**When Christianity was New –**

**A Synopsis of the Early Church**

How you ever wondered about what early Christians were like? One person told me they thought that what they believed was totally different. Others think they are pretty much identical with modern evangelicals. Both of these views are far from the truth. Much was the same, but much was different. Let’s have a very brief “taste” of what early Christians were like.

Imagine going back to a time machine to a house church in 80 A.D. and you could speak New Testament Greek. You ask them to turn to the gospel of John, and except for one guy, they don’t want to because they don’t know what you are talking about. Besides the fact that only the rich could afford books, the Christians had never heard of the Gospel of John. Then you ask why the one guy seemed agreeable, and he says, “I thought what you said sounded like a good idea; I am the John, the apostle.” So, let’s explore their world, and then to keep things straight in our minds, let’s see a timeline.

# Exploring the world of the Early Church

Wouldn’t it be exciting to live during the times of the early church? Imagine a time where many of the major Christian leaders and writers were martyred within a few years of each other. Other so-called “Christian” groups, such as the Hermetic Gnostics, taught that Christ was from God, as were Hercules and Hermes. Imagine trying to share the gospel, where people know they will be killed if they believe it.

The early church suffered severe attacks without and problems within. Externally Satan attacked with ten major Roman persecutions, and other lesser persecutions. There were at least 30 different Gnostic and 2 Ebionite spiritual counterfeits. Internally there were three schisms. There was a very influential and strange teacher Origen, who while orthodox in most areas, over-allegorized scripture and believed in eventual salvation for all, even demons.

Yet the Christians got their doctrine right. They were faithful under torture and death. And they shared the gospel with their culture, and carried it abroad.

# A Timeline of Pre-Nicene Christianity

See if you can figure out what the colors mean.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year AD** | **Pre-Nicene Timeline (before 325 A.D.)** |
| 40-62 | Paul wrote his epistles |
| 50 | 1st Roman persecution of Nero |
| 50-70 | First three gospels were written |
| 50-90 | apostles go to Persia, India, Russia, Ethiopia |
| 70 | Romans destroy Jerusalem after revolting |
| 70- | spurious writings, Gospel of Mary, etc. |
| 85-95 | John wrote his gospel |
| 95-96 | 2nd persecution under Domitian |
| 96-98 | Clement of Rome wrote (Php 4:3?) |
| 100 | An estimated half million Christians |
| 95-110 | Papias, disciple of John wrote 5 volumes |
| 100-117 | Ignatius, disciple of John wrote his epistles |
| 107-117 | 3rd persecution under Trajan |
| 118&134 | 4th: Hadrian kills Christians/Jews |
| 135 | Bar Cochba persecutes Christians |
| 138-150 | Bible mss, John, Phm, 70% Paul & Heb |
| 150? | 9 verses of Revelation |
| 96-155 | Apostolic fathers: 11 writers, 67.5 pages |
| 168-220 | first 3 of 19 authors writing on the Trinity |
| c.172 | Tatian’s *Diatessaron* Gospel harmony |
| 182-188 | Irenaeus describes 19 spiritual counterfeits |
| 188- | Ebionite heretical writings. |
| 170–300 | Marcion and 30 Gnostic heretic writings |
| 125-175 | p66 Bodmer II papyrus has 92% of John |
| 162-180 | 5th: Marcus Aurelius kills Christians |
| 189 | Pantaenus of Alexandria travels to India |
| 200 | 2 million Christians. Roman pop. 70 million |
| 202 | 6th: Septimus Severus kills Christians |
| 209 | First martyrs killed in England |
| 200-222 | Sabellian heretic bishops in Rome |
| 190-217 | Muratorian canon lists 23 of 27 NT books |
| 175-225 | p75 + p45 have most of gospels & Acts |
| 222-236 | Hippolytus lists ~ 70 groups, including Plato, Egyptians, Pharisees, & Brahmans |
| 200-240- | Montanists including Tertullian |
| 235-238 | Maximus Thrax kills Christian clergy |
| 250-450 | Novatian schism: those who denied the faith have no hope of ever being forgiven |
| 250- | first Christian monks and hermits |
| 225-253 | Origen, very influential but strange teacher |
| 250-253 | 7th: Decius & Gallus heavy persecution |
| 257-260 | 8th: Valerian persecutes Christians |
| 270 | 9th: Aurelian persecutes Christians |
| 287-300 | Gregory the Illuminator goes to Armenia |
| 300 | David of Basra, Persian missionary to India |
| 300 | an estimated 5 million Christians |
| c.300 | Christian vs. Gnostic & Bardasene debate |
| 314 | Council of Arles 1st mention a Roman pope |
| 284-305 | 10th Diocletian most severe persecution |
| 96-318 | 88 writers wrote 5,500 pages |
| 315-323 | Licinius kills Christians in the east |
| 313-326 | Lactantius & Alexander of Alex.: 317 pages |
| 318-325 | Eusebius of Caesarea wrote 1,055 pages |
| 96-325 | 92 writers >8,000 NT quotes. 65% of NT |
| 96-325 | Manuscripts < 325 A.D. have 57% of NT |
| 50-325 | estimated 40,000 to 70,000 martyred |
| 325 | Council of Nicea excommunicates Arians |

# How similar were early Christians to us?

There are at least 1,047 teachings in the Bible that Christians believe today, and four or more early Christians taught, none denied. This includes 144 on Scripture, 143 on Jesus, 39 on the Holy Spirit, 77 other ones on God, 23 on prayer, 33 on the church, 22 on the family, and many on evangelism.

If you put a typical early Christian in a room with a typical eastern Orthodox, Nestorian, Copt, and evangelical, the early Christian would be closer to each of them than they would be to each other. A Roman Catholic would be a bit farther from the early Christians than the others. In fact, Catholics would have people believing like early Christians burned at the stake during the Middle Ages for at times questioning and rejecting the bishop of Rome, refusing to bow, venerate, or pray to any images or statues, or reading the Bible on their own.

# How they differ from some believers today

Early Christians were generally very brave; being persecuted or killed for their faith was neither a surprise nor a tragedy. A martyr going home to glory was a cause for rejoicing. They spoke freely of predestination, free will, election, God’s grace, and a worthiness related to salvation. They were closer to the views of Arminianism than to the views of Calvinism. The earliest ones, like Papias and Justin Martyr were pre-Millennialists, while later ones from Clement of Alexandria on were amillennialists.

Easter was a big celebration for them, but “quarto-decimian” Christians disagreed with others on when to celebrate it. Early Christians differed among themselves on the apocrypha, though most thought those were scripture. Montanists had prophecy and spoke in tongues, but we have no evidence that the other groups: proto-orthodox, Novatianists, and Donatists, ever did so. They preferred immersion for baptism, but if there was little water, then they would use three cups of water.

They had different concerns: any apologist worth their salt would know how to talk with a stoic, vs. cynic vs. Cyrenaic They would know the contradictory stories of Zeus and of Athena. But they preached the same gospel we preach today.

# Gleaning wisdom from our “elder siblings”

They highly valued the authority of the holy scriptures, and they would envy our easy access to them. But they would be disappointed in the lukewarmness in many churches. They would be shocked at all the statues and images that were venerated in Catholic and Orthodox churches. When they would hear that some venerate Mary as a co-mediator and c-redeemer along with Christ, it is unclear if they would consider those people as Christians at all. On the other hand, they probably would not be too surprised at the cults and liberal Christians; after all heretics have been fixing Christ with other things since their time.

As all Christian should be, they were strongly against mixing Christianity with other religions, and against immorality, homosexuality, abortion, and astrology.

# What we can learn from their mistakes

When speaking authoritatively on things outside the Bible, Christian writers did not do so well. They understood the Greek concept of atoms, and agreed it was preposterous. They believe in a Phoenix bird in Arabia, that lives for a thousand years, then sets itself on fire, and is reborn. They thought God created that fabulous bird as a type of Christ’s resurrection.

# Where they were beginning to go wrong

The early Church was in general very faithful to the teachings of the Bible. But from an evangelical perspective, they had a couple of bad tendencies, which would not seem all that serious at the time, but progressed to be very ugly in subsequent centuries. Some over-emphasized obedience to the bishop without giving much thought to what if the bishop taught wrong. Some allegorizes scripture, which lead to trying to make scripture say anything you want.

**Verses to Remember Them By**

1 Tim 6:11-12 “But you, man of God, flee these things, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you confessed the good confession in the sight of many witnesses.” (World English Bible)