



# The Christian Church Family Tree

A Study on the History of the Church by Dr. Harley Ihm

## Lesson 2: The Early Departures

- *There were several branches even within the early days of the church recorded in the Bible. Gnosticism, Judaizers, the antichrist teachers, the false prophets. Satan never took a break after the cross. There was a short period of explosive growth. We can see that the enemy was devising a new plan. It's much like happened in Vietnam and now throughout the middle-east. Evil mutates like a virus that refuses to die and finds new ways to create damage.*

### 1. Broadening the Doctrines of the Church (100-202 A.D.)

- Docetism** – δοκεω, dokew, to seem, was the idea that Jesus was not real flesh and blood and did not suffer and die: he was pure spirit and his physical appearance was only an illusion. The idea was born through Plato's ideas being blended into Christianity. Jews believed God created the universe in perfection. The Greek culture taught that matter and the body are bad and unreal. Therefore, to stay in line with the Greek dominant thought, some false teachers created this spirit Jesus who could not have been flesh and blood.
- Gnosticism** – γνωστισμός, gnosis, to know, was the next logical step from docetism. They combined Greek philosophy, pagan myths, Judaism, eastern religions and Christianity. Not all Gnostics were Christians, but the influence invaded Christianity heavily. Since matter was evil, they denied that the Almighty God could have created the body. They believed in a hierarchy of spirit beings. One spirit god smuggled some spirits into some of the humans, which means not all human beings had spirits, obviously a strange idea. The “spirit Christ” came to give them a secret divine knowledge (gnosis) of spiritual things. That knowledge would set their spirits free and save them for heaven.
- Marcion** – a wealthy ship owner came to Rome in AD139 and made a huge donation to the church, so they accepted him as a preacher! Imagine that! He loved Jesus and Paul because they were full of love, forgiveness and offering heaven. He hated the Jewish Scriptures because he saw them as a harsh God who keeps changing his mind. He insisted that all scripture be taken literally, word for word. He produced a bible with no OT and only Luke and 10 of Paul's letters. By AD 144 his preaching got him expelled from the church but the damage was done. He took enough followers with him to plant rival churches. Tertullian wrote that the Marcionite followers built churches like wasps build nests. It's amazing how

people like Marcion, like Joseph Smith and others can distort Christianity and gain massive followings that are loyal without question to their leaders. Godly Elders should never have allowed Marcion to get an audience just because he was rich.

- d. **Ebionites** = the poor – were mostly Jewish were said to have understood the Scriptures in a peculiar way. They practiced Jewish circumcision and observed all the customs of the Law and taught that Jerusalem was the house of God. They didn't like Paul and his writings. They only used the gospel of Matthew because it was the only one true to Jewish customs and traditions. They later saw Paul as the antichrist because he taught that we were set free from the Law. They also did not like calling Jesus, God. Theirs was one of the last attempts to make Judaism and Christianity a combined religion, rather than one faith that was made up of a promise and a fulfillment.
- e. **Ignatius' Heartfelt Mistake** – He is dealing with all these out of control teachers. The Elders of the early church would have called a meeting and dealt with them. That was not happening. So, Ignatius pushed the idea radically of the one man bishop or elder over his church. He said, "We must regard the bishop as the Lord himself." He said only the bishop could baptize or oversee the Eucharist (giving thanks), communion. He was trying to purify the church, but he was adding to the scripture. As pure as he might have been, the bishops that began to have complete control, as if they were speaking for the Lord, began adding to the confusion and it became more about the rule of the bishop than about the absolute rule of Christ. In a short time it became difficult to tell what the Christian message precisely was!

So, we see 2 things evolved out of this struggle for keeping the church holy. 1) This pushed the early church leaders and schools to begin the process of choosing the letters that were truly inspired and made up the Old and New Testament. We call this the Canon, or Book, which is now our Bible. 2) Where there had once been a plurality of Elders, shepherds or Bishops over every church, now there was one Bishop who oversaw many churches and his power could not be questioned. He was Jesus' representative to keep the church in line. Irenaeus knew that Bishops were going to disagree at times. Therefore he was the one who proposed that the highest authority on earth would be the bishop in Rome, since the church there was founded by Peter and Paul. Isn't interesting that it was not the church in Jerusalem, the first church that was considered the original. Who moved the first church to Rome, if that was the logic that was to shape the quest for holiness in the church? So the branches are starting to split off of Jesus pure truth. With great intentions, the Words of Christ through the Apostles was being tweaked for the good of the church.

## 2. More False Teachings and the Addition of the Apologists of the Church (202-247 A.D.)

- a. **Montanus the False Prophet** – had been a priest of the mystery cult of Cybele, the Great Mother or the goddess Mother of the Mountain. Later in Rome, she would be seen as a metaphor for the goddess, Mother Earth. Cybele's most ecstatic followers were males who ritually castrated themselves, after which they were given women's clothing and assumed female identities, who were referred to by one third-century commentator, Callimachus, in the feminine as *Gallai*. They related that her priestesses led the people in sexual ceremonies with wild music, drumming, dancing, drinking and shouting—all at night. He converted to Christianity and became a prophet alone with 2 women, Priscilla and Maximilla who lived in Phrygia. They spoke in trances and tongues in first person. "I am the Lord God

Almighty, living in man." They longed to be martyred said Christ would return to Phrygia and begin His 1,000 year rule in their lifetime. What seemed miraculous was the ecstatic emotion of the pagan cult combined with a belief they were true prophets and mix it all with the Bible to form a very mystical Christianity. It took some time before Rome would declare this prophecy was not from God. Again, the damage was done. They began to spread, especially in North Africa. We now had a new branch.



- b. **Perpetua** - In 202, the Emperor Septimius Severus issued a decree forbidding any subject to become a Christian or a Jew. Anti-Christian assaults broke out. There is a record of a young noblewoman who left her husband, parents, and baby she was breast feeding rather than deny Christ. She and a slave girl were whipped, sent to the execution naked and nets for all to see, and beheaded. They said the executioner was reluctant to kill Perpetua, the noblewoman, so she put the sword against her neck for him. It was a gruesome time but filled with people who would gladly live and die for their faith.
- c. **Tertullian** – A Christian writer who became an apologist of the faith, defending the reality of Christianity. About the time of Perpetua's execution, he wrote a book called, "Defense." Her wrote:

*We are but of yesterday, yet we have filled all that is yours: cities, islands, fortresses, towns, meeting places, even camps, tribes, companies, the palace, the senate, the forum. We have left you only your temples...If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a plague, immediately the cry arises, "The Christians to the lion! What? So many to one lion?...You say we are vanquished. Yes, when we have obtained our wishes. Therefore we conquer in dying; we seize the victory at the very moment we are overcome. Bound to a stake, we are burnt on a heap of wood: this is the attitude in which we conquer, it is our victory robe, our triumphal entry...This attitude does not*

*please those whom we overcome...Your cruelty, however great, is a better advertisement for us than for you. The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is seed.*

d. **Clement** – Alexandria was in Egypt. Every major philosophy was taught there and it was seen as the intellectual capital of the Roman world. Their library had over 70,000 scrolls. Clement was head of the Christian school there. He wrote extensively including quotes from pagan writers and philosophers, even Plato. His goal was to prove that Christianity is not for the uneducated alone, but for even those with the highest of education. He said, “Philosophy may even have been given to the Greeks directly by God. It was a schoolteacher to bring the Greek culture to Christ, as the Law was for the Hebrews.” Unfortunately, because Plato and Moses had very little in common, he began to make teachings in the bible into allegories to make them more suitable to the philosophers. This added a school of thought that muddied the waters of truth in places and opened a door that would be difficult to close. He created a road for very liberal interpretations and yet he was very legalistic on moral issues pushing them further than the Bible required. It looks like a branch could split off of that kind of reasoning.

I had a friend who had grown up in the Christian Church and was marrying a Catholic girl. He decided to go to a study on Catholicism with the priest in the local parish. If he could see that the teaching was true to the Scripture he would then accept the Christianity that Catholicism was teaching. As the priest was addressing the story of Jonah and the whale, he made the comment that this was simply allegorical. Anything that smacked of the miraculous was just an allegory to help us learn. We all know that cannot happen but it is a truth wrapped in a story as is most of Scripture. My friend said that was the end of his study. Jesus claimed that He would raise from the dead the same as Jonah was delivered from death within the whale. If it wasn't true of Jonah, it isn't true of Jesus.

e. **Origen** – a pupil of Clement and his successor. He is said to have lived on a minimum of food, drink and sleep and to have become a eunuch, castrated himself, so he would not end up committing a sexual sin and hurt his spiritual life. He took the idea of Clement using allegory to a 3 tiered concept. He said every text has a plain meaning. However, the obvious meaning is sometimes wrong or immoral. Then there is the moral parable of every text. It's a story with a moral idea. Then there is finally the mystical symbolism encoded into the text. The bible has a simple level, a moral level, and a coded mystical level to understand it. Something Dan Brown might write a novel about! Origen wrote massive numbers of commentaries where he unraveled all meanings of the Bible passages. This allowed him to blend the God of the Exodus and the God of Plato into a harmony. He believed that souls existed before birth and are saved by a mystical experience of God in Christ. He interpreted the resurrection of the dead as reincarnation in new universes, a repeated process until the soul is purified. Therefore, no one is eternally damned, it's just a matter of how many lifetimes it will take you to be holy. Scientology could accept that, as long as Jesus is not the only way to come to this higher level. The 6<sup>th</sup> century church burnt his writings.

### 3. The Great Persecution - 247-311

a. **The Spread of Christianity and the New Problems** – The first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century was a time of peace and acceptance of the church. Christianity was becoming fairly acceptable

thanks to the writings of Origen. It's now been around 200 years and had spread everywhere the Roman Empire had gone, even into Britain. Hundreds of churches were planted across Italy and North Africa and as far as India. The Emperor Alexander Severus added Christ as one of the gods in his pantheon. The Emperor, Marcus Julius Philippus, was also known as Philip the Arab was said to be almost Christian. He ruled Rome from AD 244-249. When Philip was overthrown in 249, the first order of the new emperor, Decius, was to arrest church leaders. The bishops of Rome, Antioch and Jerusalem were killed. Philip had allowed the Christians to refuse to be in the army or to take part in the religious festivals to the many gods. Decius ordered execution of anyone who did not obtain a certificate saying, "I have always sacrificed regularly to the gods, and now, in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have done sacrifice, poured the drink offering and tasted the sacrifices." The sad thing was that thousands of Christians rushed to sacrifice or to buy the edict to save their lives, including a number of bishops. The only thing that stopped the persecution was the Decius was killed by the Goths in 251. Of course now the deniers of Christ wanted to rejoin the church now that it was safe.

- b. The Divisive Situation** – While in prison for their faith, priests became confessors. They took it upon themselves to issue certificates of forgiveness for those whose courage had failed. The problem was the bishops saw themselves as the only one with the moral authority to make decisions for Christ. One set of bishops decided to allow forgiveness and grace but only after a long course of penance and re-education for those who bought certificates and forgiveness could only come after death for those who sacrificed to idols. This caused a group to declare the church corrupt and led by the bishop, Novatian, started a new group of believers called, "The Pure." They offered free forgiveness to everyone who was repentant with no strings attached. A new branch is born. Both groups claimed to be the only true church.
- c. Re-baptism** – The bishop, Cyprian, got in a violent argument with Stephen, the bishop of Rome. Cyprian said anyone who was rebaptized by Novatian's clergy must be rebaptized because it didn't count. Stephen said it did count and proclaim Cyprian a false Christ and excommunicated him! He simply claimed that being the Bishop of Rome, he was St. Peter's heir and was the final word on matters among bishops. However, it didn't really matter because in 258, the Emperor Valerian ordered all bishops, elders and deacons to be executed. Stephen, Cyprian and Novatian were all killed. However, the church would go on to renounce the practice of re-baptism.
- d. Church Buildings and New Quirks** – The third century ended with 40 years of peace for the church. Churches became so confident that they began to build church buildings for the first time, as we see them in Europe today. However, because the requirements of doing penance for sin had taken hold, converts were coming to church, but they were waiting to be baptized until late in life. In Scripture baptism was always immediately following a realization of Christ's salvation and the need to make Him Lord. Repentance and baptism were inseparable. This decision came into the church through legalism, rationalization and selfishness. They decided that waiting to be baptized would allow them to commit all their major sins beforehand and avoid the pains of doing penance. Those who were seeking holiness decided it was not in the church. Therefore they began to go out into the desert away from the corruption of the church leaders and people. They would devote themselves to prayer and holy solitude and willingly become poor. Thus the monks and the concept of monasteries began to form slowly from the unholiness of the church.

e. **New Persecution** – The Roman Emperor Diocletian overpowered the Goth and Persian armies and reclaimed control of the empire. He reigned from 284-305. He restored all the temples and gods in Rome. In 303, a priest frail to read the future in a liver and the oracle of the sun god blamed the Christians who were present and had made the sign of the cross. He banned Christian worship, had Scriptures buildings, and artifacts destroyed. He arrested the bishops. One year later he was replaced by Galerius who ordered all Christians to sacrifice or be sacrificed. This was the last great assault by Rome on the church. The historian Eusebius was living in Caesarea. He writes:

“Sometimes 100 men – not counting women and small children – were killed in a day, condemned to an ever-changing series of punishments. I was there and saw many of the executions myself, some by beheading, others by fire. So many were killed in one day that the axe, blunted and weakened by the slaughter, fell to bits, while the executioners were worn out and had to work in shifts.

Many bishops were killed. The bishop in Rome sacrificed to the pagan gods to save his life. However, later on he was still canonized and made a saint. This would set up a period of radical transformation and power for the church; power that would corrupt it.