

Sharing Jesus From Generation to Generation

As Good Shepherd celebrates its 50th anniversary, this is the first in a series of articles about church history.

A History of the Early Christian Church

The Book of Acts is only the beginning of the story of how the “Word of the Lord grew.” Christians in Jerusalem, the first center of the Church, were soon scattered as the city was destroyed in 70 AD. Antioch, in Syria, another mission center, first sent out the Apostle Paul. The church in Ephesus of Asia Minor, founded by Paul, was later led by John, the longest living disciple. These cities became centers of Christian leadership. Meanwhile, other apostles spread Christianity to Africa, Persia (Modern Iraq), China and India; and the church was established in Rome, capital of the Empire, where Peter and Paul are both thought to have been killed.

After the Apostles died, the church struggled against the attacks of paganism and Judaism, which tried to destroy it, and against false teachers within, such as the Gnostics and Montanists, which would have twisted and distorted the message. While the believers endured cruel physical persecution, often supported by the government, the “Apostolic Fathers”, such as Justin Martyr, Iranaeus, Origin and Tertullian,

wrote against early heresies. Alexandria, Egypt, already a center of Jewish population, rose as a new center of Christian teaching.

In the face of false teachers, the church pointed to its continued succession of leaders from the time of the apostles. Iranaeus, for example, learned from Polycarp, who was taught by the apostle John. The claims of new teachings forced the church to define which writings, in addition to what is known as the “Old Testament” were considered to be God’s won word, the “New Testament”. A formal statement of faith, later called the “Apostles’ Creed”, began to develop as it was used to transmit the faith to those being baptized. Heresies, such as Arianism, which denied that Jesus was true God and true man, were opposed by Christian leaders such as Athanasius.

In 312 AD, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, converted to Christianity. Suddenly the relationship between the church and the state swung from persecution to approval. With support came supervision. In 325, Constantine called a council of the whole church at Nicea to deal with questions of false teaching which threatened church unity and so threatened the peace of his realm. It was also Constantine who moved the capital of the empire from Rome, in Italy, to what became Constantinople, in Turkey, making it a new center of Christianity in the East and leaving the bishop of Rome as the most powerful individual in that key city.

Later emperors continued the trend of support for the church, limiting paganism and heresy with official laws. As the Empire began to decline, barbaric kingdoms on the frontiers began to be won to the faith by bold pioneer missionaries. Heresies which had troubled the church – such as the denial that the Holy Spirit was an equal member of the trinity; misunderstandings of how the divine and human natures and will were united in the person of Christ; overdependence on the personal character of pastors; and crediting human will with the power to cooperate in salvation – were dealt with by a series of church councils at Constantinople, Ephesus and Calcedon. At these meetings, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in Africa, gained prominence as a theologian along with Ambrose and Jerome. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible became the standard for many centuries.

The church was gradually beginning to grow and change. Free from persecution, it came out of hiding in house churches into permanent buildings, patterned after Roman town halls. Church laws and courts developed, independent of civil law. The leadership grew into a hierarchical clergy, distinct from lay people. The Bishop of Rome grew in power and authority beyond that of other key cities. As Christianity became common and expected, the general level of spirituality declined. Others began to withdraw from public life into religious monasteries or live as solitary hermits.

Next: The Medieval Period