

# Church through the ages

**Staying True to God's Way**

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## The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, editor

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# Preface

Church history matters. Those who neglect to study it will repeat its critical mistakes.

This study presents the church from both a historical and a doctrinal perspective. The emphasis is on the importance of following God's instructions and truth for the church. You will be encouraged to be faithful to God's doctrine and practice for the church and to learn from both good and bad examples from church history. And most importantly, you will be encouraged to take steps now to protect the Biblical understanding of the gospel.

History never stops moving forward. As will be abundantly apparent in this study, it takes only one generation for a church to leave its Biblical moorings. The horizontal lines on the cover are meant to indicate departure from God's way. Some of those lines even reverse course, and all of them end at a point. Christ is still building His church. It is of utmost importance to make sure we are part of His building endeavor by staying true to God's way.



# Thriving Despite Tensions and Threats

## History Focus

The first century church

## Theme

God instituted the church at Pentecost with the mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ is Lord to all people.

## Memory Verse

*“Upon this rock I will build my church;  
and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”  
(Matthew 16:18).*

## GETTING STARTED

When did the church begin, and what influenced its early years? Those questions are important to answer before delving into a study on church history. The answers will help you lay aside any misconceptions you might have about church based on your childhood experiences.

1. What attitudes did you form about church as a child?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How have those attitudes continued to influence you today?

This lesson will help us see church from a Biblical perspective so your study on the history of the church will help you grow in your appreciation of and participation in Christ’s church.

## HISTORY LESSON

Before His death, Jesus told His disciples that it would be necessary for Him to leave before the Father would send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; Acts 1:4). The coming of the Spirit during the Feast of Pentecost fulfilled His promise.

### **The Church's Birth**

Christ's last instructions (Acts 1:1–12) were for the disciples to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the Father to send the promised Holy Spirit. He reminded them that the Father would not yet reveal to them end-time details. Their focus was to be on something else—namely, they were to be witnesses of the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Their eyewitness accounts of Jesus were to proceed to the ends of the earth.

3. Read Acts 2:8. When Jesus promised the Spirit would come, what questions do you think the disciples must have had?

Jesus' promise of the Spirit is proof that God sovereignly ruled to bring about His purpose for this present age. The events that began in Acts 2 were not a result of the apostles' initiative or effort but rather were from the hand of God. The apostles watched God inaugurate a new program that they were still beginning to understand.

The coming of the Holy Spirit was on the Day of Pentecost, which is always fifty days before the Passover Sabbath (Lev. 23:15–16). Pentecost was one of the three main Jewish feasts in Jerusalem. Jews came from around the world to bring the firstfruits of their wheat harvest as a gift to God. The Spirit's coming happened in a house that was likely near the temple area where many thousands of people were congregated to worship God as part of the Feast of Pentecost. The large crowd witnessed the believers' Spirit-empowered ability to speak in languages they had never learned. The crowd acknowledged the events as part of a divine sign. But they did not know their exact meaning until Peter revealed it under the Holy Spirit's direction.

In his sermon (Acts 2:14–36), Peter pointed to the Holy Spirit's coming



as the reason why some believers could suddenly speak in languages they had never learned. He went on to preach that the Jewish people, led by their leaders, had rejected and crucified the Man, Jesus of Nazareth, whom God had approved with signs and wonders and had raised from the dead and honored as Lord and Messiah (2:36). Fear seized the people when they realized they were responsible for rejecting God's anointed one, the Messiah for Whom they had waited so long. In desperation, they asked Peter what they should do. Peter answered them by sharing the gospel and inviting them to repent and be baptized, adding that the crowd would inherit the long-awaited promises of God through faith in Christ. Three thousand people responded in faith and became part of Christ's brand-new church.

Luke gives us a glimpse into the activities that occupied the new community of believers (2:42–47). Their activities seem normal, but remember that the early church did not have a church manual to follow. Instead, the Holy Spirit was directing them to participate in church-building activities.

4. Read Acts 2:42–47. What words show the believers acted as a *community*?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Do those words describe your church? Could they?

## **The Church's Expansion Despite Tensions**

While the early church began as a close community, it was not long before it faced conflict. But the gospel proved powerful enough to overcome even deep, long-standing tensions in first-century Israel. The gospel's success in the midst of such tensions demonstrates that redemption in Christ was not for one ethnic group or a people from a particular background but for all nations and ethnicities. The early church showed that the gospel is the answer to a world separated by pride, prejudice, and other sinful attitudes and customs.

## Tensions among Jews

There were two Jewish groups in Israel that did not intermingle before becoming believers. The first

group was called the Hellenists, or *Grecians*. Such Jews more openly embraced Greek culture and spoke the Greek language. The second group was known as *Hebrews*. They worshiped God in Hebrew and were more resistant to Greek culture. After Jews from both groups had come to faith in Jesus as their Savior, a dispute arose between them concerning the distribution of alms. Those distributing the aid seemed to show favoritism to the Hebraic widows in neglect of the Grecian widows (6:1).

6. Read Acts 6:3. Who would be the ultimate answer for solving the conflict between the Jews?

The problem with the distribution of alms was resolved under the direction of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the church continued to grow (6:5–7).

7. What community problems could surface in a church today?

8. What role does the Holy Spirit play in solving those conflicts?

## Tensions between Jews and Samaritans

After the stoning of Stephen, many Jewish Christians left Jerusalem to escape the persecution that followed. Philip also left and preached the gospel in Samaria, the land between Judah and Galilee (Acts 8:4, 5). Philip's actions were countercultural, for Jews did not normally interact with Samaritans.

The Samaritans were descendants of both Jews and the various people groups who inhabited Israel after the Assyrian destruction of

the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:24). The Samaritans' Jewish ancestors had intermarried with the imported foreign people groups and had adopted some of the foreigners' pagan religious practices (Ezra 9:1–10:44; Neh. 13:23–28). The exiles from the Southern Kingdom of Judah who returned to Jerusalem during the sixth and fifth centuries BC did not accept the ethnically and religiously mixed Samaritans.

By the time of the New Testament, the Jews and the Samaritans had developed a mutual animosity. The animosity led the Samaritans to worship God in their own temple and to recognize only the five books of Moses as Scripture.

Jesus crossed the centuries-old cultural and religious divide between Samaritans and Jews by preaching to the people of Samaria (John 4:9–42). Jesus' preaching was highly successful.

9. Read John 4:39–42. What key phrase in verse 42 shows the gospel is for everyone?

Philip followed Jesus' pattern, being the first person on record to preach the gospel to the Samaritans in the church age. In so doing, he fulfilled Jesus' directive to be witnesses in Samaria (Acts 1:8).

An animosity of seven hundred years does not simply disappear on its own. Samaritans and Jews coming together into one body of believers showed the gospel was more powerful than deep, prejudicial lines. The Jewish evangelism of Samaria gives us confidence that the spread of the gospel is primarily a work of God.

10. Whom might you be tempted to label as *impossible to reach with the gospel*?

## **Tensions between Jews and Gentiles**

The gospel also overcame tensions between Jews and Gentiles. Luke recorded the account of a Roman centurion who became a Christian

and experienced the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10). He had already come to believe that the God of the Jews was the only true God. One day he received a vision to send messengers in a nearby town for a man named Simon Peter (10:3–6). Meanwhile, Simon Peter, just prior to receiving the messengers from Cornelius, had also received a vision that perplexed him (10:9–16). Peter went to Cornelius and revealed that his view of God and the gospel had changed (10:24–36).

11. Read Acts 10:34. What did Peter perceive was true about God?

While Peter spoke, Cornelius received the gift of the Holy Spirit and spoke in foreign languages like the Jewish believers did on the Day of Pentecost (10:44, 45). The Jewish brethren needed to witness Cornelius exercise the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues. This was God’s divine evidence that Gentiles were also part of God’s family and that salvation had nothing to do with any religious affiliation or rites.

Four severe challenges threatened the survival of the church during its first fifty years. But none of them was strong enough to derail God’s plan to spread the gospel and grow His church.

### **Threat 1: Gospel Distortion**

When the number of Gentile believers grew, Jews questioned the Gentile believers’ obligation to practice Jewish circumcision and observe holy days and dietary restrictions. The Jews struggled with how an uncircumcised Gentile could possibly be acceptable to God without adopting Jewish practices. After all, circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. So some Jews began to teach that believing Gentiles must be circumcised to fully inherit the promises of salvation. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to refute this teaching, arguing that to require the Gentiles to observe Jewish elements of the law, such as circumcision, was to announce a different gospel that made justification based on works of the law (Gal. 1:6, 7; 3:2, 3). This conflict led to the Jerusalem council, a special meeting of the apostles (Acts 15). Peter definitively stated that Gentiles do not need to add Jewish rituals or rites to salvation by faith.

12. Read Acts 15:6–9. On what basis did Peter make his definitive statement about Gentile salvation?

Had these Jewish teachers succeeded, the gospel would have been changed from a message of salvation by grace alone for *all* nations (Matt. 28:19) to a works salvation that was limited to ethnic Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism.

That the gospel is still preached today in its purest form is not a matter of luck or even human effort. God has sovereignly protected the gospel down through the ages so that it is still preached effectively today.

### **Threat 2: Imperial Persecution**

The Roman state was initially indifferent to Christianity, assuming that it was merely another Jewish religious sect (Acts 18:12–15). However, as more and more Gentiles came to faith in Christ, this attitude changed.

The first Roman official to target Christians was the emperor Nero. He used Christians as a scapegoat, blaming the terrible fire of Rome on them in AD 64. The Roman historian, Tacitus, who was no friend of Christianity, gave a brief account of how Nero unjustly and cruelly persecuted the Christians in Rome (*Annals XV*). By the end of the first century, another emperor, Domitian, also targeted Christians for persecution. This opposition increased in frequency during the second century. Yet the gospel and Christ's church continued to flourish.

### **Threat 3: Jewish Revolution**

The Roman persecution of Jews was the beginning of the end of a tense peace that had existed for about one hundred years between the Jews in Israel and their Roman rulers. The Jews developed deep hostilities toward both the Romans and the Jewish leaders who collaborated with them. The Jews finally revolted in AD 66, gaining several victories over Roman forces. These gains increased their confidence. Rome responded by sending legions of soldiers to Israel to capture the Jewish strongholds and reassert their control in the region. Before the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, the Christians in the city migrated to Pella, a city on the east

side of the Jordan River. The Romans eventually broke through to capture Jerusalem and destroy the temple (AD 70). Three years later they captured Masada, the last Jewish fortress.

The Jewish revolt awakened the Romans and made them more aware of both Jewish and Christian threats to their sovereignty in Israel. But the awakened bear could not stop what God was doing through His new community of believers. His church moved forward under Rome's nose. The empire was no match for God.

### **Threat 4: Leadership Cessation**

Losing the apostles to martyrdom was the final major threat to the first century church. The end of the apostles was no doubt difficult for the young church. And the fact that the apostles were killed for their faith threatened to shake the early church to its core. They didn't expect to lose the apostles. In fact, many early Christians expected Christ to return during their lifetime. Some in the congregation in Thessalonica even believed that Christ had already returned (2 Thess. 2:1, 2). Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians to correct their error (2:3, 4). The early church, then, had to learn to move beyond the age of the apostles. Under the Spirit's direction, Paul wrote to Timothy about how to do just that.

13. Read 2 Timothy 2:2. What pattern did Paul set for replacing leadership as the apostles passed off the scene?

Teaching the next generation the truth is as important for believers today as it was for the early church. This course will help you understand how and why God's truth was abandoned in the centuries since the early church. This course will also encourage you stay faithful to God's truth and instructions for the church today.

## **LEARNING FROM HISTORY**

God sovereignly worked to call into existence a new people set apart to proclaim the gospel to the lost everywhere. This new group is the fulfillment of Christ's promise to build His church (Matt. 16:18).

14. Do you recognize the connection between the first century church and your church? How should such a connection affect your perspective on your church?

15. How might you respond to Christ's ongoing church building project?

At its core, Christ's church is believers. That means Christ is in the business of building our lives as part of a local community of believers.

16. Christ wants to work in your life as part of His church building ministry. How will you respond to that truth?

17. Christ also desires to work through you to build the lives of fellow believers. How will you respond to that truth?