**Maranatha Bible Church 2020**

**Equipping Hour: Church History II (Pre-Christ – Early 4th Century)**

**Week 1: All About Timing (Gal. 4:4)**

**Introduction**

This six week Equipping Hour class not only builds upon the foundation from Church History I but also takes a deeper look into the various times of church history. We will begin before Christ came and end at the Reformation.

**Week 1: All About Timing (Pre-Christ – Early 4th Century)**

* Paul, in his earliest letter to the churches in Galatia, wrote “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son.” (Galatians 4:4a). We are going to explore the ancient Roman/Greek world and see just how God set the stage for the coming of Christ and the spread of the gospel.

**Week 2: The Church, Government, Compromise and Heresy Part 1 (Early 4th Century – 590 AD)**

* After nearly 300 years of unrest, torment and persecution, the church finds rest through merging with the Roman government.
* Many heresy’s arise from inside the church and are answered by some of the most influential men in all of church history.

**Week 3: The Church, Government, Compromise and Heresy Part 2 (Early 4th Century – 590 AD)**

* We are going to continue looking at the movements which shaped history during this time and how the church (and individual Christians) reacted.

**Week 4: The Start of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Islamic Religion (590-1054)**

* With the appointment of Gregory as the Bishop of Rome in 590, the RCC officially becomes institutionalized. Much of the RCC heretical teachings come from Gregory.
* A seemingly small disagreement in 867 AD becomes the spark with will ultimately destroy the unity of the RCC.
* With all the confusion and compromise in the RCC, Islam takes converts away from the RCC and spreads rapidly throughout the Middle East, North Africa and much of Europe.

**Week 5: The Church Splits and Crusades Begin (1054 AD – 1291 AD)**

* Eastern and Western churches (Greek and Latin respectively) had been in a declining relationship for many years starting with the addition to the Nicene Creed.
* These events have been called the Great Schism between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

**Week 6: The Decline of the Middle Ages (1291 AD – 1517 AD)**

* Roman Catholic Church (RCC) splits, multiple Popes at the same time and the dawning of Luther’s future Reformation Age begins to take root.

**Introduction**

Christ’s coming at the time and place He did was not an accident or happen outside the purposed and specific will of God. As Paul wrote in **Galatians 4:4a**, it was when the *fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son.* In this weeks study we are going to look at what *the fullness of time* means and how the world was in the perfect situation for Christ’s coming.

We will also look at some of the early Apostolic Fathers and their significance for us today. Furthermore, we will discuss how and why the church had do develop doctrinal clarity and the ability to defend proper doctrine through the use of apologetics. Lastly, we will discuss the type of persecution which came upon the early church and how they combatted it.

**Before the Early Church**

1. Late 330’s BC, Alexander the Great conquers Israel and takes control from the Persian Empire who had conquered the Babylonians for control about 200 years previous.
   1. If you remember back to Daniel 1:21 “And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.”
      1. Cyrus was the Persian King who conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to go back and rebuild their temple and Jerusalem.
   2. It was the Babylonians (732 BC – 539 BC)…the Persians (539 BC – 332 BC)…the Greeks (332 BC – 37 BC) and then in 37 BC – 324 AD the Romans.
2. The greatest impact, which is still felt today, is that of Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire.
   1. Unlike all other conquerors before him, Alexander wanted to make everyone Greek. It was not so much about control as it was about uniting the world under one banner.
      1. This is what is referred to in the Bible as being Hellenistic. It was a way of taking some Greek elements and combining them with other cultures elements, thus forming a new Greek society.
         1. This was upsetting to the Jews as they had very little oversight under the Persians and were allowed to worship as they saw fit. Now they were expected to blend their One God with the gods of the Greeks.
         2. As one author puts it “In a way, the history of Palestine from the time of Alexander’s conquest to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE may be seen as the constant struggle between Hellenizing pressures on the one hand and Jewish faithfulness to their God and their traditions on the other.”[[1]](#footnote-1)
            1. Taking note of this, it is quite easy to see why the Jews were very hesitant, reluctant and combative when Jesus came with a *new message*.
            2. The Jews had been through this before and under Roman rule they were fairly autonomous with regards to their worship. They did not want to mix in this *new* Christian God.
3. In 167 BC – 142 BC, the Orthodox Jews were done with both the Greek culture being forced upon them and also with their fellow Jews who had become “Hellenized.”
   1. “The year is 167 BCE and the horrible persecution of Judaism by the Greeks is in full swing. The Greek troops show up in the town of Modi'in (a site west of Jerusalem which you can visit today off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway) and demand that the Jews there sacrifice a pig to the Greek gods. The elder of the town, Mattathias, who is a kohen, that is of the priestly class, refuses.”[[2]](#footnote-2)
   2. We are told in 1 Maccabees 2:19-22 “Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers...We will not obey the king's word by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left.”
   3. Unfortunately, there were Hellenized Jews in the town and one hastily agreed to sacrifice a pig to the Greek gods. Mattathias stabs him (and the Greek official) to death before he could sacrifice the pig. He then says "Follow me, all of you who are for God's law and stand by the covenant" 1 Maccabees 2:27.
   4. There were roughly 12,000 men, including his five sons, who chose to follow him. They bravely fought against a Greek army over twice their size and were able to make it to Jerusalem where they secured the Temple.
      1. This battle, to regain the Temple, lasted 3 years and was a bloody massacre on both sides.
      2. “They find the Temple defiled and turned into a pagan sanctuary, where pigs are sacrificed on the altar. When they re-enter the Temple, the first thing they do is try to light a make-shift menorah (as the real gold one had been melted down by the Greeks) but only one vial of pure lamp oil with the special seal is discovered. They use this vial to light the menorah and miraculously it stays lit for eight days, by which time fresh pure oil has been pressed and delivered to the Temple.
         1. The Maccabees then purify the Temple and rededicate it on the 25th of Kislev, which is the date on the Hebrew calendar when we begin to celebrate the eight days of Chanukah. (The Hebrew word Chanukah means "dedication" or "inauguration.")
         2. The rededication of the Temple does not end the fight however. A Greek garrison remained stationed in Jerusalem in the Acra fortress and the Greek armies besiege Jerusalem and attempt to re-conquer the City. More battles will be fought before the conflict finally ends.
         3. It's not until 142 BCE, during the reign of Seleucid monarch Demitrius, that the Greeks finally have enough of the fighting and sign a peace treaty with Simon, the last survivor of the five sons of Mattathias.”[[3]](#footnote-3)
4. After the Maccabean revolt, one of the sons, Simon, started what became known as the Hasmonean Dynasty. This dynasty lasts for 103 years and is marked by great territorial expansion but also by a terrible moral and religious decline.
   1. They should not have been kings in the first place and then became corrupted by their own power.
5. Simon’s son starts to forcibly convert people to Judaism. One of the peoples that are forcibly converted at this time are the Idumeans (Edomites). And this error costs the Jews dearly.
   1. One of the Idumean families that is forcibly converted will become very significant for its role in the drama of Israel some years later when the Romans invade.
   2. A descendant of this family, Herod the Great, will be appointed Jewish king and he will be a schizophrenic ruler. He will murder the High Priest, some 45 members of the Jewish Supreme Court and several members of his own family.
   3. He also embarks on a series of fantastic building projects that will include the city of Caesarea, the fortress at Masada and a total re-building of the Temple.
6. In 63 BC, the final two rulers (brothers who both want to be king) of the Hasmonean Dynasty decide to call in Rome to settle their dispute.
   1. The Roman General, Pompey the Great, came and took Jerusalem by force and Israel became a client state of Rome until its reinstatement in 1948.
7. After some struggle for who was going to rule Israel, Herod was appointed by Rome, thus ending the Hasmonean Dynasty and beginning the Herodian Dynasty in 34 BC.
   1. Herod was given the title *King of Judea or King of the Jews* by the Roman Senate.
   2. The same time, Mark Antony (Roman General and politician) has relations with Cleopatra (Egypt). Their saga, along with the other general Octavius, would end in bloodshed and Octavius being named Rome’s sole Emperor. He would reign from 27 BC – 14 AD.
      1. In 27 BC, he gave himself the title *Augustus*, meaning “the illustrious one,” essentially bringing on himself religious deity.
   3. It was during the reign of Octavius that Rome began again to enlarge her borders. Places like modern day Greece and Turkey were now under his control. At his death, he said “I found Rome in clay but left her in marble for you all.”
      1. **This would be key in the spreading of the gospel. These places were already “Hellenized” by Alexander the Great and now they were united by the Roman Empire. The road system was established and trade was encouraged.**
      2. **There were vibrant cities with booming economies and profitable industry.**
   4. Speaking of Octavius “Through a peaceful and mild rule he gave to the world a period of unprecedented outward calm and to his huge empire a permanent organization which afterwards facilitated the spread of Christianity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
   5. For over 100 years before Octavius gained independent power, the area had known far too much civil war. With his reign, he brought submission through power, but also peace through profit.
8. This is the world that Jesus was born into. Herod the Great is fully aligned with Rome but ruling over Jerusalem. Octavius, who is called Augustus, is enjoying unfettered control over the most powerful empire which may have ever existed.
   1. The Jews were in factions, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Hellenists and Samarians. They were constantly struggling for their own rights and to be left alone from Rome.

**Key Highlights Which Made This Time Unique:**

1. Universal Roman Law called for all men to be under one law and united through citizenship.
   1. This was accomplished by Augustus and had never been done, even under Alexander the Great.
2. Free and encouraged movement around the empire.
3. The road system
4. Universal language
5. Everyone was a worshipper of various gods

None of these existed at one time in all of human history before the coming of Christ. This truly was *the fullness of time.*

**The Birth of Christ**

1. All that we just covered was *the fullness of time.* The nation of Israel was caught between orthodoxy, Hellenists and zealots who desired to overthrow the government. Even when all seemed to be out of control, God was certainly working in the midst.
2. Luke 2:1-2 “Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”
3. Luke records for us, not a timeline of the birth of Christ, but the *timing* of His birth. This is the same Augustus who took over when Mark Antony killed himself and Cleopatra was seemingly poisoned.
4. God used Augustus to make sure that **Micah 5:2** was fulfilled and Christ was born in Bethlehem.
5. But, Christ’s birth is not the birth of the church. Christ said that He would build His church (**Matt. 16:18**). The church officially began on the day of Pentecost.

**Book of Acts**

1. We spent some time last Church History class talking about the church in the book of Acts. You can go back and read those notes for a fuller view of the church’s beginnings.
2. Aside from the book of Revelation, all the books of the Bible we have in our hands were written before 70 AD. In April of that year, Rome invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The way the temple is today in Jerusalem is the way it was left in 70 AD.
   1. The reason this is a monumental event in the life of the church is that now Judaism and Christianity were finally severed. Before this, Christianity was looked at as an appendage of Judaism, now it would have stand on its own.

**Apostolic Fathers, Their Writings and Subsequent Influence**

“By the end of the first century, the death of the apostles produced a leadership vacuum in the church. Who had the authority to lead the believers? Who would guide and guard this flourishing new Christian faith? A group generally called the Church Fathers filled the gap.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. The early church fathers cover a wide range of time and have varying importance.
   1. The Apostolic Fathers were around from 95-150 AD.
      1. The apostolic fathers were not known for writing anything theologically profound but were more devotional and encouraging.
   2. **Clement of Rome (30-100 AD)** is known for his writing to the Corinthian church 40 years after Paul wrote his letter. He encouraged him in similar ways as Paul did and he quoted the Old Testament extensively as well as several of Paul’s other letters.
      1. He also was instrumental in forming and establishing church leadership. He focused on the church submitting to the eldership because he believed they received their authority from the apostles who received their authority from Christ.
         1. Though he did not intend, this idea of apostolic succession would be abused by the Roman Catholic Church centuries later.
   3. **Ignatius (50-117 AD)** was the bishop of Syria but was martyred in Rome for sharing his testimony of faith. He was a direct disciple of the apostle John.
      1. Because of his martyrdom, Ignatius is considered a giant among the early Church Fathers. As he made his way to Rome for execution, he visited several cities along the way. His subsequent letters to these seven churches, written about A.D. 110, stressed the twin themes of heresy and unity.
         1. The heresy he addressed was an early form of Gnostic teaching, which denied the full humanity of Jesus. Thus Ignatius argued that the best defense against such heresy and the foremost guarantee of unity was the bishop.
      2. When he called on unity *to* the bishop, he laid the foundation for what would eventually take away the authority from the elders and deacons of the local church.
   4. **Polycarp (died 155 AD)[[6]](#footnote-6)** was also a disciple of the apostle John and a bishop of the church in Smyrna.
      1. Polycarp wrote a most significant letter to the church at Philippi about A.D. 110. The value of this letter with its copious Old Testament quotations is its dependence on many of the circulating books of the New Testament, especially those written by Paul.
         1. This letter shows that the early second-century church regarded the New Testament books as authoritative in calling Christians to holy living.
      2. Polycarp’s martyrdom at age eighty-six in A.D. 155 remains one of the great narratives of the early church. At his trial he did nothing to provoke his accusers but passionately defended Jesus Christ as his Lord. He died at the fiery stake, giving praise to his Lord. Venerated for centuries as a model martyr, Polycarp illustrates the truth stated by the apologist Tertullian later that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.”

**Heresy and the Church’s Response**

1. The Apologists were around from 150-300 AD and wrote to defend the faith and counter errors that were rising up.
   1. **Justin Martyr** **(100-165)** who was beheaded in Rome with six others for refusing to recant their faith.
   2. **Irenaeus** **(135-202)** who was the first writer after the New Testament to write in-depth on Scriptural authority. He uses Scripture to exhort believers to defend the faith using Scripture.
      1. He references all but 4 New Testament books and also shows Jesus as the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies.
2. The major heresy which came upon the church was **Gnosticism**.
   1. **Gnosticism** believed that all matter was evil and the material and immaterial world were completely separate. This means they believed that Jesus only appeared to have a physical body because the material was all evil.
      1. They also held to only an elite few have special knowledge for salvation, which was totally spiritual.
      2. This was the worst heresy to face the church in the beginning and much is written about it.
      3. This heresy is also why apostolic succession was a needed teaching so people could verify what they taught.
   2. Gnosticism has never gone away in the history of the church. In fact, it is still very active and present in our evangelical churches today. There is an allure for people to have special knowledge that is only attained by certain individuals.
      1. There are two facets to modern day Gnosticism…special knowledge and experience.
         1. Kenneth Copeland – “***The Spirit of God spoke to me*** and He said, “Son, realize this. Now follow me in this and don’t let your tradition trip you up.” He said, “Think this way—a twice-born man whipped Satan in his own domain.” And I threw my Bible down . . . like that. I said, “What?” He said, “A born-again man defeated Satan, the firstborn of many brethren defeated him.” He said, “You are the very image, the very copy of that one.” I said, “Goodness, gracious sakes alive!” And I began to see what had gone on in there, and I said, “Well now you don’t mean, you couldn’t dare mean, that I could have done the same thing?” He said, “Oh yeah, if you’d had the ***knowledge*** of the Word of God that He did, you could have done the same thing, ’cause you’re a reborn man too.”
            1. Here you see the experience of God speaking and then having secret knowledge.
         2. John Wimber (Vineyard Church founder) taught a whole generation of pastors and church leaders at Fuller Seminary in his “Signs, Wonders, and Church Growth” class.
            1. He taught power evangelism, that without signs and wonders (experience) people were not going to get saved. He said “We must remember always that the Bible was written in the Middle East, not with rational assumption, that we bring to it as we try to understand it, but with an experiential assumption.”

We have a special knowledge ***outside the Bible.***

* + - 1. Bill Johnson (Bethel Church founder) teaches that to follow the Bible is not to follow God. He says “Those who feel safe because of their intellectual grasp of Scriptures enjoy a false sense of security. None of us has a full grasp of Scripture, but we all have the Holy Spirit. He is our common denominator who will always lead us into truth. **But to follow Him, we must be willing to follow off the map—to go beyond what we know**.”
    1. All three of these men teach that Jesus was born again (once from Mary and then again after His death) so all that He accomplished on earth we can do as well. In fact, they all go to say that we are little gods, equal with Christ in all areas.

1. These men, and many, many more, have influenced Christianity based upon their Gnostic beliefs. We must understand they are not men to be tolerated or fellowshipped with, but they are their followers must be kept out of the church and the fellowship.
2. Listen to what Paul says about those who call themselves Christians but follow the world:
   1. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.”

**The early church also faced heresy from within her walls**.

1. The first person to cause a church split was **Marcion** (2nd century). He taught that there were two gods, one of the Old Testament and one in the New.
   1. He called the church to leave the Old Testament in favor of only the New.
   2. ***He was expelled from the church*** around 144 AD and subsequently started his own churches, which resembled Orthodox churches in practice.
2. The second major heresy to come out of the church was **Montanism**, from Montanus around 170 AD.
   1. “In his lust for leadership, he became obsessed and would suddenly fall into frenzy and convulsions. He began to be ecstatic and speak and talk strangely, and prophesied *contrary to that which was the custom from the beginning of the church*. Those who heard him were convinced that he was possessed. ***They rebuked him and forbade him to speak, remembering the warning of the Lord Jesus to be watchful because false prophets would come***”[[7]](#footnote-7)
   2. Montanus was joined by two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, who also claimed to have the gift of prophecy and also prophesied in an ecstatic state.
   3. He was a pagan priest who was supposedly born again and brought his pagan rituals into the church. From the end of Acts up until this time, there were no occurrences of tongues and prophecies.

**Persecution & Pandemics in the Early Church and Their Response**

1. As we end this section, it is important to note that for the first 250 years of Christianity, persecution was sporadic around the Roman Empire. It was never really illegal to be a Christian, but they did not “fit in” to the social atmosphere of the empire.
   1. **Emperor** **Nero** (During the Apostles time…killed both Peter and Paul)
      1. 64 AD tried to expel and kill all Christians around the empire by blaming the fire in Rome on them.
   2. **Emperor Domitian** (89-96)
      1. also is known to have persecuted Christians locally in Rome.
   3. **Emperor Trajan** (98-117)
      1. He made every attempt to persecute Christians, even those who were just accused of being one.
      2. He would force them to recant by cursing Christ and giving an offering to pagan gods. If they did not, he would have them tortured (many recorded cases) until they died or recanted.
   4. **Emperor(s) Lucius Verus** & **Marcus Aurelius Antonius** (161-180)[[8]](#footnote-8)
      1. After sieging modern day Iran, the soldiers returned to Italy (Rome) but brought death and disease in their wake. They infected (Smallpox) the entire area (approx. 2200 miles) where they marched.
         1. This plague is recorded to have killed over 2000 people daily in the city of Rome. It would not be eradicated for another decade.
      2. During plague periods in the Roman Empire, Christians made a name for themselves. Historians have suggested that the terrible Antonine Plague of the 2nd century, which might have killed off a quarter of the Roman Empire, led to the spread of Christianity, as Christians cared for the sick and offered an spiritual model whereby plagues were not the work of angry and capricious deities but the product of a broken Creation in revolt against a loving God.[[9]](#footnote-9)
      3. Christians, who preached a message of hope and life beyond the grave, remained to serve the multitudes who were suffering. And the church of Jesus Christ grew, as Christian principles were proven to be true in the crucible of crises. Christians came to the rescue and demonstrated the compassion of Jesus to their friends and neighbors who were in deep distress.[[10]](#footnote-10)
   5. **Emperor Decius[[11]](#footnote-11)**, who in 250 issued at edict that demanded a minimum of yearly sacrifices to the Roman gods.
      1. When you made the sacrifice, you received a certificate (libellus) that made it possible to maintain your current life in society. Without that certificate, you would be brought before a tribunal and asked to sacrifice. If one denied, they would be tortured and if still recanting, put to death.
      2. The unintended consequence of this action for the church was what to do with those who had denied the faith and sacrificed to Caesar?
   6. **Emperor Diocletian** is credited with the most ruthless persecution to Christians in church history. It occurred in the early 300s but it started with his dismantling of the government in 285. He ended the Senate and Emperor rule set up by Caesar Augustus in 27 BC and established a monarchy.
      1. In March of 303 AD, he ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of the Scriptures, the closing of church meetings, and the imprisonment of Christians. Later he made the refusal to sacrifice to the gods a capital crime.
      2. Because of the intense persecution, there were many who gave up their Scriptures in order to save their own lives.
      3. Just like those Christians who had sacrificed to Caesar under Decius, the church had to figure out what to do with those who called themselves believers but when put to the test, did not pass.
2. Next week, we will discuss what the church did with those who gave in to pressure from the government to bypass persecution.
3. One of the main reasons Christians were targeted was because they did not blend in with the culture. The rulers were afraid they were making a state within a state. They did not participate with their pagan rituals or make sacrifices to the various gods.
   1. They were scared because Christianity was growing so fast they thought it was going to eventually take over the Empire.
   2. In a way, through the help of the next Roman Emperor, Christianity did take over…but the results were anything but good.

1. Gonzalez, Justo L *The Story of Christianity* vol. 1, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.aish.com/h/c/t/h/48942121.html> accessed 07/01/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Geldenhuys, Norval *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke,* 1952, pp. 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Eckman *Exploring Church History* p. 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. He was the last Emperor to lead the Roman Empire in a time of relative peace and stability. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/#:~:text=Historians%20have%20suggested%20that%20the,capricious%20deities%20but%20the%20product> 07/16/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://ktsonline.org/en/kts-life/news/457-a-demonstration-of-christian-compassion-epidemics-and-the-church-s-response-to-disease> 07/16/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We are going to take a much closer look at both Emperors, Decius and Diocletian next week. Their policies and persecution against the church were instrumental in shaping the modern day church. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)