Bible 101 • Summit View Church of Christ • Spring-Summer 2026

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

101-200 C.E.

March 18, 2026

Key Dates:
ca. 115 CE, martyrdom of Ignatius
135, Jerusalem destroyed again, rebuilt as a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina
155, martyrdom of Polycarp

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: Christianity spreads rapidly and becomes fully distinct from Judaism • leadership focuses around the bishops • heresies arise and are rejected • persecution is local and sporadic, but always possible

Key Questions: Which books does the church consider Scripture? • How do outsiders view the church and the Christian faith?

Key Places: Rome & Ephesus (very influential congregations), Jerusalem (destroyed again by the Romans)

Key People: Ignatius (died ca. 115; Bishop of Antioch; wrote 7 letters to various churches while en route to his martyrdom in Rome) • **Irenaeus** (ca. 130-ca. 200; Bishop of Lyons; widely respected teacher/writer; wrote *Against Heresies,* refuting Marcion and Gnosticism)

Church Leadership: Bishops (separate from the elderships) gradually emerge, joining elders and deacons, and grow in power throughout the century

1) SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

- rapid growth! — mostly throughout the Roman Empire, but also in the east beyond the Empire
- tremendous growth in Asia Minor in particular (Ephesus was the leading church there)
- rapid increase in societal influence, leading to suspicion by outsiders and sometimes persecution

2) WORSHIP & PRACTICES

• CANON — Muratorian Canon (ca. 170-200) offers the earliest list we have of documents that the churches accepted as Scripture: all of our current New Testament except Hebrews, James, and 1 & 2 Peter (but the first part of the list is missing). It also mentions the *Revelation of Peter* and the *Wisdom of Solomon*, but rejects *The Shepherd of Hermas* and some other well-known documents.

During this period, churches were weighing the value of Christian documents according to the truth of their teaching and their authenticity as documents written by the apostles or close associates of the apostles.

• WORSHIP — Around 155-160, the church in Rome met on Sunday morning, not on the Sabbath. Christian hymns began to appear.

• BAPTISM was preceded by extensive teaching, including an emphasis on how baptism connected the new Christian with the Holy Spirit so that the Christian shared in Christ's victory over demons. Protection against demons was a strong motivation for people to follow Jesus.

• *The Old Roman Symbol* was a teaching used in Rome to help new converts learn and summarize their faith in Jesus (it was a predecessor of the Apostles' Creed):

I believe in God the Father almighty; and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried, on the third day rose again from the dead,

ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, whence He will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting.

- The LORD'S SUPPER became less attached to the Agape meal than it had been in the church's earliest years (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). It came to be attached to a preaching service (as it usually is today). At least some Christians believed the bread and cup are transmuted into the actual blood and flesh of Christ when the words "This is my body" and "This is my blood" are spoken.
- OTHER PRACTICES — Some Christians said the Lord's prayer 3 times daily and fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. There were still Christian Jews around, including some (called Nazareans) who followed the Law of Moses but did not require Gentile Christians to do so.
- SACRED DAYS
  - *Easter* — Christians in Asia Minor celebrated Christ's resurrection on the Jewish Passover, but Christians in Rome celebrated it on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox (as we do today). The Roman bishop in 155-166 pressured Christians in Asia Minor to adopt the Roman church's date, and Victor, bishop of Rome in 189-199, nearly excommunicated all Christians in the province of Asia over this dispute (Irenaeus talked him out of doing so).
  - *Other Special Days* — Pentecost, "birthdays" (execution days) of martyrs starting with Polycarp in 155
- CHRISTIAN STRUCTURES
  - Catacombs in Rome contain Christian paintings from the second century.
  - No specifically Christian buildings from the 100s have survived.
- LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE — Churches everywhere gradually moved from an elders + deacons leadership structure to a bishop + elders + deacons structure. At first, the bishop was the chairperson of the eldership—probably something like today's preacher, an executive officer and leading teacher for the congregation. Appointing an executive officer and lead teacher probably became necessary for organizational purposes as churches grew larger. Eventually, the bishop came to have authority over the eldership and was considered a successor to the apostles. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was a strong advocate for the role of bishop. He urged the churches to "do nothing without the bishop" (the Lord's Supper, marriages, baptisms, etc.).

3) INTERNAL PROBLEMS

- **MARCION** (ca. 144)
  - taught that there are 2 Gods: the lesser (Old Testament) God who created the world and the greater (New Testament) God who was the merciful Father of Jesus Christ
  - emphasized grace, love, and forgiveness, denied the resurrection of the body, Jesus' second coming, and the final judgment, prohibited marriage, required fasting
  - accepted as Scripture only 10 edited letters of Paul and a revised version of Luke
- **MONTANISM** (founded by Montanus between 156 and 172)
  - sort of the Pentecostals of their time, emphasized prophecy heavily, considered speaking in tongues a form of prophecy
  - orthodox in doctrine but disruptive through its attempted revival of prophecy, its emphasis on marriage, fasting, and martyrdom, and its eschatological speculations
- **GNOSTICISM** (began in the first century CE) — a form of spirituality that was sometimes clothed in Christianity, sometimes in Judaism, sometimes in neither. The Nag Hammadi Library discovered in Egypt in 1945 contained 52 mostly Gnostic texts. Gnostic beliefs varied widely. Key concepts:
  - the material world is evil, spirit alone is good; we need release from the material world

- the supreme God, called the One, is pure spirit; he could not have created matter (which is evil); matter was created by lesser deities (demiurges) that exist in spheres descending from the One to the earth, separating the two realms

- we need to free the soul (good) from the body (evil) — some advocated for asceticism and extreme purification, others exercised extreme indulgence that would free the soul from the body

- once freed from the body, the soul needed secret knowledge of the rulers of the higher realms and passwords to get the soul through to the One

- to Christian gnostics, Christ was the Redeemer who shared secret knowledge with select teachers

• **ELKESAITES** (named for the prophet Elkesai, 101) —Jewish Christians who continued to practice Jewish customs, rejected Paul's writings, and viewed Christ as merely a human prophet

• **EBIONITES** (from Hebrew *ebion,* "the poor") — Christian Jews in the Transjordan

- continued many Jewish practices and required Gentiles to submit to the Law of Moses (they did not like Paul's teaching to the contrary)
- regarded Jesus as a man and prophet who became the Messiah by living a righteous life
- rejected the virgin birth, practiced water baptism for forgiveness of sins

• **MONARCHIANS** — rejected the idea that the Logos (Jesus) is God, because that would make 2 Gods; they rejected John's Gospel and Revelation

• **WHAT TO DO WITH THOSE WHO FALL AWAY?** — Churches struggled to decide whether Christians guilty of a major sin (adultery, murder, apostasy) <u>after baptism</u> could be permitted repentance. Roman churches stood against such repentance on the basis of Hebrews 10:26-31. Some said one repentance for serious offenses after baptism should be permitted. Others said charitable giving could be used as proof of repentance. Others advocated for permitting repentance demonstrated through public confession. Different churches addressed such matters differently. One of the goals of stern refusal to accept repentance was to avoid frequent cycles of *sin-repent-repeat*.

4) DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM (135 CE)

• The Bar Kochba Rebellion (132-135) of the Jews against Rome resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem a second time (following the destruction in 70 CE). Jerusalem was turned into a Roman city renamed Aelia Capitolina. All Jews were expelled. Caesarea (the Roman capital of Palestine) became the center of Palestinian Christianity (though Antioch of Syria remained the leading Christian city on the east side of the empire).

5) ATTRACTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

• impressive charity toward one another and outsiders
• courage in the face of death/martyrdom
• self-restraint in regard to passions; high moral standards
• promise of victory over demonic powers

6) OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

• outsiders mistook the eating of the "body and blood" to refer to cannibalism and Christians calling each other "brother and sister" to refer to incestuous relationships

• the Greeks/Romans despised Christians "for worshiping a crucified man, abandoning Greek religion, believing in the resurrection ('immortality'), and accepting doctrines by faith rather than by demonstration." *(Everett Ferguson, <u>Backgrounds of Early Christianity</u> 3rd ed., page 599)*

• Celsus [late 100s] thought Christians broke the order of society, abandoned traditional religion, and did not help the emperor fight against Rome's enemies (*Against Celsus* 3.5; 5.25, 34; 8.65ff.)

The "Alexamenos Graffito" (ca. 200)
- graffiti scratched on a stone in a guardroom on Palatine Hill in Rome
- shows a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross, with another man raising his hand in worship
- the writing says, "Alexamenos worships his god"
- *background:* Jews in the Roman Empire were often said to worship a donkey as their God; here Jesus is the donkey

7) PERSECUTION

• "Persecutions, therefore, were local and sporadic, depending on charges being brought and magistrates following through. The threat of persecution was ever present, but persecution was not a constant experience. Everything depended on the general circumstances of the empire, the attitude of the populace, and the policy of individual governors. Often the pressure from the crowds provoked persecution, while the authorities tried to get Christians to conform outwardly so as to avoid the death penalty. Thus times of economic or political disaster when someone was needed on whom to place the blame were particularly bad times for Christians… Rome was tolerant except for religions associated with debauchery, disorder, or disloyalty." *(Ferguson 606)*

• See the Pliny-Trajan Correspondence (ca. 112)

- Pliny was worried that there were so many Christians in his region that they were causing the local temples and associated businesses to be abandoned.

• IGNATIUS, BISHOP OF ANTIOCH — martyred in Rome — sent 7 letters to encourage churches as he was taken westward to Rome — He urged the churches in proper conduct, faithfulness to Christ, and obedience to their bishops. He also insisted that the church in Rome not try to rescue him; he wanted to die for Jesus who had died for him!

• Emperor Antoninus Pius (ruled 138-161) forbade a pagan uprising against Christians in Thessalonica and Athens and another uprising against Christians in Larissa in Thessaly.

• Christians enjoyed relative peace" during Hadrian's reign (117-138).

• POLYCARP, 86-year-old Bishop of Smyrna, was the 12th martyr in Smyrna — killed on February 23, 155 — his "birthdate" (execution date) came to be celebrated annually. The careful gathering up of his bones began the cult of relics.