

CHURCH HISTORY

The End of the Apostolic Age

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Early Church History, part 7

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Apostolic Age comes to a close with the death of the apostle John, probably around A.D. 96. Most scholars give the date of A.D. 95 as the time of writing for the book of Revelation, which was written by John during his banishment on Patmos.
- B. John, being a very young man when called to the apostolic office by the Lord Jesus, probably outlived most of his fellow apostles by a number of years. Assuming that the book of Revelation was written when John was an old man, it is concluded that he died soon after this writing.

II. MISSIONS IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

- A. Through the efforts of the apostle Paul, the gospel was preached in Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Rome and as far west as Spain. These missionary journeys can be sustained by the inspired Word. We know also that Barnabas ministered in Cyprus.
- B. Tradition has it that Bartholomew preached in Armenia; Thomas in Parthia, Persia, and India; Matthew in Ethiopia; James the Less in Egypt; Jude in Assyria and Persia; and Mark (not one of the apostles, but closely related to them) in Alexandria. We have no trustworthy accounts of the results of their labors or of the dates or circumstances of their deaths.

If India was evangelized during the first century, it is entirely reasonable to suppose that the believers also reached China with the Christian message. The apostles Thaddeus and Simon the Canaanite are also said to have ministered in the remote East.

- C. If the Babylon from which Peter wrote (1 Pet. 5:13) was Babylon on the Euphrates instead of a symbolical representation of Rome, then Babylonia was also evangelized during the first century.
- D. There is very strong evidence that the gospel reached Britain in the first century, probably through Roman soldiers who had been converted to Christ.
- E. On the Day of Pentecost, many people from various lands heard the gospel and believed in Christ and then returned to these lands with the gospel of Christ (Acts 2:9-11).
- F. Also converts would move from place to place in the Roman Empire, and they would carry the gospel of Christ with them.
- G. Vos in his *Church History* says:

“If there is any truth in these traditions concerning the Apostles and other early Church leaders, the Gospel, through these men and their converts, penetrated to most of the more important inhabited areas of Europe, Asia and Africa by the end of the first century.”

III. SOCIAL ACTION IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

- A. *Introduction:* Wherever the gospel goes, people believe and find the forgiveness of sins in Christ, and they begin to want to live for the Lord Jesus. Conversion also has a restraining effect upon those who do not know the Lord. It also brings a concern on the part of believers for the social need around them.
- B. *Slavery:* While the early church did not do away with slavery, it gave the slave an equal place with all men in Christ Jesus. The slave, who could be sold or killed at the pleasure of his owner, was now given a place in the Christian church as a child of God, and sat down at the same communion table with his master. The effects of all this on the first century are greater than any of us can realize.
- C. *Democratic Spirit:* Local churches in the first century were ruled and overseen by elders, but in the local congregation there was good communication between elders and congregation which stimulated a democratic spirit.

- D. *Freedom from Superstition:* Through the gospel, the chains of sin were broken, and sinners were cleansed and raised to a higher spiritual plane by the power of God. The brokenhearted were comforted, the weak were made strong, the selfish learned to love their fellow men and to sacrifice themselves for the cause of Christ. Superstitions were swept away, idolatry dwindled.

IV. CHURCH GOVERNMENT IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

- A. *Introduction:* The early church government was very simple but effective. The New Testament is quite clear on the form of government exercised by the early church. It is essential to know what the Bible teaches on church government in order adequately to refute the Roman Catholic claims to government by the pope and hierarchy.
- B. *Apostles:* The original twelve apostles are said to be the foundation of the church with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). The apostles were responsible for establishing local churches and appointing elders to rule. All ruling offices in the New Testament were by appointment, not by free election. After the passing of the apostle John, the apostolic office was apparently closed. There is not one shred of evidence in the Bible for the passing of authority from the first century apostles to a ruling hierarchy as Roman Catholicism claims.
- C. *Elders (Presbyters or Bishops):* This office was an appointed office (Tit. 1:5), and requires clear-cut qualifications in the one who holds it (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9). There was always a plurality of elders in one local church (Heb. 13:7,17; Tit. 1:5; Acts 20:17), and there may have been one who had the special gifting of teaching elder (1 Tim. 5:17). The duties of the elders were to rule, oversee and teach the local flock of believers. The New Testament makes no distinction between elders and bishops. This division came later in the church.
- D. *Deacons:* The office of deacon was that of a server (Acts 6) who took up the menial tasks of the ministry so the apostles and elders could get on with the work of leadership in the ministry. The qualifications for a deacon are found in 1 Timothy 3.
- E. *Independent Local Churches:* The churches that were started by the apostles were local, autonomous groups, with Christ ruling through the elders and the

people. Each church was self-sustaining, self-supporting and self-propagating. They were indigenous churches.

There were no hierarchies or denominations as we know them today. The simplicity of government in the early Church was soon corrupted by man, and this has led to a great deal of confusion in God's people.

V. WAS PETER THE FIRST POPE OF THE APOSTOLIC AGE?

- A. *The Claim:* The Roman Catholic Church claims that Peter was the first Pope, the Church being founded upon Peter (Matt. 16:13-19), and that he was the first bishop of Rome, his pontificate lasting 25 years, from A.D. 42 to 67. It also claims Peter was martyred in Rome around A.D. 67.
- B. *The Issue:* The whole structure of the Roman Catholic Church is built on the assumption that in Matthew 16:13-19 Christ appointed Peter the first pope and so established the papacy. If one can disprove the primacy of Peter, the foundation of the papacy is destroyed. If the papacy is thus undermined, the whole Roman hierarchy must topple with it.
- C. *Major Arguments Against Peter Being the First Pope:*
1. *The Rock of Matthew 16:13-19 is Christ, not Peter:* In context, Peter has just acknowledged the Lord to be the Christ, the Son of God, acknowledging his deity. Our Lord replies, "Thou art Peter (*petros*) and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church." *Petros* is masculine, meaning a little rock, and *petra* is feminine, meaning a large, immovable rock. The rock refers to Christ, not to Peter, for Christ is the chief cornerstone of the church (Eph. 2:20). Christ is often called "the Rock" in the Bible (Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Ps. 118:22; 1 Cor. 10:4). Christ did not build his church upon a weak, sinful man. Rather he built it upon the essential deity of Christ, which was so forcefully set forth in Peter's confession. Christ was the starting point and rock upon which the church would be built.

It is interesting to notice that some of the Church fathers, Augustine and Jerome among them, gave this Protestant explanation of this verse. Others, of course, gave the papal interpretation. But this shows that there was no unanimous consent of the fathers, as the Roman Catholic Church claims.

2. *Peter's Own Claim:* Peter claimed to be an apostle and an elder (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1-3). He did not claim the highest place in the church as one would expect a pope to do or as some would claim for him. He assumed no ecclesiastical superiority, but with profound humility put himself on a level with those whom he exhorted.
3. *Peter Rebuked by Paul:* In Galatians 2:11-14, the apostle Paul rebuked the apostle Peter for falling into legalistic tendencies. If the Roman Catholic Church is right, then the first infallible pope was reprimanded by another apostle.
4. *Paul Is the Outstanding Apostle:* Paul was easily the greatest of the apostles, with a deeper insight into the way of salvation and a larger revealed knowledge concerning the mysteries of life and death. He wrote much more of the New Testament than did Peter. His 13 epistles contain 2,923 verses, while Peter's two epistles contain only 166 verses. Peter's epistles do not stand first among the epistles, but after those of Paul. In fact, his second epistle was one of the last to be accepted by the church. Paul worked more recorded miracles than did Peter, and seems to have established more prominent and more permanent churches than did Peter.
5. *Peter Was a Married Man:* On some of his missionary journeys he was accompanied by his wife, for Paul says, "Have we no right to lead about a wife that is a believer, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas?" (1 Cor. 9:5). The Confraternity Version here reads "sister" instead of "wife," but the Greek word is *gyne* meaning "wife," not *adelphē* meaning sister. A married pope would go against Roman Catholic dogma.
6. *Peter Was Not in Rome:* Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans (A.D. 58) at the very height of Peter's alleged papal reign there. Yet Paul did not address the letter to the apostle Peter, nor did he even mention his name. If Peter was the first pope, then Paul's letter was a terrible insult to Peter. Obviously Peter was not in Rome at this time.
7. *Archeology:* Incredibly extensive archaeological research has been conducted throughout the centuries in order to find some inscription in the catacombs or other ancient Roman ruins that would indicate that Peter at least visited Rome. Archeology has yet to recover one shred of such evidence.

8. *Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15)*: At the Jerusalem Council, where the problem of the Gentile Christians' relationship to the Mosaic Law was solved by the early church, James, not Peter, presided over the meeting and made the final pronouncement. Until Jerome in the fifth century, none of the early church fathers lent support to the belief that Peter was the first pope.
 9. The eastern church, which broke from Rome and the western church in A.D. 1054, never really went along with the idea of the papacy or Rome's claim to be the only true church.
- D. *Conclusion*: The Roman Church builds its papal system not on New Testament or the facts of history, but only on unfounded traditions.