated. He was arrested and brought to trial at a council of the Church of Constance (in present-day Germany) where, over a seven-month period, Huss was accused of teachings contrary to the official Church dogma.

In defense, Huss declared that he had never taught what he was accused of teaching. How could he recant or take back what he never said or wrote? Nor could he renounce the truth that the Church had become corrupt in some areas. The practice of penance was wrong for salvation is by grace through faith alone. Because of his stand for an alien righteousness, on July 6, 1415, Huss was condemned to be burned at the stake. He was taken outside the city limits and tied to a stake where a fire was lit. He died with these words upon his lips: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy.”

There are great men and movements to be read about in the study of history. Therefore, cultivate a greater appreciation for the saints of old, learn to witness with confidence, and learn the interesting stories of the Church.

The study of history need not be overwhelming. Let me share some practical ways to study this subject.

First, read the excellent biographies that are available. Barbour publishing House has an excellent series of biographies called *Heroes of the Faith*. The books can be read by old and young. The names of faithful men and women will live again: John Bunyan, William Carey, Amy Carmichael, Fanny Crosby, Corrie ten Boom, Jim Elliot, David Livingstone, Martin Luther, D. L. Moody, and George Muller, to name but a few.

Second, subscribe to *Christian History*, a very informative magazine. Several times a year this excellent work will be received. Several times a year some great person or event can be read about.

Third, find out what happened on some of the most important dates in Church history. We are familiar with secular dates.

July 4, 1776	The Declaration of Independence was signed
December 7, 1941	Pearl Harbor was attacked
September 11, 2001	The iconic Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were felled by terrorists

As we are familiar with dates in secular history let us become familiar with specific dates and events in sacred history.

A.D. 70	The city of Jerusalem is destroyed according to prophecy
A.D. 312	The conversion of Constantine took place
A.D. 1095	Pope Urban II launches the First Crusade
A.D. 1380	John Wycliffe oversees the English Bible Translation
A.D. 1478	The Spanish Inquisition was established
A.D. 1517	Martin Luther posts his Ninety-Five thesis
A.D. 1735	The Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards begins
A.D. 1949	Billy Graham's Los Angeles Crusade is held

There are dates with destiny.

History need not be boring and will not be when it is remembered that the past is really His-Story. It is the story of God working in the lives of His people to conform them into the image of Christ and bring them back to glory. May it be said of the next generation as it was said of another, “ We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old” (Ps 44:1).

I commend to you the study of Church history.

Stanford E. Murrell
 Viera, Florida
 May 2018



PART ONE

WHEN THE CHURCH WAS YOUNG

A.D. 33—754



CHAPTER 1

*The Birth of the New Testament Church*¹

A Divine Interpretation

The story of human history may rightly be called “His-Story,” or the story of God’s work in the affairs of man. There is a grand central theme to be found in history and that is *God’s redeeming love*. Viewing history from this perspective, where God is actively working out His plan of redemption in the affairs of men, could be called a “divine interpretation” of history. The Bible teaches us that, “God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The Son was given about 2,000 years ago.

Born in humility, raised in obscurity, Jesus Christ came in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4-5) to accomplish the great act of redeeming His people from their sins (Matt 1:21). The Lord of Glory came to earth through the lineage of the house of David in the nation of Israel. The Hebrew people were privileged to be the recipients of divine truth. Their prophets had predicted the Messiah was to come, and He came. Matthew was careful to record many incidents in the life of the Lord and then wrote, “That it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets” (Matt 2:15; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 21:4).

During the days of the Lord’s earthly ministry, most people in Palestine did not believe that the ancient prophecies were being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Because of this, the religious leaders arrested Jesus; He was tried, sentenced, and executed on a wooden cross at Calvary (Matt 27:27–35). But on the third day Jesus

¹ I am particularly indebted to B. K. Kuiper who greatly influenced my thoughts in writing *A Glorious Institution: The Church in History When the Church was Young A.D. 33–754*, and the companion volume, *A Glorious Institution: The Church in History The Reformation and its Aftermath 1517 to the 1900s*. Gratitude is also extended to Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. for permission to use *The Church in History* by B. K. Kuper under Eerdman’s Fair Use policy.

arose from the dead (Matt 28:1–6). His resurrection became the foundation on which the New Testament Church would be built (1 Cor 15:3–8).

A Spiritual Kingdom

It was the Lord's desire to establish a *spiritual kingdom* (John 18:36) that would touch all the nations of earth (Matt 28:19–20). It was the Lord's design to call unto Himself a peculiar people (1 Pet 2:9) from every tongue and tribe (Rev 5:9), who would be indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26). This called-out assembly would be *a most glorious institution, the Church* (Eph 5:25–27)!

Here we must draw a careful distinction between the *visible* and the *invisible* church. In the New Testament, the word “church” is the translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means simply “an assembly.” We find the word *ecclesia* used in the following senses in the New Testament (taken from *Easton's Bible Dictionary*):

(1) It is sometimes translated “assembly” in the ordinary sense (Acts 19:32, 39, 41).

(2) A few Christians associated together in observing the ordinances of the gospel are an *ecclesia* (Rom 16:5; Col 4:15).

(3) All the Christians in a particular city, whether they assembled together in one place or in several places for religious worship, were an *ecclesia*, as at Antioch (Acts 13:1), Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), and Ephesus (Rev 2:1).

(4) The whole *visible* body of professing Christians throughout the world are called the church (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Matt 16:18). It is called “visible” because its members are known and its assemblies are public. God has ordained His people to organize themselves into distinct visible church communities, for the great purpose of giving visibility to His kingdom, of making known the Gospel of that kingdom, and of gathering-in all its chosen subjects.

In our day, as throughout history, the visible professing church is a mixture of “wheat and chaff,” of the saved saints and the unsaved (Matt 13:24–30). It simultaneously has become polluted with the values of the world. In the visible church, great discernment is required in order not to judge but yet correctly to follow God's ways of holiness.

Ecclesia also denotes the *invisible* church, the whole body of the redeemed, all those whom the Father has given to Christ (Eph 5:23–29; Heb 12:23). The church invisible is a pure society, the church in which Christ dwells, the body of Christ. It is called “invisible” because the greater part of those who constitute it are already in heaven or are yet unborn, and also because its members still on earth cannot be

distinguished with certainty. The qualifications of membership in it are internal and hidden. It is unseen except by Him who “searches the heart.” “The Lord knoweth them that are his” (2 Tim 2:19). The church to which the promises appertaining to Christ’s kingdom belong, is a spiritual body consisting of all true believers. It can be characterized by:

- *Its unity.* God has ever had only one church on earth. The Apostles did not set up a new organization. Under their ministry, disciples were “added” to the church already existing (Acts 2:47).
- *Its universality.* It is the “catholic” church: not confined to any particular country or outward organization, but comprehending all believers throughout the whole world. This use of the word “catholic” does not refer to any specific religious institution.
- *Its perpetuity.* It will continue through all ages to the end of the world. It can never be destroyed. It is an “everlasting kingdom.”

For our purposes in this history of the Church, we treat the recognized visible Church up until the time of Constantine (chapter four), as approximately representing Christ’s true invisible Church on earth. This was true in times of persecution because it was mainly only true believers who were willing to pay the costs (in suffering) associated with outward profession. However, as the State entered into Christian decisions beginning with Constantine, the resulting “institutions” of the visible Church became increasingly corrupt through sensuality, greed, pride, and political intrigue (1 John 2:16), creating a great departure from the principles given by God in Scripture.

Therefore, especially from the time of Constantine, we should understand our use of the word “church” herein to mean only the visible Church. Christ’s true invisible Church would continue in the hearts of men, not in the institutions of mankind!

In the Fullness of Time

Physical preparation

To enhance the physical spread of the Gospel in “the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4), God used the Roman Empire. Peace and safety replaced tribal warfare. Widespread and easy travel became possible through a network of roads and bridges, like the

famous Via Apia on the Italian peninsula. The pirates were driven from the sea to protect travelers and trade. Roman justice was swift and severe, which reduced robbery and rioting.

Spiritual preparation

While physical conditions of Roman life helped the cause of Christ, there was a spiritual and intellectual hunger in the hearts of people. The Greek altars and philosophy that had “conquered” Rome caused many people to doubt the multitude of gods with their fatal flaws. Myths and legends abounded. Superstitious travelers considered it wise to sail under the figurehead of two Greek gods, the Dioscuri or “Twin Brothers,” Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus and patrons of seafarers. The state religion of Rome offered no real change of heart or life. There was a moral vacuum as individuals became saturated with sins of the flesh. Then came the Gospel with its promises of peace from troubled consciences, pardon from all sin, and rest for heavy hearts. In Christ, people could find assurance of salvation, divine forgiveness, and eternal life—for Jesus was the Son of God.

Rapid expansion

Armed with a powerful message of hope, the early Church was poised for rapid expansion. The primary cause for the expansion was the sovereign movement of God visiting people and converting hearts. The book of Acts is careful to record that “the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). As God worked directly, so He also worked through secondary causes, such as the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54–60) and the persecution by Saul and other religious leaders (Acts 8:1–3). The Church was forced to flee for protection. In the flight to safety the Gospel was shared continuously, many were saved, and the Church grew.

Courage and Corruption

People looked at the suffering saints and were impressed by their faith, commitment, and perseverance. The Gentiles wanted to come to Christ and were welcomed (Acts 10:44–48). People looked at the spiritual body of the earthly Church and found it attractive. An enthusiastic belief that Jesus was alive, the good news of eternal life, high moral standards, followed by miraculous power (Acts 4:33), all these caused sinners to seek out the Savior. In addition, individuals were impressed with the unity

of the saints (Acts 2:44), their firm doctrinal conviction (Acts 2:42), their acts of generosity (Acts 2:45), their joy (Acts 2:46), and the success that was present (Acts 2:41, 47).

Unfortunately, the early New Testament Church soon knew the pain of corruption and dissension as the world, the flesh, and the devil found a way into the local assemblies. Division, taking others to court, drunkenness during communion, open immorality, greed, pride, posturing for position, and many other sins were manifested. Still, in spite of transgressions, in spite of human failures, in spite of outward fears and inward corruption, the gates of hell would not prevent the Church's expansion (Matt 16:17–18). In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Stone which the builders rejected was about to fill the earth (Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7; cp. Dan 2:35).

Selected Early Church Leaders

Apostolic Fathers

Clement of Rome	died c. A.D. 100
Ignatius	died c. A.D. 107
Hermas of Rome	died c. A.D. 150
Polycarp of Smyrna	A.D. 70–156
Barnabas of Alexandria	died c. A.D. 130
Papias	A.D. 60–130
Justin Martyr	A.D. 100–165

Church Fathers

Melito of Sardis	A.D. 100–170
Hegesippus	c. A.D. 120–190
Tatian	died c. A.D. 180
Irenaeus	c. A.D. 175–195
Tertullian	c. A.D. 160–225
Clement of Alexandria	c. A.D. 155–220
Origen	c. A.D. 185–254
Hippolytus	c. A.D. 160–236
Cyprian	c. A.D. 200–258
Lactantius	c. A.D. 240–320

Selected Early Writings of the “Fathers”

The Didache

Apology of Aristides

Apologies (Justin Martyr)

Shepherd of Hermes

Dialogue with Trypho

Epistle of Diognetus

Epistle of Ignatius

Epistle of Barnabas

Epistle to the Corinthians (Clement)

Epistle to the Philippians, Sayings of the Lord (Polycarp)

First and Second Epistles (Clement of Rome)

Address to the Greeks, Harmony of the Gospels (Tatian)

Apologetics (Tertullian)

Against Heresies (Irenaeus)

Miscellanies, Outlines of Scriptures (Clement of Alexandria)

Against Celsus, Hexapla, Tetrapla (Origen)

Ecclesiastical History (Eusebius)

Confessions, Retractions (Augustine)

Concerning the Trinity, Concerning Doctrine (Augustine)

The City of God (Augustine)

CHAPTER 2

The Suffering Saints

A.D. 33–313

The Heroic Age

The Greek word *thilipsis* is a very important word in the Christian vocabulary, for it speaks of tribulation. Christ had forewarned His disciples that they shall know something about suffering for righteousness by saying, “If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). During the first three hundred years of its existence, sometimes called “The Heroic Age of the Church,” the people of God knew persecution.

Enemies on Every Side

Peter was put in prison for preaching the gospel, “*but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him*” (Acts 12:5). Stephen and James died violently as faithful witnesses to Christ. Stephen was stoned, while James was put to death by the sword (Acts 7:59–60; 12:1–2). During his first visit to Corinth, Paul was taken by force into the presence of the Roman proconsul of Achaia, Gallio (Acts 18:12). The Lord inter-vened for when the governor discerned that the Jewish enemies of Paul were opposed to him based on a religious dispute, and not civil disorder, he had them ejected from the court (Acts 18:12–17).

At first the sufferings of the Church came primarily from the Jewish community because the message of Christ threatened the social and economic fabric of their society in many ways. The early Christians were turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The attitude of the Jewish community towards Christians influenced the attitude of the Roman government officials when specific charges were heard. Of Paul and Silas it was said, “*These all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar*” (Acts 17:7).

Christians were also accused of atheism, cannibalism, immorality, and antisocial behavior. The charge of atheism arose because Christians refused to worship the emperor or the gods of Rome. The charge of cannibalism was based upon a misunderstanding of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Spiritual language of "eating the body of Christ and drinking His blood" was taken literally by those who were not spiritually minded (1 Cor 11:23–26). Because religious services were often conducted in secret or after dark out of necessity, and because Christians displayed great love for each other, they were accused of immorality. Finally, Christians were charged with being antisocial, since many found it necessary to remove themselves from public life, rather than honor false gods in the same social gathering, or engage in unholy relationships (2 Cor 6:14).

The blood of the early Church flowed freely. Leading the path to martyrdom were the Apostles (1 Cor 4:9). According to tradition, each of the Apostles met a violent death with the exception of John (but even he suffered for righteousness sake).

- **Simon Peter** the first notable leader of the Church (Acts 1–15; Gal 2:9) was executed at Rome. It is said that he was crucified upside down (cf. John 21:18–19).
- **James**, the son of Zebedee, preached in Judea. He was beheaded by Herod Antipas about A.D. 44 (Acts 12:1–2).
- **John**, the son of Zebedee, labored in Jerusalem, and then from Ephesus among the Churches of Asia Minor. He was banished to the isle of Patmos, liberated, and died a natural death at Ephesus (cf. John 21:20–23).
- **Andrew**, once a disciple of John the Baptist, preached in Scythia, Greece, and Asia Minor. He died by crucifixion.
- **Philip** preached in Phrygia, and died a martyr's death at Hierapolis.
- **Bartholomew** became a missionary in Armenia. He was flayed to death.
- **Thomas** labored in Parthia, Persia, and India. He suffered martyrdom near Madras, at Mount St. Thomas.
- **Matthew** ministered in Ethiopia and was martyred.
- **James the Less** preached in Palestine and Egypt, where he was finally crucified.
- **Jude** preached in Assyria and Persia, where he was martyred.

- **Simon** the Zealot was crucified.
- **Judas** Iscariot hanged himself following his betrayal of Christ (Matt 26:14–16; 27:3–5; Acts 1:16–20).

Of the original Twelve Disciples, one committed suicide, one died a natural death, and ten suffered martyrdom—four of them by crucifixion.

The Glory and the Power of the Roman Empire

(The Roman Emperors from Augustus to Commodus)

The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

30 BC–AD 14	Augustus
AD 14–37	Tiberius
AD 37–41	Gaius (Caligula)
AD 41–54	Claudius
AD 54–68	Nero

The Year of the Four Emperors and the Flavian Dynasty

AD 68	Galba
AD 69	Otho
AD 69	Vitellius
AD 69–79	Vespasian
AD 79–81	Titus
AD 81–96	Domitian

The Antonine Emperors

AD 96–98	Nerva
AD 98–117	Trajan
AD 117–138	Hadrian
AD 138–161	Antoninus Pius
AD 161–180	Marcus Aurelius
AD 161–169	Lucius Verus
AD 180–192	Commodus

- Polemicists A.D. 180–225
led the Church against internal heresy
- Theologians A.D. 225–460
attempted to harmonize Christianity with popular philosophy

Ignatius (A.D. 67–107)

About A.D. 110, Ignatius was ordered by the Roman authorities to be arrested because of his Christian profession and was sent to Rome to be executed by being thrown to the wild animals. The emperor at this time was Trajan (A.D. 98–117) who was usually a moderate ruler. Though he did fear secret societies, it was not Trajan’s official policy to engage in random persecutions of Christians. He allowed no arrests to be made solely on the basis of anonymous tips. However, an open profession of faith could be dangerous as Ignatius discovered. Because of his confession of Christ, he was arrested and sent to Rome. Along the way Ignatius wrote letters to different congregations stressing the importance of Church unity. Unity, he taught, was to be enhanced by rooting out all heresies denying the deity of Christ. Finally, the time of death came. Ignatius wanted to die for Jesus. He did not want other Christians to interfere in his commitment. “I fear your kindness, which may harm me,” he wrote to the saints in Rome who desired to set him free; “you may be able to achieve what you plan. But if you pay no heed to my request, it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God.”

Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100–165)

As Ignatius faced death bravely, so did the philosopher Justin Martyr, who was scourged and beheaded in Rome with six other Christians. Born about A.D. 100 in a small town in Samaria, Justin was a natural scholar. After studying the various philosophical systems of his day, he embraced Christianity and became a capable defender of the faith. He wrote two apologies¹ to the emperor Antonius Pius (A.D. 138–161) and to his adopted son Marcus Aurelius, who would one day reign from A.D. 161 to 180. He also wrote a dialogue with Trypho the Jew, in which Justin contended that Jesus was the Messiah.

¹ The word *apologies* is here used to mean verbal or written defenses of a particular doctrine; the word is so used by the Apologists.

On his second stay in the city of Rome, Justin engaged in a public debate with a Stoic philosopher by the name of Crescens who attacked Christians with great acrimony saying they are atheists and impious. Shortly thereafter, about A.D. 166, Justin was beheaded during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. He faced death bravely. When threatened with execution Justin said, “If we are punished for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, we hope to be saved.”

Polycarp (A.D. 70–156)

Perhaps the best known of the early martyrs is Polycarp, who ministered in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) as bishop of Smyrna. He was a disciple of the Apostle John. In his messages to the Church, Polycarp emphasized faith in Christ and the necessity of working out faith in daily life. When the hour of his execution came, the proconsul offered Polycarp a way to escape. But Polycarp stood firm in his faith. On the day of his execution, after being bound with his hand behind him like a sacrificial ram, Polycarp lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed. “I bless Thee for that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of [Thy] Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit.”

Though he is now famous for his thoughtful *Meditations*, the emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180) proved to be a terrible opponent of Christianity. According to the Christian historian, Eusebius, Christians were shut out from many forms of public life. Some were arrested without cause, brought before magistrates, convicted, and condemned. Their property was confiscated and given away.

In Lyons and Vienne in southern Gaul (France) the assault on Christians was intense. Those who could not be compelled to renounce their faith were beheaded even if they possessed Roman citizenship. Some were taken to the arena of the amphitheater to be splattered in blood. They were part of a cruel spectacle known as *damnatio ad bestias*—literally “condemnation by beasts.” The men who orchestrated the show were known as *bestiarii*. Vicious and starving animals were trained to pounce upon human flesh. One such martyr was Blandina, a slave girl of Lyons (A.D. 177). She had personally endured numerous tortures, and witnessed the killing of others. Through her many ordeals, Blandina was a source of inspiration as she encouraged fellow prisoners under terrible torture to be faithful to Christ. Among those who died was Ponticus, a boy who was about fifteen years old. Finally, Blandina’s moment came. She faced her death bravely rejoicing that she could suffer

for the Lord. After much abuse a net was thrown over her. She was tossed about and gored by a bull until death overcame her. The body of Blandina along with others were exposed for six days and then burned. Their ashes were thrown into the Rhone River. The pagans did not want to acknowledge the hope of resurrections which Christians believed.

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: A.D. 193–476

(The Roman Emperors from Pertinax to Romulus Augustulus)

The House of Severus

Pertinax	A.D. 193
Didius Julianus	A.D. 193
Septimius Severus	A.D. 193–211
Pescennius Niger	A.D. 193–195
Clodius Albinus	A.D. 195–197
Caracalla	A.D. 211–217
Geta	A.D. 211
Macrinus	A.D. 217–218
Elagabalus	A.D. 218–222
Severus Alexander	A.D. 222–235

The Struggle for Survival

Maximinus I	A.D. 235–238
Gordian I	A.D. 238
Gordian II	A.D. 238
Balbinus	A.D. 238
Pupienus	A.D. 238
Gordian III	A.D. 238–244
Phillips I	A.D. 244–249
Trajanus Decius	A.D. 249–251
Trebonianus Gallus	A.D. 251–253
Aemilian	A.D. 253
Valerian	A.D. 253–260
Gallienus	A.D. 253–268
Postumus	A.D. 260–268

The Period of Military Rule

Claudius II Gothicus	A.D. 268–270
Quintillus	A.D. 270
Aurelian	A.D. 270–275
Tacitus	A.D. 275–276
Florian	A.D. 276
Probus	A.D. 276–282
Carus	A.D. 282–283
Carinus	A.D. 283–285
Numerian	A.D. 283–284

The Tetrarchy and the Dynasty of Constantine

Diocletian	A.D. 284–305
Maximian	A.D. 286–305/307–308
Carausius	A.D. 286/287–293
Constantius I Chlorus	A.D. 305–306
Galerius	A.D. 305–311
Severus II	A.D. 306–307
Maxentius	A.D. 306–312
Constantine the Great	A.D. 306–337
Licinius	A.D. 308–324
Maximinus II Daia	A.D. 310–313
Constantine II	A.D. 337–340
Constantius II	A.D. 337–361
Constans I	A.D. 337–361
Magnentius	A.D. 350–353
Julian the Apostate	A.D. 361–363
Jovian	A.D. 363–364

The House of Valentinian Rulers of the West

Valentinian I	A.D. 364–375
Valens [East]	A.D. 364–378
Gratian	A.D. 375–383
Valentinian II	A.D. 375–392
Theodosius I the Great	A.D. 379–395

[East only, then the whole empire]

Magnus Maximus	A.D. 383–388
Arcadius [East]	A.D. 395–408
Honorius	A.D. 395–423
Constantine III	A.D. 407–411
Theodosius II [East]	A.D. 408–450
Constantius III	A.D. 421
Johannes	A.D. 423–425
Valentinian III	A.D. 425–455

The Survival of the Eastern Part of the Roman Empire and the Fall of the West

Marcian [East]	A.D. 450–457
Petronius Maximus	A.D. 455
Avitus	A.D. 455–456
Leo I the Great [East]	A.D. 457–474
Majorian	A.D. 457–461
Libius Severus	A.D. 461–465
Anthemius	A.D. 467–472
Olybrius	A.D. 472
Glycerius	A.D. 473–474
Julius Nepos	A.D. 474–475/477–480
Zeno [West]	A.D. 474–475
[East]	A.D. 476–491
Basiliscus [East]	A.D. 475–476
Romulus Augustulus	A.D. 475–476

Peace Before Persecution

Following the death of Marcus Aurelius on A.D. March 17, 180, the church enjoyed a time of relative peace. It was not to last due to the reign of Septimius Severus (A.D. 200–211). In the early years of his reign, Christians were not treated badly. But then, in A.D. 202, the emperor issued a decree which forbid anyone to convert to Christianity or Judaism. The reason for this official change in policy is uncertain. What is certain is that believers in Alexandria, Egypt experienced a fiery trial of their faith. Along with many others who suffered for Christ was Origen (c. A.D. 185–254), the most famous of the Alexandrian writers. His father Leonides had been beheaded

for the Lord. His son was to suffer for the Savior as well. In A.D. 250, the emperor Decius imprisoned Origen and had him tortured. In the providence of God, Origen initially survived his ordeals. Then, Decius died and Origen was released. However, his health was destroyed. He died shortly after his release. He was faithful to Christ to the end.

Origen encouraged the *allegorical interpretation* of the Scriptures. Simply stated, this method of understanding the Scriptures holds that the literal meaning of the Bible conceals a deeper meaning that can only be perceived by the mature believer. He taught that this concealing of the truth by God under the guise of common words was designed to prevent “pearls” from being cast before the uninterested and unbelieving (Matt 7:6).

Renewed Efforts of Destruction

In A.D. 249 another general persecution of the Church broke out under the emperor Decius. In the providence of the Lord, his reign only lasted two years (A.D. 249–251). Then came Valerian (A.D. 253–260) and the Church suffered again. There was hardly any reprieve. Hostility was endured through the reigns of Galienus (A.D. 260–268), Aurelian (A.D. 270–275) and on into the reign of the emperor Diocletian (A.D. 284–305).

Perhaps the most severe of all the persecutions came under Diocletian. Beginning in February 303, three edicts of persecution were issued in quick succession. The Churches were to be burned, all sacred books were to be confiscated, and the religious leaders were to be imprisoned or compelled to offer a sacrifice. Many lives were lost. Mental cruelty was added to physical hardships, as Satan’s servants assaulted the Church in order to destroy it completely.

During these dark days many Christians in the city of Rome found a small place of security. Under the city were the catacombs. The catacombs existed because, as early as the fifth century before Christ, burials were forbidden inside the city of Rome. Burial vaults could be carved into the underground tunnels of Rome which winded and crisscrossed in every direction making up over 500 miles of subterranean passages thirty or more feet below the surface. In the sides of the galleries or passages, excavations were made in rows upon rows so that the dead could be properly buried. Here, among the dead, the living found a hiding place.

The Promise of Jesus Realized

Despite her great hardships, the Church never lost hope, and the Lord began to honor such faith. When the emperor of the East, Galerius, became ill, he suffered excruciating torment. A Christian writer named Lactantius recorded that the body of Galerius rotted and was eaten by maggots as he twisted on his bed in agony. In his final days Galerius had opportunity to reconsider the pain of the Christians which he had caused. In A.D. 304, Galerius had issued an edict requiring everyone in the empire to sacrifice to the gods on pain of death or forced labor. When Christians refused they were imprisoned or executed. Precious Bibles were destroyed. However, in the will of the Lord, Galerius manifested a belated measure of repentance. Believing he was being judged by the Christian God for the sufferings he had caused the followers of Christ, from his deathbed, Galerius issued in the year A.D. 311, a proclamation which allowed Christians permission to worship freely. He even invited prayers for his own welfare. By receiving more freedom to worship, and by manifesting a willingness to pray for one's enemies, little by little, the Church began to gain the spiritual triumph that Jesus had promised (Matt 16:18).

* * *

THE DOCTRINE OF TRIBULATION

- (1) The word *tribulation* is found twenty two times in the Authorized Version. The word *tribulations* is found four times.
- (2) To suffer tribulation (Gk. *thilipsis*) is to suffer affliction, to be troubled, to suffer due to the pressure of circumstances or the antagonism of persons.
- (3) In examining the passages that speak of tribulation, it becomes evident that all God's people in all ages have known emotional, spiritual, and physical affliction (Deut 4:30; Jdgs 10:14; 1 Sam 26:24; 1 Sam 10:19; Matt 13:21).
- (4) Tribulation also comes to those who are not God's people, in the form of divine discipline (Matt 24:21, 29; Mark 13:24; 2 Thess 1:6; Rom 2:9).

(5) Of particular concern is the Christian and tribulation. The Bible clearly makes the following statements.

- For as long as they are in the world, the disciples of Christ shall have tribulation (John 16:33).
- Only through much tribulation will the saints enter into the kingdom (Acts 14:22).
- The value of tribulation is that it works patience (Rom 5:3; 12:12).
- To endure tribulation is not to be loved less by Christ, for nothing shall separate Christians from His faithful love (Rom 8:35).
- God finds a special way to comfort the saints who suffer (2Co 1:4).
- Paul could find reasons to rejoice in the very midst of tribulation (2 Cor 7:4; Rom 5:3; 2 Thess 1:4), and therefore did not want anyone else to worry on his behalf (Eph 3:13).
- When believers at Thessalonica were surprised at the suffering they had to endure, Paul reminded them he had taught that Christians must suffer (1 Thess 3:4).
- John on the isle of Patmos does not divorce himself from tribulation, nor does he ever say of himself that he represents those who shall not suffer tribulation. On the contrary, John considers himself at the moment of his writing to be a companion in suffering (Rev 1:9).
- The tribulation of the saints is well known to the Lord (Rev 2:9–10), and is for a stated purpose.
- Always, God's people emerge victorious out of tribulation, no matter how great (Rev 7:14).

(6) In all the biblical passages, there is not a single word that God will spare His people from the purifying effects of tribulation. Just the opposite is stated and demonstrated time and again.

(7) The story of the Old Testament, the writing of the New Testament, and the documentation of 2,000 years of history testify to the blood of the saints in the Church.

(8) Any teaching that seeks to exempt God's people from tribulation during any period of human history, will not find support from the twenty-six passages in the Scriptures that use this word.

*** *End of Free Sample* ***