THE EQUIP INSTITUTE
Theme: Christian Heritage
Topic: The Spread of the Faith (100-324 AD)
3rd Semester / Spring 2024

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The topic tonight is the period from 100 to 324 AD. The theme is the spread of the faith.

The Roman Empire in the 2nd Century

During the earliest days of Christian history, the Roman Empire was the only real superpower in the world. Geographically, the empire encompassed almost the entire Mediterranean region and included most of Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa. Linguistically, although dozens of languages were spoken in the empire, the two official languages were Latin (West) and Greek (East). By the 2nd century, Roman religion centered upon emperor worship but remained polytheistic and syncretistic; the gods of conquered peoples were incorporated into the state religion. The cultural centers of the empire were the imperial cities, which enjoyed considerable autonomy as long as they paid taxes and were loyal to Caesar.

Church Life in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries

By the turn of the 2nd century, the church was primarily a gentile movement. The earliest centers of Christian growth were the cities. Though critics claimed Christianity was a religion for women and slaves, the evidence indicates the early church was fairly socioeconomically diverse. By the early 2nd century, many churches were setting apart special buildings for corporate worship gatherings; typically houses that had been bequeathed to the congregation. When churches gathered for worship, they sang hymns, recited creedal statements, prayed, read the Scriptures, listened to teaching from a biblical text, and celebrated the Lord's Supper.

Elders or bishops led local churches, though there was debate as to whether a church should have one bishop or a plurality of bishops. **Clement of Rome** (died ca. 100) argued for a plurality of bishops who could share shepherding responsibilities. **Ignatius of Antioch** (died ca.

110–115) argued for a single bishop. He feared plurality leads to factions, while one man can preserve the church's unity. All bishops were men, though in many churches both men and women served as deacons. By the 3rd century, bishops and elders were considered two different positions. Elders, increasingly called priests, provided pastoral care to particular congregations. Like the first-century apostles, bishops exercised oversight over all the churches in a particular city. The most important bishops served in the key imperial cities such as Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Over time, bishops exercised authority over other bishops in smaller cities and rural areas.

By the 2nd century, church membership had been divided into a two-step process: catechesis and baptism. Those who came to faith in Christ became catechumens who were instructed (catechized) in basic Christian doctrine and ethics, often for a period of at least a year. After the catechesis period came to an end, catechumens were baptized by immersion, typically at sunrise on Easter Sunday. Following their baptism, the new church members celebrated their first communion, which in the early 2nd century was a full meal following the worship gathering. By the end of the 2nd century, the Lord's Supper had been separated from a meal and incorporated into the worship gathering. By the turn of the 3rd century, some terminally ill infants were being baptized on the presumption that baptism would guarantee their salvation. In Christian families, infant baptism became increasingly popular over the next three centuries, though adult converts were still baptized by immersion.

There was no comprehensive missions strategy; typically, the faith simply spread with merchants, soldiers, and immigration. Beginning in the 3rd century, some individuals began to sense a special calling to spread Christianity to unreached places. Typically, the bishop would give his blessing to this calling and send the missionary out with his endorsement. **Gregory Thaumaturgus** (210–265) was a gifted evangelist who allegedly performed miracles and established the first permanent Christian witness in Cappadocia, a region in eastern Turkey that became home to several important Christian leaders in the 4th century.

Defining and Defending the Faith

By the 2nd century, several heresies were beginning to threaten the church. A **heresy** is a theological error that

arises from within the church and threatens a core teaching about God, Jesus Christ, or salvation. Heresy is damnably incorrect doctrine. Other errors weren't necessarily damnable but were still spiritually dangerous. Such beliefs were **heterodox** rather than heretical. One notable heterodox group were the Montanists, a 2nd century sect that claimed the gift of prophecy and imposed legalistic moral requirements on all members. When heresy or heterodoxy threatened the faith, God would raise up key thinkers to clarify what the church had believed since the time of the apostles. We call these thinkers the Church Fathers and their beliefs **orthodoxy**.

The most influential heresy was Gnosticism, an umbrella term used to describe hundreds of pagan religions in the second and third centuries. Gnostics believed that the spiritual is good and the material is bad, the physical world was created by an evil or ignorant being, and salvation comes through believing a secret oral tradition that had been passed down by the apostles. **Irenaeus of Lyons** (ca. 130–200) argued against the Gnostic belief in a secret oral tradition, countering that there was a public oral tradition that was consistent with the Scriptures and that was known to the whole church. Irenaeus also argued that Jesus had "recapitulated" or reenacted Adam's history, but without sin.

Other Church Fathers made key contributions to the faith. **Tertullian of Carthage** (ca. 160–220) agreed with Irenaeus that there was a public oral tradition that dated to the time of the apostles. In response to those who argued the Son or Spirit weren't fully divine, he coined the Latin term *trinitas* to explain God's triune nature. Tertullian was very pessimistic about Roman culture, especially traditional pagan philosophy, famous asking "what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" **Justin Martyr** (ca. 100–165) and **Clement of Alexandria** (ca. 150–215) took a more optimistic view of philosophy, arguing that God had communicated real truth through the greatest Greek philosophers; they even hinted that some of them (particularly Plato) might have even been saved as "pre-Christians." They also were gifted apologists and evangelists who provided rational arguments for the Christian faith against Jewish and pagan critics.

Clement's student **Origen of Alexandria** (185–254) straddled the fence between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. He defended the faith against critics and wrote the first systematic theology. But he also preferred allegorical

interpretations of the OT over literal interpretations, he argued that human souls preexisted in heaven before they were placed in bodies at birth, and he at least hoped that all rational beings, including the demons, would eventually be saved. Though his views on preexistent souls and universal salvation would be rejected by the church, his allegorical interpretation greatly influenced the medieval church.

The Canon of Scripture

Marcion (ca. 85–160) argued the God of the OT was wrathful and only loved Jews, while the God of the NT was merciful and loved all people. He rejected the OT completely and argued Jesus wasn't really a Jew. Marcion circulated his own canon of Scripture that rejected all the NT writings except the letters of Paul and an edited version of Luke's Gospel. Marcion's anti-Semitic canon created the need for Christian leaders to determine which NT books seemed to be inspired in the same way as the OT Scriptures.

By the 2nd century, Christians agreed on the core of the NT canon. All agreed there are only four true Gospels, even though the 2nd century witnessed a proliferation of "Gospels" written from a Gnostic perspective. All agreed that the letters of Paul are inspired, though the Church Fathers debated whether Paul wrote Hebrews. All agreed Luke wrote Acts, which is inspired. But some of the other books weren't universally accepted, particularly the non-Pauline epistles and Revelation. Furthermore, some books sounded similar to the NT writings, especially the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, both of which date to the turn of the 2nd century.

There was no formal vote about which books were inspired and which weren't, but several criteria became important in the canonization process:

> **Apostolicity** – only books written by apostles or those closely associated with apostles were Scripture
>
> **Catholicity** – only books widely accepted by most mainstream Christians were Scripture
>
> **Orthodoxy** – only books that reflected the mainstream beliefs of orthodox Christians were Scripture

The canon was settled by the 3rd century, though it wasn't until the 4th century that the debate completed ended.

Persecution

During the 1st century, persecution was sporadic, was never empire-wide, and was typically the result of mob violence. By the early 2nd century, Christianity was an illegal sect that was punishable by death. The scope and ferocity of persecution increased from generation to generation until the legalization of Christianity in 313.

In 111, Emperor Trajan argued that Christians shouldn't be sought out, but Christians should be executed if they refused to worship Caesar. Around 115, **Ignatius of Antioch** was martyred in Rome. In 155, **Polycarp of Smyrna** was martyred. When Polycarp was led into the coliseum and commanded to renounce Christ, he responded, "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" **Justin Martyr** was executed in 165 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, who was a harsh enemy of Christianity.

By the turn of the 3rd century, persecution was becoming more common. Many emperors wanted to return Rome to its former glory, seeing Christianity as a threat to traditional Roman religion and values. New converts were tortured and executed. The most famous martyr was **Vibia Perpetua**, who was executed in the coliseum in 202. In 249, Emperor Decius decreed that all citizens must offer sacrifices to a statue of Caesar. All who complied received certificates; after a grace period, anyone caught without a certificate was tortured or killed. Some Christians purchased certificates on the black market. Many Christians offered the sacrifices and worshiped Caesar.

After the persecution ended in 249, many who had offered sacrifices applied to rejoin their churches. They claimed they privately still worshiped Christ, and that their worship of Caesar was merely outward and insincere. Some church leaders, such as **Cornelius of Rome**, argued that these "lapsed" believers should be allowed back into church membership if they sincerely repented. **Novatian** disagreed, arguing the lapsed had abandoned Christ and forfeited their salvation. Novatian led a breakaway movement (the Novationists) that claimed to be the true church. **Cyprian of Carthage** responded "he cannot have God as his Father who doesn't have the church as his mother" and "there is no salvation outside the church." During the Middle Ages, the writings of Cyprian would be

used to argue that the Catholic Church is the institutional embodiment of the universal church.

Persecution affected Christians in many ways. First, it forced them to worship in hiding; a popular place was the catacombs under the major Roman cities. Second, it led to a great reverence for martyrs that sometimes bordered on worship. Many Christians collected relics that were in some way tied to a martyr, while others prayed to martyrs. Third, and most important, persecution led to growth. No matter how bad persecution became, the church continued to grow—historians estimate that by 300, between twenty-five and forty percent of the Roman Empire had become Christian. Tertullian argued that, despite efforts to destroy the church, "the blood of the martyrs is seed."

The Legalization of Christianity

In 284, Diocletian became emperor. The empire was rapidly declining, and two consecutive Caesars had been assassinated prior to Diocletian. In 293, Diocletian divided the empire into a tetrarchy. Diocletian remained the primary ruler, but he appointed three generals to help him rule. Diocletian also instituted the worst persecution of the church to date, ordering that all Christians be systematically executed. He also seized Christian property for the state. His successor, Galerius, succeeded in almost wiping out Christianity in North Africa.

After Diocletian stepped down for health reasons in 306, Constantine became one of the members of the tetrarchy. Constantine refused to continue to persecute the Christians in the area of the empire he controlled. Perhaps he was lenient because his half-sister was a Christian. Maybe he believed that Christianity was the way of the future. Whatever his reasons, Constantine intentionally cultivated loyalty from the Christians at the very time he began moving to consolidate imperial rule back into the hands of a single emperor.

In 312, Constantine launched an invasion of Rome. He met his rival Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, about five miles North of Rome. In the ensuing battle, Constantine defeated Maxentius and drowned thousands of his soldiers in the Tiber River. According to the early church historian **Eusebius of Caesarea**, the day before the battle Constantine received a vision from the Christian God commanding him to conquer in the sign of Christ and his

cross. In response to the vision, Constantine had the Chi-Rho symbol put on his soldiers' shields. Constantine marched into Rome and was declared the sole emperor of the western half of the empire.

In 313, Constantine reached an accord with Licinius, the emperor of the eastern half of the empire. The Edict of Milan included three provisions: Constantine and Licinius wouldn't go to war with each other, Licinius would marry Constantine's half-sister, and Christianity would be granted legalized status and all confiscated property would be returned to the church. Despite the agreement in Milan, Licinius and Constantine battled for full control of the Roman Empire off and on for a decade until Constantine finally became sole emperor in 324.

A Christian Emperor?

After the Edict of Milan, Constantine continued to publicly favor Christianity. Under his leadership, destroyed churches were rebuilt and Christian clergy were exempted from paying taxes. In 330, Constantine relocated his throne to Constantinople, which was meant to be both the new Rome and a Christian city. Despite his partiality toward Christianity, Constantine maintained strong ties to traditional paganism. For example, he retained the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, which made him the official high priest of the state pagan religion. The first coins he issued contained images of pagan gods. When he declared the first day of the week a public holiday in 321, he named it in honor of the sun rather than the Christian God. The sun was the sign of Apollo. Many scholars speculate that perhaps Constantine conflated the Christian God with Apollo, assuming they were two ways to speak of the same deity.

Despite the ambiguities surrounding his Christian commitment, Constantine played a crucial role in legalizing Christianity and putting it on the road to becoming the official imperial religion. Like earlier emperors, Constantine wanted to restore Rome's ancient glory; unlike his predecessors, Constantine wanted to base this renewal upon Christianity rather than paganism. Constantine did receive baptism near the end of his life, which may have indicated a final break with traditional paganism as well as his personal confidence in the superiority of the Christian faith. It's perhaps best to think of Constantine as one who, for whatever reasons, was favorable to Christianity during his reign and perhaps finally embraced the faith at the end of his life.