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Foreword

HISTORIANS, especially believing historians writing about the history of Christianity, have often been drawn to the tenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. There the apostle observes that records describing the history of Old Testament Israel have been preserved "for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Christian historians naturally recognize that nothing they write can possess the same kind of authority as comes from the Scriptures. But they may certainly hope that efforts to chart the history of God's people may in their own way provide useful instruction for those who believe in God's rule over the past, the present, and the ages to come.

The well-researched and accessibly written chapters of Kevin DeYoung's *Church History for Everyone* provide a winning example of such instruction. Capsule biographies of noteworthy individuals structure the book: ten for individuals from the church's earliest centuries and ten from the Middle Ages. Each chapter offers succinct biographical information about the individual under consideration (two individuals in chap. 3), along with brief suggestions for what contemporary believers may take away from these biographies for strengthening their own understanding of the faith and their own efforts to live with

integrity as Christians today. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter help move from learning about the past to thoughtful considerations for the present.

The book, however, is more than just a collection of biographies. Because each chapter is set in full historical context, readers come away understanding how the subject of each chapter was shaped by, responded to, influenced, fit in with, or resisted main developments of the era. As an example, the chapter on Athanasius (fourth century) explains why his defense of formulations about Christ in the Nicene Creed remains a positive guide for Christian instruction to this day. But when the reader also learns something about the Roman emperors whose actions sometimes defended—but more often undercut—the church’s well-being, Athanasius comes alive. He was not only a thinker articulating doctrine but also a believer persevering under duress.

Similarly, we learn not only that Bernard of Clairvaux became a much-valued teacher in the twelfth century because of his personal piety, defense of orthodoxy, and efforts to inculcate scriptural virtues but also that he carried out this reforming work while negotiating with popes, promoting a crusade to the Holy Land, and managing an extensive network of reforming monasteries. In a word, by attending to the sweep of broader historical developments, the book becomes “church history” rather than only a series of vignettes.

Another chapter in 1 Corinthians is also relevant for this book. In chapter 12 the apostle Paul describes the variety of gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to God’s people. Together in all of their variety, these gifts function “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). Paul is writing primarily about spiritual

gifts—faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. But his list of gifts begins with “the utterance of wisdom” and “the utterance of knowledge” (12:8). It may not be a stretch to think that those who write books about the history of Christianity may also be exercising gifts that lead to edifying wisdom and genuine knowledge.

For grasping how the history of Christianity may benefit Christian life today, an emphasis on the variety of gifts is particularly pertinent for our own time. At the end of this book, Kevin DeYoung has provided a helpful list of the more detailed accounts he drew on for writing each chapter. That list underscores a significant reality: For exploring the history of Christianity, there has never existed such a wealth of detailed, balanced, and superbly researched studies. In addition, for the most part, such studies are sympathetic to the Christian faith itself. Thus, for many purposes, we live in a golden age of scholarly expertise when it comes to matters of belief and practice for the whole history of Christianity.

And yet, with some exceptions, the benefits of this expertise have not been communicated well to, or gratefully received by, the Christian church at large. Especially in our day when wild ideas and unrestrained nonsense proliferate so widely, ordinary believers in ordinary churches need reliable mediators who have taken pains to digest advanced learning and present it to popular audiences.

Church History for Everyone provides such a needed service. It exemplifies a variety of gifts working together “for the common good”—a gift of advanced scholarship, a gift of patient distilling of that scholarship, a gift of readable prose communicating

complicated material clearly. Not least, there is a gift for measured but edifying instruction.

The result is to learn why significant figures in the history of Christianity deserve to be emulated, without papering over their flaws or sinful mistakes. It is to find out why Protestants can learn much from popes like Gregory the Great, who served at the end of the sixth century and the start of the seventh, and from figures designated by the Catholic Church as “doctors.” It is to realize why for purposes of Christian instruction and examples of Christian living the centuries between the great Christian teachers of the fourth century and Martin Luther were anything but “the Dark Ages.” And with a message especially relevant for our times, it is to see why despite compromising entanglements of church and state—and vicious internal conflicts—the Christian faith has survived.

A final word is that those who appreciate what they have learned from this book will be glad to hear that a second volume is on the way with ten chapters for the Reformation / early modern era and ten chapters for the centuries closest to the present.

MARK A. NOLL

Author, with David Komline and

Han-luen Kantzer Komline, of

*Turning Points: Decisive Moments in
the History of Christianity*, 4th ed.

INTRODUCTION

Christians Are a Remembering People

THERE IS NO Christianity apart from history.

Think about our weekly worship services. They are steeped in history. We read from an ancient book. We sing old songs. We recite confessions and creeds written centuries ago. We repeat rituals that began before the Roman Empire fell.

Think about our salvation. We hope in a host of historical facts: Israel's redemption from Egypt; Israel's return from exile in Babylon; and, supremely, Jesus's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The gospel includes historical fact (Jesus died) plus theological interpretation (for our sins). There is no true Christianity that is not rooted in history and announces to the world the good news that took place in history.

Think also about the Bible itself. In the pages of Scripture, God's people are constantly called to remember their past:

Then Moses said to the people, "*Remember* this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place." (Ex. 13:3)

If you say in your heart, "These nations are greater than I. How can I dispossess them?" you shall not be afraid of them but

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you shall *remember* what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. (Deut. 7:17–18)

Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders and they will tell you. (Deut. 32:7)

The word *remember* in these passages is about more than mere mental recollection. *Remember* is a covenantal word (Ex. 2:24). It speaks of the God who remembers and of a people who should not forget.

History is supposed to be a source of encouragement for God's people. The author of Hebrews tells us, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). Similarly, history is supposed to be a source of warning. "Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the way as you came out of Egypt," Moses warned the people (Deut. 24:9). Paul told the Corinthians that God's actions toward his rebellious people in the Old Testament "took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor. 10:6).

We go astray when we forget the mighty deeds of God's love and power in the past.

Our fathers, when they were in Egypt,
did not consider your wondrous works;
they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love,
but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea. (Ps. 106:7)

We also go astray by remembering the *wrong* things. "Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the

people of Israel also wept again and said, ‘Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic’” (Num. 11:4–5). Instead of remembering God’s steadfast love, the Israelites remembered vegetables! No wonder they faltered on their way to the promised land.

Christians are a remembering people. Over and over, the Bible shows us (and tells us) how important it is to know our history. Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 is a recounting of all the times God’s people were wayward in the past. Hebrews 11, on the other hand, is a recounting of the men and women who lived by faith according to God’s promises in the past. We need to know both parts of our history—the courage and the cowardice, the triumphs and the tragedies, the faithfulness and the failures. And that means we need to know the story of the church.

Doing Church History

This is a book on church history. That much is obvious. But how one approaches the topic of church history is not always straightforward.

One approach is to write history for professional historians replete with lots of footnotes and the latest scholarship in the field. This is not that kind of book, though I hope that the information presented is accurate and based on fair-minded research and a careful reading of selected texts. I intend this book to be popular history rather than professional history, which means I am writing to be understood by ordinary people who are eager to learn but are not experts.

I should also specify that I am writing specifically for Christians. While I trust that anyone can benefit from this book—it is,

first of all, a work of history and not a sermon, a prayer, or a theological treatise—I mean this to be a book on church history *for* the church. That is, I am writing with an eye toward edifying Christians. I have Psalm 78 in the back of my mind. As one of the longest chapters in the Bible, Psalm 78 is all about one generation passing on to the next generation the story of their triumphs, their failures, and, above all, the mighty deeds of the Lord. History is concerned with names and dates. There is no getting around that. But church history is more than that. Church history is fundamentally about Jesus’s promise that he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

The story of the church over two thousand years is like the parable of the seed in Mark 4:26–29. The farmer scatters the seed. “He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how” (Mark 4:27). Jesus told this parable to explain the kingdom, but it also tells the story of the church. The church has grown and flourished because the seed has been sown. Yet if we are honest, we have to say that at times the church has grown—and we know not how. The sowers have not always been the best. Nevertheless, like the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32), the church—from tiny beginnings—has grown to be larger and sturdier and more expansive than anyone could have imagined.

We have to be realistic about our own history, but realism is not the same as cynicism. If hagiography (viewing our spiritual ancestors only as saints) was the danger of an earlier age, it seems to me that hamartiography (viewing our spiritual ancestors only as sinners) is our danger today. History “warts and all” should not mean history “warts and nothing else.” The Bible does not give us superheroes, but it does give us heroes. So does church

history. And we need them. “Remember your leaders. . . . Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7) is a biblical command.

Think of those in Hebrews 11 “commended through their faith” (11:39): Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel—as well as those alluded to like Joshua, Daniel, and the Shunamite woman. Most of these characters had profound flaws. Some sinned in horrendous ways. But the Bible doesn’t cancel them or consider them off limits because of their sins. Despite their failures, they still lived lives of faith. The book of Hebrews wants us to remember these men and women so that we might be spurred on “by so great a cloud of witnesses,” that we might cast aside every weight and “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

My Approach

Any attempt to write a book covering all of church history—no matter how many pages or how many volumes—is an exercise in the impossible. No one can be an expert in two millennia of people, places, ideas, and things. Although I have a PhD in history, I am *far* from an expert in twenty centuries of history that spans several continents, is rooted in dozens of languages, and requires knowledge in multiple disciplines. Just like the daily news does not really tell you everything going on in the world, I can’t pretend to recount for you the whole history of the church, even in two volumes and several hundred pages. Every work attempting to cover two thousand years of history is bound to be highly selective.

Many books that try to tell the whole history of the church end up taking an encyclopedic approach. Each chapter might give a

few paragraphs on ten different people while also mentioning six different books, talking about a few councils and controversies, highlighting a few places on the map, and then giving some background information on how people lived, what they wore, what they ate, and where they lived. This approach has the benefit of being somewhat comprehensive. It introduces you to lots of people, places, ideas, events, artifacts, and documents. This is one way to become familiar with as much as possible. It is a useful approach, but I'd like to tell more of a story.

So instead of a chronological encyclopedia version of church history, I'm going to take a biographical approach. I've divided church history into four periods: the early church, the medieval church, the church of the Reformation and the Awakening, and the modern church. The first two periods will be treated in this volume, while the third and fourth periods will appear in volume 2. Each period will consist of ten biographical chapters. Simple, clear, easy to follow.

Admittedly, there are weaknesses to this approach. Most notably, there are lots of important names, dates, and events that I am *not* going to mention. One could easily count up the individuals mentioned in each chapter and wonder why more women weren't chosen or why so many Westerners were. Part of the justification on these two fronts is that, right or wrong, men have been the major players in history for most of history and that the Christian church was largely confined for almost 1,700 years to the Roman Empire, to the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, and then to Europe and its colonies.

In addition, I freely acknowledge that the people I've chosen to highlight reflect my own knowledge and interest. I'm from the West, not the East. I'm Protestant, not Catholic or Eastern

Orthodox. I'm evangelical, not liberal. I'm Reformed, not Lutheran or Wesleyan or Anglican. I live in America, and I speak English. These chapters started out as lectures in an adult Sunday school class in a conservative Presbyterian church in Charlotte, North Carolina. While I have deliberately chosen *not* to write a book that only focuses on Reformed heroes of the faith, my telling of church history no doubt slants toward my own tradition and is shaped by what my tradition considers to be right, true, and faithful.

Even with these limitations, I prefer a biographical approach to church history for a number of reasons: It is more manageable, allows for more depth in key areas, and is just plain more interesting. I am a strong believer that history should be enjoyable. That doesn't mean everyone will like it equally well or that it won't take work along the way. But everyone likes a good story; and history, if told in the right way, is full of the most illuminating and fascinating stories that can be told. People may not thrill to read about the five reasons the Reformation was necessary, but most people (again, if the historian is a good one) will find the lives of John Wycliffe and Jan Hus inherently interesting.

Let me add a few more comments about the people I've chosen to highlight in these chapters. Right away, you should notice that the chapters don't all focus on the good guys. (The first person, Titus Vespasian, wasn't even a Christian!) My aim is to tell the story of the church not to preach mini-sermons from the lives of Christian heroes (a fine approach but not what I'm doing).

I've chosen people who are not only important but also illustrative. Antony, for example, is certainly not one of the most consequential thinkers in the history of the church, but by focusing on him we can look at the monastic movement as a whole (which is one of the most consequential ideas in the

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history of the church). In each chapter, I try to deal with more than one person's life and show how those lives help us understand broader themes, movements, and ideas.

I should also mention that my aim is to find positive lessons wherever possible. Obviously, there are negative lessons too, especially with someone like Pope Boniface. But for the most part, I take a sympathetic look at the men and women I've chosen to highlight. That means, for example, that I try to show what made Gregory "great" rather than emphasize where I, as a Protestant, disagree with his theology.

Above all, I want to tell a story. One can do church history as a history of big ideas, or a history of books, or a history of councils, or a history of denominations. I want to do a history of people. We will use these people to talk about bigger issues and themes, but I don't want to stray too far from an overarching narrative approach. For I believe that by reading the stories of men and women from the past, Christians not only can learn about the present but might even gain wisdom for the future. I also believe that when the author tells a story, there is a better chance that the reader might keep reading. And that counts for something too.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As the introduction states, "Christians are a remembering people." As you start learning about church history, what is important to remember as a Christian?
2. What in Psalm 78 is good to have in mind as you read through this book?



PART I

THE EARLY CHURCH
70–451



Titus Vespasian
39–81

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Fall of
Jerusalem

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Martyrdom
of Polycarp

325
Council of Nicaea

476
Fall of Rome

599
Missionaries Sent
to England

THE EARLY CHURCH

CHAPTER 1

Titus Vespasian and the Fall of Jerusalem

IT MAY BE THE MOST significant arch anywhere in the world. The Arch of Titus—fifty feet high, forty-four feet wide, and fifteen feet deep—stands at the southeastern end of the Forum, the plaza at the center of the ancient city of Rome. The arch was constructed in AD 81 by Emperor Domitian to commemorate the death of his older brother, Titus. The Arch of Titus, with its large rectangular design and vaulted passageway, has been the model for famous arches around the world: the Soldiers' and Sailors' Arch in Brooklyn, the National Memorial Arch in Valley Forge, the India Gate in New Delhi, and most famously the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

The details inside the Arch of Titus depict Titus in glorified form. The inner panels and relief work show him crowned with a laurel wreath, deified as a god, surrounded by imperial servants and angelic guardians, and led into the afterlife by a four-horsed chariot. The original inscription reads, “The Senate and the Roman people (dedicate this) to the deified Titus Vespasian Augustus, son of the deified Vespasian.”

800
*Coronation
of Charlemagne*

1054
*Great Schism Between Eastern
and Western Churches*

1215
*Fourth Lateran
Council*

1347
*Outbreak of
the Black Death*

The most notable part of the Arch is its southern inner wall, the panel on which you can see a depiction of the spoils of war taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Titus and his victorious army are carrying away the golden trumpets, the fire pans from the altar, and the table that held the bread of the presence. Your eye is especially drawn to the large seven-branched candlestick, the menorah, being carried aloft on the shoulders of two Roman soldiers as they leave the devastated city and razed temple behind. It is a picture of an old city torn to pieces and, as it would turn out, of a new world about to emerge.

A Surprising Emperor

Titus was born in Rome on December 30 in AD 39 during the reign of Caligula. Titus was not born into great wealth. He arrived in the world in a small room in an ordinary house. But when Claudius became Emperor in 41, Titus—whose father, Vespasian, fought with Claudius in Rome's invasion of Britain—was granted the rare privilege of a court education. Once out of school, Titus served in Germany and in Britain as a military tribune. He also married the daughter of a former commander of the praetorian guard. After she died, Titus married into an even more distinguished family. But that marriage was also short-lived. Titus divorced his second wife in 65, and he never remarried.

Up to this point, Titus had lived a privileged but unremarkable life. That changed dramatically with the outbreak of the Jewish War. Titus was appointed commander of the Fifteenth Legion Apollinaris where he served with great success and distinction under his father. When Vespasian was proclaimed emperor on July 1 in 69, Titus became caesar (essentially a junior emperor) and took over command of the conflict in Judea.

Titus returned to Rome in June 71 as a conquering hero. But his popularity did not last. He was appointed commander of the praetorian guard—a prestigious appointment but one that required much unsavory activity. From this new position, Titus carried out his father’s dirty work: forging letters, removing political opponents, and ginning up convictions. This may have been a life for influencing people (in all the wrong ways), but it was not a life for making friends. Besides his shady political reputation, Titus was despised by many as a libertine and gained the reputation of partying with eunuchs and catamites (i.e., boys kept for homosexual relationships).

Worst of all, in the eyes of the Roman public, Titus was in love with Bernice, a Jewish queen (and daughter of Herod Agrippa, mentioned in Acts 25). Titus and Bernice (or Berenice) had become lovers during the Jewish War. For a time, they lived together openly in an imperial palace. But this was thought unseemly by many of the Romans, so Vespasian ordered Bernice to be sent back to Judea. As the caesar, Titus was neither well liked nor well respected—which is what made his imperial reign so surprising.

When Titus became emperor on June 24, 79, most Romans thought they were in store for another Nero: a cruel, selfish, debauched ruler. But in his short reign—only two years and two months—Titus was one of the best Roman emperors. He stopped his partying. He banished the informers. He became a man of clemency and generosity. When Mount Vesuvius erupted on August 24, 79, destroying the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, Titus personally visited the ruins and ordered the rebuilding efforts. He did the same when Rome caught fire. And when a severe epidemic ripped through the capital, Titus

opened up the imperial treasury to ease the suffering, earning him the reputation as a caring and generous benefactor.

Titus was succeeded by his brother, Domitian, whose reign was nothing like the relatively enlightened reigns of Vespasian and Titus. Domitian's tenure oversaw the execution and exile of several senatorial families. He insisted on the title *dominus et deus* ("Lord and God") and was hostile to the Christians. He was likely the emperor during the time Revelation was written, which explains why the atmosphere in that book is one of threats and persecution. Like Nero, Domitian came to be seen as a cruel tyrant. He was unpopular, and in the end his enemies conspired against him and murdered him in his own palace.

Titus, on the other hand, had proved to be an effective leader. He was frugal and responsible in financial matters. He surrounded himself with wise counselors. He signed off on popular legislative measures. He continued his father's policy of establishing roads and forts in the East. He encouraged free speech (while also cracking down on dissidents). He completed the Flavian Amphitheatre (i.e., the Colosseum), hosting games and shows there to great acclaim.

In the summer of 81, Titus died suddenly of a fever. He was only forty-two years old. Perhaps if he had lived longer, he would have shown his true colors and become a despotic emperor, but during his short reign he cut an impressive figure. Upon his death, Titus left these enigmatic words: "I have made but one mistake." (Interestingly, his father also had curious last words. Vespasian declared when he was dying—probably poking fun at Roman religion—"I think that I am becoming a god.") No one knows for sure what Titus meant, but there have been plenty of theories. Did he regret sleeping with his brother's wife (as was

widely rumored)? Did he regret not killing his brother Domitian who plotted against him (and who some suspect had a hand in his illness)? Or is it possible he regretted the devastation he inflicted on Judea? It is nice to think of Titus regretting his cruelty to the Jewish people, but there is no hard evidence that he experienced such a change of heart. For all the good that marked the reign of Titus as emperor, he is still mostly remembered (if remembered at all) for overseeing the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

Roman Rule and Jewish Revolt

Jerusalem was conquered by the Romans in 63 BC. For more than a century leading up to the Jewish War (AD 66–70)—also called the First Jewish-Roman War, or the First Jewish Revolt, or the Great Jewish Revolt—the Jews living in Palestine were ruled by governors (called procurators) from Rome or by kings appointed by the Romans. Herod the Great (an Idumaeon and not a Jew by descent) was the most famous of these Roman-appointed Judean kings. Even though Roman rule could be fairly tolerant of subjugated peoples (who didn't plot insurrections), the Jews, understandably, did not take well to being ruled by a foreign power. No doubt, many Jews heard stories of when they had their own king and Jerusalem was a great capital of a great kingdom. So the Roman questions never went away. Do we go along with Romans and mind our own business? Do we rebel? When will the Messiah come and get the Romans off our backs?

In the decades after the time of Christ, the insurrections had become bigger and better. The Jews were able to secure garrisons at Jericho in the Jordan Valley and at Masada on the Dead Sea. They even minted their own coins marking the “liberation of

Zion” with inscriptions like “Israel’s Shekel Year 1” and “Holy Jerusalem.”

The Jews were uniform in their dislike for Roman occupation but divided in the intensity of their disdain between radicals and moderates. With the despotic Gessius Florus ruling in Judea, the Zealots gained the upper hand, and in May 66 the Jews revolted against Rome. To defy Rome—the world’s largest superpower at the time—without a single military advantage was either an act of foolish fanaticism or heroic bravery. Whichever it was, it was gutsy, and it was bound to fail.

To crush the rebellion, Nero sent Vespasian, one of his best generals, and gave him command of three legions (probably around fifteen thousand men, though some estimates go as high as forty thousand). Vespasian advanced down the Mediterranean coast in the spring of 67, subduing Jewish towns from Antioch south to Jerusalem. When Nero, only thirty years old, committed suicide in June 68, Vespasian was the leading candidate to become the next emperor. By the end of 69, after three other emperors came and went in quick succession, Vespasian had finally assumed the throne. With Vespasian tied up in imperial politics, the quelling of the Jewish rebellion fell to his son, Titus.

It is worth mentioning, especially when it comes to understanding Titus, that most of what we know about the Jewish War comes from two sources: either from the Roman historian Suetonius who wrote biographies of twelve successive Roman rulers or (more commonly) from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. Josephus was a learned Pharisee, initially opposed to the Romans and appointed a commander in the Jewish army. As Vespasian and his men moved through Galilee, Josephus hid in

a cave with other members of the town rather than surrender. The entire group committed suicide except for Josephus and one other person, both of whom surrendered to the Romans. Eventually, Vespasian freed Josephus and made him an interpreter in the army. Years later, toward the end of Vespasian's reign, Josephus wrote *The Jewish War* based on his years in the army and his access to other firsthand accounts. While Josephus never gave up his Judaism, he gave up his opposition to the Romans. In fact, being close to imperial power, he was granted a comfortable life as a Roman citizen, with a government pension and a tax-free estate in Judea.

As a historian, Josephus wrote with two significant biases: (1) He believed the Jewish people had the highest form of culture, history, and religion; (2) because of the apostasy of the Jews, he believed God's favor now rested upon the Romans. Josephus was highly favored by Titus, and Titus shines through in Josephus's account as a man of great courage and skill in the Jewish War. Not surprisingly, Titus was more than happy to have Josephus's history be the official chronicle of the conflict.

With Vespasian in Rome as emperor, Titus took over command of the Roman forces in Palestine, and in April 70 after the Feast of Passover, he laid siege to Jerusalem. The Jews barricaded themselves in the holy city, only to face starvation and eventual death. Families fought over every scrap of food. The situation, Josephus recounted, was beyond desperate:

All hope of escape and all food supplies were now cut off from the Jews, and famine devoured thousands upon thousands. The alleys were choked with bodies, the survivors not having enough strength to bury the dead and even falling into graves

with them. No mourning was heard in Jerusalem, for famine stifled all emotions, and an awful silence shrouded the city.¹

Heroically, and against all odds, the Jews held off the Romans for months, even several times repelling the Roman advances. But by August, the Roman legions broke through the city walls, and on August 10 they set ablaze the temple itself. According to Josephus, Titus wanted to spare the temple as a gesture of goodwill and to keep it as spoil. According to the fourth century Christian writer Sulpicius Severus, however, Titus ordered the destruction of the temple so that he might make an end once and for all of both Judaism and Christianity.

Within a few months the whole city would be in Roman hands. Many Jews fled to the mountain fortress of Masada where about a thousand inhabitants held out for three more years. Once their doom was imminent, rather than give the Romans the satisfaction of victory, they committed mass suicide. If the Great Jewish Revolt was all but over by AD 70, it was completely wiped out by 73. Emperor Vespasian had coins minted to commemorate the triumph, with inscriptions like *Iudaea capta* (“Judea captured”) and *Devicta Iudea* (“Judah conquered”).

The War That Changed the World

When Christians think about the important events in the first decades of the church, they often think of the persecution under Nero. And that is an important story to remember. On June 18, 64, a fire broke out in Rome that lasted six days and seven nights. Ten of the city’s fourteen sections were destroyed. It was rumored that Nero spent most of the time during the fire on

a tower, dressed as an actor, playing his lyre and singing songs about the destruction of Troy. Some even speculated that he had the city set on fire as inspiration for his poetic song. Nero needed someone to blame, and the Christians made for convenient scapegoats.

The Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 56–120) reported that in order “to get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians.” (Interestingly, Tacitus provides one of the best corroborating pieces of evidence for the historicity of the Gospels by recounting that “Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.”) According to Tacitus, those who confessed to being Christians were arrested, not so much for the fire but “because of hatred of the human race.” They were put to death and made objects of amusement. They were dressed as animals and torn to death by wild dogs. Others were crucified. Others were set on fire and made torches for the city. By the end of the Neronian persecution, many Romans felt sorry for the Christians, believing that the punishment went too far and was not for the public good but only to satisfy the cruelty of the emperor.²

As memorable as the details from Tacitus have proved to be—both for understanding the madness of Nero and for defending the historicity of Christ’s death on the cross—the Jewish War was far more consequential for the early church than Nero’s short-lived persecution. Early Christians saw the conquest of Titus as the outworking of Christ’s end-time prophecies. Eusebius, for example, writing around 325, considered the destruction of

Jerusalem a direct fulfillment of Jesus's prophecies in Matthew 24, Luke 19, and Luke 21:

These things happened in the second year of Vespasian's reign, in exact accordance with the prophetic predictions of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who by divine power had foreseen them as though already present, and wept and mourned over them. . . . Anyone who compared our Savior's words with the rest of the historian's account [Josephus] of the whole war could not fail to be astonished, and to acknowledge as divine and utterly marvelous the foreknowledge revealed by our Savior's prediction.³

The Jewish War was significant not only for confirming the words of Christ about the capital of Judea but also because it forced a decisive break with Judaism itself. Sometime during the siege, the Christians in Jerusalem believed they received a warning in a dream to flee to the city of Pella, east of the Jordan River. The flight meant two things. First, because of the flight to Pella, pious Jews viewed the Jewish Christians as traitors. And second, the flight from Jerusalem further cemented that Christianity would not be tied to one sacred place or sacred space. The church was on its own. Christianity would no longer be a sect of Judaism. The faith that centered on the worship of the Jewish Messiah would largely become a Gentile religion.

Judaism would become a different religion as well. No temple meant no more sacrifices, no more annual pilgrimages, no more ark of the covenant, no more Most Holy Place. The faith of the Jews, already centered on the synagogue in the Dias-

pora, would in the centuries ahead become a faith ordered by the laws and rabbinical precedents gathered together in the Talmud.

As tragic as the destruction of Jerusalem was religiously, historically, culturally, and architecturally, it was also God's providential means of forcing the church out of its Jewish shell. We can understand why Titus may have thought he was wiping out, in one fell swoop, the Jewish religion *and* Christianity. To most outside observers, Christianity appeared to be a small appendage to Judaism (a faith with no shortage of rival factions and divisions). In the middle decades of the first century, Christianity was undeniably a *Jewish* Christianity. The main problems facing the church had all been Jewish problems: holy days, food regulations, the role of the law, conflicts between Jews and Gentiles, and questions about the promises to Israel. Initially, the evangelistic strategy was literally "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). Wherever possible, Christian evangelists started with the Jewish synagogue. Not surprisingly, the fiercest persecution in the earliest years of the church often came from other Jews.

And yet once Jerusalem fell, the faith centered on Jesus of Nazareth would prove to be something more than just "Israel with a difference."⁴ Christianity was already becoming its own thing by 70; the destruction of the temple and the end of the sacrificial system accelerated these changes. For all practical purposes, the fall of Jerusalem marked the beginning of the end of the apostolic age.

At the same time, it was also the beginning of a new age of expansion for the church. The *pax Romana* established under Caesar Augustus around the time of Christ's birth provided the

political and social stability necessary for people, commerce, and ideas to travel farther and faster than they had before. Christianity benefited from the opportunities afforded by the Roman Empire more than any idea or movement in history. As one contemporary historian has put it, “The blows that Vespasian, Titus, Hadrian, and other Roman generals rained upon Jerusalem did not destroy the Christian church. Rather, they liberated the church for its destiny as a universal religion offered to the whole world.”⁵

Even better is the prophecy from Isaiah seven hundred years before the birth of Christ. The Lord says,

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.
(Isa. 49:6)

When Titus and the Romans conquered Jerusalem, they could not possibly have known that the tiny Christian sect they propelled into the world would, just three centuries later, conquer the Roman Empire itself.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do we deal with the tension of Titus being “one of the best Roman emperors” and yet responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple?

2. How do politics and religion intersect in this time period?
3. What is the significance of the Jewish War in church history?
4. What are the seeds of Christianity sown during this time?
5. Where do you see the sovereignty of God displayed in this chapter?
6. How could you have been a Christ-honoring believer in this era?



Irenaeus
ca. 130–200

70
*Fall of
Jerusalem*

155
*Martyrdom
of Polycarp*

325
Council of Nicaea

476
Fall of Rome

599
*Missionaries Sent
to England*

THE EARLY CHURCH

CHAPTER 2

Irenaeus and the Rule of Faith

BECAUSE CHRISTIANS BELIEVE the Bible to be the inspired word of God, the only book of its kind in all the world, we may be tempted to instinctively treat biblical history as separate from everything else in history. That is, we think of the history of the church as something hermetically sealed off from the history of the Bible. It's almost as if the people and places and events we read about in the New Testament took place in some far away galaxy that ceased to exist as soon as the New Testament was completed. And then following the completion of the New Testament, this thing called "church history" began.

But, of course, history doesn't work that way, and no one living in the first centuries of the Christian era would have thought of history in those terms. It's true: Christians understood that the apostles wrote and spoke with God-given authority and that when they died a unique era in history came to an end. But the Christians in the early church were still closely connected to that era—and not just connected by ideas, places, and patterns. They were connected by living people. The leaders of the church at the end of the second century were still only two

800
*Coronation
of Charlemagne*

1054
*Great Schism Between Eastern
and Western Churches*

1215
*Fourth Lateran
Council*

1347
*Outbreak of
the Black Death*