

CHRIST AND  
HIS CHURCH  
*through the ages*



VOLUME 1 **THE ANCIENT CHURCH** (AD 30–590)

# CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

*through the ages*

Second Edition

**HERMAN HANKO**

Edited and Revised by Dan Van Uffelen



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Dedicated to the teachers of church history  
in the Protestant Reformed high schools,  
who have assumed the responsibility of showing the children  
of the covenant the glorious truth of the church of Christ.



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# CONTENTS

Foreword . . . . .	ix
Editor's Notes . . . . .	xiii
Author's Preface . . . . .	xix
Acknowledgments . . . . .	xxiii
Introduction . . . . .	1

## Part One: *The Apostolic Period (AD 30–100)*

Introduction to the Apostolic Period . . . . .	15
Chapter 1: <b>THE CORNERSTONE OF THE CHURCH</b> . . . . .	19
Chapter 2: <b>THE FOUNDATION OF THE APOSTLES</b> . . . . .	29
Chapter 3: <b>THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL</b> . . . . .	39

## Part Two: *The Post-Apostolic Period (AD 100–313)*

Introduction to the Post-Apostolic Period . . . . .	55
Chapter 4: <b>THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH</b> . . . . .	59
Chapter 5: <b>THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH</b> . . . . .	70
Chapter 6: <b>THE EARLIEST HERESIES</b> . . . . .	81
Chapter 7: <b>THE FORMATION OF THE CANON</b> . . . . .	91
Chapter 8: <b>THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH</b> . . . . .	98
Chapter 9: <b>THE WORSHIP OF THE EARLY CHURCH</b> . . . . .	109
Chapter 10: <b>THE MONARCHIAN HERESIES</b> . . . . .	119

Part Three: *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Period (AD 313–590)*

Introduction to the Nicene and Post-Nicene Period. . . . .	129
Chapter 11: <b>THE CHRISTIAN ROMAN EMPIRE</b> . . . . .	135
Chapter 12: <b>THE TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSIES</b> . . . . .	145
Chapter 13: <b>THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSIES</b> . . . . .	159
Chapter 14: <b>THE WORSHIP OF THE IMPERIAL CHURCH</b> . . . . .	170
Chapter 15: <b>THE BEGINNINGS OF MONASTICISM</b> . . . . .	180
Chapter 16: <b>THE DONATIST SCHISM</b> . . . . .	192
Chapter 17: <b>THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY</b> . . . . .	199
Chapter 18: <b>THE RISE OF THE PAPACY</b> . . . . .	213
Chapter 19: <b>THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS</b> . . . . .	225
Index . . . . .	235



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## FOREWORD

I still remember the first time I heard him preach. It was Sunday, July 21, 1985, and I was seven. Towering over our pulpit at First Protestant Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, a slender man with a commanding presence, piercing eyes, and a ringing voice introduced his sermon. “I’m going to talk to you children tonight, because this word of God is for children,” he began. “We’re going to let the parents listen in, and all who are here tonight... but nevertheless I am going to talk to you children.” I felt like he was staring right at me. Maybe he was. I hung on every word. As young as I was, I knew I was listening to a great preacher.

His name was Herman Hanko. He was fifty-five years old and in his prime as a pulpiteer and a seminary professor. Based on Colossians 3:20, his sermon that night was titled “God’s Word to Children.” Opening the scriptures and preaching in terms I could understand as a child, he pointed us to God’s providential placement of each unique son and daughter in the right family; he explained the high calling that children have to honor their parents; and he encouraged us to live as God’s children in a wicked world. I remember his vivid illustrations, including one with angry children banging dishes around in the kitchen; and I recall the effective acronym he used to make a child’s calling to obey his parents stick: “HOLY—Honor. Obey. Love. Yield.” That sermon still lives in my soul. It is a case study in effective preaching and storytelling, patterned after the Lord’s method of teaching with parables.

Thirty years later, on June 21, 2015, at Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan, I heard him preach for the last time. That Sunday morning he preached on the theme “A Doxology of Election,” based on Ephesians 1:3–4. Before he finished his introduction, he shared a story about his teaching days in the seminary, brought us back to the 1940s radio ministry of the PRC, and used multiple metaphors to appeal to listeners of every age. His sermon declared the comforting doctrine of God’s election, extolled the covenantal unity of Christ and his church,

and cataloged the champions of sovereign grace through the ages: Guido de Bres, Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Franciscus Gomarus, and Herman Hoeksema. In his stirring conclusion, he delivered his own doxology of election and declared, “Isn’t that wonderful, beloved?” The sermon was his swan song and a microcosm of his ministry.

In the thirty years between these bookend sermons, I came to appreciate Professor Hanks not only as a preacher and a storyteller, but also as a teacher and a writer. When he came to lead an interim course on prayer at Heritage Christian High School during my first year as a teacher, I sat at his feet along with my students as he engaged our hearts and minds. As I struggled to find my way as a church history teacher, I discovered his book *Portraits of Faithful Saints* and found it inspirational and indispensable. In subsequent years, I learned the history of my denomination by reading *For Thy Truth’s Sake* and came to appreciate the doctrinal riches of the church by reading *Contending for the Faith*. I found in each of these books a beautiful blend of history and storytelling, doctrine and application, firmness and comfort.

Now, at long last, Professor Hanks has crowned his life’s work with a panoramic survey of two thousand years of church history. Entitled *Christ and His Church Through the Ages*, this fresh series unlocks his thirty-six-year goldmine of church history instruction in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches (1965–2001). Written for the student in the classroom, the theologian in the study, and the layman in the living room, this series imparts a solidly Reformed understanding of the historical development of Christ’s church. Brimming with instruction and encouragement, these books were written to help all readers understand and appreciate the biblical foundation of the church, the wonderful works of God throughout history, the trials and triumphs of the saints, and the marvelous theme of sovereign grace. In an age of historical amnesia, this series erects memorial stones to the mighty acts of God (Gen. 28:10–22; Josh. 4:1–9, 21–22; 1 Sam. 7:7–12) and preserves the ancient landmarks of our fathers (Deut. 19:14; Job 24:2; Prov. 22:28).

For those readers who have never heard Professor Hanks preach, and never will, you will catch in these pages something of the passion, conviction, and sincerity of the man. You will enjoy his prowess as a storyteller and his natural ability to engage readers of every age. You will profit from his knowledge of God’s word, his application of scripture to church history, and his ability to show the relevance of church history for the church today. You will also appreciate his glowing love of Christ and his church, his call to an antithetical life of holy living, and his comfort for God’s

pilgrim people as they look toward heaven. These are the qualities I recall from the first time I heard him preach to the last, qualities the Lord has used to make his teaching, preaching, and writing effective these many years.

May God bless those who travel these pages with Christ and his church through the ages, and may God bless the tour guide who captured my imagination when I was just seven years old.

Dan Van Uffelen  
*Church History Teacher*  
*Covenant Christian High School*



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## EDITOR'S NOTES

### PROJECT HISTORY

This church history series is ten years in the making.

Many years ago, I joined a chorus of voices urging Professor Herman Hanko to produce a layman's guide to church history, a textbook for both old and young that would celebrate the great doctrine of sovereign grace and trace the history of the church from the days of the apostles through the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches. When I asked him again in early 2010, he wrote to me, "It is getting rather late in life to start on such a mammoth project." He was, after all, nearly eighty years old. The dream seemed to be vanishing.

But desperate times call for desperate measures. At the time, I was teaching at Heritage Christian High School in Dyer, Indiana; and Gwen Van Baren (now Birkett), a granddaughter of Professor Hanko, was one of my students there. When Gwen mentioned offhand that she often wrote letters to her grandfather, I had a rare epiphany. "Gwen!" I exclaimed. "Ask your grandpa to write a church history book! Maybe he'll listen to *you*." She smiled and enthusiastically agreed.

Just days later, Gwen's mother—and Professor Hanko's daughter—Mrs. Karen Van Baren asked me what I knew about a church history book. Karen shared with me her father's recent message to her: "I have been under some pressure, as you know, to write some sort of book on church history. I would love to do this, but again face an insurmountable task even in the preparation for writing." Gwen's request had put the wheels in motion. Professor Hanko was ready to write! What I failed to accomplish through years of dogged determination, granddaughter Gwen achieved by a simple request. It is abundantly clear to me that Professor Hanko wrote this one for the children and the young people—for the generations to come.

And the rest is history. In early 2011, things began to move quickly. Already in January, at Professor Hanko's request, Karen and I collaborated on an outline for the manuscript. By March, Professor Hanko submitted the first three chapters to us for feedback. In April, I wrote a prospectus to pitch the project to the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA). When Professor Hanko and I met with the RFPA's book committee in June, they loved the concept, expressed a strong desire to publish the book, and encouraged us to proceed. Energized by the meeting, Professor Hanko buried himself in his writing, an activity he once described as "blood, sweat, and tears," and yet a work he thoroughly enjoys. In an interview published in the winter 2011 issue of the RFPA *Update*, he said, "History, especially of the church, attracts me like a magnet attracts a nail, and so writing history is a fascinating occupation." Already in the early stages of writing the manuscript, he wrote to me, "I think we have a good thing going here that, under God's blessing, will be for the welfare of the church of Christ."

By 2013, Professor Hanko had already finished the entire first draft of *Christ and His Church Through the Ages*. I read the draft and offered an initial round of editorial remarks and suggestions. At the RFPA's request and with Professor Hanko's approval, I used the manuscript in my church history classes at Covenant Christian High School. My students offered a wide range of helpful suggestions, many of which were utilized. Over the next two years, I worked my way through the entire manuscript a second time, producing a document of suggestions for revision. Professor Hanko incorporated the ones that he deemed useful and necessary. He also selected fitting Bible verses to introduce each chapter.

In 2015, the RFPA made a formal review of the early manuscript and then asked me to serve as the project's developmental editor. At their request and in conjunction with a master's course I was taking at Calvin College, I began another critique of the entire manuscript, focusing especially on unity, clarity, and historical accuracy, and incorporating previous editorial suggestions into the manuscript.

In 2018, the RFPA decided to print several hundred copies of the unedited first edition to satisfy the immediate needs of several Christian schools and to give teachers time to provide quality feedback on adjustments they would find helpful in the finished product. Based on their experience with the first edition in the classroom, teachers gave corrections and suggestions. In the meantime, the RFPA asked me to revise the manuscript one last time to prepare it for publication, dividing it into multiple volumes and providing further editing, quality introductions, various sidebars, and an array of pictures, maps, timelines, and tables in order "to publish a high-quality work that will be great for any reader and for Christian schools."

In 2020, I finished my work on the ancient period and submitted it for peer review and copyediting. In 2021, *Volume 1: The Ancient Church (AD 30–590)* was ready for the printer. It is my hope that *Volume 2: The Medieval Church (AD 590–1517)*, *Volume 3: The Reformation Church (AD 1517–1648)*, and *Volume 4: The Modern Church (AD 1648–present)* will be available in subsequent years.

## EDITION CHANGES

Because my work on Professor Hanko's manuscript has been extensive, it is appropriate that I explain the editorial changes and revisions I have made. I am convinced that these changes to the first edition will significantly improve the book's readability, usefulness, and appeal in our homes, schools, and churches. However, those who would like to read the unedited edition of Professor Hanko's work are welcome to do so. It was published by the RFPA in 2018 to be used on a trial basis in our schools. My revisions of that first edition fall into ten basic categories:

**Introductions:** Ancient church history is divided into three distinct periods. To introduce these historical periods, I wrote introductory essays, compiled timelines of events (based on Susan Lynn Peterson's *Timeline Charts of the Western Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999]), and selected appropriate maps (from Tim Dowley's *The Baker Atlas of Christian History* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997] and *Atlas of Christian History* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016]).

**Organization:** In order to strengthen the organization of the material I occasionally renamed and rearranged chapters; added, renamed, and repositioned subheadings; and even moved paragraphs and blocks of text to different locations in the manuscript.

**Development:** Although hesitant to alter Professor Hanko's syntax, I found it necessary to add transitions, simplify sentences, remove repeated material, define terms, provide further context, and incorporate various selections from his "Ancient Church History" seminary syllabus (1977).

**Fact-checking:** Reviewing the manuscript for historical accuracy and consistency, I fact-checked, corrected dating issues, and modernized spellings of names and places.

**Copyediting:** Although I am not the copyeditor, I did make capitalization, punctuation, spelling, grammar, and usage corrections along the way.

**Biographies:** I wrote biographical sketches highlighting the ancient heroes and villains of church history and added reading recommendations from Professor Hanks's books *Portraits of Faithful Saints* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 1999) and *Contending for the Faith* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2010). I placed these biographies throughout the book where I thought they fit best.

**Sidebars:** When something important was missing from the text or was insufficiently treated, I wrote fresh sidebar material (e.g., “The Destruction of Jerusalem,” “The Apostles’ Creed,” “The Decian Persecution,” and “Jerome’s Latin Vulgate”). Unless otherwise noted, these sidebar materials are my own.

**Supplements:** At other times, I was convinced that complementary material written by Professor Hanks in other articles and books should be incorporated into this book as well. These supplemental quotations appear as sidebars and include the author’s name and original work citations.

**Charts:** I selected and created charts and tables and recommended placement throughout the book. The selections came from John D. Hannah’s *Charts of Ancient and Medieval Church History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001) and Robert C. Walton’s *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

**Pictures:** Finally, I chose nearly one hundred suitable pictures, photographs, and maps in order to bring life to the book and widen its general appeal. Most of these resources came from Wikimedia Commons.

## SPECIAL THANKS

Many deserve to be acknowledged for their contributions to the first volume of this second edition of *Christ and His Church Through the Ages*.

I express special thanks to my dear wife, Kate, for the sacrifice of my time and attention for this project. Maybe someday she will forgive me for editing the manuscript in the hospital delivery room while we waited for one of our children to arrive.



This book truly was a labor of love. Thanks to my children too, who were at times frustrated when I was slow to pull myself from this work. Their reward will be to read these books in years to come.

Thank you to my former and current high school church history students. Their enthusiasm for church history has fueled my own love for the subject, and their encouragement has motivated me to press on. Their suggestions regarding the rough draft were a great help to me on this project as well.

I thank the church history teachers of our Protestant Reformed Christian schools who were willing to utilize the first edition in their classrooms and who provided helpful suggestions. Thanks as well to the church history teachers who graciously agreed to peer review the revised second edition before it went to the copyeditors: Prof. Russell Dykstra, professor of church history at the Protestant Reformed seminary (1996–present); Prof. Douglas Kuiper, professor of church history at the Protestant Reformed seminary (2017–present); and Mr. Scott Van Uffelen, teacher of church history at Covenant Christian High School (1998–present). They kindly read the revised manuscript and offered detailed suggestions for improvement.

Thank you to the board and staff of the Reformed Free Publishing Association. Their commitment, patience, and deadlines were all necessary to make this book happen. Mrs. Evelyn Langerak provided indispensable direction in the early days of the project; Mr. Alex Kalsbeek's idea to publish an incomplete first edition to garner feedback from the schools was brilliant; and Mr. Jeff Kalsbeek's unflagging commitment to the project saw it through.

Finally, many thanks to Prof. Herman Hanko—my hero, my teacher, and my friend—who through many years has cultivated within me—and countless others—a profound love and appreciation for the history of Christ's church and a sincere desire to declare it to the generations to come. No one has taught me more about church history. I thank him for asking me to contribute to this grand project. Working with him has been a tremendous honor, a remarkable learning experience, and a rich blessing indeed.

Dan Van Uffelen  
*Summer 2020*



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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I am not embarrassed to add another book to the long list of books written on the history of Christ's church. In 1965 the Lord called me from the pastoral ministry, which I loved, to spend the rest of my active years in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches. One of the subjects that I was called to teach was church history. The seminary curriculum called for four semesters of church history: one semester each for the ancient, medieval, modern, and recent periods.

Preparing and keeping fresh lectures on these four periods required extensive reading and research of the subject. Many works were available, from Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*<sup>1</sup> to Bruce L. Shelley's recent book *Church History in Plain Language*. While the books that I read were all helpful in giving the facts of church history, some in considerable detail, I could not find one book that dealt with the history of Christ's church from a biblical and, more specifically, a *Reformed* viewpoint.

The term "scholarly" has taken on a unique meaning in academia. A scholarly work has copious footnotes, extensive quotations from many writers, a thorough analysis of their views, and many conclusions from different writings on a given subject. But a scholarly author does not often test ideas, weigh conclusions, and include his own views in his work. That, it appears, is unscholarly. It is left to the reader to make his own judgments—if, indeed, judgments are even expected.

If the idea just described is truly scholarly, this book on church history is *not* a scholarly work, nor is it intended to be. I started this project too late in life to do such an enormous work. Nor is this necessary in a world flooded with books on church history.

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1 Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340) was a contemporary of Constantine the Great and the father of church history from Pentecost up to his time.

This work reviews events that belong to the church, errors that were taught, innovations adopted, and views of many men who were part of the history of the church. As I wrote, I have felt free, even compelled, to weigh all things in the light of God's word, the only infallible canon of faith and life. Running through my mind was the apostle John's injunction, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1).

Even then, my primary goal in writing this book was not to give the reader a huge file of facts and dates. Rather, my goal was to write for enjoyment and learning on the part of all God's people. I have consciously tried to make the book enjoyable and worth reading. I firmly believe that God's people ought to know the history of Christ's church, for they are a part of that church and members of the family of God who constitute the church. God's people ought to know the members of their family. It is good to know them now, for we shall live with them in heaven, world without end. Further, throughout the writing, I was conscious that the book will be used in high school church history classes. It is imperative that our children, children of the covenant, know the history of the church of which they are a part.

If God is pleased to use the book for the spiritual welfare of his people, that is to be preferred to scholarship.

This goal required teaching church history from the viewpoint of scripture's teaching concerning the church. Any book on church history has to take its starting point in scripture, and scripture has much to say about the church that was elect from all eternity, redeemed by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, saved by the irresistible power of the Spirit of Christ, and destined for eternal life with God in heaven.

A scriptural approach to church history must include some important points in order to serve its proper purpose. First, it must include the truth that the entire history of the church is God's history of saving his church. The viewpoint must be that of God's work through Jesus Christ. The history must make clear that the Son of God from his exalted position in heaven gathers, defends, and preserves the church.

Second, a scriptural approach to church history traces the church's defense of the faith over against heresy. It is biblical to describe the church by the name often given it: the *church militant*, in distinction from the *church triumphant* in glory. It is the church militant because the devil is determined to destroy it, and one of his most successful methods has been the introduction of false doctrine into the church. The church must fight to defend the truth.

Third, a church history that is faithful to the scriptures defines the crucial doctrine at stake in all the church's history: the doctrine of the particularity and sovereignty

in God's work of grace in gathering his elect church through Christ. The doctrine of God's sovereignty was the issue on the floor at the Council of Nicaea. It was the burden of Augustine's ministry. The Roman Catholic Church corrupted the doctrine throughout the Middle Ages. It was restored triumphantly and emphatically by the works of all the reformers. It is written large on the pages of the Canons of Dordrecht and the Westminster Confession of Faith. It has been the chief point of dispute in one form or another in the history of Protestantism from the Reformation until today.

Finally, a scriptural approach to church history must point out that the church built the imposing body of the truth on the basis of the teaching of the apostles and prophets recorded in holy scripture. The church in any age and in every age builds on the foundation of the doctrine confessed by the church that lived before it. Christ promised his Spirit, the Spirit of truth, to the church, so that he from his throne on high might preserve his church through the one work of the one Spirit given to and possessed by the church of all ages. He has and does now lead the church into all truth. That truth is her life and her blessedness. A faithful church history has to be written on the foundation of these biblical givens.

The high schools established by Protestant Reformed parents throughout the denomination are staffed with Reformed teachers. Many times over the years these teachers of church history have asked me to write a textbook from a biblical perspective—not because there were no other books available, but there was nothing that they or I could find that was written from a Reformed viewpoint; that is, one that applies the truths of scripture to every aspect of the church's life. It seemed to me too enormous a task to undertake. But now, in my retirement, I have done so. May God be pleased to use this book to strengthen the faith of our covenantal children, to instill in them a love for Christ's church, and to give them incentive to devote their gifts to the church of which they are a part.

It is my firm belief that the students in our schools ought to learn church history, and that the subject ought to have high priority for all those who love Christ's church. If we are to live responsibly as God's children in the world, we ought to be acquainted with the history of those who have gone before us from the world to their eternal rest. So this book is prepared for use as a textbook and for the general edification and strengthening of God's people everywhere. I have tried to make it as interesting as possible, for the history of the church is like a travelogue filled with adventure that describes the journey of the church through time until the Lord returns.

It is somewhat embarrassing to include in the book many footnotes that call the reader's attention to two of my own books: *Portraits of Faithful Saints* and *Contending*

*for the Faith.* This inclusion of my own books is not intended, at least not in the first place, to promote them. It was suggested that I do this by the teachers of church history in our schools, for these teachers use those two books for collateral reading in the courses they teach.

It is my hope and prayer that the Lord will use what I have written in weakness to the strengthening of the faith of those who love Christ and his church.

Herman Hanko

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been written without the help of Dan Van Uffelen, a church history teacher at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, Michigan. He not only was kind enough to read the entire manuscript, but he also offered detailed suggestions for improvements that he drew out of his own experience teaching church history in the classroom. He even tested the entire Ancient Church History section in teaching that course so that he could see how it worked out in the actual teaching situation. His help proved invaluable.

Calvin Kalsbeek, a retired church history teacher from Covenant Christian High School, also read the entire manuscript. He tested it for readability and clarity of understanding. His evaluation kept out many words beyond the understanding of high school students, thus making the book more readable. He is also to be thanked for suggesting inclusion of various events and also omission of less than important matters.

Tom De Vries, a retired teacher in our Protestant Reformed schools, also read the entire manuscript and made significant changes that were incorporated into the book.

I recall that many years ago *Time* magazine ran an essay on how to write well. The essay concluded with the words: “Rule 1: Revise. Rule 2: Revise again. Rule 3: Revise again.” I have found this to be true. The tedious work in revising is, however, to type the revisions into the original manuscript. I was saved from this task by Shari Bosveld, who did all this work for me. She also took the opportunity to read the entire manuscript at least two times and offer her own insightful suggestions on word usage, sentence construction, and clarity of thought. Without her assistance the task would have taken a much longer time.

Finally, I have to recognize with deep gratitude my wife, Wilma, who never complained about enduring whole summers of my writing without a vacation, and who encouraged me repeatedly to continue the work at those moments when discouragement with the enormity of the task overtook me.





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## INTRODUCTION

*In the house of God, which is the church of the living God,  
the pillar and ground of the truth.*

—1 TIMOTHY 3:15

### **CHURCH HISTORY IS FAMILY HISTORY**

A growing interest in one's past and a search for one's ancestors has become a favorite pastime. All have ancestors who were born in other lands, and people like to know their roots. This desire is understandable and often proves interesting. But the believer has roots of a quite different kind. His roots go back two thousand years to Pentecost, when the exalted Christ poured out his Holy Spirit on the church. The believer has a spiritual ancestry as well as a physical one.

This spiritual ancestry is composed of a multitude of saints who are all one spiritual people or nation: the church of Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). This church is a family that ultimately traces its history back to the beginning of time. The church is not only a nation, but also a family with a spiritual ancestry. One who belongs to it has many brothers and sisters who are a part of the same household of faith. They are all of the family of God, for God is their father, Jesus Christ is their elder brother, and all believers are brothers and sisters in this family, for they are all sons and daughters of God (2 Cor. 6:18).

What this family has in common, and what makes them one family, is a spiritual birth that brings them into the family of God. This rebirth is regeneration, which God sovereignly performs through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. The birth that unites the members of this family is not a physical birth that enables them to trace their

ancestry back through many generations, but the spiritual bond of a common life given through the wonderful and sovereign work of God.

In addition to a spiritual birth, the family also has in common spiritual characteristics, such as a shared goal in life, quite different from the goals of the people of the world. The members of this family have a calling to witness to the truth of God as revealed in the sacred scriptures. They have a common calling to walk in the world as a holy people, reflecting in their lives the holiness of their God who has saved them. They all seek one destination, their heavenly home, to which so many of their brothers and sisters have already gone and at the doors of which angels will be waiting to usher them into their home.

The result of this is that throughout two thousand years of history all the saints have believed the same truth. They are united into one family by this truth, for it is the truth of God revealed in Christ, and it is a truth given to them by faith in Christ. But because that truth is under constant attack in a world of sin, their unity in the truth becomes a war in its defense; for faithfulness to the truth marks their membership in God's family. To deny the truth is to join the enemy. The church militant on earth is at war; the church triumphant in heaven has gained its victory, for faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4).

This family of God is called the “church of God” or the “church of Christ.” The church of one generation hands down to the next generation the truth for which it has fought and the weapons with which it has defended its cause. So it has been since Pentecost; so it will continue until the Lord comes again. It is of this history that I write.

## **CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH: THE CENTER OF ALL HISTORY<sup>1</sup>**

Christ is the center of all history. He is the firstborn of every creature; he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending. He is the first in God's counsel—not in order of time, but in principle. And he is the first and the last in history—the revelation of the counsel of God in time. History in the old dispensation pointed ahead to Christ; the new dispensation is the dispensation of the coming of Christ.

But inasmuch as this is true of Christ, it is equally true of the church. Christ and his church are one. There is no Christ apart from and without the church, even as

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1 Taken from Herman Hanko, “Ancient Church History, AD 100–AD 590” (syllabus, Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1977), 2–4.

there is no church apart from Christ. Christ came as the head of his elect church. For this elect number he died, securing redemption; on their behalf he rose again from the dead; these are the ones destined to inherit the everlasting kingdom of righteousness. Hence, even as Christ is the center and focal point of all history, so also this is true of the church—the elect and eternally chosen body of Christ. Thus the church is the goal of all that happens in history.

All this must be interpreted in terms of Christ's sovereign rule over all things in this dispensation. By his conquering death and his victorious resurrection, Christ gained a position of universal rule at God's right hand in heaven. All authority is given unto him. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. His rule is, in the strictest sense of the word, universal. He rules over all the brute creation; he rules over angels and devils; he rules over all wicked men, governing in such a way that their affairs are strictly under the sway of his sovereign scepter; he rules over his own elect church. And in all this rule of Christ, the purpose of God is realized—the glory of the only adorable God through the salvation of the elect into everlasting glory.

We must be careful to distinguish properly between the rule of Christ over his elect people and his rule over the wicked. Failure to make this distinction will inevitably result in a destruction of the antithesis and in the error of some form of postmillennialism. The rule of Christ over the wicked and devils is surely a sovereign rule. Christ rules over them in such a way that they serve Christ's purpose in spite of their rebellion and hatred of God and his Christ. They are wicked, desperately intent on destroying the kingdom of Christ and establishing the kingdom of darkness. They take counsel together and plot against the Anointed of the Lord. But Christ rules over them so that, in spite of their hatred and rebellion, they nevertheless accomplish all the purpose of God.

It is different with the elect people of God. Christ rules over them too, but in such a way that their hearts are changed. The elect are called out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. They are made citizens of the kingdom of heaven that Christ came to establish. Their wills are bent to the service of Christ. They are made, by the power of sovereign grace, willing subjects of Christ who bow before him and subject themselves to his rule. And presently they shall be taken into Christ's everlasting kingdom when that is perfectly established at the end of the age.

Yet there is a relation between the rule of Christ over the wicked and his rule over his people. Christ rules over the wicked so that they must serve the church. All that the unbelieving do is for the purpose of the realization of the kingdom of heaven. Even Christ's rule in the brute creation and in the realm of the angels must be

subservient to the final deliverance of those for whom Christ died. “For all things are yours; and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21–23). “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). It is the establishment of Christ’s kingdom that is the purpose of all things and the goal of Christ’s universal rule: “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

This principle starting point must control our entire view of church history. Church history is the important history of this world. All other history is subservient to the church. Only when we apply this principle will we come to a proper understanding of the history of the church. We must see Christ’s scepter swaying in all the events of time. But we must see that it sways for the realization of Christ’s kingdom that the elect of God shall inherit.

## THE DEFINITION OF CHURCH HISTORY

Before we begin our journey with Christ and his church through the ages, two important distinctions should be made in order to define church history clearly. The first distinction is that between *church history* and *secular history*; the second is between *church history* and *sacred history*.

### ***Church History Distinct from Secular History***

As we have seen, God has ordained that the history of the church takes place in the history of the world. Church history is not a history divorced from secular history, taking place in a realm of its own, independent of and invisible to the wicked world. It is a history interwoven with the history of the nations. Never can the history of the church be separated from the history of the nations. Such an experiment has been tried, for example, in the Anabaptist attempt in Münster shortly after the Reformation; but it ended in immorality and bloodshed. The Lord is emphatic: “Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me; declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (Isa. 46:9–10).

Yet church history can be distinguished from secular history: not separated from it, but distinguished from it. The former is the history of the church from God’s announcement of the “mother promise” to our fallen parents, by which the church

was sovereignly begun; the latter is the history of the nations. The former takes place within and as a part of the latter, but it is distinct, and the two must never be confused.

The secular history of this world, fallen in sin and doomed to everlasting destruction, is the stage on which is enacted the drama of the salvation of the church. It is not of man's devising, nor is man's destiny in his own hands. Man does not determine what happens; God does, for he has eternally ordained it. But God has a purpose also in all that he sovereignly does in secular history. In God's providence, secular history serves church history. God had a purpose with Nebuchadnezzar, Nero, Pelagius, Charles V, Napoleon, Hitler, and every man, woman, and child who ever lived and played a prominent or minor role in secular history. That purpose is ultimately to manifest God's holiness and righteous judgment in the punishment of sin. God is "just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Into this sad world of sin, suffering, darkness, and awful wickedness, God comes also in his grace and mercy. He, as it were, causes the power of heaven itself, with all its holiness and righteousness, to shine into this world. He does this through the gospel, first preached to Adam and Eve in paradise, and constantly and unendingly preached throughout all history. By that gospel God announces that he has one overriding purpose in all he does: to reveal himself in Jesus Christ as merciful and gracious. By the gospel God gathers a church, the membership of which possesses heavenly life, even though the members are still in this world and are a part of its history. That church is saved by the miracle of Jesus Christ. He came into this world. He suffered at the hands of the world power of his day and those of his own countrymen. He died on a wooden cross planted on Calvary. He rose again by the power of God from Joseph's garden. He ascended into heaven from Mount Olivet just outside Jerusalem. He is now exalted as Lord of lords and King of kings.

Trailing in the wake of the miracle of Christ are all the miracles recorded in scripture: the flood, the victories of Israel in Canaan, the raising of the dead, the healing of the blind, the casting out of demons, and all that the Old Testament saints, the Lord himself, and his apostles performed over the centuries. Those many miracles were but signs of the great miracle of Jesus Christ and the salvation of his church. That central miracle continues and will continue until the end of secular history, the return

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2 Belgic Confession 16, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 41–42.

of our Lord, and the everlasting realization of the kingdom of Christ. The physical miracles that dominated the history of the church have faded away, for the reality to which they pointed, the miraculous work of Christ in salvation, is now an everyday event as Christ saves his elect sinners.

Church history is the story of the great miracle of salvation through the ages.

### ***Church History Distinct from Sacred History***

In addition to the distinction between church history and secular history, another important distinction must be made within church history itself. Church history is of two parts. The first part, while a part of the history of the church, is also sacred history or the history of revelation. While all this history took place in this world, God was revealing himself in his purpose of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is the history from paradise the first to the writing of Revelation by the apostle John on Patmos. That history of revelation God preserved for the church of all ages by the divine and infallible inspiration of sacred scripture. That part of church history ended with the closing of the canon of scripture around AD 100.

However, the history of the church continues, not now as the history of revelation, but as the history of the same church, now guided in all her life by scripture. Church history, narrowly defined and in distinction from sacred history, is God's revelation of his sovereign, infinitely wise, merciful, just, and all-embracing counsel regarding Christ's church on earth, from the death of the last apostle to the second coming of the Savior. It is thus a biography of the church—of her development both normal and abnormal; of her life, activity, and tribulations in the world; and of all her physical, intellectual, and ethical forces within the limits above specified. It is this church history that is the focus of this book.

Let it never be forgotten, however, that both sacred history and church history take place on this earth and in the cradle of secular history. It must be so, because God sovereignly controls and directs the whole. Christ saves his church from a fallen human race. Through Christ the creation is redeemed from the curse and saved by Christ's atoning work (Col. 1:20). And God's sovereign rule over the wicked, of which scripture so often speaks, is for the purpose of the salvation of the elect. The reprobate are the scaffolding needed to build the temple of the church. They are the roots, stalk, tassel, husks, and cob, necessary for the kernels of corn, but ending their purpose when the corn is ripe. They are the tares in the field, staying in the field until the harvest (Matt. 13:24–30, 37–43).

In this book I deal with church history, but with church history that takes place

in the world of wicked men. I deal therefore with church history in its warfare and peace, in its triumphs and seeming defeats, in its influence in and its struggle with the world about it. I deal with the truth for which the church fought and died, for the enemy of the church is not only the wicked world, but also the false church. In the attacks of the false church lies the greatest danger, for when persecution comes from the false church it comes deceptively, with a mask of friendship but hiding a blood-thirsty heart.

Much of the history of the church is written with the ink of the blood of martyrs who loved not their lives unto death. There were also those great moments when Christ showed in emphatic ways that the church is victorious, not *in spite of* the martyrs' death, but *in* their death, for they entered the gates of glory. The church marched on from victory to victory, under the banner of the cross (Ps. 60:4; Song of Sol. 6:4), led by the captain of their salvation (Heb. 2:10), and armed with the weapons of the word of God (Eph. 6:10–17). “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING CHURCH HISTORY<sup>3</sup>

For many reasons, the study of church history is important for the child of God.

First, and principally, the reason for studying church history is to see the glory and wonder of the works of God. History in general, and church history in particular, is the unfolding of the eternal counsel of God through Jesus Christ. We come to know God through church history as part of his revelation to us. This is in order that we may bow in adoration before him who is worthy of all praise.<sup>4</sup>

Second, as we have already seen, church history is family history. The history of the church is the history of the family to which we belong. It is our history, therefore; and we have the solemn obligation, as members of the church, to know our own history. It is good and necessary that we know our roots.

Third, the history of the church can never be separated from the history of doctrine. The history of the church is the history of the work of the Spirit of truth whom

<sup>3</sup> Taken and slightly altered from Hanks, “Ancient Church History, AD 100–AD 590,” 4–6.

<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the relation between God's revelation in scripture and in creation and history. It will be sufficient to point out that there is no possibility of understanding God's revelation in history without standing by faith upon the truth of scripture. Scripture gives us the eyes to see God in history and the knowledge to understand God's truth revealed there. This must be our approach throughout a study of church history.



Christ promised to give to his church. To ignore this history is to despise the work of the Spirit of Christ. Thus, church history serves as a necessary background for the history of doctrine.

Fourth, it is essential to have a thorough acquaintance with the history of the church in order that we may fulfill our own calling in our present time. It has been well said, “The present is the fruit of the past and the germ of the future.” To understand our times, we must know the past; to prepare for the future, we must labor in the present. Specifically, we cannot fight the battle of faith today in defense of the truth once delivered to the saints unless we know the battles the church before us has fought and won. The battle never changes materially. The enemy is the same; the weapons with which he fights and with which we fight are identical. To fight successfully means that we have studied the battles of those who are now made perfect. The church lapses into error when she loses the consciousness of her heritage. Further, only when we know the truth as it was developed in ages gone by can we take this heritage of the truth and develop it further. We build on a foundation already laid. We can uncover yet greater riches of the knowledge of God only when we work with the heritage entrusted to our care. A church that loosens herself from the moorings of the past is a church hopelessly adrift in the seas of time, doomed to be smashed to pieces on the shoals of error. Faithfulness requires that we know the fruit of the Spirit of truth.

Finally, we shall someday live in glory with those who have belonged to the same church in which we live and die. They were prepared for their place in the perfected temple of heaven by their lives in their day. Likewise we are prepared for our place by God, fashioned and fitted by the Master Builder. Because all this is true, they with us and we with them shall enjoy perfectly the communion of the saints.

### ***THE EXCITING ADVENTURE OF THE MARVELOUS WORK OF GRACE***

The importance of Church History is based upon the firm conviction that Scripture is the infallibly inspired Word of God which is given to the church as the revelation of Jehovah God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. It contains the whole mystery of salvation which to believe is to be saved. It is

everlastingly sure and fixed and relevant for the Church in every age. The history of the Church and of her doctrine is the history of God, through the preaching of the Scriptures and by the work of the Spirit of Christ in the church, gathering, defending, and preserving His Church until the end as He



leads that Church into all truth. The history of the Church is the demonstration of the marvelous work of grace. It is the exciting adventure of the marvelous work of grace. It is the exciting adventure of the realization of the work of Christ in the salvation of the elect. Amid the cries of martyrs who loved not their lives unto death, in the crash of the battles for the defense of the faith, through the triumphs and tragedies of a Church living in every age, one comes face to face with the truth: upon the rock which is Christ God builds His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

It is necessary to know that truth. When Israel forgot the wonders which God performed for the nation, Israel went apostate. When the Church does not know her

heritage, the Church loses her heritage and joins Laodicea in being spit from the mouth of Christ. A Church which has no appreciation for the blood of martyrs will not be faithful until death. A Church which does not understand the subtleties of Satan in his fierce attacks against the truth will be easy prey for every wind of doctrine. A Church which does not appreciate and give thanks to God for the work of the Spirit of Truth in leading the Church into all truths will be a Church that despises the truth and sells her heritage for a mess of worldly pottage. A Church which will not learn from the mistakes of the past is doomed to repeat them. But a Church which lives out of her past is a Church vibrant with life and power in this present age to fulfill her calling before God.

—Herman Hanko, "Church Historical Studies," *The Standard Bearer* 57, no. 2 (October 15, 1980): 36



# The Ancient Church (AD 30–590)

**PART 1: THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD (AD 30–100)**

**PART 2: THE POST-APOSTOLIC PERIOD (AD 100–313)**

**PART 3: THE NICENE AND POST-NICENE PERIOD (AD 313–590)**



Part One

# The Apostolic Period

(AD 30–100)



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## INTRODUCTION TO THE APOSTOLIC PERIOD

**F**orty days after his death on the cross and just before his ascension to heaven, the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ told his disciples, “Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). With these words, the Lord reminded the disciples of his promise to send to his church the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who would guide the church into all truth (John 16:13). Ten days later, on the Jewish holy day of Pentecost, that promise was fulfilled; and the New Testament church was founded.

The year was likely AD 30, and Jerusalem was packed with devout pilgrims from throughout the Roman world who were there to celebrate the Old Testament Feast of Weeks, a Jewish harvest festival called “Pentecost” (which means “fiftieth”) because it was celebrated fifty days (seven weeks) after the Feast of Firstfruits. The disciples of Jesus were there too, waiting for the fulfillment of Christ’s promise at his ascension. As 120 disciples met together, God accomplished a tremendous work in church history: he poured out his Holy Spirit upon the church, a wonder accompanied by the sound of a mighty wind, by the appearance of cloven tongues as of fire, and by speaking in tongues. When the apostle Peter preached the gospel of Jesus Christ at the temple that day, three thousand people believed and “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47).

Understanding the significance of what Christ accomplished at Pentecost is of supreme importance for the child of God and for the student of church history. At Pentecost, God blessed his New Testament church with the gift of the Holy Spirit. That day made it plain that the Old Testament types and shadows were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who makes all things new. As men from every nation heard the good news in their own languages, Pentecost demonstrated that the gospel is not just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. This event marked the beginning of the rapid

expansion of the church as the gospel spread to every major city throughout the Roman Empire.

In addition, Pentecost made it abundantly clear that the Lord had placed a handful of men in a special office in order to lead the New Testament church in its infancy. These men were the apostles, the “sent ones,” who were commissioned, equipped, and empowered by God to lead the early church and to lay the foundation of the church by writing the New Testament scriptures. Their apostolic office existed for just seventy years, from the day of Pentecost, when they were filled with the Holy Spirit, through the death of the apostle John, the last living apostle. For this reason, we call this crucial era in church history the Apostolic Period (AD 30–100).

These years are indeed special ones for the church. Much of what we know about the early history of the church is revealed in sacred scripture. These years witnessed the leadership of the apostles, special signs and wonders, the very first synod in church history, the writing of every New Testament book, the rapid spread of the gospel throughout the world, the first outbreaks of persecution against the church, and the shocking destruction of the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem by the Romans.

A proper understanding of church history requires an appreciation for God’s work during these crucial years—years in which the cornerstone and the foundation of the church were laid, and in which the trumpet blast of sovereign grace through Jesus Christ rang loudly in the world.

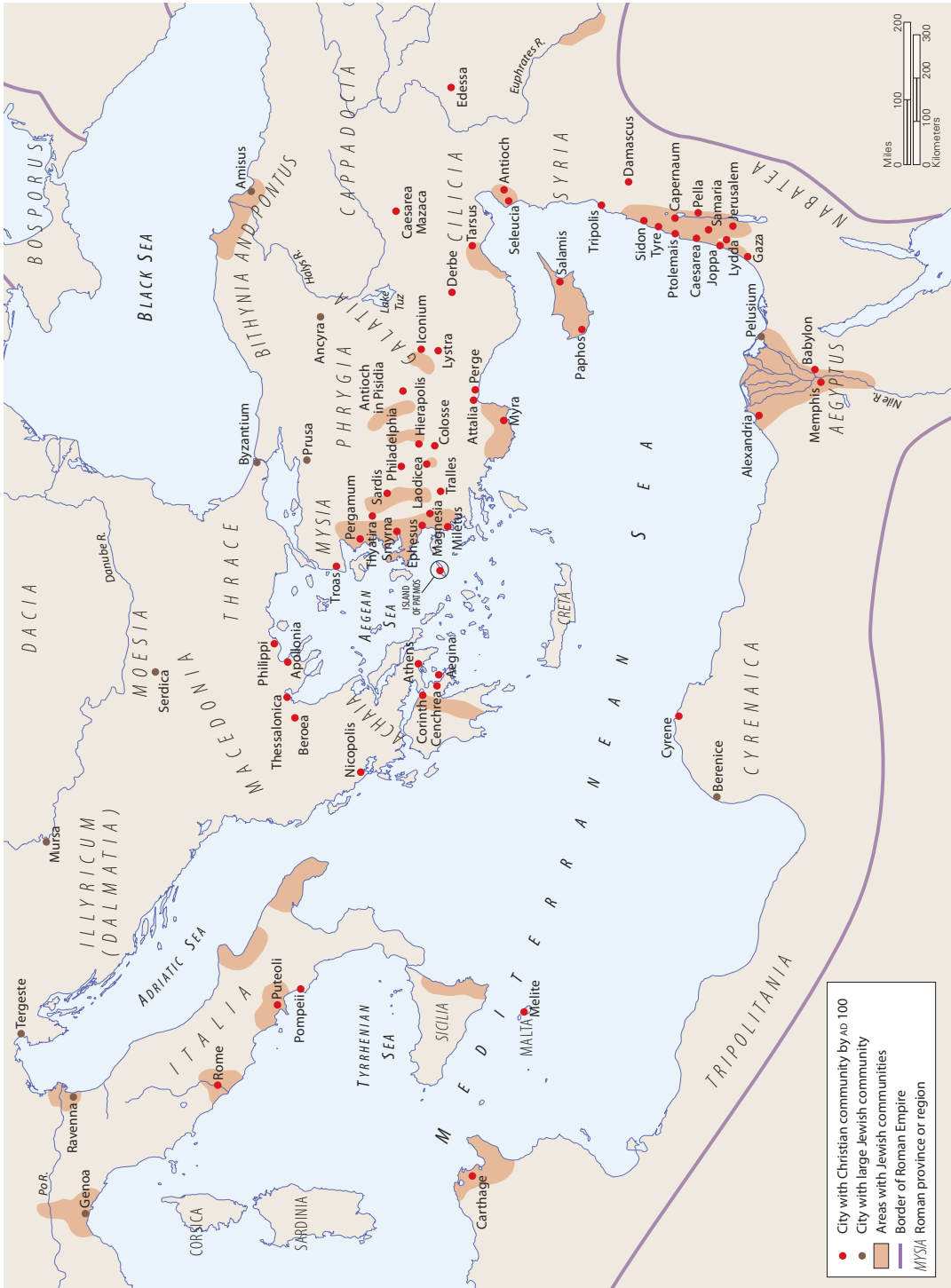


## Timeline of the Apostolic Period



<b>30</b>	The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
<b>34</b>	Stephen, one of seven early deacons, is stoned, becoming the first Christian martyr; Paul is converted.
<b>40</b>	The disciples of Jesus Christ are first called <i>Christians</i> in the city of Antioch in Syria.
<b>44</b>	James, the son of Zebedee and the first apostle to be martyred, is beheaded by Herod Agrippa I.
<b>45</b>	The Gentile church in Antioch sends famine relief to the Jewish church in Jerusalem.
<b>47</b>	The apostle Paul embarks on his first missionary journey, traveling to Cyprus and then Asia Minor.
<b>48</b>	The Jerusalem Council, the first synod in church history, settles whether Gentiles must be circumcised.
<b>50</b>	The apostle Paul begins his second missionary journey, traveling to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece.
<b>53</b>	The apostle Paul begins his third missionary journey, traveling to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece.
<b>58</b>	Arrested in Jerusalem for starting a riot, the apostle Paul is imprisoned in Caesarea for two years.
<b>60</b>	The apostle Paul appeals to Emperor Nero, is taken to Rome, and lives there under house arrest.
<b>64</b>	Emperor Nero initiates the first Roman persecution; the apostles Peter and Paul are soon martyred.
<b>70</b>	The fall of Jerusalem; the Romans stop the Jewish revolt, raze the city, and destroy the temple.
<b>75</b>	Christians are expelled from Jewish synagogues; the rift between Jews and Christians widens.
<b>90</b>	Emperor Domitian persecutes Jews and Christians for refusing to offer incense to the emperor.
<b>95</b>	The apostle John writes Revelation on the island of Patmos, completing the canon of scripture.
<b>96</b>	The apostolic father Clement of Rome writes <i>1 Clement</i> , one of the oldest non-canonical epistles.
<b>97</b>	Timothy, a disciple of the apostle Paul, is killed by a mob while opposing a pagan festival in Ephesus.
<b>100</b>	The apostle John, the last of the apostles, dies; the apostolic father Clement of Rome is martyred.

## Map of the Apostolic Period



Distribution of Christianity by AD 100. Tim Dowley, *Atlas of Christian History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 24–25. Used with permission from 1517 Media.

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## CHAPTER 1: THE CORNERSTONE OF THE CHURCH

*Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*

—EPHESIANS 2:19–22

### THE FULLNESS OF TIME

When the apostle Paul was telling the saints in the Galatian churches what God had done for their salvation, he said, “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4).

What did Paul mean that Christ came at the fullness of time? The expression is a figure. He pictures the time of the history of the world as a cup, the size of which is determined by God. Gradually that cup was being filled as the moments and years of history passed. But a moment came when the cup was filled. That was the moment when Christ came into the world. Because the cup is filled, Christ’s coming is the end of history.

It does not seem that way to us, for two thousand and more years have gone by since the coming of Christ into the world, and two thousand years is a long time. But God does not look at time in the same way we do, and he does not use time in the same way we use it. He created time when he began the work of creation, and he uses time also for his own glory. Because time is a creature, the mere passing of moments means nothing to him. He tells us that “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8). We must try to understand time from God’s viewpoint.

The four thousand years before the coming of Jesus were years in which God made everything on this earth ready for his Son's arrival. Everything had to be ready, not only in the history of the world, but also in the history of the church, the nation of Israel. Making all things ready meant that God had to teach his people what the coming of Christ meant. He did that by revealing increasing amounts of information about the work that Christ would do to defeat the devil and his work. He did this by dividing the history of the Old Testament into dispensations, or periods of time. God marked the end of one dispensation and the beginning of a new one by specific works that gave his people the additional information God wanted them to have.<sup>1</sup>

After the fall of Adam and Eve in paradise, God almost immediately gave these two sinful humans the promise that he would send the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent and his poisonous brood: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Adam and Eve fell into sin, but they fell into the arms of Christ. Although God's promise included all that he would do to save his people, God revealed only a little bit of that promise to Adam and Eve. Gradually, through the four thousand years before Christ came, God revealed more and more of his promise.

The revelation of God's promise in the Old Testament was like the full blossoming of a rosebud. When a rose first appears on the bush, it is only a small bud, although the whole rose is in the bud. But over the course of a few days, the rose gradually grows and unfolds until it is fully opened and all the beauty of the flower is displayed. So it was with God's promise. The "bud" was shown to Adam and Eve in paradise; the full bloom was revealed in Christ's work.

God revealed the truths of his work of salvation in a very simple way. In Galatians 4:1–3, Paul compares the Old Testament church with a child. A child cannot understand things very well, and the church in the Old Testament could not understand things very well either. The church had a childish understanding because God had not yet poured out his Spirit on his church as he did on Pentecost. So God made his truth known to the saints through pictures, or types.

Because a child cannot understand very well a book of Reformed dogmatics, he needs pictures to help him understand. God gave Israel a picture book that would help his people understand his works. Some of these pictures were the tabernacle and later the temple, all the sacrifices made in the tabernacle and temple, and all the feast

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1 Matthew speaks of three of these dispensations in Matthew 1:17, each dispensation limited to fourteen generations.

days. God also gave the people pictures in mighty miracles that he performed: the flood, the passage through the Red Sea on dry ground, the manna from heaven, water from a rock, and the defeat of Israel's enemies when the sun and moon stood still. All these pictures made the believing children of Israel understand better the promise of Christ and increased their longing for Christ to come. These believers knew that God was showing them only pictures, but the pictures were so beautiful that they wanted to see the real work of God in Christ. If you had never been to Yellowstone National Park but saw pictures of the park, you would want to go see it for yourself, because you know that the park is far better than the pictures, even though the pictures are very beautiful. So it was with the Old Testament people of God.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT DISPENSATIONS

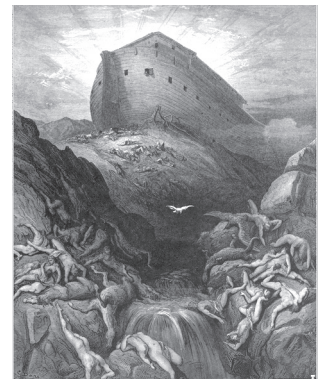
Although the cornerstone of the church was not laid until Christ's death and resurrection, the people in the Old Testament were also part of the church built on the cornerstone and, in fact, built on the same cornerstone and foundation as the church of the new dispensation.

Baptists and dispensationalists deny that the saints in the Old Testament were part of the church. But this denial is a serious mistake. Stephen calls the nation of Israel "the church" in his speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:38). The cornerstone of the church in the Old Testament was also Christ, and he was given to the church by promise.

The six dispensations of the Old Testament are the following.

### ***Dispensation 1: From the Fall to the Flood***

The first dispensation began with the announcement of the promise of Christ to Adam and Eve after they had fallen into sin in paradise, and it ended with the worldwide flood. God revealed that his promise would be fulfilled in the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). That is, his promise would be someone born in the generations of Adam and Eve who would destroy the devil's power. This seed of the woman is Jesus Christ.



A dove is sent forth from the Ark

### ***Dispensation 2: From the Flood to Abraham***

The second dispensation began when God sent the great flood on a world that had become ripe for judgment, while at the same time saving Noah and his family in the

ark. He revealed by the flood that when his promise would be fulfilled, God would destroy the wicked world that had become as wicked as it could possibly be, but he would save his church from the world, of which baptism would later be a sign (1 Pet. 3:20–21). The flood also revealed that salvation would include the covenant that God would make with the whole creation, so that the creation that was under the curse would also be saved and made new. God gave the rainbow as a sign of this promise (Gen. 9:8–17).

### ***Dispensation 3: From Abraham to the Exodus***

The third dispensation began with the call of Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and ended with the exodus of Israel from Egypt. It was a dispensation in which God revealed a number of things about his promise. He revealed that the content of the



Abraham journeys into the land of Canaan

promise was a covenant that would be a personal relationship between God and his people in which God and his people would be friends. He revealed that his covenant would be established by God alone without man's help, permission, or agreement (Gen. 15). God revealed that his covenant would be established with his people and their generations (17:7), but that these generations would be gathered from both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 5–6). This covenant, God said, would

be made with his people only, because he would send the Messiah, the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15; Gal. 3:16). God told Abraham that part of the treasures of that covenant would be the land of Canaan for his possession, which was a picture of heaven. Such a covenant also included a prophecy from God that these people would have to be slaves in the land of Egypt (Gen. 15:14), a picture of the slavery of sin from which Christ saves his church. This was a very important dispensation.



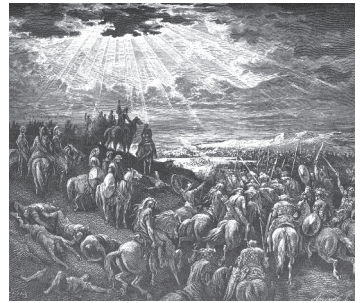
Moses comes down from Mount Sinai

### ***Dispensation 4: From the Exodus to the Conquest***

The fourth dispensation began with the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt by signs and wonders, and it ended with the inheritance of the land of Canaan, under the leadership of Moses and Joshua. It too was a dispensation in which God revealed much concerning his promise. He revealed that the inheritance of Canaan was only a picture



of the real inheritance, which was a new heavens and a new earth (Heb. 11:10, 13–16). He also reminded his people that before he would take them to heaven, they would have to be in this world for a long time; that this world is like a desert, without spiritual food and spiritual water; and that he would take care of them by protecting them from many enemies and by providing them with the spiritual food and water they needed (1 Cor. 10:1–4). God also showed them that there would always be wicked among them who would greatly distress them (vv. 5–14). He told them that they would be under the law that came to them from Sinai, but that the Messiah would save them by fulfilling the demands of the law for his people, for they could not keep the law by their own power. God would make it possible for them to keep the law (Gal. 3:23–25; Heb. 8:10–12). He also said that the covenant he would establish with them would be given to them by a mighty warrior named Joshua who would fight for them and defeat all their enemies. The name *Joshua* is Hebrew for Jesus.



The sun stands still for Joshua

### ***Dispensation 5: From the Conquest to David***

The fifth dispensation started with the conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua and lasted until the reign of David. During this period, which included the time of the judges and the rule of Saul, God showed Israel that they could never inherit the real promised land of heaven without a king. Yet the king who would make it possible for them to inherit heaven would not be a king of their choice, like Saul—who was a king like the other nations had—but a king God would give, who really is our Lord Jesus Christ, pictured in David (Ps. 89:19–37).

### ***Dispensation 6: From David to the Captivity***

The sixth dispensation extended from the reign of David and Solomon through the Babylonian captivity. It made clear that God’s covenant with his people would be in the form of a kingdom, in which Christ would be king. It would be a kingdom of righteousness and peace in which all sin would be taken away. It would be a kingdom of great heavenly riches as in Solomon’s days, but it would be ruled by one much wiser than Solomon could ever be. And it would be a kingdom in which God would be acknowledged as worthy of all praise and glory.

Although God did not reveal anything more during this dispensation that began with David’s rule, he did show his people that all the types and shadows of the Old



The prophet Amos

Testament were not the real blessedness of the covenant. The types and shadows disappeared, one by one, until they all were gone and God's people found themselves in Babylon, where they could no longer sing the songs of Zion (Ps. 137).

After four hundred years when silence settled over the whole land of Canaan and God did not speak to his people anymore, the fullness of time had come. There was nothing more for God to say. He had described in detail what his promise included. It was a treasure chest of wonderful blessings. But God had shown too that all that his people tried to do on their own ended in disaster, and so God himself had to fulfill his promise. This he did when he sent forth his Son.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT DISPENSATION

At the end of all these years of Old Testament types, Christ came as the fulfillment of all that God had promised. With our Lord's birth the new dispensation began. It is the dispensation of the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of our Lord's promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20).

This dispensation is the dispensation of the coming of Christ because he comes to his church by his word and Spirit; he comes by his Spirit to lead the church into all truth (John 16:13); he comes when we die in order to take us to heaven (vv. 14:1-4); he comes upon the clouds of heaven at the end of time to finish his work (Matt. 24:30).

Christ's coming is the end of all these dispensations, but it is also the end of the world. That Christ's coming is the end of the world is difficult for us to see, for Christ was born of Mary in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago. How then can Christ's birth be considered the end of the world?<sup>2</sup>

The concept is hard for us to understand because we are so tied up by the chains of time that we cannot think of things from God's point of view. God does not look at time as the passing of minutes, hours, days, and years, but he looks at it entirely as a means to accomplish his own purpose to glorify himself in Christ. God looks at time from the viewpoint of what he does in time.

Peter gives us an idea of how God looks at time when he says, "But, beloved, be

<sup>2</sup> The word "end," used in this sense, refers to a purpose that is accomplished. The end of a war is the accomplishment of the defeat of the enemy.



not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8). In God’s works the mere passing of one day or of a thousand years means nothing; the important thing is what happens in time. What difference does it make to God whether what he does takes a day (the creation of the rainbow) or a year (the time Noah and his family were in the ark) or forty years (the time Israel was in the wilderness) or four thousand years (the time it took for God to teach his people everything they had to know about his covenant) or more than two thousand years (to bring the world to an end through the coming of Christ)?

The prophets spoke of the “day of the LORD” as the day of the coming of Christ (Joel 2:1–2, 28–32; Acts 2:16–21). But although it became evident that the day of the coming of Christ would be a period of many, many years, the prophets spoke of it as a “day.” They did this because, regardless of whatever length of time it took for Christ to come and to finish his work, the “day” of the Lord was the climax and fulfillment of all God had said he would do.

## **THE COMING OF CHRIST**

The coming of Christ in the New Testament dispensation is the laying of the cornerstone of the church (Eph. 2:19–22). The church is a temple, and Christ is the cornerstone.

In ancient times the cornerstone was an extremely important part of a building. The foundation began with the cornerstone; therefore, builders spent a great deal of time looking for the proper one and preparing it. The cornerstone had to have an outside angle of ninety degrees and a level, flat top. If the cornerstone was right, the walls attached to it were square, and the walls were level if the top of the stone was level. So Christ, the first in God’s counsel in the building of his church, determines the shape and perfection of the church.

The Bible speaks of the one coming of Christ the cornerstone in many different ways. These ways include the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the death of believers in every age, and the coming of Christ at the end of time.

### ***The Birth of Christ***

Christ came when he was born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem. That coming included all the work that Christ did here on earth in his incarnation. He grew up,

began his public ministry, preached and worked miracles, gave himself up to be a captive of the Jews, suffered and died on the cross for the sins of his people, rose again from Joseph's grave, and went back to glory. All that was the coming of Christ (John 1:11). The purpose of this part of Christ's coming was specifically to crush the head of Satan by smashing his power, which he did on the cross.

God's works are always marvelous. So it was with the laying of the cornerstone. The cornerstone was laid by means of its rejection by those who claimed to be builders of God's house. But in so doing, they rejected the only cornerstone on which the house could be built. God used their very rejection (the cross) to lay the cornerstone (Isa. 28:16; Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7–8).

### ***The Outpouring of the Spirit***

What happened on Pentecost was also the coming of Christ. In his sermon to his disciples on the very eve of his crucifixion, Christ told his disciples that he would not leave them comfortless but would come to them (John 14:16–18, 28). Christ comes from heaven to his church when he sends his Spirit to the church, for he is with the church by means of his word and Spirit.

### ***The Death of Believers***

Furthermore, Jesus speaks of the death of believers as his coming. In John 14:1–4, he tells the church that after his death and resurrection he is going away to prepare a place for them in his Father's house. When that place is ready for each saint, Christ will come again to take his saint to glory. Christ himself has prepared each saint for his place. The saint is ready to go home at the same time that his place is ready in the Father's house. There Christ's people will be with him. Death is a part of the gathering of the church. Christ does not gather his church to make his church to live in the world forever. He comes to lead his saints into the heavenly land of rest. In every respect, the moment of death for a believer is the end of the world for him.

### ***The End of Time***

The coming of Christ at the end of time is final. He comes in judgment to destroy all the wicked and Satan and his devils. He comes to take his whole church to glory, for then all God's people will have been born and saved. God's purpose with the whole creation and all history will be accomplished, and there is no reason why the world should continue. It would be like coming to the end of a book but trying to continue

to read. There is no more to read. The world comes to an end. There is no more to be done.

## THE LAYING OF THE CORNERSTONE

The work that our Lord performed is therefore the cornerstone for the entire Old Testament and the New Testament church. The cornerstone of the church was laid by Christ's suffering and death. He bore the curse of sin, which was rightfully ours; he went to hell in our place; he was obedient to his God in all respects, even when hell burned him with its hottest fires; and he fulfilled the law by his obedience. In this way he made it possible for us to be saved, for we do not have to do anything to atone for our sins and deliver ourselves from them. The church could now be built on a solid foundation.

Our Lord arose from the dead in power. He did not come from the grave by means of the door through which his body had been carried; but he broke a new door from the grave that opens in heaven. Throughout all history, the grave was the door to hell. But it could not be a door to hell for Christ, for he had already been to hell and had broken hell's power. He broke out of the grave through a new door to heaven that he had made through his work. That door becomes the door to heaven for all those for whom he died.

Now Christ is exalted in the highest heavens. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to him. He holds the reins of the universe and of the heavenly creation in his hands. God has given him the power to do all the things that God had determined in his counsel to do. Our Lord from heaven saves his church and takes his church into heaven with him. He also rules over all things so that "all things work together for good, to them that love God and are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

So is the cornerstone laid on which the foundation and the temple of the church is built.

4. To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious,
5. Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.
6. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.

7. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,
8. And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.
9. But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people: that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Pet. 2:4–9)