

CITY OF THE LIVING GOD

CHURCH HISTORY

28

SERIES

In dedication to all the soul-winners that need a Bible study on the history of the Early Church and its fight against false doctrine.

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“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:29-31).

The Early Church started on the day of Pentecost about AD 33. From its inception the church believers were referred by different terms such as disciples, believers, and eventually as “Christians” (Acts 11:26). The local churches were never referred to as a group in any other term than the church. The early church held strongly to teachings that were recognized in all churches. While there existed false teachers that tried to inject their beliefs within the church, they were opposed by the apostles and pastors. The Apostle Paul warns the churches against all false teachings in his letters to the churches and individuals. As well as John the Elder in his epistles does likewise.

Paul warns the Ephesian elders which were the pastors and leaders of the churches in that area that false teachers would try to affect the churches with their false teachings. He warns them for three years “every night and day with tears.” Obviously, God showed him the future.

PROPHETIC WARNINGS

Paul did not warn the Ephesian elders in vain. Otherwise, what would have been the reason for him to warn them? His warnings were listened to by these elders and helped them later on to defend themselves from these false teachings that crept into some of the churches.

John the elder, who wrote the Gospel of John, I, II, III John, and the Book of Revelation, was the last living apostle about AD 90. He warned the church against the false teachings of the Gnostics (pronounced nos-tics) which believed that all matter was evil. Their teachings lead to the belief that Jesus could not have come in the flesh because it is sinful. So, they believed that Jesus came as a “phantom.”

1 John 4:3

“And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”

The Gnostics not only spread the false teaching that God could not have manifest himself in the flesh, but they taught that any fleshly desires were evil, so they began to teach celibacy and abstaining from certain foods.

The Apostle Paul gave his credentials as being “circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5). Being a Jewish Oneness believer, his teachings are numerous on the subject of one God. He says in 1 Corinthians 8, “*we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one*” (vs. 4). His teaching that God is one was foundational to his beliefs on the identity of Jesus. Jesus was not another person in the godhead.

Paul warned Timothy of people teaching false doctrine concerning the identity of Jesus. This is why he follows up the teaching about God

manifest in the flesh with the warning of false doctrine concerning Jesus' identity.

1 Timothy 3:16-4:3

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods.”

Eventually these false teachings led to the development of the monasteries with the monks that were called the “desert fathers.” Their false teachings on the identity of Jesus had a very negative impact on the way that they lived. The more that they held back their human feelings of relationship, marriage, friendship and even food, the more holy they felt that they had become. Obviously, this was why false teachings were so viscously fought against within the church. That’s why the Bible warns against man’s false teachings and philosophies that twist the teachings of the Mighty God in Christ.

Colossians 2:8-10

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.”

MONOTHEISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The early church from its inception has always held on to the belief that God is one. The church began within Judaism among Jews that were taught early on from childhood that God is one. They were to repeat that teaching to their children multiple times during the day and night and were to make physical reminders that they would see every day.

Deuteronomy 6:4,7-9

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one... You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Clearly, God wanted to make sure that they did not deviate from this teaching. This was the teaching that all of the New Testament apostles and writers believed from an early age. There was no other teaching so foundational to them than the teaching that God is one.

Jesus answered the pharisee that asked him about the highest commandment of all:

Mark 12:28-29

“Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, “Which is the first commandment of all?” Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...”

And to this agree the words that Jude penned “to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen” (Jude 1:25).

THE CHURCH AFTER THE APOSTLES

After the Death of John the Elder, other false teachings began to creep into certain local churches and leaders. Still the vast majority of the Christians held on to the teachings that the apostles taught. They looked unto the copies of the New Testament books that were circulating to all the churches as their basis of truth.

The Church after AD 100 continued to be persecuted off and on by the Roman emperors until Emperor Diocletian in AD 305. With the persecution of the Church, the Christians fled to all parts of the Roman empire with this gospel of truth. While there were false teachings about the identity of Jesus Christ arising in certain areas of the empire in the 3rd century such as Arianism and Proto-Trinitarianism, the majority of the Christian churches and leaders held on to the belief that Jesus was the incarnate God of the Old Testament.

In the early AD 200's, the teachings of the Oneness of God continued to be the most widespread belief among the bulk of the Church. These oneness believers were called Modalists since they believed that God was one, but had different modes of operation.

About AD 213, Tertullian the founder of the doctrine of the Trinity, states that the majority of the Christian Church in his day denied God as three persons, but believed that God was only one with many different titles. He writes against the oneness Christians and calls them the "simple. He states, "The simple, indeed, (I will not call them unwise and unlearned,) who always constitute the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation (of the Three in One)" (Ad Praxeas).

The Church during this time was beginning to be called the Catholic Church, but held to the teachings of the oneness of God and denied any teachings of trinitarianism. There were four bishops of Rome during this period that professed their beliefs in Jesus as the only God: Eleutherus (174 to 189), Victor (189 to 199), Zephyrinus (199 AD) and

Callistus (217 AD). Zephyrinus states, "I know one God, Christ Jesus, and besides him no other born and suffering," which he announced with the limiting clause, "the Father did not die, but the Son." Callistus latter

kicked Tertullian out of the church for some of his erroneous beliefs. Sometime after AD 200, Trinitarianism and Arianism began to surge in many churches.

Even at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, where various bishops and leaders came together to speak about the identity of Jesus Christ, the council being led by Alexander of Alexandria voiced their belief that Jesus Christ was of the same substance (homoousios) of God and that the Father and the Son were one person (hypostasis). While there was some confusion of exactly what they believed, there still is evidence that the majority believed God was one. At the end of the council, there was a condemnation issued to anyone that did not believe that God was of one substance (homoousios) and one person (hypostasis). While the council was not ordained by God and was avoided by many, it still showed that the majority still believed that God was one.

It wasn't until after the Nicæan Council, in AD 381 at the Council of Constantinople, that doctrine of the trinity evolved into three equally divine persons and this became the official doctrine of the Catholic Church.

It is noteworthy that during this time, there were many oneness believers throughout all of the Roman Empire. They were referred to by different terms such as Monarchian Modalists, Sabellianists, Patripassionists, and other terms. Throughout the succeeding centuries all the way up to the Reformation Era of the AD 1500's, Apostolics have always existed under different names and are noted in history—usually by other councils. In many of the cases these groups were so large and thriving that they had to be addressed by the Catholic Church so that they could try to stop their growth.

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