Pre-Reformation Church History

Introduction

A. Why study Church History?

1. Necessary to understand ourselves

2. See how God operates in providence toward his Church

3. See how Satan has attempted to destroy the Church

4. To observe life and struggles of great heroes of Faith

5. Helps to evaluate methods and goals of Christian work

6. Valuable source for preaching material

B. Cautions in studying Church History

1. In no period of Church history has doctrine been completely pure

2. The most exemplary Christians were often misguided

C. Description of Church History

1. *historia* = process of inquiry, historiography

2. *historikos* = product of inquiry, the written result

3. *geschichte* = the impressions and beliefs that evolved from previous times

4. *Historical Theology* is the study of the development of doctrines

5. *Ecclesiastical History* is the study of people and events that have shaped the church and its beliefs

I. The world into which Christ came

There is little information regarding the church itself before A.D. 80

A. Roman Empire

1. World of law and justice: *Pax Romana*

2. Culminations of the Roman Republic and of the Hasmonean Dynasty in Palestine

* + - Pompey conquers Jerusalem in 63 BC
		- Julius Caesar defeats Pompey in 47 BC to end the Roman Republic

3. Roman citizenship (extended to entire Empire by A.D. 200)

4. Concise history to Constantine

a. Julian family: Julius to Nero

I Cent. b. Flavian family: Vespasian, Titus, Domitian

II Cent. c. Antonines: stabilized leadership, begun by Nerva. Continuity preserved by adoption of heir from among military leadership.

 Notable emperors: Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius

III Cent. e. decline in Empire; over 20 emperors, many coups

IV Cent. f. severe persecution climaxes under Emperor Diocletian (284‑305)

g. edict of toleration by Constantine, A.D. 313, (Schaff, II p. 72)

5. Advantages to Christianity

a. Comparative peace and safety

b. Lack of borders

c. Roman roads

d. Roman legal system

 6. Disadvantages to Christianity

a. Emperor cult worship

b. Official opposition to Christianity

“So long as Christianity was regarded by the Romans as a mere sect of Judaism, it shared the hatred and contempt, indeed, but also the legal protection bestowed on that ancient national religion.”
–Schaff II, p. 40.

However, once it passed into the category of “new” religion, it fell under the ban as a *religion illicita*. –Schaff II, p. 41.

B. Hellenistic Culture

1. Achievements of Greece (Golden Age, 800‑300 BC)

art, culture, philosophy, language, literature

2. Spread of Greek civilization

‑340 BC, Philip of Macedon united the Greek city states

‑323 BC, Alexander dies and his kingdom is split into four regions

3. The Advantages to Christianity.

a. Universal means of communication, Koine Greek

b. Widespread skepticism regarding old, established religions

c. Development of oratory reached pinnacle

4. Disadvantages to Christianity

a. Lower classes attached to Greek superstitions and Greek Mystery Cults that involved wild orgies, eating flesh of live bulls, and general immorality

b. Skepticism of new religions

c. Greek philosophy (with its inherent dualism) provided basis for many early heresies: Gnosticism, Docetism, Cerithianism, etc.

C. Influence of Judaism

1. Extent of Judaism – throughout the world; two diasporas

2. Jewish worship

a. Temple worship ended 70 A.D.

b. Synagogue worship began during Babylonian captivity

c. Order of worship:

‑Shema, Prayer, Reading from Law, Reading from prophets, Sermon

\*\*Characterized by simplicity and dignity

3. Critical dates

A.D. 70 Jerusalem, Temple destroyed by Titus: Christians fled to Pella across the Jordan for refuge

A.D. 73 fall of Masada

A.D. 132‑35 final revolt under Bar Kochba; destruction and eviction from Jerusalem (penalty of death for returning). Jerusalem renamed: “Aelia Capitolina”

II. Church of First Century

A. Beginnings of Roman Empire

1. Julian family

Augustus: 30 B.C. to A.D 14 (diarchy with Senate, 27 B.C.)

Tiberius: A.D. 14‑37, adopted son of Augustus

‑emperor in time of Christ, Lk. 3:1

‑appointed Pilate A.D. 26, removed Pilate A.D. 36

Caligula: A.D. 37‑41

Claudius: A.D. 41‑54 (Acts 11:28, 18:2), expanded bureaucracy

Nero: A.D. 54‑68, committed suicide in A.D. 68 at 32 years of age after killing much of his own family (I, p. 387f.)

2. Interregnum (rule by generals, usurpation, coups)

(Galba A.D. 68, Otho A.D. 69, Vitellius A.D. 69)

3 Flavian family

Vespasian A.D. 69‑79 left Eastern theater under son, Titus, in order to march on Rome; frugal emperor; prophesied by Josephus in Palestine to be next emperor

Titus: A.D. 79-81

Domitian: A.D. 81-96 brother of Titus, killed by own family; emperor during exile of John

B. Beginnings of the Church

1. Bible is our main source of information

2. Central theme of preaching: Resurrection of Christ (Book of Acts)

3. Two functions of Book of Acts:

‑Trace history of spread of Gospel and development of early church

‑provide apology to Roman authorities concerning true nature of Church

4. Place of the Apostles: foundational (Eph. 2:20); no apostolic succession

5. 1st century: a period of transition:

Direct revelation --> Written revelation

Jewish church --> Gentile church

Synagogue --> Local church

Sabbath --> Lord’s day

C. Period of little evidence

1. Reasons:

a. Papyrus main source of writing material

b. Period of expansion and growth not conducive to thoughtful reflection and extensive records

c. Imminent return of Christ means the passing of the present world

2. Bible = main source

3. Early church traditions (deal mainly with lives of apostles and places of “miraculous” occurrences)

4. Earliest Church writer = I Clement (from Rome = western church) written ca. A.D. 95‑100

(Schaff (\*\*\*II Clement, A.D. 145, is pseudepigraphal)

II, 637) I Clement encourages church to support its leadership

Uses bishop and elder interchangeably

--Says there are two offices, bishop and deacon, Ch. 42

--Refers to the “consent of the whole church,” Ch. 44

5. Non-Christian sources

a. Josephus

‑from wealthy priestly family; traveled to Rome to plead for release of Jewish priests held in Palestine. Found favor with Nero’s wife, A.D. 63

‑led Northern Jewish army in revolt, A.D. 66

‑captured by Vespasian; Josephus prophesied Vespasian would become emperor; became interpreter for Titus during siege of Jerusalem

‑moved to Rome and changed name from Joseph ben Matthias to Flavius Josephus

A.D. 78, wrote *Wars of the Jews*, tracing history from 175 B.C.

A.D. 93, wrote *Antiquities*

A.D. 100, wrote autobiography and “Contra Apion”

IMPORTANT

PASSAGES: *Antiquities* 18:5:2.... refers to John the Baptist

10:9:1........ martyrdom of James

19:8:2........ death of Herod Agrippa

20:8:2........ cruelty of Nero

18:3:3........ mentions Pilate, Felix, Festus, Annas, Caiaphas, Christ

Thackeray: thinks quotation regarding Christ is authentic.

Eisler: thinks passage doctored by Christian monks. See also F.F. Bruce, *N.T. Documents*

b. Suetonius, secretary to Hadrian A.D. 75-160

–Wrote *Lives of Twelve Caesars*, from Julius to Domitian

–Second-rate historian who focused on the scandalous events

1) “Life of Claudius” 25:4, mentions expulsion of followers of Chrestus from Rome.

2) “Life of Nero” 16, Christianity is a “novel and mischievous superstition”; also mentions the punishment of its proponents

c. Tacitus, Roman historian A.D. 60-120

Became pro-consul of Asia A.D. 112-3

Wrote:

 Histories of Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian

Annals of Augustus to Nero, A.D. 14-68

Mentions Pilate, execution of Christus, Nero’s fire (which he says Nero unjustly blamed on Christians)

III. The Church in the Second Century

A. Antonine Dynasty

1. Nerva, A.D. 96-98 (John returned to Ephesus from Patmos, per Irenaeus)

2. Trajan, A.D. 98-117

a. First emperor not from Italy (Spain)

b. Good administrator; extended Empire; built Roman Forum

c. Banned secret societies, thus some persecution of Christians, as per Pliny the Younger’s letter

d. John dies, ca. A.D. 100, per Irenaeus

3. Hadrian, A.D. 117-138

a. Adopted by Trajan; earlier led army in Syria; most competent of Antonines; emperor during revolt of bar Kochba (132-135)

b. Built Hadrian’s wall in Britain, Pantheon in Rome

c. Simplified law code, exercised leniency toward Christians

d. Afflicted by terminal disease, committed suicide by starvation

4. Antoninus Pius, A.D. 138-161

a. Persecuted Christians

b. Justin Martyr writes his “Apology”

c. Improved status of women, children, slaves

d. Poured personal wealth into state treasury, but later depleted it

5. Marcus Aurelius, A.D. 161-180

 a. Became Stoic at age 12; asceticism led to poor health in later life; superstitious

b. Tried to portray Plato’s model of the Philosopher King: wrote *Meditations*, moral reflections written while on R&R in Hungary

c. Persecuted Christians, promoted Roman religions

S, II, 5 6. Commodus, A.D. 180-93 (natural son of Aurelius)

a. Extremely immoral, harem of 300 women, 300 boys; fought with gladiators

b. Marcia, one of his concubines, persuaded him to not persecute Christians; (later she helped poison, strangle him)

 TRANSITION ‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑

Pertinax: hesitated to become emperor, but persuaded by Senate in order to restore order. Instituted political, military, economic reforms; killed by Praetorian Guard

Julianus: became emperor after bidding to pay off Praetorian Guard. Paid 5,000 to each man.

7. Septimius Severus paid 10,000 to Praetorian Guard who conveniently removed Julianus Severus; Septimius ruled from A.D. 193-211

a. Began Severi dynasty

b. Plundered Italy for personal gain ‑ Senate protested and appointed Albinus as emperor. Albinus and followers were quickly killed.

c. Wife was daughter of Syrian pagan priest ‑ violent persecution of Christians (A.D. 202, edict against the spread of Judaism and Christians — perhaps instigated by excesses of Montanists)

d. Passed kingdom to two sons: Caracalla & Geta

B. Persecution during Second Century

1. General characteristics of period

a. Time of Church growth

b. Christianity officially illegal

c. Light persecution throughout period

d. Worst persecutions under Aurelius, Severus

2. Pliny’s letter to Trajan

a. Pliny was governor of Bythynia (N. Asia Minor), A.D. 109-112

b. Wrote concerning the persecution of Christians

c. Main parts of letter

1) great influence of Christianity (“contagion of superstition, Roman temples deserted, decrease in purchase of sacrificial animals”)

2) Speaks of Christians tortured and killed (says he used the rack)

3) Speaks of some who renounced faith and cursed Christ

4) Describes worship: meeting before dawn, hymn, oath to godliness. (See S, II, 222)

d. Trajan’s reply

1) Do not actively seek after them, but

2) If they are accused, prosecute them.

Tertullian accused Trajan of hypocrisy under the law: If it is illegal, then they should be sought out. If not, they should be left alone.

3. Second Century Martyrs

Trajan: Simeon (brother of Jesus, crucified in Jerusalem) (S, II, 47)

Ignatius (bishop of Antioch)

Hadrian Telephorous (elder of Rome)

Antoninus Pius: Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna) see Eusebius, pp. 146f.

Marcus Aurelius: Most severe persecution since Nero (centered in Gaul, Lyons, Vienna)

Justin Martyr beheaded; Blandina, a slave girl, gored and trampled by a bull

Commodus: dissuaded by Marcia; otherwise preoccupied with harem

Severus: severe persecution from A.D. 200-211 in North Africa, Egypt; many burned, killed

Leonides (father of Origen) killed in Alexandria

Potamiaena, a beautiful virgin and Basilides (her exe­cutioner, who was converted) were beheaded in Alexandria

Perpetua, Felicitas killed in Carthage

C. The Apostolic Fathers

1. Clement of Rome, see II.C.4 above

2. Papias: ca. A.D. 60-140, Bishop of Hierapolis

a. disciple of John

b. wrote Exposition of Oracles of the Lord; no extant copies but referred to by Irenaeus, Eusebius

c. chiliast, quoted by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.3,4 fantastic stories re: millennial kingdom

3. Ignatius: died A.D. 110, Bishop of Antioch (2nd largest city)

a. seven of 13 letters extant (4 written from Smyrna)

b. strongly opposes heresy

‑Docetism (Christ’s physical body an illusion) and Judaizing

c. expresses strong desire for martyrdom

d. distinguishes between himself and apostles

e. church government: references to Bishops, Elders, Deacons

4. Polycarp: A.D. 70-156, Bishop of Smyrna 45 years

a. disciple of John

b. wrote to Philippians (who had requested copies of letters of Ignatius)

c. church government: references to elders, deacons

d. distinguishes between himself and apostles

e. went to Rome, A.D. 155 re: Quartodeciman controversy

f. met Marcion while in Rome, called him “first-born of Satan”

g. martyred in Smyrna under Antoninus Pius

NOTE on the Quartodeciman Controversy

“[This was] the practice of keeping the Easter festival on the fourteenth Nisan irrespective of the day of the week on which it fell. The main strength of this view was in Asia Minor, where it was said to derive from the Apostle John. On a visit to Rome in A.D. 155, Polycarp tried to persuade Bishop Anicetas to adopt the custom, but they finally agreed to differ. Later in the second century, Victor of Rome attempted to impose the more general observance of the day, rather than the date, and in spite of a rebuke by Irenaeus, excommunicated the Quartodecimans. His action was both resented and resisted, and although he represented the dominant view, Quartodecimanism persisted in a separate communion.” *Bakers Dictionary of Theology*, p. 431.

Easter Observance:

 Eastern church ‑ always on 14th, regardless of day of week

 Western church ‑ always on the Sunday after the first Friday after the Nisan full moon

5. Epistle of Barnabas (ca. A.D. 70-135) pseudepigraphal

a. allegorical

b. opposes Judaizing

c. argues for Sunday worship

d. alleges life of world will be 6,000 years

6. Shepherd of Hermas A.D. 100-150

– the author was contemporary of Clement of Rome

– Muratorian fragment, ca. A.D. 154, says author was brother of Pius of Rome

a. Hermas was a slave of Rhoda whose children (Hermas’) turned from the faith

b. Had series of visions

c. 12 commandments for the penitent

7. Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve (A.D. 70-160)

a. rules for catachumens

b. instruction on church government (no reference to superior bishop)

8. Epistle to Diognetus (A.D. 150)

a. an apology defending Christianity (phps. written by Justin Martyr)

b. says Christianity is the only true foundation for life

D. Select Apologists of the Second Century

1. Quadratus, ca. A.D. 130

a. No extant writings; quoted by Eusebius, pp. 129ff.

b. Appealed to Hadrian; said many had been healed by Christ

2. Justin Martyr, A.D. 100-165

a. The philosopher of the II Cent. church; emphasized Christ as the Logos and said “Christianity is the only safe and beneficial philosophy” (*Dialogue*, 8.1)

b. “First Apology” to Antoninus Pius in 152; “Second Apology” in 153

c. Other major work is “Dialogue with Trypho the Jew”

d. Worked out of Ephesus; martyred under Marcus Arelius

3. Tatian, A.D. 110-172

a. Syrian student of Justin Martyr, but despised philosophy; wrote “Address to the Greeks, a scathing attack on Greek philosophy

b. Composed the *Diatessaron*, (“Through the Four”), first harmony of the Gospels

c. Fell into ascetic gnosticism after the martyrdom of Justin

4. Aristides, ca. A.D. 150

No extant writings, but cited by Eusebius (4:3) as arguing for one God from the “first cause theory”

5. Theophilus, d. 181

a. Wrote three defenses to a heathen friend

b. Calls Christ the “Second Adam” and is the first to refer to God as a “Triad” (Schaff II:732)

6. Melito of Sardis, late II Cent.

a. Petitions Marcus Aurelius against persecutions and unjust plundering

b. Provides one of first Christian lists of the Hebrew canon (excludes Esther)

7. Athenagorus, late II Cent.

a. Crusaded to convert the philosophers of Athens

b. In appealing to Marcus Aurelius, he advances the morality of the Christians; also incidentally refers to the Trinity

c. Argued for the physical resurrection on philosophical grounds

E. Gnostic Heresies: the attack from within

1. Extent: by 175, it had almost overshadowed orthodox Christianity

2. Gnostic records found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt: Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of the Egyptians

 3. Common beliefs of Gnosticism

a. Claim to higher knowledge, gnosis, based on speculation, eclectic approach to philosophy; less rational than intuitive; rejected OT and much of NT

b. Dualism = Good vs. Evil ... the invisible vs. the material

Good ‑ spiritual/invisibles

Evil ‑ physical/material

c. Many divine emanations, aeons, from supreme monadic divinity

d. warring gods

–world (matter) created by a lesser demiurge who was the god of the OT

–Christ was the highest aeon ‑ God of the NT, spiritual

 (Hodge, II, 400 ff.)

e. Denial of incarnation and bodily resurrection

4. Roots of Gnosticism

a. Simon Magus (Acts 8:19)

b. Colossian heresy, Col. 2:8-10

c. I Tim. 6:20 = “knowledge, falsely so called”

d. Early *docetism* (“it only *seems* Jesus had a body”): I John 4:1-3, II John 7, Jude 4

e. Nicolaitans ‑ Rev. 2:15 (Irenaeus says Nicholas, Acts 6, apostatized and started this sect)

f. Cerinthus‑ Christ came upon Jesus at baptism, left him at death

5. Marcion the Docetist: ‑ excommunicated by his own father, a bishop in Asia minor

a. Jesus had no physical flesh

b. Rejected all of OT, most of NT

c. Accepted 10 of Paul’s epistles

d. Was active in Rome

6. Effects of Gnosticism upon Church

a. Heresy led to development of “orthodox” catholic church

b. Forced Christians to clarify view on Scripture, formulation of canon

c. Care was taken in handling/quoting Scripture

F. Irenaeus ca. A.D. 180, from Smyrna

1. Ministered in Lyons, Gaul

2. Pothinus martyred (Schaff II:50), Irenaeus appointed bishop

3. Wrote:

a. “Against Heresies” and “Epistle to Florinus” (who had apostatized)

b. “Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching”

‑ apologetic and catechetical

‑ says John wrote Revelation

‑ says John exiled under Domitian

G. Montanism (Montanus, from Asia Minor, A.D. 150); (Hodge, I, 69)

1. Continuing revelations, Mysticism

2. Ascetic practices

3. Excommunicated from Church

H. Tertullian (a Montanist) A.D. 160-220

1. From Carthage, a lawyer

2. Wrote *Apology* to Severus, objecting to persecutions

*Against Marcion*

*Against Praxeas*

*On Women’s Dress*

3. Said: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church”

4. Trichotomist; developed Latin theological vocabulary

I. Beginning of Monarchianism (= Unitarianism)

1. Dynamic Monarchianism

a. Jesus only a man

b. Father entered Jesus at baptism as the Holy Spirit (the active “force” of God) empowered Jesus for miracles

c. Paul of Samasota (bishop of Antioch)

‑attempted to make hymns monarchian

‑gave equivocal meanings to theological terms

2. Patripassianism (literally: “the father suffers”)

a. God the father crucified (God the Father = Jesus)

b. Praxeas (ca. A.D. 200, student of Noetus, the pantheist)

c. Appealed to John 10:30 = “I and the Father are one”

3. Sabellianism or Modalism

see Baker’s *DoT*, p. 465

a. Sabellius from Egypt

b. attempt to guard against Tri-theism

c. God is eternally and essentially one

d. economically, or, for specific purposes, he manifests himself as

Father in OT

Son in Gospels

Holy Spirit in Acts

\*\*\*Condemned in Rome A.D. 263

J. Papacy in Second Century

No evidence Peter ever held any office other than elder; see *DoT*, p. 406, 410; Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 117ff.

1. “Pope” from Italian, Latin “papa.” Scripture forbids calling any man father (Matt 23:9, I Cor. 4:15)

a. By third century bishop of Rome was called Pope

b. In A.D. 604 emperor offers title “Pontifex Maximus” to Gregory; he refused it. Boniface, a later Pope, took the title

2. Bishop of Rome in 1st century ‑ little evidence

a. Anacletus/Cletus one of first bishops mentioned

b. Clement of Rome writes as representative of Church, not as one exercising episcopal sovereignty

\*\*\* Church at Rome was important because Rome was the first city in the empire, not because of any ecclesiastical privilege

“The papal system has been in the process of development over a long period of time. Romanists claim an unbroken line of succession from the alleged first pope, Peter, to the present pope (John XXIII)... the 262nd member in that line. But the list is in many instances quite doubtful. The list has been revised several times, with a considerable number who were formerly listed as popes now listed as anti‑popes.

“It simply is not true that they can name with certainty all the bishops of Rome from Peter to the present one. A glance at the notices of each of the early popes in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* will show that they really know little or nothing about the first ten popes. And of the next ten only one is clearly defined in history. The fact of the matter is that the historical record is so incomplete that the existence of an unbroken succession from the apostles to the present can neither be proved nor disproved. For a period of six centuries after the time of Christ none of the regional churches attempted to exercise authority over any of the other regional churches. The early ecumenical councils were composed of delegates from the various churches who met as equals. There is not a scholar anywhere who pretends to show any decree, canon, or resolution by any of the ecumenical councils which attempts to give preeminence to any one church. The first six hundred years of the Christian era know nothing of ally spiritual supremacy on the part of. the bishops a Rome.”
–Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 126.

K. Situation at the end of the Second Century

1. Time of growth and expansion in the midst of persecution

2. Principle centers:

Asia Minor

Antioch

Jerusalem

Alexandria

Carthage

Gaul

Rome