

Perspectives on Church History: Where we've come from and how we got here
Unit 1: The Ancient Church (6 BC to AD 590) – The Ancients were people just like us
Part 1: From Jesus to the Apostles (6 BC to AD 70)

1. General Overview of the entire Ancient Church era (to AD 590): This first “age” of church history includes the growth of the apostolic church into the Old Catholic Imperial church and then into the beginnings of the Roman Catholic system. Most activity took place in the Mediterranean basin, including parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The ancient church took root within the cultural environment of Greco-Roman civilization and the political environment of the Roman Empire.

During this era, the Church would develop from one small congregation in Jerusalem to a substantial organization reaching into many lands. As it grew, the Church developed a form of organization and government. As it grew in its understanding of truth, and being faced with challenges regarding such truth, it came to issue carefully worded statements of belief.

Soon after its beginning, the Church began to suffer persecution, first from the Jews and then at the hands of pagans. In time, this persecution would subside, and the Church would become the approved religion of the reigning political power of its time.

Before the close of this era, the Church would be confronted by a great invasion of barbarians from beyond the Roman Empire, hastening its collapse. As the era ends, however, the Church will undertake the substantial task of Christianizing and educating newly established barbarian kingdoms. Kuiper, B.K., *The Church in History*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964 (hereafter “Kuiper, p. _”).



2. Summary of the period we are presently considering (6 BC – AD 70). “Christianity’s roots go back into Jewish history long before the birth of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus of Nazareth, however, who attacked established Judaism and brought a renewal movement into history’s light early in the first century. After his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, a Roman official, Jesus’ teachings spread throughout the Mediterranean area. An apostle named Paul was especially influential. He stressed God’s gift of salvation for all men and thus led in Christianity’s emergence from Palestinian Judaism to a position as a universal religion.” Shelley, p. 1.

3. The beginnings. “The Passover season was ended. The crowds that had gathered for the occasion dispersed, and Jerusalem returned to normal. Some were puzzled, however, by the unusual circumstances surrounding the crucifixion of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, who appeared to be a revolutionist – for He had talked about setting up a kingdom of His own. A rumor had spread concerning His resurrection from the dead, but certainly that was impossible, they thought. Had not the soldiers who guarded His tomb reported the theft of His body by His followers? That was sufficient explanation for most. Another Galilean rabble-rouser had come to a grisly end.” Vos, Howard F., *Exploring Church History*. Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1994 (hereafter “Vos, p. _”). Or had He?

- 120 followers gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem because they knew differently, and on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the crucifixion and ten days following the ascension, their faith was confirmed.
- Word spread rapidly of this event among Jews gathered for the feast. A crowd came to investigate, and Peter, a leader among the disciples of Jesus, addressed the onlookers. From this event, the Church as we know it to this day was born.
- They held to true doctrine, were faithful in prayer, partook of the Lord’s Supper, enjoyed the fellowship of each other, and lived joyous lives.
- Those who met them were awed, and many believed daily. The number of followers grew rapidly to about five thousand men, as well as numerous women and children.

4. The first persecution, and the growth that followed. As described in Acts 4, the Temple priests began a persecution against them. Soon, it would be evident that following Jesus was a serious matter and involved suffering for His sake.

- “Persecution came with increasing frequency and intensity. First there was warning, then beating, then murder. Stephen was the first Christian martyr (Acts 7.54-60).
- This persecution failed to silence the message. Even as members of the Jerusalem church were scattered all over Judea and Samaria, the gospel spread rather than failed. Philip’s ministry in Samaria fulfilled Christ’s commission to preach in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth.

5. Saul’s conversion. At this same time, a devout Pharisee who had been present at the stoning of Stephen became himself a chief persecutor of Christians. He was intent enough in his mission as to move on Damascus to persecute believers there. Of course, it was in route that God revealed His plans for Saul of Tarsus. He traveled on to Damascus and was baptized.

- After spending about three years in Arabia, Saul began his ministry in Damascus but soon returned to Jerusalem. His efforts were impeded by the suspicions of other believers until Barnabas persuaded the apostles that Saul’s conversion was genuine. Saul ministered with Peter and James and in due course came to experience a plot on his life. He left for Tarsus but took the gospel with him.
- For the next several years, Saul preached around his home in Tarsus and in Syria. Meanwhile, the church in Palestine grew, and Peter took the gospel to Gentiles in the household of Cornelius in Caesarea.
- The church in Syria expanded rapidly, as believers were first called Christians in the Syrian city of Antioch.

6. Paul’s missionary work. Called of God, Barnabas and Paul traveled and preached in Cyprus and Asia Minor (today’s Turkey). Upon their return to Antioch, they discovered that a question had arisen regarding the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the church and how the law should apply. The issue was referred to the mother church at Jerusalem, and Paul and Barnabas were among those sent there to deal with the question.

7. The Council of Jerusalem (AD 49 or 50) and Paul’s other journeys. Acts 15 describes the Council, which is of significance both then and now. “Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the council decided that the law, which had been an impossible burden for Jews, should not be required of Gentiles.” Vos, p. 4.

- With this critical matter resolved, Paul undertook a second missionary journey, accompanied by Silas. After visiting established churches in Asia Minor, they travelled to Greece and established churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. During this journey Paul would also preach on Mars Hill in Athens, thereby initiating the spread of the gospel to Europe.
- On a third journey, Paul spent much of three years at Ephesus, as well as revisiting churches in Asia Minor and Greece. Upon returning to Jerusalem, however, he was imprisoned by leaders of the Jews. As a Roman citizen,

he appealed to Caesar and was taken to Rome for trial. He was imprisoned for two years under what must have been like a house arrest, but he ministered successfully during this time.

- Paul was apparently released and made a fourth journey. Church tradition holds that he arrived in Spain as well as Crete, where he established Titus in a leadership position. He will be rearrested in Rome around 62-64 AD, however, and will be martyred there in the period of 64-67 AD.

8. Church traditions regarding the missions of other apostles. “The other apostles were also active during the first century.... Tradition teaches that Bartholomew preached in Armenia; Andrew in the southern steppes of Russia and the Ukraine; Thomas in Persia and India; Matthew in Ethiopia; James the Younger in Egypt; Jude in Assyria and Persia; and Mark (not one of the apostles but closely related to them) in Alexandria. If the Babylon from which Peter wrote (1 Peter 5.13) was Babylon on the Euphrates instead of a symbolic representation of Rome, then Babylonia was also evangelized during the first century. Indications are that Peter ministered in Rome near the end of his life and was martyred there. Evidently, he also preached in several of the provinces of Asia Minor (1 Peter 1.1).

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9. The Book of Acts – The original church history. This timeline ties our broad discussion to the gospels themselves:

Timeline of Acts	
<small>(All dates are approximate, based on F.F. Bruce, <i>Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free</i>, page 475.)</small>	
Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection; Pentecost	30 AD
Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8-8:1)	33
Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-19)	33
Paul visits Jerusalem to see Peter (Galatians 1:18)	35
Paul in Cilicia and Syria (Galatians 1:21, Acts 9:30)	35-46
Herod Agrippa I dies (Acts 12:19-23)	44
Paul visits Jerusalem to clarify the mission to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-10)	46
Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13-14)	47-48
Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)	49
Paul and Silas travel from Antioch to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 16-17)	49-50
Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18)	50-52
Paul visits Jerusalem	52
Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19)	52-55
Paul travels to Macedonia, Dalmatia, and Achaia (Acts 20)	55-57
Paul to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1-23:22)	May 57
Paul imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23:23-26:32)	57-59
Paul sent to house arrest in Rome (Acts 27:1-28:31)	59-62

10. The historicity of Christ. Rather than the founder of His faith, Jesus is the very foundation for it. Luke 1.1-4 and John 20.30-31 report that Christianity cannot exist apart from the Christ of history. Therefore, before we go any farther, we should examine some temporal history from which Christianity has its beginnings. Extrabiblical historical evidence confirms the existence of the Christ. The following writers were not sympathetic to the Christians and could hardly be called apologists for the faith:

- Tacitus (55-117), probably the leading Roman historian, linked both the name and the origin of Christians with “Christus,” who during the reign of Tiberius “suffered death by the sentence of the Procurator, Pontius Pilate.”
- Suetonius wrote that the Jews were expelled from Rome due to disturbances over “Chrestos.”
- Lucian satirically noted around AD 170 that Jesus was crucified in Palestine for starting “this new cult.” He wrote sarcastically that Christ had taught His followers to believe that they were brothers who should observe His laws.
- Josephus (ca.37-ca.100), the wealthy Jewish writer to the Romans, described James as, “the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ.” Josephus further noted that Jesus was a “wise man” condemned to die on the cross by Pilate.

11. Next time (and one more chart). In our next class, we will look at the people and means used by God to spread the gospel as the infant church grew dramatically. Meanwhile, here's one more useful timeline of the first century in the life of the Church.

New Testament Timeline - The following chart provides a detailed New Testament timeline. Most of the dates can be determined precisely by correlating biblical events with extensive historical documents and archaeological evidence. Dates with an asterisk denote approximate or alternative dates. The extensive external confirmation of New Testament dates and events encourages great confidence in the truth and historicity of both the Old and New Testaments.

5 B.C.*	Jesus is born in Bethlehem.
4 B.C.	Jesus' family flees to Egypt to escape from Herod's plan to kill Jesus (Matt. 2:13–18); Herod dies; Judas (of Sepphoris) and others rebel, requiring the Syrian Governor Varus to intervene throughout Palestine; Sepphoris, a city four miles from Nazareth, is destroyed by Roman soldiers; Judea, Samaria, and Idumea are given to Herod's son, Archelaus; Galilee and Perea are given to his son Antipas; Jesus' family, after returning from Egypt, resides in Nazareth (Matt. 2:19–23), a small village in southern Galilee.
A.D. 6	Archelaus is exiled for incompetence; Judea becomes a Roman province; Judas the Galilean (of Gamla) leads a revolt against the tax census; the governor of Syria, Quirinius (A.D. 6–7), appoints Annas high priest (6–15).
8*	Jesus (age 12) interacts with the teachers in the temple (Luke 2:41–50).
8*–28/30	Jesus works as a carpenter in Nazareth (Matt. 13:55 ; Mark 6:3) and probably in neighboring villages and Sepphoris, which was being rebuilt.
28–29*	John the Baptist begins his ministry around the Jordan River (John 1:19).
28–30*	Jesus begins his ministry in Judea, but soon focuses his efforts in Galilee. In Jerusalem, Pharisees (like Gamaliel) train disciples (like Paul) in their tradition. They send a delegation to Galilee, but the delegation rejects Jesus' teaching. In Alexandria, Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50) attempts to unify Greek philosophy with Hebrew Scripture.
33 (or 30)	Jesus returns to Judea, is crucified, and resurrected. James the brother of Jesus becomes a believer after witnessing the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7 ; Acts 12:17). Jesus ascends to the Father's right hand (Acts 1). Jesus' first followers receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and begin to proclaim the gospel (Acts 2).
33/34*	Paul witnesses the resurrected Lord on the way to Damascus and is commissioned as an apostle to the nations (Acts 9 ; Gal. 1:15–16).
34–37	Paul ministers in Damascus and Arabia (Acts 9:19–22 ; 26:20 ; Gal. 1:16–18).
36	Pilate loses his position for incompetence.
36/37*	Paul meets with Peter in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–30 ; Gal. 1:18).
37–45	Paul ministers in Syria, Tarsus, and Cilicia (Acts 9:30 ; Gal. 1:21).
38*	Peter witnesses to Cornelius (Acts 10).
39	Antipas is exiled.
40–45*	James writes his letter to believers outside Palestine (see James 1:1).
41–44	Agrippa, Herod the Great's grandson, rules Palestine; he kills James the brother of John (Acts 12:2) and imprisons Peter (Acts 12:3).
42–44	Paul receives his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7).
44	Peter leaves Jerusalem; Agrippa is killed by an "angel of the Lord" (Acts 12:23).
44–46	Theudas persuades many Jews to sell their possessions and follow him into the wilderness where he claimed he would miraculously divide the Jordan River; Roman procurator Fadus dispatches his cavalry and beheads the would-be messiah.
44–47*	Paul's Second Visit to Jerusalem; time of famine (Acts 11:27–30 ; Gal. 2:1–10).
46–47	Paul's First Missionary Journey (with Barnabas) from Antioch to Cyprus, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra (Acts 13:4–14:26).

46–48	Roman procurator Tiberius Alexander crucifies two sons (Jacob and Simon) of Judas the Galilean.
48*	Paul writes <i>Galatians</i> , perhaps from Antioch (see Acts 14:26–28).
48–49*	Paul and Peter return to Jerusalem for the Apostolic Council, which, with the assistance of James, frees Gentile believers from the requirement of circumcision in opposition to Pharisaic believers (Acts 15:1–29); Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch (Acts 15:30) but split over a dispute about John Mark (Acts 15:36–40).
48/49–51*	Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (with Silas) from Antioch to Syria, Cilicia, southern Galatia, Macedonia, notably Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea; and then on to Achaia, notably Athens and Corinth (Acts 15:36–18:22).
49	Claudius expels Jews from Rome because of conflicts about Jesus (Acts 18:2); Paul befriends two refugees, Priscilla and Aquila, in Corinth (Acts 18:2–3).
49–51*	Paul writes <i>1–2 Thessalonians</i> from Corinth (Acts 18:1, 11 ; also compare Acts 18:5 with 1 Thess. 1:8).
51	Paul appears before Gallio, proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12–17).
50–54*	Peter comes to Rome.
52–57*	Paul’s Third Missionary Journey from Antioch to Galatia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Macedonia, Greece (Acts 18:23–21:17).
52–55	Paul ministers in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–20).
53–55*	Mark writes his Gospel, containing Peter’s memories of Jesus; perhaps within a decade, Matthew publishes his Gospel, which relies on Mark and other sources. Paul writes <i>1 Corinthians</i> from Ephesus (Acts 19:10).
54	Claudius dies (edict exiling Jews repealed); Priscilla and Aquila return to Rome and host a church in their home (see Rom. 16:3–5).
54–68	Nero reigns.
55–56*	Paul writes <i>2 Corinthians</i> from Macedonia (Acts 20:1, 3 ; 2 Cor. 1:16; 2:13; 7:5; 8:1; 9:2, 4 ; see 1 Cor. 16:5).
57*	Paul winters in Corinth and writes <i>Romans</i> (Acts 20:3 ; see Rom. 16:1–2 ; also see Rom. 16:23 with 1 Cor. 1:14); travels to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1–16), visits with James the brother of Jesus (Acts 21:17–26), and is arrested (Acts 21:27–36; 22:22–29).
57–59	Paul is imprisoned and transferred to Caesarea (Acts 23:23–24, 33–34).
60	Paul begins voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1–2); he is shipwrecked for three months on the island of Malta (Acts 27:39–28:10).
60–70*	Letter to the <i>Hebrews</i> is written.
62	James the brother of the Lord is executed by the Sadducean high priest Ananus.
62–63*	Peter writes his first letter (<i>1 Peter</i>) from Rome (1 Pet. 5:13).
62*	Paul arrives in Rome and remains under house arrest (Acts 28:16–31); he writes <i>Ephesians</i> (see verses for <i>Colossians</i>), <i>Philippians</i> (Phil. 1:7, 13, 17; 4:22), <i>Colossians</i> (Col. 4:3, 10, 18 ; see Acts 27:2 with Col. 4:10), <i>Philemon</i> (see Philem. 23 with Col. 1:7 ; Philem. 2 with Col. 4:17 ; Philem. 24 with Col. 4:10 ; also see Col. 4:9). Luke, Paul’s physician and companion (see Col. 4:14), writes <i>Luke</i> and <i>Acts</i> .
62–64	Paul is released, extends his mission (probably reaching Spain), writes <i>1 Timothy</i> from Macedonia (see 1 Tim. 1:3) and <i>Titus</i> from Nicopolis (Titus 3:12); he is rearrested in Rome (2 Tim. 1:16–17).
63–64	Work on the temple complex is completed.

64 (July 19)	Fire in Rome; Nero blames and kills many Christians.
64–67*	Peter writes his second letter (2 Peter). Jude writes his letter. Paul writes 2 Timothy (see 2 Tim. 4:6–8). Paul and Peter are martyred in Rome.
66	First Jewish-Roman War begins with a riot between Greeks and Jews at Caesarea; Roman procurator Gesius Florus (A.D. 64–66) is murdered and a Roman garrison wiped out; Menahem, son or grandson of Judas the Galilean, murders the high priest Ananias and seizes control of the temple; Nero dispatches Vespasian with three legions.
67*	Romans destroy the Qumran community, who beforehand hid the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls in nearby caves; the church in Jerusalem flees to Pella (Matt. 24:15–16 ; Mark 13:14 ; Luke 21:20–22); John migrates to Ephesus with Mary, Jesus’ mother.
68	Nero commits suicide; year of the three emperors.
69	Rebellion quelled in Galilee and Samaria; Vespasian summoned back to Rome to become emperor.
70 (Aug. 30)	Titus, Vespasian’s son, after a five-month siege of Jerusalem, destroys the temple after desecrating it; the temple’s menorah, Torah, and veil are removed and later put on display in a victory parade in Rome; the influence of the Sadducees ends; the Pharisee Johanan ben Zakkai escapes and convinces the Romans to allow him and others to settle in Jamnia, where they found a school.
73 (May 2)*	Before Roman general Silva breaches the fortress atop Masada following a two-year siege, 936 Jewish rebels commit suicide.
75	Titus has an affair with the Jewish princess Berenice, sister of Agrippa II (Acts 25:13, 23), whom he later abandons because of the scandal.
77	Pliny the Elder writes <i>Natural History</i> .
77–78	Josephus publishes <i>Jewish War</i> in Rome.
79	Pompeii and Herculaneum are destroyed by eruption of Vesuvias; Pliny the Elder dies attempting to investigate.
81	The Arch of Titus, celebrating his destruction of the temple, is erected in Rome.
81–96	Domitian, Titus’s brother, persecutes Christians among the Roman nobility, including his own relatives Clemens and Domitilla.
85–95*	John writes his letters (1–3 John), probably in Ephesus.
89–95*	John writes his Gospel, probably in Ephesus.
93–94	Josephus publishes <i>Jewish Antiquities</i> in Rome.
94	Domitian exiles philosophers from Rome.
95*	Amidst persecution, Clement, a leader in the Roman church, writes his <i>Letter to the Corinthians (1 Clement)</i> appealing for peace between the young men and elders.
95–96*	Exiled by Domitian to Patmos, John writes Revelation (Rev. 1:9) .
96–98	Nerva, the first of five “good” emperors, ends official persecution.

* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or