

## Essential Church History

# 3

## The Seeds of Decline

So far in our studies of Church history we have examined the phenomenal growth of the Church, and the reason for that growth – the power of the Gospel itself. But during this time, Satan was not inactive. Just as he had sought to destroy Jesus (and had failed miserably), so he now sought to destroy the Church. His strategy was two-fold:

- **Annihilate** – This was the attack *from the outside*, in the form of persecution. As we saw in the last lesson, this strategy backfired on Satan, for it only served to propel the Church forward.
- **Infiltrate** – This was the attack *from the inside*, in the form of heresy and mixture. As we will see in this lesson, this strategy was far more effective, for it struck at the very heart of the Church’s power – the Gospel itself.

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▶	<b>The Seeds of Decline</b>	◀
	<b>Leaven, Leaders and the Word</b>	
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Even in the first century, the beginnings of this internal attack were evident. Many of the New Testament letters were written to bring correction and to address the errors that were already creeping into church life. As early as AD 51, Paul wrote to the Galatian church in **Galatians 1:6-7**:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

This onslaught against the true message of the Gospel was to continue throughout Paul’s ministry and beyond, and as we study the first four centuries of Church history, we see a slow but steady corruption of the Gospel.

## The Foreknowledge of God

As we now begin to look at the seeds of decline in the Church, it is important that we see what unfolds in the first four centuries of the Church through the eyes of God. This is only possible by viewing these events through the lens of God's Word. Just as the Gospel record shows that behind all the opposition leveled against Jesus – even his trial and crucifixion – God's plan was ultimately at work, so we shall see the same thread of God's sovereignty running through what we call "Church history."\*

**Read Matthew 24:1-14**

**Read Luke 21**

One day, the disciples were with Jesus in the Temple courts and were admiring the beautiful stones of the surrounding buildings. Jesus then made a declaration that stunned them, as it would have any Jew of the day. The Temple was going to be destroyed. Not one of those beautiful stones would be left on another! Shocked by this revelation and presuming he was speaking of the end of the world, the disciples then asked the Lord when it was all going to happen (**Matthew 24:3**). In his reply, Jesus gives an overview of history – of both the world and of the Church – climaxing in its full expression at the Second Coming.

### **World history**

In **Matthew 24:7-8**, Jesus said:

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.”

Here the Lord describes the overspread of history from the destruction of Jerusalem to the time of his return. **Luke 21:10** makes it clear that in the period prior to his Second Coming, everything he mentions – famines, wars, earthquakes and “signs in the sky” – will build up to a climax.

### **Church history**

In **Matthew 24:9-14**, he gave an overview of Church history:

“Then you will be handed over *to be persecuted and put to death*, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time *many will turn away from the faith* and will betray and hate each other, and *many false prophets will appear and deceive many people*. Because of the increase of wickedness, *the love of most will grow cold*, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

\* Although we call it “Church history,” not everything we see happening within the Church during the first four centuries was the true Church in action. God defines the Church as “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” This doesn't mean that the Church is perfect, but as long as it is founded on the Gospel, the Church will move forward. Decline, however, sets in as soon as the foundation of the Gospel begins to decay.

Just as the Lord told Abraham beforehand what lay ahead for his descendants (read **Genesis 15:12-16**), so Jesus told his believers ahead of time what was going to happen in the history ahead of them. To Abraham it was revealed that his descendants would be enslaved by a foreign nation, but that they would then come out with great possessions to possess the land of promise. In a similar way, the Lord foretold the historical decline of his Church and then its glorious restoration prior to his return.

Jesus himself warned his disciples in **Mark 13:5**: “Watch out that no one deceives you.” Paul too warned of the danger of encroaching deception.

### Read 2 Corinthians 11:2-4

In **Romans 16:17-18**, Paul urged the Roman Christians “to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way *that are contrary to the teaching you have learned*...For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery *they deceive the minds of naive people*.” He has but one piece of advice: “Keep away from them.” In the same way, he wrote strong warnings to his protégé, Timothy.

### Read 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Paul was not just speaking of a future condition. Even in Timothy’s day, the seeds of these “terrible times” were evident, for Paul directs Timothy: “Have nothing to do with them!”

Jude also wrote his letter in response to news that false brothers “who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” had “secretly slipped in among you” (**Jude 4**).

### Read Jude 17-19

Peter also identified the great danger that would later come upon the Church. In **2 Peter 2:1-3**, he predicted that “there will be *false teachers among you*. They will *secretly introduce destructive heresies*, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. *Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute*. In their greed these teachers will *exploit you with stories they have made up*.”

Writing at the end of the first century, John too warned of the coming deception.

### Read 2 John 7-11

## The Beginning of Decline

The Enemy has been bent on destroying the Church from the moment of its birth on the Day of Pentecost. As we have already seen, his strategy was two-fold:

- **Attack from the outside** – annihilate the Church through *persecution*.
- **Attack from the inside** – infiltrate the Church through *deception*.

We have already seen how Satan’s openly aggressive strategy of persecution was in full sway (although it had the opposite effect upon the Church as intended), but

concurrent with this blatant outward attack, Satan sought to subvert the Church by eroding its Gospel foundation. This subtle infiltration strategy was far more effective. Through deception, Satan began to replace the Gospel with heresy, the real with the counterfeit, the true with the false. As Earle Cairns explains:

“The Christians of the second and third centuries had to fight what every strategist tries to avoid – a war on two fronts. While the church was fighting to preserve its existence in the face of attempts by the Roman state to abolish it, it was also fighting to preserve purity of doctrine within the church.”<sup>1</sup>

As we saw in **ES102-23**, four main “toxic gospels” were already beginning to creep into the Church during the first century:

- The legalism influenced by the Judaizers (**Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1-3**)
- The human wisdom of worldly philosophies (**1 Corinthians 1:17**)
- The teachings of the gnostics (**Colossians 2:18-19**)
- The thinking and motives of the world (**James 4:2-3; 1 John 2:15-16**)

The seeds of decline had been planted in the first century, and during the second and third centuries these seedlings of heresy began to flourish. In this lesson, as we look at the errors that began to creep into the Church, let us, as the generation of the twenty-first century, not just *study* history, but *learn* the lessons from history!

You will note as we go through these errors that many, ironically, came in as a reaction to another error and the desire to correct it. It is important to understand the difference between error and heresy. Error is anything that digresses from the purity of God’s intention for the Church. Many errors came into the Church. Most of them arose in reaction to another error. They resulted because people had right desire (recognising an error and wishing to correct it) but applied the wrong solutions (bringing in another error as the answer).

Error is often expressed in two opposing extremes. For example, as we will see later in this lesson, Montanism was a reaction to formalism, and formalism became more entrenched because of Montanism. And as we will see in the next lesson, the fourth century monasticism (the proliferation of monks living in secluded communes called “monasteries”) was a reaction to the growing worldliness of the Church after the conversion of Constantine.

Heresy, however, is against the very fundamental truths of Christ, his redemptive work on the Cross, and his resurrection. Error, if left unchecked, often leads to outright heresy, something we will encounter often in Church history.

## Errors and Heresies

Let’s look now at the various errors and heresies that crept into the Church.

### **Old Covenant Legalism**

Although a clear and strong decision had been made at the Jerusalem Council that the keeping of the Old Covenant Law was not a requirement for salvation (**Acts 15:1-31**), some of the converts from Judaism still continued to dilute the

faith with these legalistic requirements, insisting that Gentile as well as Jewish Christians were still bound by the Law of Moses. Two particular groups arose with this error – the Nazarenes (not the modern-day church called the Nazarenes) and the Ebionites.

### **The Nazarenes**

Originally a derisive name given to the whole Church (**Acts 24:5-6**), the name “Nazarenes” was later applied to a particular sect which followed the tradition of the early Judaizers (those who had caused so much trouble to Paul and been the reason for his letter to the Galatians). During the AD 66-70 war, when the Zealots rose in rebellion against Rome, the Christians in Jerusalem (remembering the word of the Lord in **Matthew 24:15**) fled across the Jordan to Pella. Though this had spelt the end of the old order for them, the descendants of those who fled to Pella continued to keep the Law of Moses scrupulously.

They combined their observance of the Sinai Covenant with their belief in Jesus as the divine Messiah. They used the Gospel of **Matthew** in Hebrew. But they did not speak against the apostle Paul and they never denounced the Gentile Christians for not observing the Law. The sect spread widely in Syria, but shrank to insignificance by the end of the fourth century.

### **The Ebionites**

The sect of the Ebionites was found in Palestine and the surrounding regions, on the island of Cyprus, in Asia Minor, and even in Rome. Although similar to the Nazarenes in some ways, the Ebionites were not just in error like the Nazarenes; they were in blatant heresy. They rejected all the writings of Paul and wanted to impose the Sinai Covenant on every Christian. They used a Hebrew Gospel, now lost, which was probably a corruption of **Matthew**. They cut out all reference to the Saviour’s pre-existence and supernatural conception. They believed that it was only at his baptism, when the Spirit descended on him, that Jesus became divine. Their claim was that the Spirit left him before his death, and so it was just an ordinary man who died on the cross.

Justin Martyr distinguished between the Nazarenes and Ebionites, acknowledging the former as genuine Christians, but not the latter. The first was in error, the second was heretical.

### **Gnosticism**

More widely spread than the Judaistic form of error and heresy was the paganizing heresy known as Gnosticism. Towards the end of the first century, Christian communities were receiving repeated warnings against those who denied the reality of Christ’s physical birth – who denied his “coming in the flesh” (**2 John 1:7**). These heretics were attracting many followers because they claimed they were prophets and that they were speaking by the Spirit of God. They were counterfeiting the gift to gain a hearing for their false teaching. John had written a strict warning against this dangerous heresy in **1 John 4:1-3**:

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

So, John tells us, the heresy of Gnosticism was infused with the spirit of antichrist – total opposition to Christ and his Gospel. We examine Gnosticism in more detail in the supplementary lesson, **SP113-03**.

## ***Monarchianism***

The early Church had regarded Christ as unquestionably both Lord and God. From the end of the second century, however, new views began to present themselves, the chief of which was Monarchianism. It took its name from the Greek word *monarchy*, meaning “single principle.” This doctrine claimed that there was only one Person in the Godhead. The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could be applied indiscriminately to this one Person.

The Monarchians were excessively zealous to emphasize the unity of God in opposition to any attempt to conceive of God as three separate personalities. Their problem, however, was how to relate Christ to God. Because they could not at the same time believe that God was one, and that Christ was fully God, they denied the unique identity of Christ.

Three other names were given to the Monarchians:

- **Modalists** – they were given this name because they claimed that God existed in different “modes,” but only in one mode at any one time. God’s different names – Father, Son and Spirit – described the different roles he played at different times, but it was always the same divine Person.
- **Patricians** – this name was given to them by their opponents, because they taught in effect that the Father (Latin, *pater*) suffered (Latin, *passus*) as the Son.
- **Sabellians** – this name was given to them after one of their leaders, Sabellius. Sabellius wanted to avoid any danger of tritheism and, in AD 200, formulated the teaching that goes by his name. He taught that there were not three persons in the Godhead but that God was manifested in three forms – as Father in the Old Testament times, later as the Son to save mankind, and then as the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Christ. A man, explained Sabellius, may be in one relationship, a son; in another, a brother; and in a third, a father – yet in all these relationships he is just one person. In the same way, said Sabellius, God is one, but has expressed himself in three ways at three different times.
- **Dynamic (or Adoptionist) Monarchianism** – During the third century a man by the name of Paul of Samosata was bishop of Antioch. He

taught that Christ was not divine but merely a good man. Divine power had descended on him and had enabled him to do the works of God (thus the term “dynamic” from the Greek word *dunamis*, power). Because of his righteousness, he had achieved divinity and saviorhood by the divine Logos penetrating his being at baptism. This view was also maintained by Theodotus, Artemon and by the Alogi who denied the Logos teaching of John. In addition to his office as bishop, Paul of Samosata held an important political post in the government of Zenobia, queen of Palmyra. Because he was neither engaged in business nor had inherited a fortune, there was some suspicion as to where he obtained his large wealth. In the church at Antioch he often played to the gallery by preaching with violent bodily gestures and asking for applause and for the audience to wave their handkerchiefs. Sometimes he had a female choir sing hymns praising him.

## **Schisms and Divisions**

Some schisms and divisions also developed in the Church during its infancy.

### ***The Easter Controversy***

About the middle of the second century, controversy arose over what was the proper date to celebrate Easter. The Church in the East held that it should be celebrated on the fourteenth day of Nisan, the date of the Passover according to the Jewish calendar, no matter what day of the week it fell on.

In AD 155, Polycarp visited Rome to discuss this question. He met with Anicetus, bishop of Rome, on equal terms, and, although they did not come to any agreement on the matter, they nevertheless remained excellent friends. According to Irenaeus his ministry to the church in Rome was greatly blessed.\*

In AD 162, Anicestus, who believed that Easter should be celebrated on the Sunday following the fourteenth of Nisan, opposed Polycarp of Asia about this. Then in AD 190, Victory, the new bishop of Rome, excommunicated the churches of Asia as part of his opposition to Polycrates of Ephesus. Irenaeus rebuked him for his pretensions to power. It was not until the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 that the Eastern and Western segments of the Church could arrive at any agreement. The viewpoint of the Western Church was then adopted.

### ***The Novatian Schism***

Novatian took a very rigid line concerning those who had renounced Christ during the persecutions. He refused to receive back anyone who had given way and, for this reason, broke away to form his own church. The Novatianists soon had a network of small congregations. They called themselves ‘Cathari’ (pure ones) to distinguish themselves from all other churches, which they considered polluted as a result of their leniency towards sinners. Novatian is believed to have been martyred during the persecution of the Emperor Valerian about AD 258.

\* It is obvious from this and other accounts that at that time of the second century, the bishop of Rome did not claim any authority over other churches. This was to come later.

## ***The Donatist Controversy***

After AD 300, as a result of the persecution of the church by Diocletian, the Donatist controversy, mostly centered in North Africa, developed. A churchman by the name of Donatus demanded that Caecilian step down as bishop of Carthage. His reason was that Caecilian had been consecrated by Felix, who was accused of denying the faith during the Diocletian persecution. Donatus believed that failure to remain true during the persecution invalidated the authority of Felix to ordain because he had, he believed, committed an unpardonable sin.

Donatus and his group elected Majorinus as bishop. When Majorinus died in AD 313, Donatus became bishop. Their newly formed “pure” church became known as the followers of Donatus. The schism increased when Constantine later gave money for the African church, but excluded the Donatists. A synod held at Rome decided that the Donatists had no right to any of the aid because (they said) the Donatists’ stand that the validity of a sacrament depended on the character of the one administering it was not valid. In AD 314, another council of Western bishops held at Aries, again decided against the Donatist position.

## **Attempted Answers**

These errors, heresies and divisions were a challenge to the infant Church. How to deal with them was the big question. The two main solutions they brought to try to curtail false teachings, though helping somewhat at that time, set the Church on a course that would take it far from its original design and purpose.

### ***Formalism***

In his translation of *The Didache* (a second century circular letter giving instruction to the churches), Maxwell Staniforth comments:

“It must be remembered that the organization of the primitive Church was not the system with which we are familiar today. During the first period of its life the Church was very directly under the rule and guidance of the Holy Ghost. This results in the emergence of three classes of officials, whose names are given us by St Paul: ‘God,’ he says ‘hath set in the church first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers’ (1 **Corinthians 12:28**). All these were men who had been directly called to their office by the Holy Ghost; they were not appointed by any local congregation, nor was their ministry confined to any local church. The ‘apostles’ were travelling missionaries or evangelists, who went about founding new churches and visiting and edifying others; the ‘prophets’ were men with the gift of revealing spiritual truths while in trances or ecstasies; the ‘teachers’ were endowed with special powers of instruction and exposition. To supplement this itinerant ministry, there were resident officers in each local church; who, however, were more concerned with administration and discipline than with teaching and preaching. These were the ‘bishops’ or ‘presbyters’ (until the second century either name was used indifferently to denote the one functionary) and their helpers the ‘deacons.’”<sup>2</sup>



### Read 3 John

In this brief letter, John also refers to the travelling ministries, instructing the churches on how they should be received. Here is what the *Didache* instructed regarding the traveling ministry of apostles and prophets in the second century:

“Concerning the apostles and prophets, do so according to the ordinance of the Gospel. Let every apostle, when he comes to you, be received as the Lord; but he shall not abide more than a single day, or if there be need, a second day. If he abides three days, he is a false prophet. When he departs let the apostle receive nothing except bread, until he finds shelter; but if he ask for money, he is a false prophet...Let every one who comes in the name of the Lord be received; and then when you have tested him you shall know him, for you shall have understanding on the right hand and on the left. If the comer is a traveller, assist him, so far as you are able; but he shall not stay with you more than two or three days, if necessary. But if he wishes to settle with you, being a craftsman, let him work for his bread and eat it. But if he has no craft, according to your wisdom provide how he shall live as a Christian among you, but not in idleness. If he will not do this, he is trafficking upon Christ. Beware of such men.”<sup>3</sup>

In reaction to the waves of heresy in the second century, however, several things happened.

#### **The gift of prophecy in the churches died out**

The reaction to heresies like Gnosticism coming into the church played a part in this. Because the gnostics claimed they were speaking by the Spirit of God, they brought the true gift of prophecy into discredit. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, curbed the exercise of prophecy in the churches even though he possessed the gift of prophecy himself. Thus a wonderful gift of the Spirit began to die out in the second century.

#### **The travelling ministry of apostle and prophet ceased**

By the end of the second century, the work of the itinerant minister, as described in **Ephesians 4:11-16** and in *The Didache*, had virtually ceased. Churches soon began to formalize their worship. The Lord’s Supper was given prominence as the focal point of the liturgy. Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, written in about AD 150, contains what has been called “the oldest systematic description of Sunday worship.” It is based on practices in the church in Rome at that time. Though still simple in its expression, formalization is becoming evident:

“On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place and the memoirs of the apostles (i.e. the letters and Gospel accounts) or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then, we all rise together and pray, and when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according

to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given.”<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note here that the one leading is called “president.” In other words, he was one of the brethren chosen to preside over the meeting and not yet a member of a special priestly group. A M Renwick and A M Harman comment:

“We note the marked simplicity of this second-century service, the reading of the Holy Scriptures, the address by the president, and his prayers ‘according to his ability’ which shows that *extempore* (spontaneous) prayer was still customary.”<sup>5</sup>

### **A liturgical form of service sets in**

In his *First Apology*, Justin also describes the partaking of the Lord’s Table:

“At the end of the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Then the president of the brethren is brought bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he takes them, and offers up praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and gives thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at his hands. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their joyful assent by saying Amen...Then those whom we call deacons give to each of those present the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and carry away a portion to those who are absent.”<sup>6</sup>

Ralph Martin comments on Justin’s description:

“In Justin’s day, Christian worship was becoming distinctively ecclesiastical. The domestic atmosphere of the Passover meal was giving way to formality, and a new vocabulary introduced to give a more other-worldly, even transcendental character to worship. For Justin the act of communion was a ‘memorial of the passion’ of Christ. The elements of bread and wine over which thanks had been given nourished the lives of Christians by assimilation — a thought derived from **John 6**. This idea played an increasing role in explanations of the eucharist as a sacramental sharing in the divine life. Justin...may possibly allude to a special prayer, later known as the *epiclesis*, which ‘called upon’ the divine Word to come upon the bread and wine. It is not surprising that, especially among gnostics, magical ideas about the nature of the consecrated elements began to emerge...Clearly what has come to be regarded as a service of worship was already more or less fixed in Justin’s time.”<sup>7</sup>

We can see from Justin Martyr’s description that even in his day formalism had begun to set in. Although this was in reaction to errors like Gnosticism, the mystical and magical ideas of Gnosticism still had strong influence. Ecclesiastical language and garb had already begun to take hold and this was going to become more predominant as time went by. The less evidence of the Spirit’s working, the more ornate and elaborate the form of worship became.

## **A heirarchal structure emerges**

*The History of the Christian Church* gives a beautiful description of how the Church functioned during the first century:

“In the apostolic church preaching and teaching were not confined to a particular class, but every convert could proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, and every Christian who had the gift could pray and teach and exhort in the congregation. The New Testament knows no spiritual aristocracy or nobility, but calls all believers ‘saints’ though many fell far short of their vocation. Nor does it recognize a special priesthood in distinction from the people, as mediating between God and the laity. It knows only one high-priest, Jesus Christ, and clearly teaches the universal priesthood, as well as universal kingship, of believers. It does this in a far deeper and larger sense than the Old (**Exodus 19:6**); in a sense, too, which even to this day is not yet fully realized. The entire body of Christians are called ‘clergy,’ a peculiar people, the heritage of God. On the other hand it is equally clear that there was in the apostolic church a ministerial office, instituted by Christ, for the very purpose of raising the mass of believers from infancy and pupilage to independent and immediate intercourse with God, to that prophetic, priestly, and kingly position, which in principle and destination belongs to them all (**Ephesians 4:11-13**).”<sup>8</sup>

Within one generation of the death of John, the last apostle who had been with Christ, this began to change. With the problems of the heresies and errors strong leadership was thought to be the solution. So the “episcopate” (“overseer”) system of Church government was developed. Although it used first century terminology, it was a major change of direction for the Church.

The institutionalization of the Church happened in stages. The episcopal form of government was universally established in the Eastern and Western church as early as the middle of the second century but it reached that stage step by step. There were three stages in this development and three men connected with them – Ignatius in Syria (died in AD 107 or AD 115), Irenaeus in Gaul (died in AD 202), and Cyprian in North Africa (died in AD 258).

## **The rise of the local bishop**

The term “bishop” in early Christian writings is used, as in the New Testament, in the sense of “elder” or “presbyter” or “overseer”. Clement of Rome (who died in AD 100), was one of the early bishops or presbyters of Rome. He wrote an open letter to the church at Corinth, shortly after the persecution by the Emperor Domitian. Apart from the New Testament it is probably the earliest surviving Christian writing. His letter sheds light on church life not long after the age of the apostles. In it there is no mention of a single ruling bishop. Instead the leaders of the church are called bishops, elders (presbyters) or deacons.

However, as a reaction to the errors that were creeping into the church this began to change. It was apparent necessity in the face of persecution and heresy that led to the exaltation of one bishop’s position in each church. Whereas in New

Testament times there had been a number of equal elders (or bishops), the people now acknowledged and thought of one as superior to the others. This more pyramidal structure was designed to combat the encroachment of heresy, since one of the bishop's main functions was to define what was truth and what was error.

Each city now had a single bishop. Anything that was not under the umbrella of the bishop's authority was not considered the true Church. This was the safety mechanism they instituted to protect them from error.

### **The rise of the bishop of Rome**

Clement's counsel to the specific problem in Corinth opened the way later for what was thought to be the solution to the problem of the gnostic teachers. He was writing to the Corinthians because they had deposed their original leaders and put new men in their place. Clement pleaded with them to preserve unity and to rectify what they had done by reinstalling those who stood in "due succession from the apostles." This idea was taken up by Irenaeus.

"Irenaeus also appealed to the idea of an apostolic succession of office-bearers in the Church. These were viewed as guarding the sacred deposit of the faith which had been given through the apostles, and the tradition which reached back to the days of the apostles. Lists were made of the succession of bishops in the larger churches. It is noticeable, however, that Irenaeus, like the early Church, makes no distinction between 'bishops' and 'presbyters'. For example, he refers sometimes to Polycarp as 'bishop', sometimes as 'presbyter'. He deals similarly with the whole list of bishops at Rome. The presbyter (or elder) was by now, however, imperceptibly passing into a bishop in more or less the modern sense. When we come to Tertullian and Clement in the third century, the transition has been made. The Church has come to find its unity in the episcopate, and now appeals to the supposed 'tradition' which has come down through the bishops."<sup>9</sup>

The bishops were now considered successors of the apostles and equal in their dignity and authority. Important factors in their rise to power were the development of the doctrine of apostolic succession and the increasing exaltation of the Lord's Supper to the point that it was only the bishops who could administer this sacrament.

Over time, the bishops were organized into different ranks, according to the ecclesiastical and political importance of their different districts, and ultimately, beginning with Leo I's accession to the episcopal throne in AD 440, the bishop of Rome began to claim supremacy over other bishops.

### **The Montanist Controversy**

Just as the formalizing of the meetings and the setting up of the heirarchal leadership were a reaction to some of the errors coming into the Church, so there was a reaction to the formalism and the human leadership. In the middle of the second century, Montanism rose up.

“At the time when Montanism arose, things were not well with the Church. Gnosticism was offering a serious challenge and undermining the foundations of Christianity. The apostles were all dead, and the remarkable gifts of the Holy Spirit which characterized the early Church were dying out. Many false prophets had arisen, and prophecy itself was falling under suspicion. The Church was settling down to an easy formalism. The pulsating spiritual life of an earlier day was lacking, and rigidity, if not frigidity, was becoming the order of the day. Montanism arose as a strong reaction against all this.”<sup>10</sup>

Montanus was an enthusiastic young Christian from Phrygia, a region of western Asia Minor, who began to attract attention as a prophet. He was strongly opposed to the rise to prominence of the bishop in the local church and the dependence of the Church on human leadership instead of on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He contended that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was immediate and continuous and he started a wild revival campaign, claiming to have received a special revelation from the Holy Spirit.

He was joined by two rich women, Maximilla and Prisca, who had left their husbands. They, with Montanus, claimed to be mouthpieces of the Paraclete, the Greek title John uses in **John 14:16** for the Holy Spirit, and declared they were the “New Prophecy.” Maximilla predicted: “After me there will be no prophecy, but the End.”

The main message of the Montanists was the nearness of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the age. Because of this they called all Christians to be prepared for his coming and to live by a very strict ascetic code. They claimed to have authority to impose a more rigid discipline on the Church. Christians, they said, should abandon marital relationships in favour of chastity. Widows and widowers should remain single. Fasts should be multiplied and food eaten dry. They refused forgiveness for serious sins after baptism and for flight from persecution. They named their communities at Pepuza and Tymion in Phrygia “Jerusalem,” believing that Christ would return and set up his kingdom there. Montanist communities survived in Africa into the fifth century and longer still in Phrygia.

“This attempt to combat formalism and human organization led him to a reassertion of the doctrines of the Second Advent and the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, as so often happens in such movements, he swung to the opposite extreme and developed fanatical misinterpretations of Scripture.”<sup>11</sup>

The Montanists had the opposite effect on the wider Church to what they desired. Their extremism produced some strong reactions. The doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ, with which their extreme millenarian teaching became identified, was laid aside by the Church as a whole. Prophecy was discredited and, as A M Renwick and A M Harman put it, “Christ came to be regarded as far way, and the clergy were conceived of as having His affairs in their hands, and doing His work on earth through the Sacraments. This led to the exaltation of the ministers of the Church...”<sup>12</sup>

## Learning from History

There are very important principles that we can learn from what we see in history. As well as examples to follow, we see also errors to avoid. The Christians of the early centuries were people just like us. They made mistakes. But, as the writer to the Hebrews exhorts his readers to learn by the mistakes of Israel of old (read **Hebrews 3:6-4:2**), let us today learn by the mistakes of those who have gone before. Three major errors stand out:

### ***Natural wisdom***

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:16**

In seeking to handle the problems and heresies the Church was facing, men used their own judgment and wisdom. The solutions seemed sensible at the time, but their decisions set a direction that took the Church of the future off course.

### ***Imbalance***

A very great error can be seen in both sides of the Montanist controversy. Each missed an all-important factor for the healthy balance of the Church. Just as at the time of creation the Spirit of God and the Word of God worked together (see **Genesis 1:1-3**) so it is with the New Creation (see **2 Corinthians 4:6**).

God has designed the Church to live and function with the cooperative balance of the Word and the Spirit. The Lord Jesus likened the Holy Spirit to a flowing river bringing life wherever it goes (see **John 7:38-39**). The Word of God provides the banks to that river, the Spirit always following its direction and course.

The Montanists majored in the Spirit but neglected the Word of God which was emerging at the time (we will see this in the next lesson), and this led them into fanatical excess, uncontrolled emotionalism, and serious error. The other side emphasized the “tradition” of the apostles with their focus on the emerging canon of the Word, but rejected the life of the Spirit in their midst and lost the wonder of his supernatural ministry.

### ***Division***

David Wright describes the different attitudes of the two groups to one another:

“The Montanists...were excommunicated by the first synods of bishops known of in the history of the church. Why they were condemned is uncertain. They were fanatics but not heretics. (One bishop of Rome apparently recognized their gifts as of the Spirit, but later changed his mind.) Their visions, speaking in tongues and intense religious excitement attracted suspicion. The claims made for their prophecies seemed to question the emerging canon of New Testament Scriptures. Maximilla’s predictions were not fulfilled. The Montanists scolded the ‘unspiritual’ church for rejecting their Paraclete. In short, allegiance to the New Prophecy created discord at a time when the bishops were working towards a united, stable church which conformed with the tradition of the apostles.”<sup>13</sup>

On the one side, the failure of the ecclesiastic Church to embrace the movement as part of them robbed them of the ability to bring correction. The more the Montanists were rejected, the more separatist they became and the greater error they went into. On the other side, the Church lost something by excluding them. As David F. Wright says:

“Despite their excesses, the Montanists stood for the conviction that the Spirit was as active in the contemporary church as at the beginning; greater manifestations, not lesser, were promised for ‘the last days.’”<sup>14</sup>

## Our Prayer Today

May we, the Church of the twenty-first century, seek the Lord’s clear direction in every strategic move we make. May we never react to anything that comes our way in our own human wisdom. May we move in the life and power of His Spirit and in everything we do may we seek to follow his Word. May our central desire always be the unity of the Church and the fulfilment of the Lord’s ultimate plan and purpose for his Body.

<sup>1</sup> Earle E Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p.97.

<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1984), p.236.

<sup>3</sup> *The Didache*, <http://www.antioch.com.sg/th/twp/bookbyte/hermas/didache.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, quoted by A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.30.

<sup>5</sup> A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp.30-31.

<sup>6</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.128.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph P Martin, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), pp.127-129.

<sup>8</sup> *The History of the Christian Church*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>9</sup> A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), pp.37-39.

<sup>10</sup> A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.34.

<sup>11</sup> Earle E Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p.102.

<sup>12</sup> A M Renwick and A M Harman, *The Story of the Church* (Leister, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p.34.

<sup>13</sup> David F Wright, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.87.

<sup>14</sup> David F Wright, quoted in *The History of Christianity*, editors Tim Dowley et al (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1994), p.87.

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