

**BRUCE L. SHELLEY**

*Revised by R. L. Hatchett*

# CHURCH HISTORY

**IN PLAIN LANGUAGE**

**UPDATED**



**EDITION**



**THOMAS NELSON**  
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

"majority world" are inevitably problematic. Without intent to offend or make a point, I use common but unsatisfactory terms because better terms have not been commonly accepted. The "West" is North America, England, and Western Europe. The "Global South" refers to the Third World, counting South America, Africa, and Asia, and includes places such as China that are above the equator. Similar frustration exists with the Western point of reference in terms like "Far East" and "Middle East." Perhaps a discerning student will point a better way forward. I hope, however, no reader will miss the point that American evangelicals need a larger frame of reference to participate in the great kingdom work flourishing in the world today. I usually cite modest numbers from established sources but believe these are typically under-reported. I watched my friend, the late Walter Lumpkin, attempt to account for non-denominational church life in Houston, Texas. The experience impressed me that mainline churches count well, but the most vital people to count are the ones we miss altogether.

Several students deserve mention for help in typing or research: Jimmy Parks, Ashley Ashcraft, Karl Russell, and Joel Burdeaux. Jim Denison, Daniel Vestal, Pete Sanchez, and Randy Richards, friends with significant experience in the wider world, have offered fruitful conversation about the project. Thanks to David Capes and Heather McMurray of Thomas Nelson who recruited me to the project, and to Malcah Bell who patiently saw it to completion. Thanks most of all to my wife Debbie. She assisted with some typing, good judgment, and a keen eye. She contributes to anything I do well.

R. L. Hatchett

*Professor of Theology and Philosophy  
Houston Baptist University*

## PROLOGUE

FOR YEARS I KEPT a cartoon on my study door. Students who stopped to read it often stepped into my office smiling. It encouraged easy conversation. It was a *Peanuts* strip. Charlie Brown's little sister Sally is writing a theme for school titled, "Church History." Charlie, who is at her side, notices her introduction, "When writing about church history, we have to go back to the very beginning. Our pastor was born in 1930." Charlie can only roll his eyes toward the ceiling.

Many Christians today suffer from historical amnesia. The time between the apostles and their own day is one giant blank. That is hardly what God had in mind. The Old Testament is sprinkled with reminders of God's interest in time. When he established the Passover for the children of Israel, he said, "Tell your son . . . it will be like a sign . . . that the Lord brought us out of Egypt" (Ex. 13:8, 16, niv). And when he provided the manna in the wilderness, he commanded Moses to keep a jar of it "for the generations to come" (Ex. 16:33, niv).

As a consequence of our ignorance concerning Christian history, we find believers vulnerable to the appeals of cultists. Some distortion of Christianity is often taken for the real thing. At the same time other Christians reveal a shocking capacity for spiritual pride, *hubris*. Without an adequate base for comparisons they spring to the defense of their way as the best way, their party as the superior party. Finally, many Christians engage in some form of ministry without the advantage of a broader context for their labor. When they want to make the best use of their time or their efforts, they have no basis for sound judgment.

I am not suggesting that one book surveying our Christian past will refute all error, make the reader a humble saint, or plot a strategy for effective ministry. But any introduction to Christian history tends to separate the transient from the permanent, fads from basics. That is my hope for this book among my readers.

The book is designed for laypeople. We all know that term is made of wax; we can twist it to suit our own tastes. After four decades of teaching first-year seminarians, I have concluded that college graduates entering the ministry and an engineer or salesman who reads five books a year are members of the same reading public. For my purposes here, both are *laypeople*.

In preparation for classes a professor digests hundreds of books and accumulates thousands of quotations. In this survey volume I have borrowed freely from the ideas and descriptions of others, while working with a simple aim: keep the story moving. I have tried to corral all of these resources and list the most helpful books at the end of each chapter and my major quotations at the end of the book.

From years of teaching I have also concluded that clarity is the first law of learning. So the divisions of the subject are all here. We call them *ages* because the conditions of the church's life change. Great eras, I know, do not suddenly appear like some unknown comet in the skies. In every age we find residue of the past and germs of the future. But if the reader wants to get the plot of the story, all he or she has to do is to read the paragraphs on the title pages of the major divisions.

This device was important for unity, I felt, because each chapter is arranged in a certain way. Only one issue appears in each. The reader can find it, in the form of a question, after an introduction to the chapter. The introduction is usually some anecdote from the time. This means that each chapter is almost self-contained and could be read in isolation, almost like an encyclopedia article on the subject.

Taking this issues approach admittedly leaves plenty of gaps in the story. Some readers will wonder why certain important people or events are not included. But this approach has the advantage of showing to the layperson the contemporary significance of church history. Many of today's issues are not unique. They have a link with the past.

Finally, some readers may wonder about the amount of biographical material. Why so many personal stories? Again, the answer is communication. Without ignoring ideas, I have tried to wrap thoughts in personalities, because I assume most readers are interested in meeting other people.

Church historians often ask, "Is the church a movement or an institution?" These pages will show that I think it is both. So I have talked about missionary expansion as well as papal politics. Professionals in the field may not be happy with my failure to set limits by a strict definition of the term *church*. But that fuzziness is due to the fact that I believe the people of God in history live in a tension between an ideal—the universal communion of saints—and the specific—the

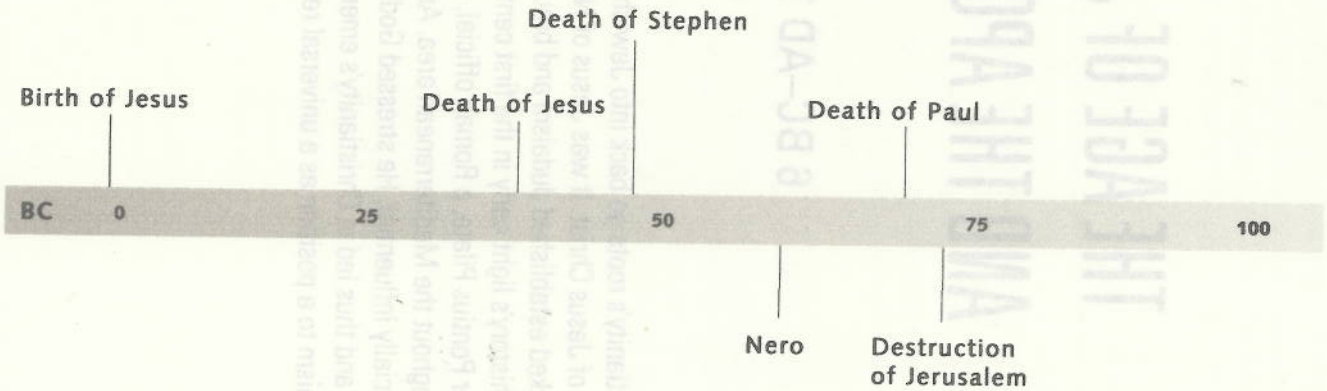
particular people in a definite time and place. The church's mission in time calls for institutions: special rules, special leaders, special places. But when institutions themselves obstruct the spread of the gospel rather than advancing it, then movements of renewal arise to return to the church's basic mission in the world. These pages will illustrate how often that has happened.

For the third edition I had my share of helpers. Daniel Hallock, a student friend and master of the World Wide Web, supplemented my research, especially for chapter 49, with dozens of articles from that mystical realm called *the Internet*. My colleague David Buschart, author of *Exploring Protestant Traditions*, contributed scores of titles for our updated Suggested Reading lists in addition to helpful dialogue about the emerging churches. Finally, Scott Wenig, my colleague and successor, added other new titles to the reading lists, vigorous discussion, and the foreword for this edition. I am deeply grateful for all three.

Bruce L. Shelley



## The Age of Jesus and the Apostles



# AWAY WITH THE KING!

## The Jesus Movement

CHRISTIANITY IS THE ONLY major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God.

"Dear dying Lamb," believers sing,  
"thy precious Blood  
Shall never lose its power,  
Till all the ransomed Church of God  
Be saved to sin no more."

Crucifixion was a barbarous death, reserved for agitators, pirates, and slaves. Jewish law cursed "everyone who hangs on a tree" and the Roman statesman, Cicero, warned, "Let the very name of the cross be far, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears."

Part of the victim's punishment was to be whipped and then to carry the heavy crossbeam to the place of his own death. When the cross was raised, a notice was pinned to it giving the culprit's name and crime. In Jesus' case, INRI: *Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews).

Pontius Pilate, Jesus' Roman judge, apparently intended it as a final thrust of malice aimed at the Jews, but, like the cross itself, Jesus' followers found a special meaning in the message.

## JESUS AND THE CHURCH

Jesus was a Jew. He came from a Jewish family; he studied the Jewish scriptures; he observed the Jewish religion. Any serious study of

his life makes this so clear that many people have asked if Jesus ever intended to create that company of followers we call the church. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary to Africa, believed that Jesus was obsessed with a dream of the impending end of the world and died to make the dream come true. Rudolf Bultmann, an influential German theologian, taught that Jesus was a prophet who challenged people to make a radical decision for or against God. Other Christians have held that Jesus' kingdom was a brotherhood of love and forgiveness. If he founded a society at all, they say, it was an invisible one, a moral or spiritual company—not an institution with rites and creeds.

This anti-institutional view of Christianity is so widespread that we had better face the question straightaway. Did Jesus have anything to do with the formation of the Christian church? And if he did, how did he shape its special character?

The gospel writers picture Jesus as retracing the steps of Israel. Reminiscent of Israel, Jesus spent time in Egypt, entered the Jordan (baptism), was tempted in the wilderness, called twelve apostles (like twelve tribes), spoke God's word like Moses (Sermon on the Mount), preached five sermons (compare the Pentateuch) in Matthew, performed mighty deeds of deliverance (signs, wonders, and exorcisms), and confronted imperial powers. Where Israel had failed, Jesus had been a faithful Son. His followers were to take up the task of being God's servant people. He worked with a faithful band of disciples, he taught them about life in what he called "the kingdom of God," and he introduced them to the new covenant that bound them together in forgiveness and love.

Granted, that simple company lacked many of the laws, officials, ceremonies, and beliefs of later Christendom, but it was a society apart. Jesus made a persistent point about the special kind of life that separated the kingdom of God from rival authorities among men. Little by little his disciples came to see that following him meant saying no to the other voices calling for their loyalties. In one sense that was the birth of the Jesus movement. And in that sense, at least, Jesus "founded" the church.

### PALESTINE IN JESUS' DAY

During the days of Jesus, Palestine never lacked for loyalties. It was a crossroads of culture and peoples. Its two million or more people, ruled by Rome, were divided by region, religion, and politics. "In a day's journey a man could travel from rural villages where farmers tilled their fields with primitive plows to bustling cities where men

enjoyed the comforts of Roman civilization. In the Holy City of Jerusalem, Jewish priests offered sacrifices to the Lord of Israel, while at Sebaste, only thirty miles away, pagan priests held rites in honor of the Roman god Jupiter."

The Jews, who represented only half the population, despised their foreign overlords and deeply resented the signs of pagan culture in their ancient homeland. The Romans were not just another in a long series of alien conquerors. They were representatives of a hated way of life. Their imperial reign brought to Palestine the Hellenistic (Greek) culture that the Syrians had tried to impose forcibly on the Jews over a century before. All the children of Abraham despised their overlords; they simply disagreed about how to resist them.

Centuries earlier the prophets of Israel had promised a day when the Lord would deliver his people from their pagan rulers and establish his kingdom over the whole earth. On that day, they said, he would send an anointed ruler, a messiah, to bring an end to the corrupt world of the present and replace it with an eternal paradise. He would raise the dead and judge their actions in this world. The wicked would be punished, but the righteous would be rewarded with eternal life in the kingdom of God.

According to the book of Daniel and other popular Jewish writings, the Lord's kingdom would be established only after a final cosmic struggle between the forces of evil, led by Satan, and the forces of good, led by the Lord. It would end with the destruction of the existing world order and the creation of a kingdom without end (Dan. 7:13-22). This belief, along with ideas about the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment, was in Jesus' day very much a part of popular Jewish faith.

Out of the distaste for life under the Romans, several factions arose among the Jews, each interpreting the crisis in a different way. The Jesus movement was one of them.

One group, the *Pharisees*, emphasized those Jewish traditions and practices that set them apart from pagan culture. Their name means *separated ones*, and they prided themselves on their strict observance of every detail of the Jewish law and their extreme intolerance of people whom they considered ritually unclean. This piety and patriotism won respect among the people.

On the other hand, some Jews found Roman rule a distinct advantage. Among them were members of Jerusalem's aristocracy. From this small group of wealthy, pedigreed families came the high priest and the lesser priests who controlled the temple. Many of them enjoyed the sophisticated manners and fashions of Greco-Roman culture. Some even took Greek names. Their interests were represented by the

conservative political group known as the *Sadducees*. At the time of Jesus, these men still controlled the high Jewish council, or Sanhedrin, but they had less influence among the common people. Another party, the *Zealots*, were bent on armed resistance to all Romans in the fatherland. They looked back two centuries to the glorious days of the Maccabees when religious zeal combined with a ready sword to overthrow the pagan Greek overlords. Thus the hills of Galilee often concealed a number of guerrilla bands ready to ignite a revolt or destroy some symbol of Roman authority in Palestine.

Finally came the *Essenes*, who had little or no interest in politics or in warfare. Instead, they withdrew in protest to the Judean wilderness, believing the temple of Judaism to be hopelessly compromised. There, in isolated monastic communities, they studied the Scriptures and prepared themselves for the Lord's kingdom, which they believed would dawn at any moment.

Scholars typically identify the Essenes as the occupants of the Quran community who copied ancient manuscripts and wrote commentaries. These documents, called the Dead Sea Scrolls, were discovered in 1946.

Jesus had to call for the loyalty of his followers without confusing the purpose of his mission with the objectives of these other parties among the Jews. It was a tough assignment.

### Judaism Now and Then

The Pharisees' version of first-century Judaism has survived and evolved to become the Rabbinic Judaism we know today. The destruction of the temple in AD 70 changed the character of Judaism. The Roman resolve to quash revolutionary movements made the Zealots (a protest seeking political revolution) and the Essenes (a protest seeking purity) impracticable.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic power brokers who operated the temple, and they saw their vision of Judaism vanish with the temple's destruction. The destiny of Judaism was left to the "book people" (the Pharisees), who sought to direct the entirety of their lives by the instructions of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pharisees' book-oriented version survived once the temple was destroyed and Roman power silenced revolutionary voices.

### JESUS' MINISTRY

Jesus chose to begin by recognizing a new movement in the Judean wilderness led by a prophet named John. The ford of the Jordan, just north of the Dead Sea, was one of the busiest parts of the whole region,

so John the Baptist got the crowds he wanted to hear him. Wearing a garment of camel's hair, his eyes ablaze, he stood on the riverbank and warned all who passed by to repent of their sins and prepare for the coming day of judgment by receiving baptism in the Jordan. Israel first entered the land by crossing the Jordan; Jesus began his ministry at this pivotal place.

Many thought John was the promised Messiah, but he vehemently denied any such role. He explained his mission in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matt. 3:3). He was, he claimed, only the forerunner of the Messiah. "I baptize you with water" he said, "but . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16).

John's call to repentance and righteousness drew Jesus to the Jordan. He found in John's message the truth of God, so "to fulfill all righteousness" he submitted to John's baptism and soon afterward began his own mission, proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Jesus, however, rather than remaining in the desert, chose to begin his mission in Galilee, a land of gentle hills and warm, green valleys. During those early weeks and months he traveled from village to village throughout Galilee, preaching in synagogues in the evening and on the Sabbath. Carrying a bundle of bread, a wineskin, and a walking stick, he hiked along the dusty highways. He probably dressed as any other traveler, in a rough linen tunic covered by a heavier red or blue mantle.

On a typical day Jesus would set out at dawn and walk mile after mile. Toward sunset he would enter a village and proceed to its synagogue. As one popular history puts it, "There he probably received a warm welcome from the townspeople, who often had no resident rabbi and relied on the services of wandering teachers like Jesus. When the lamps had been lit and the men of the village had taken their places, Jesus would seat himself on the raised central platform" and begin reading a passage from the sacred Scriptures. In a clear, forceful voice he would announce the fulfillment of some prophecy or relate some parable.

The main theme of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God. What did he mean by that? Did he believe in a dramatic intervention of God in the history of the world? Or did he mean that the kingdom is already here in some sense? He probably meant both. The two can be reconciled if we recognize that the phrase stands for the sovereignty of a personal and gracious God, not a geographical or local realm.

Jesus taught that the rule of God was already present in saving power in his own person. And he offered proof of the point. His miracles of

healing were apparently not just marvels; they were *signs*, the powers of the age to come already manifest in the present age. "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons," he once said, "then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). Yet he feared that his cures would be misinterpreted, that people would see him as just another magician, and he often cautioned those he healed to be silent.

Of course, the news spread, and before long people in every town and village in Galilee were talking excitedly of the new wonder-worker who could cure the blind, the lame, and the sick with the power of his voice and the mere touch of his strong carpenter's hands. Soon large crowds gathered wherever he spoke.

Jesus' growing popularity aroused controversy, especially among the Pharisees, who hated to see people following a man who had never studied under their learned scribes. They didn't hesitate to question his credentials openly.

### JESUS' MESSAGE

Jesus welcomed their challenge for it gave him a chance to contrast his message of repentance and grace with the self-righteousness of the Pharisees.

On one occasion, probably as pilgrims were on their way to Jerusalem for one of the great feasts, Jesus told about two men who went to the temple to pray. What a striking contrast they made! One was a Pharisee; the other, surprisingly, was a despised tax collector.

With a touch of showmanship, the holy man took his stand and prayed, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). That, at any rate, is what he prayed to himself, and it was not a hollow boast. Pharisees excelled in those works of righteousness—fasting and tithing—that set them apart from wicked men.

The fault of the prayer was in its spirit of self-righteousness and its cruel contempt for others. The Pharisee alone was righteous, and all his fellow mortals were included under one sweeping condemnation.

The tax collector believed he was religiously compromised. By working to collect taxes for the Romans, he broke faith with his own people. Sensing his own feeble religious standing, he stood at a distance, the very image of contrition. His eyes were downcast, his head bowed in guilt. His prayer was a sob of remorse, a cry for mercy: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

"I tell you," said Jesus, "this man went down to his house justified rather than the other" (Luke 18:14). The contrast between the piety of

the Pharisees and the attitude of the Jesus movement could hardly be greater. One was based on the observance of the hundreds of religious laws of the Jews; the other rested upon a denial of self-righteousness and a trust in the mercy of God.

Out of his hundreds of followers Jesus called a handful to travel with him full time. They came to be called *apostles*, meaning *sent ones*. At first they were a rather motley group, twelve in all, drawn from fishing boats and tax tables, but their loyalty to Jesus was strong.

So for them Jesus drew the distinction between his kingdom and the kingdoms of the world. His followers, he said, represented another type of society and another type of greatness. In the kingdoms of this world, powerful leaders lord it over others; but God's kingdom is governed in a wholly different way, by love and service.

"Fear not," he told them, "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (12:32).

The highwater mark of Jesus' popularity came about a year before his arrest in Jerusalem. After he fed over five thousand Passover pilgrims on a grassy hillside in Galilee, many of his disciples tried to proclaim him king. Jesus knew, however, that they had no idea of God's unfolding plan for his life—and death. So he fled to the hills with a committed few.

Jesus knew that he had a unique role in God's plan of redemption, but he feared the traditional titles for a messianic redeemer. Crowds were too likely to misunderstand them. The picture that appears in his teaching of the twelve is along the lines of Isaiah's portrait of the Suffering Servant, "despised and rejected by men . . . with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:3, 5), and the image of Zechariah's predicted king who would be "humble and riding on an ass" (Zech. 9:9).

### THE LAST WEEK

Apparently with these prophetic portraits in mind on the Sunday before his last Passover, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey in fulfillment of Zechariah's prediction. Crowds threw palm branches in his path and shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

This seems to be the only occasion when Jesus openly identified himself with the Messiah of Jewish prophecies. He apparently intended to challenge the Jerusalem authorities to make up their minds: Would they or would they not accept the rule of his kingdom? The Holy City was stirred, asking, "Who is this?"

The next day Jesus led a procession through Jerusalem's teeming, narrow streets, to the temple. There, in an act of protest reminiscent of



the Old Testament prophets, he "entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you make it a den of robbers'" (Matt. 21:12-13).

News of this dramatic event quickly swept through Jerusalem and people began flocking to the temple, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Rumors spread of the appearance of the Messiah and the imminent destruction of the temple.

Such talk of a messiah alarmed the temple authorities. What if this Galilean were to ignite another revolt against the Roman government? Yet they were hesitant to arrest him for fear of provoking a riot.

A man like Jesus presented a real danger to the Sadducees, because they held their privileged position with the support of the Roman authorities. Anyone who aroused talk of a messiah undermined the people's allegiance to the established political order and endangered the relationship the Sadducees had with the Romans. Such a man, they concluded, had to be silenced before he sparked an uprising, which the Romans would crush with characteristic brutality. If that happened, the Sadducees stood to lose their privileges.

Thus their common fear of Jesus brought about an unusual alliance between the Sadducees and their rivals, the Pharisees. Jesus, who openly violated the Sabbath laws and questioned the validity of other laws, seemed to be undermining the authority of the Jewish religion. For their separate reasons, both parties saw this self-styled prophet from Galilee as a dangerous enemy, and together they concluded that he should be brought to trial and condemned to death.

The temple authorities found their opportunity among Jesus' closest followers. With the aid of Judas from Iscariot, one of the Twelve, they could arrest Jesus secretly without provoking a riot; so "they paid him thirty pieces of silver," nearly four months' wages for a skilled worker, providing he would lead them to Jesus.

### THE NEW COVENANT

"The next day was the first day of the Jewish Passover, and Jesus and his disciples prepared for the ritual dinner that evening. At sundown they gathered secretly at the appointed place. Their mood was solemn as they ate the meal, commemorating the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. Reclining on couches arranged around a low table, they drank wine and ate the bitter herbs and unleavened bread." Toward the end of the meal, Jesus took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and

said, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). In the same way he took a cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:25).

What did Jesus mean by this "new covenant"? The background, to be sure, was the Exodus from Egypt and the formation of Israel as a nation at Mount Sinai. But Jesus had in mind more than this reminder of the obvious.

He spoke of the new covenant in his own blood. His words were an echo of the prophet Jeremiah who had promised a day when the covenant on tablets of stone would be replaced by a covenant written on the hearts of men: "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:33-34).

The time of the new covenant, said Jesus, has come. A new people of God, enjoying the forgiveness of sins, is now possible through the shedding of his own blood.

At that moment the disciples were undoubtedly as puzzled by his words as by his actions. But in a matter of weeks they would see all these final hours in a new, revealing light.

After the meal Jesus led the disciples to a familiar meeting place at the foot of the Mount of Olives, an olive grove known as Gethsemane. There was a full moon, and the grove was bathed in soft light. While the disciples slept, Jesus withdrew to pray: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39).

After renewing his commitment to God in prayer, Jesus aroused his sleeping disciples. "While he was still speaking, Judas came . . . and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders" (Matt. 26:47). They seized Jesus and dragged him away to the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest, in the western section of Jerusalem.

### THE TRIAL AND DEATH

Inside the splendidly appointed mansion, the Sanhedrin swept aside all tokens of justice and hastily secured two witnesses who testified against Jesus. The court charged him with blasphemy and voted to put him to death, but for that they were forced to turn to a despised Roman.

When the first rays of light appeared, the Jewish authorities led Jesus out of Caiaphas's palace and through the streets to the Antonia, a palace-fortress where the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was staying during the Passover. Since the Sanhedrin was not empowered to carry out the death sentence, the members had to present their case against Jesus to Pilate.

"A messenger entered the sumptuous chambers of the Antonia to summon Pilate, while the council members and their prisoner waited below in the paved courtyard of the fortress. A few minutes later the governor appeared. He wore a red toga draped over a white tunic in customary Roman fashion, the distinctive mark of a Roman citizen."

After asking about their purpose, the Roman governor pondered the situation. It seemed to him that the chief priests had approached him to settle a petty religious dispute, and to convict Jesus during the festival could surely spark at least a minor uprising. Yet if he ignored their accusations and this Galilean eventually proved to be a traitor to Rome, his own position would be endangered. Meanwhile a belligerent crowd had gathered outside the Antonia, clamoring for Pilate's decision. Fearful of offending Caesar, Pilate delivered Jesus to his soldiers for crucifixion.

When the execution party reached a hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha, the soldiers stripped the clothes from Jesus and divided the garments among themselves as the crosses were assembled. "Each prisoner was then placed on his cross. Jesus suffered in silence as the soldiers nailed his wrists to the crosspiece with large iron spikes and drove another spike through both ankles. As they lifted his cross upright, his weight was supported by a peg jutting out from the cross between his legs." Then the soldiers fastened over the cross that sign describing his crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

"It was a slow and painful death. Jesus hung there helplessly for long hours as the hot sun beat down on his body and insects buzzed about his limbs. Curious passersby paused to watch his agony and to read the sign. Gradually he weakened, his body tortured by muscle cramps, hunger, and thirst." A small group of his despairing followers watched in silence as his life slipped away, a strange and revealing prelude to the history of Christianity.

As he grew weaker and weaker Jesus cried out, "It is finished," and yielded up his spirit. Within hours a friend, Joseph from Arimathea, carried Jesus' body into his own garden. There he had a tomb hewn out of a large rock. Inside near the rear of the tomb was a couch, also of stone, and Joseph gently placed the corpse upon it. Then he rolled a heavy stone across the entrance and went home.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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Where is the house you will build for me?  
 Where will my resting place be?  
 Has not my hand made all these things . . . ? (Isa. 66:1-2, NIV).

The council stirred excitedly. But Stephen moved on boldly to the climax of his speech: "You stiff-necked people!" he cried. "You are just like your fathers: you always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you, who have received the law . . . but have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:51-53, NIV).

Enough! Enough! The council was furious! They covered their ears as a mob rushed at Stephen. They dragged him out, through the streets, beyond the walls and stoned him again and again until all was silent.

### CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

That mob scene, including the trial and death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, holds the answer to the question, how did Christianity emerge from its Jewish roots? How did a Jewish Messiah preaching a Jewish theme (the kingdom of God) to a Jewish following become the Savior of people everywhere?

The answer lies in Stephen's confrontation with the Jewish authorities. It centered upon the interpretation of the Old Testament. The encounter with Jesus prompted the early believers to examine the Old Testament anew. They discovered in the Old Testament documents a greater and comprehensive message for the entire world that Israel had failed to embrace. God had promised Abraham long ago that all the peoples of the world would find their blessing in him (Gen. 12:3). While Jesus appealed to the lost sheep of Israel, his scope was greater.

The experts in the Jewish Scriptures, the Scribes and Pharisees, believed the Old Testament presented the law of God for his special people, the Jews. The law began with the Ten Commandments, but it also provided instruction for every area of life, worship, and piety. Stephen, however, disagreed—and said so. He insisted that the institutions of Jewish life, the law and the temple, were temporary. God intended them to point beyond themselves to the coming Messiah, who would fulfill all righteousness for all people. The Old Testament's central purpose was to promise the Messiah. And he has come, said Stephen. Jesus is his name. We know this because the

## CHAPTER 2

# WINESKINS:

## OLD AND NEW

### *The Gospel to the Gentiles*

THE SANHEDRIN HAD AN uprising on their hands and they knew it. They had barely escaped a riot by bringing Stephen, the agitator, before them. But what to do with him—that was the question.

The Jewish Council had little rest since the trial of Jesus. No one knew how to stop the spread of the Nazarene movement. Time and again the council had commanded them to stop their incessant jabbering about Jesus, but each time the Nazarenes grew bolder, even accusing the council of killing the Messiah.

Stephen, however, was a special case. He dared to renounce the law of Moses and attack the temple of God, openly and repeatedly. The angry men felt that Stephen had to be silenced. But how?

All eyes were upon Stephen as he began his defense. He spoke of Jewish history, but he argued that men might worship God apart from the temple. He traced the ways of God with his people from Abraham to Moses and showed that Moses prophesied the coming of Messiah saying, "God will send you a prophet like me from your own people" (Acts 7:37, NIV).

He also told how the Lord gave Moses the pattern of the tabernacle and how Solomon built the temple, but he quoted the prophet Isaiah to prove that the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands:

Heaven is my throne,  
 and the earth is my footstool.

events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion give clear evidence of the hand of God.

### Resurrection Faith

Critics argue that the followers of Jesus were desperate to be with Jesus and were filled with a longing hope; dejected followers worked themselves into a series of hallucinations, some even group hallucinations. Critics reason that resurrection faith or hope of the believers produced the encounters or visions of the risen Jesus. But the first-century evidence points in the opposite direction. Despite all the remarkable things the followers of Jesus had witnessed him do, they concluded that Jesus was one more messiah whom the Romans executed. The disciples were defeated. Not even the empty tomb provoked them to conclude that Jesus was alive; the risen Jesus had to confront them to awaken resurrection faith. Encounters with the risen Jesus prompted resurrection faith, not vice versa.

How could Stephen say that? The crucifixion had sent Jesus' apostles into hiding, confused and fearful. Their hopes for the kingdom in Israel had vanished in the darkness that had enveloped the cross.

Early on Sunday morning some of the women claimed they had seen Jesus alive. And upon checking the grave, several of the disciples had indeed found it empty. Some of the apostles, however, remained skeptical until an encounter with the risen Jesus convinced them all that he was indeed raised from the dead. During one of these appearances in Galilee, Jesus told the disciples to gather in Jerusalem and to wait there until they were baptized with the Holy Spirit a few days later.

### PENTECOST

When they returned to the Holy City to join the other pilgrims for the celebration of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' crucifixion, excitement among them was running high. During the festival about 120 disciples were meeting in a home, when suddenly God's Spirit fell upon those gathered there. Some thought that it was a violent wind rushing through the house; others testified to a tongue-like flame of fire resting on each of them.

Swept up in the experience, they rushed into the streets and headed for the temple. Many of the visitors in the city saw them and followed because they heard their native tongue coming from the lips of the disciples.

### Tongue Speaking or Glossolalia

Christians have disagreed about the nature of tongue speaking. Some say it is an ability to deliver a message in a language without ever having studied or learned the language. This ability is given by the Holy Spirit and provides God's message in the listener's language even though the speaker usually does not understand that language.

Others say that tongue speaking is ecstatic speech. This series of sounds does not represent a spoken human language. If this is the nature of tongue speaking, then the book of Acts would not picture a language miracle (giving the speaker the ability to speak a foreign language) but a hearing miracle (granted to the listeners, enabling them to understand). Although ecstatic speech was being spoken, the listener heard or understood in his or her own language.

Once at the temple Peter, one of Jesus' apostles, stood before the huge crowd and told them that the miracle they were witnessing was a fulfillment of the prophet Joel's promise about the outpouring of God's Spirit in the "last days." The explanation for the marvel, he said, lay in the recent crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. God had made him Lord and Messiah by raising him from the dead!

Peter's announcement of the resurrection was an astounding development. How could he ever substantiate such a claim? He appealed to the Jewish Scriptures, which said that the Messiah would not be abandoned in death but would be enthroned at God's right hand until universal victory was his (Ps. 16:10; 110:1).

But what do such Scriptures have to do with Jesus of Nazareth? "He was the Messiah," said Peter. "We know it is so, because God raised him from the dead and we are all witnesses of the fact" (Acts 2:32).

From the beginning, then, the apostles preached the resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's purpose announced in the Old Testament. The Messiah, once crucified, was exalted above the universe. Apart from that miracle, said the apostles, there is no gospel, no salvation, and no church. But it is true. Therefore, "Repent," Peter told the Pentecost pilgrims, "and be baptized in the name of Jesus and your sins will be forgiven and you too will receive the gift of the Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Many accepted Peter's invitation. They were baptized and about three thousand were added to the Jesus movement that day. That is how the Christian church started.

It was quite a beginning. Stephen knew the story well and Christians ever since have insisted that the death of Jesus on the cross, his resurrection from the grave, and the empowering mission of the Holy Spirit

are the foundational realities of Christianity. The first forty years saw the infant church spread at a phenomenal rate. It sprang up in most of the major cities in the Roman Empire and was transformed from a tiny Jewish sect into a fellowship of many different peoples.

Stephen, of course, never lived to see it. Yet he grasped first of all the special meaning of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and outpouring of the Spirit for biblical history. He sensed deeply that Christianity could never be confined to the rigid boundaries of the Pharisees' laws.

Jesus himself had hinted that a breach would open. Once, when asked why his disciples did not fast like the Pharisees, he said, "Men [do not] pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved" (Matt. 9:17, NIV). The most important development in first-century Christianity was the rip in the old wineskins.

### THE FIRST COMMUNITY

No one doubted that the first company of believers was Jewish. It included Jesus' mother, Mary, and some other kinsmen, along with the apostles: Peter, James and John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas, son of James. They chose a disciple named Matthias to become the twelfth apostle, replacing Judas Iscariot, who had committed suicide soon after the crucifixion.

Since the whole company was devoutly Jewish, they remained loyal, for a time, to their Jewish law and continued to worship in synagogues and at the temple. In all outward respects their lifestyle resembled any other Jewish sect of the time. The disciples called their new movement "The Way," emphasizing their belief that Jesus would lead his followers to the kingdom of God. Before long, however, the Jerusalem community came to speak of itself by an Old Testament term used to refer to the assembly of Israel. The Greek equivalent was *ekklesia* (or *church* in English) and meant a gathering of people, God's people.

Despite their outward conformity to Jewish religion and their use of the Jewish Scriptures, the disciples sensed that the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost had made them something unique—a new wineskin?

Shortly after Pentecost the temple authorities, uneasy about the preaching of Jesus' resurrection, arrested Peter and the other eleven apostles. They futilely threatened the church's leaders not to proclaim Jesus' resurrection. Despite this the followers of Jesus attended temple

services regularly and strictly observed Jewish laws and rituals. They showed no signs of rejecting the law of Moses or the authority of the temple. Within two years their ranks had grown to several thousand.

Under the leadership of the apostles, the fledgling movement maintained its unity by two special ceremonies that kept the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection at the center of their fellowship.

The first, baptism, was familiar to them because many of the early disciples had followed the ministry of John the Baptist. But baptism in the apostolic community was different. John's baptism was a way of professing faith in a kingdom yet to come. Baptism in the infant church was what theologians now call *eschatological*. It marked entrance into a spiritual kingdom already proclaimed, though still to be revealed in its fullness.

These first Christians came to believe that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, followed by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, were divine events. They inaugurated a new age, and people could enter life in that spiritual kingdom by faith in Jesus as Lord and witness to that faith by baptism.

In a similar way the second ceremony, the Lord's Supper as it was soon called, looked back to Jesus' betrayal and death and found in the events of Calvary and the empty tomb evidence of the new covenant promised by the prophet Jeremiah. Jesus' death and the new life in the Spirit were symbolized and sealed to the congregation of disciples in their drinking from the cup and eating the consecrated bread. This simple meal renewed their covenant with God and with one another.

### THE HELLENISTS

Bound together, then, by the teaching of the apostles and the two ceremonies depicting the death and resurrection of their Lord, the infant church spread throughout Judea. This rapid growth, however, aroused new fears in the authorities and created tensions within the church. More and more of the converts were recruited from among Hellenist Jews. These were Jews who had come to Jerusalem from all parts of the Roman Empire to settle in the Holy City. Many of them had come on pilgrimages, then decided to remain permanently. Like immigrants everywhere, they lived in separate communities. They spoke Greek and used a common Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint.

The Hellenistic Jews were faithful to their religion, but in the world beyond Palestine—Egypt, Asia Minor, Europe—they had long been exposed to Greek culture. They mixed more easily with Gentiles

and were more responsive to new ideas than were their Palestinian cousins.

At first the apostles welcomed to the church the Hellenists who believed in Jesus. The spirit of oneness was marred, however, by a growing rivalry between Palestinian and Hellenist members. Some of the Hellenist believers complained that their widows were overlooked in the church welfare program. In an attempt to remove these resentments, the apostles created a council of seven Hellenist disciples, among them Stephen and Philip, to oversee the distributions. These men may have been the first to occupy an office called elsewhere *deacon* (in Greek, *diakonos*), meaning *servant* or *minister*.

Before long, however, Stephen began preaching in Jerusalem's Hellenist synagogues. That touched off the riot that led to his death. It proved to be only the beginning. Groups of vigilantes began to seize and imprison suspected Nazarenes. One of the vigilante leaders was a zealous Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus.

This first Christian bloodletting, in about AD 36, marked the widening chasm between Judaism and Christianity and turned the young faith into a missionary movement. Though the Hebrew apostles were not molested, the Hellenist disciples were forced to flee Jerusalem. They found refuge in Samaria and in Syria, where they founded Christian communities. Other unnamed Hellenist Christians founded churches at Damascus, Antioch and Tarsus in Syria, on the island of Cyprus, and in Egypt.

News of the churches among the Hellenists filtered back to the Holy City, and the Christian elders in Jerusalem soon sent delegates to establish ties with the new Christian centers. Peter and John went to Samaria to confer with Philip. Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus who was among the earliest Jerusalem converts, traveled to Antioch in Syria. There unnamed "men of Cyprus and Cyrene" had founded a successful Christian movement by taking the revolutionary step of evangelizing Gentiles.

Antioch was the administrative capital of the Roman province of Syria. With a population of half a million, it was also the third largest city in the empire, after Rome and Alexandria. As a busy cosmopolitan center, its racially mixed population was overwhelmingly Gentile, but there was also a large Jewish community. At Antioch, for the first time, Jesus' followers were called *Christians*. Originally, opponents of the church used the term as a derogatory label for the "devotees of the Anointed One" (in Greek, *Christianos*). But the believers soon adopted it gladly.

Thus Antioch grew in Christian influence. In time it succeeded Jerusalem as the center of missionary outreach. This was due in large

part to the work of Saul of Tarsus, who joined Barnabas there about AD 44.

### THE APOSTLE PAUL

No man—other than Jesus, of course—has shaped Christianity more than Saul (or, as Christians came to say, Paul, a name more familiar to the ear of Greek-speaking people). No one did more for the faith, but no one seemed less likely.

When Stephen had crumpled to the ground, bleeding from the stones thrown by his enraged accusers, Saul had stood nearby as leader of the attack upon the Nazarenes. How, he asked, could anyone profess to follow a crucified Messiah? Almost by definition the Messiah is one upon whom the blessing of God rests in a unique way. What fool can believe that crucifixion is a blessing from God?

Saul found the answer to that question when he confronted the Lord one day outside Damascus. He dropped to the ground blinded by a light and he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Soon after Stephen's argument fell into place, and Saul became a believer.

He later explained that the law pronounces a curse on everyone who fails to keep it in its entirety, so all who hope to gain God's favor by keeping the law are exposed to a curse. Fortunately, God provided a way of escape. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us," by hanging on a cross (Gal. 3:10-14, NIV).

Stephen, then, was right. The law of God was given for a time to convince men of their inability to fulfill the will of God and to leave them with no option except to embrace the good news of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

That was strong medicine for Judaism. The authorities wanted no part of it. So the persecutor of Christians became the persecuted among Christians. He was, however, a leader uniquely qualified to bridge the gap between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. He was a man of three worlds: Jewish, Greek, and Roman.

Though he had been educated in the strictest Jewish tradition and had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem, Paul spoke Greek fluently and was familiar with Greek thought and literature. This meant he could express the doctrines and teachings of Jesus, many of which were based on Old Testament beliefs completely foreign to the Gentiles, in ways that the pagan mind could grasp. In addition, Paul was a Roman citizen, which gave him special freedom of movement, protection in his travels, and access to the higher levels of society.

The Palestinian Christians, steeped in traditional Judaism, said, "Tell them that unless they submit to the Jewish law, in addition to believing in Jesus, there is no hope for their faith."

Paul, however, found this impossible. His own experience pointed another way. If a person could gain the righteousness of God by obeying the law, said Paul, I would have been the greatest in the kingdom. But righteousness by personal effort can only lead to failure. Man can be accepted as righteous only through God's undeserved mercy. That is grace. And grace always arises from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many Christians thought Paul was impossibly optimistic. They were deeply troubled by the decline in Christian morality they felt sure would come in the gentile churches. If you teach justification by faith alone, they argued, people will imagine that once they have accepted Christ by faith it does not really matter how they live.

On the contrary, said Paul, if they really have accepted Christ by faith, they have accepted the way of Christ and the mind of Christ. The man who really loves God can do as he chooses, for if he really loves God he will choose to do the will of God.

This difference between Paul and his Jewish opponents did not pass away with the apostles. It has endured in Christianity to our own day. The legally minded think Paul and his kind are rash and unrealistic; Paul and his followers accuse the legally inclined of treason against the meaning of God's grace.

Paul's itinerant ministry, however, won more and more believers to his convictions. On his first journey he visited the island of Cyprus and the main cities in the province of Galatia in central Asia Minor. On his second journey he revisited the congregations he had founded earlier. Then he traveled across western Asia Minor to Troas, where he decided to carry his mission to Europe. Sailing to Macedonia, he set foot for

including those of immortality, resurre good and evil. This superficial similar to Paul in explaining the message of Je From Athens Paul traveled to Corin Christian community. A year and a ha in Syria.

On his third missionary tour, Paul fe preached and taught there for more th to Jerusalem at the end of his journey, and imprisoned him. He spent the ne at Caesarea, the Roman capital of Jude right as a Roman citizen to appeal his c

Thus Paul came at last to the capital the final years of his life awaiting trial. ing, he probably won other converts. Bt secution of Christians (AD 64) we neve there are traditions claiming he went tr By that time the breach with traditi plete. Gentile believers were not circu practiced Jewish dietary laws, and in m day) observance had given way to worsl the day on which Jesus rose from the d

## THE DECLINE OF ]

Voices from Jerusalem, not Rome, how the separation of ways. While Paul w throughout the pagan world, the chu strict adherence to Jewish orthodoxy. P sibility. About AD 41, James, the son c

were growing ever stronger. The completion of the Jewish temple in AD 64 put thousands of laborers out of work, adding to the general discontent. Finally in AD 66 the Jews revolted, signaling their intent by refusing to perform the daily sacrifice for the emperor.

As one account describes it,

The tragic, bloody war that followed cost more lives than any previous conflict. The Jews held out against overwhelming odds for four years, but they could not withstand the power of Rome. In AD 70 Emperor Vespasian's forces, led by Titus, broke through the walls of Jerusalem, looted and burned the temple, and carried off the spoils to Rome. The Holy City was totally destroyed. In the reprisals that followed, every synagogue in Palestine was burned to the ground.

At the start of the revolt, the leaders of the Jerusalem church were advised in a vision to flee the city.

Pious Jews considered the Christian flight an act of treason, and it sealed the fate of the church in the Jewish world. With the decision to bar Christian Jews from synagogue services some years later, the break was complete. Any Jew who wished to remain faithful to his religion could not also be a Christian. The new faith had become and would remain a gentile movement. The old wineskin was irreparably torn.

For practical purposes AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem mark the end of the apostolic age. Most of the original apostles were dead, and the churches they had founded had passed into new hands. Through their tireless activity a powerful new elixir had spilled out into the Mediterranean world. More lasting and resilient than the forces that opposed it, the message of the apostles would endure persecution and opposition, emerging centuries later as the dominant faith of the Roman Empire.