

The First 100 Years

A Fresh Glance At Church History

The story of the Christian Church during the first one hundred years of its existence, needs to be looked at again. It is not sufficient to regurgitate past misunderstandings and distortions, making out that there is nothing wrong with following the same old hares up the same old hollow logs.

We have to face up to the fact that literally within minutes of its birth, the Church was in a life and death struggle with the forces of darkness and deception. And we also have to face up to the fact that almost immediately there were large parts of the body of believers who became entangled in the strands of misleading doctrine.

There was no idyllic period in which the Early Church was bathed in blissful sunshine. Neither was there ever a perfectly united Christian Church, nobly resisting repeated attacks from an external foe. At best such views are based on a superficial reading of NT texts. At worst, they have been promoted down through the centuries by a succession of apologists and propagandists for a corrupt and false church.

In other words, it is time to stop considering the NT Church as a special case, only relevant to its own period of social history. Or somehow especially protected and equipped because of some glorious 'apostolic age.'

The reality is that from the very beginning of its existence, the 'church' has been at war within itself. Even in those formative decades, the truth was under threat inside the church. And, if we take note of the exhortations in Jude and 2 Peter, the truth as they had originally received it was already being fiercely contended for by the saints.

This was a spiritual battle that the principal protagonists believed to be far more important than the physical battle which raged outside. For example Paul, who was no stranger to physical persecution, always reserved his real passion for those who undermined the message he preached (see Galatians 5:7,10,12), rather than those who actually cast the stones.

The purpose of this study is to reveal a little of what actually took place during those first years of the Christian Church. The focus will be on the one doctrine that was (and remains) critical to the spiritual health of every part of the Body of Christ, which is the Path of the Cross.

Behind all of the multiple heresies that have deceived people during the Church Age, there lies a fundamental resistance to this one central teaching of humility and obedience. This premise remains true whether you call the deception Judaism, or one of the later names like Gnosticism. Underlying all doctrinal error is a refusal to submit to the chastening hand of God our Father and the refining work of His Son within us.

TABLE #1 – AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIRST CENTURY

DATES BY DECADE	HISTORICAL EVENTS	CHRISTIAN CHURCH	NEW TESTAMENT
10 BC - 10 AD	4BC Death of Herod the Great	5BC? Birth of Christ	
11 - 20 AD	14AD Tiberius becomes Roman Emperor 18AD Caiaphus is made High Priest		
21 - 30 AD	26AD Pilate becomes Prefect of Judaea	28AD? John the Baptist begins his ministry 29AD? Jesus Christ begins His ministry	
31 - 40 AD	36AD Pilate recalled to Rome 37AD Caligula becomes Roman Emperor 39AD Herod Antipas dies	33AD? Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ 34AD? Peter arrested. Deacons appointed 35AD? Steven is martyred. Philip preaches Paul is converted	
41 - 50 AD	41AD Claudius becomes Roman Emperor 44AD Herod Agrippa dies 49AD Claudius expells Jews from Rome	44AD? James brother of John killed 48AD? First Missionary Journey 49AD? Council Meeting in Jerusalem 50AD? Second Missionary Journey	48AD? James (James) 49AD? Galations (Paul)
51 - 60 AD	52AD Felix made Procurator 54AD Nero becomes Roman Emperor 59AD Festus replaces Felix as Procurator	53AD? Third Missionary Journey 57AD? Paul arrested and imprisoned 59AD? Paul taken by ship to Rome	51AD? 1 & 2 Thess (Paul) 56AD? 1 & 2 Cor (Paul) 57AD? Romans (Paul) 58AD? Gospel (Mark) 60AD? Ephesians (Paul)
61 - 70 AD	64AD Fire destroys Rome 66AD Jewish revolt against Roman control	62AD? James the Lords half-brother killed 64AD Nero persecutes Christians	61AD? Colossians & Philemon (Paul) Gospel (Luke)

	67AD Zealots occupy Jerusalem 68AD Nero dies 69AD Vespasian becomes Roman Emperor 70AD Titus destroys Jerusalem & Temple	67AD? Peter & Paul killed in Rome 70AD? Jerusalem Church flees to Pella	62AD? Philippians & 1 Timothy (Paul) 63AD? Acts (Luke) 65AD? Gospel (Matt) 1Peter (Peter) 66AD? Titus (Paul) 67AD? 2 Timothy (Paul) 2Peter (Peter) 68AD? Hebrews (...?) Jude (Jude)
71 - 80 AD	79AD Titus becomes Roman Emperor		
81 - 90 AD	81AD Domitian becomes Roman Emperor	90AD Domitian persecutes Christians	85AD? Gospel (John) 90AD? 1-3 John (John)
91 - 100 AD	96AD Domitian dies 98AD Trajan becomes Roman Emperor	94AD? John imprisoned on Island of Patmos 100AD? John dies	95AD? Revelation (John)

The Life And Times...

Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, and the First Apostles of the Early Church, were all born into a Roman world. And it was in that Roman world that they grew up, worked, ministered, sometimes married, often travelled, and finally died.

The territory owing allegiance to the city of Rome was so vast that it entirely surrounded the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. With typical pride the Romans called it *Mare Internum*, or the Internal Sea. The power of the state of Rome at that time is illustrated by another Latin phrase—*Pax Romana* or the Roman Peace. This peace was imposed and guaranteed throughout the empire by the marching Legions of Rome, who were in turn directly controlled by the all-powerful figure of Caesar.

The events narrated in the New Testament story all took place under the rule of Roman emperors. Christ was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar, and His ministry and crucifixion occurred during the reign of the subsequent emperor Tiberius. A great famine was prophesied by Agabus (Acts 11:28) and Aquila and Priscilla were expelled from Rome (Acts 18:2) in the reign of Claudius. Paul was arrested, imprisoned, and killed, all during the reign of Nero. The Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed in the reign of Vespasian (by his son Titus who was to succeed him as emperor). And John was imprisoned on Patmos during the reign of the emperor Domitian.

The story of the New Testament is also strongly influenced by two regional dynasties, both of whom played significant political and religious roles in the first century Roman province of Palestine.

The family of Herod ruled Palestine (or parts of it) as client-kings for the Romans over five generations. Christ was born in the reign of Herod the Great, and He ministered and was crucified in the reign of Herod Antipas. Herod Agrippa I executed James the brother of John and imprisoned Peter to appease his Jewish constituency (Acts 12:1-4) Herod Agrippa II heard Paul's defence but was unable to intervene due to the apostle's 'appeal to Caesar' (Acts 26:32), and later went on to assist in the Roman suppression of Jerusalem.

The other family of note is that of Annas the High Priest. This dynasty dominated the office of High Priest during the critical years of Christ's ministry and the establishment of the church. Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas figure prominently in the lead-up to the crucifixion, as well as in the subsequent harassment of the apostles. They and other members of the family succeeded in occupying the office of High Priest for a total of 35 years, before its final extinguishment by Titus in 70 AD.

The House of Caesar

The period from 63 BC to 31 BC was one of civil war for Rome, with rival generals and politicians pitting great armies and fortunes against each other, in a ruinous struggle for ultimate power. The struggle between the first Triumvirate of **Julius Caesar**, Pompey, and Crassus (formed to rule the state in 60 BC) ended in the dictatorship and then assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. The struggle between the second Triumvirate of Octavian, Marc Antony, and Lepidus (formed to rule the state in 43 BC) ended at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC with Octavian (now called Augustus) becoming sole ruler.

Augustus Caesar (a grand nephew of Julius Caesar) ruled as emperor for 45 years until 14 AD, and he left a strengthened and reformed empire for his successor Tiberius. 28 Legions, each containing 5,000 armed and disciplined soldiers and their officers, guarded the frontiers of the empire from the 'barbarians' without. The presence of these armies also ensured civil order within the borders of 9 imperial and 12 senatorial provinces, as well as providing a sobering reminder of Roman power to 6 client kingdoms.

The city of Rome boasted considerable architectural achievements and Roman engineering and construction skills were replicated throughout the empire. Soaring aqueducts brought fresh water to cities. Multiple bath-houses brought hygiene to the masses. Extraordinary public buildings were erected for pagan worship, the administration of law, and public amusement. And a vast network of solid all-weather roads meant the awesome power of the Legions was never far away.

Tiberius Caesar (an adopted son of Augustus) ruled the empire for 23 years until his death in 37 BC and, on the surface at least, appeared to run it in the same administratively competent manner as his predecessor. Soldiers continued to march, grand buildings continued to be constructed, and wealth and grain continued to pour into Rome (Tiberius left 20 times more wealth than he inherited to his successors). But on a personal and moral level the decades of palace intrigue and assassination, as well as a steady diet of 'bread and circuses' for the largely indolent ordinary people, were beginning to take their toll.

Tiberius too began to show signs of moral deterioration. Forced to divorce the woman he loved and marry Caesar's widowed and wanton daughter Julia, he retreated into self-imposed exile on the island of Rhodes from 6BC to 3AD. There he began to develop his reputation as a sadistic and perverted monster. Later when he was emperor, he again retreated, this time to the island of Capri. From 27 AD to his death in 37 AD, Tiberius left the day to day running of his empire to the head of the powerful Praetorian Guard, Sejanus. Meanwhile he filled Capri with a dozen luxurious villas

complete with underground dungeons and torture chambers, as well as a huge retinue of sex-slaves and entertainers of every description.

The chosen successor was **Gaius Caesar**, better known as Caligula, who was a great-grandson of Augustus through the promiscuous Julia. Caligula was a malicious choice, for Tiberius had said of him, "I am nursing a viper in Rome's bosom." And he proved to be the out and out madman that his stepfather predicted. "Remember," Caligula once said, "I can do anything to anybody." And he did.

Coming to power in 37 AD, he declared his horse 'Incitatus' a Consul of Rome; made a mistress of his sister Drusilla (and when she died he forbade Romans to laugh or bathe during weeks of public mourning); ordered his Legions to collect sea-shells from the Gallic coastline (he had gathered them there to invade Britain, but had overlooked ordering the construction of sufficient ships to take them across the Channel); entertained himself by torturing condemned prisoners to death; and conducted vicious purges of Roman families in order to confiscate their wealth.

After 4 years of this even his own Praetorian Guard had had enough. Several of them stabbed him to death, murdered his wife, and smashed his young daughter's head against the wall. The succession was far from clear at this stage. However as they rampaged through the imperial palace, some of the Guards happened upon Caligula's 50 year old uncle Claudius. He was cowering behind a curtain, fearing he would be the next to die, but instead they made him Emperor!

Claudius Caesar was physically deformed from birth. His mother the ghastly Julia said 'the gods' had not finished making him and his grandfather Augustus ordered that he was not to be seen in public in case something unseemly occurred. So Claudius had turned to a private life of studying language and history. Ruling from 41 AD to 54 AD, he was actually a careful and intelligent man, and a competent general who successfully conquered most of Britain. He would have made a very good emperor if it were not for his unfortunate choice of wives, of which he had four. The last and most ambitious of these was his niece Julia Agrippina, who poisoned him with a dish of mushrooms so that her son Nero could ascend the throne.

In 54 AD, and at the age of 17 years, **Nero Caesar** was made Emperor of Rome. He moved quickly to set the 'tone' of his rule. First he poisoned the rival claimant Britannicus, who was Claudius' natural son. Later he despatched his own mother, the domineering Agrippina, when she too became irritating. He took up playing the lyre and singing his own compositions. These performances took place on stage and before 'captive' audiences who were forbidden to leave until he had finished. All in all Nero seemed to be shaping up to be a fairly typical representative of the sinister family called Caesars. But he was to go one better than any of his forbears.

In the summer of 64 AD, the city of Rome was seriously burnt by a great fire. No sooner had the flames died down, than a rumour that the fire had been lit under Nero's direct orders, swept through the smouldering ruins. To avert suspicion from himself, Nero accused the Christian community of being the culprits. Tacitus writes, "Besides being put to death they [ie Christians] were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed." (Annales XV.44.). Even the hardened and cynical populace of Rome knew that the Christians, "were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual." (Ibid).

Nero's subsequent extravagance in rebuilding the city very nearly bankrupted the empire. Tensions increased to unbearable levels as heavy taxation, depreciation of the currency, and confiscation of great land-holdings by the state, made their impact. In 68 AD the Praetorian Guard revolted once again and Nero was forced to flee Rome. At 30 years of age, on the run and terrified, he committed suicide--finally bringing the reign of the House of Caesar to an inglorious end.

The Caesars left behind them an empire that, at its heart, was in chaos. The Mediterranean sun continued to reflect off marble buildings and the armour of the Legions. And the ordinary people of

the provinces continued to go about their daily lives largely unaffected by the imperial traumas acted out in Rome. But the financial and institutional core of the empire was rotten and hollow. It would take the next dynasty, the Flavian emperors of Vespasian (69-79AD), Titus (79-81AD), and Domitian (81-96AD), all their efforts to repair the damage and prevent its total collapse.

The House of Herod

In 63 BC the Roman general Pompey marched into Palestine. For many Jews, it was hard to accept that the Legions of Rome were here to stay. But for one wily Arab it was obvious, and he soon recognised it as an opportunity for the political advancement of himself and his family. The Arab's name was **Antipater**, and it was his eldest son Herod who was to give his name to the dynasty which followed. The Herods were to prove cunning and ruthless rulers, serving as client-kings for the Romans in the region over the next century and a half.

Antipater had been meddling in Judaeen politics for a decade or so before Pompey arrived. He knew that the most burning need for Rome would be loyal governors to control their new and historically troublesome province. So he went straight to work, establishing his bona-fides with the Jews by outwardly professing Judaism, and cultivating the Romans with his shrewd advice and support. By 47 BC Antipater had become procurator of Judea and his son Herod was made governor of Galilee in the same year.

Following the death of his father, the Roman Senate nominated **Herod the Great** (originally meaning Herod the Elder) as 'King of Judea' and gave him an army to make good his claim. By 37 BC he had become undisputed "King of the Jews." Over the next 33 years he ruled his 'kingdom,' steadily expanding its borders as circumstances allowed, and pacifying his subjects with a massive building program. He was a physically impressive man with exceptional military skills. He was also politically adroit and adept, changing allegiances as the situation in Rome required, and managing the local scene with a combination of armed might and an extensive network of spies.

As well as passing on a united kingdom to his three son (Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip the Tetrarch) in 4 BC, Herod the Great left an imposing heritage in stone and mortar for his descendants. In Jerusalem: a massive Temple complex covering 35 acres, the Fortress Antonia (named after his first patron Marc Antony), and his own luxurious palace. In Palestine: a whole new artificial harbour and port city called Caesarea Maritima (named after his second patron Caesar Augustus), the ancient capital of Samaria completely rebuilt as Sebaste, and ten impregnable fortresses including Masada, Herodium, Machareus, and Hyrcania.

However Herod's considerable physical achievements have been somewhat eclipsed by the sheer awfulness of his personal reputation. His suspicion and cruelty led him to murder his wife Mariamne (he had 10 wives over his lifetime), and both their sons Alexander and Aristobulus (he had 15 children who survived to adulthood). Later he executed another son, Antipater, who was by his wife Doris. Augustus is reported to have made the grim joke, "It is better to be Herod's pig than to be his son." The pig was safe because of Herod's outward observance of Judaism, but his sons were not! (Macrobius, Saturnalia, 2:4:11).

These violent attacks of jealousy and rage culminated in an extraordinary order at the end of Herod's life. Realising that his own death was near, Herod had the notable citizens from each municipality arrested and imprisoned. His intention was that they be killed at the public announcement of his decease, to ensure that at least some tears would be shed in grief. The order to kill all the male infants in Bethlehem, so as to eliminate any potential rivals to his throne, is therefore entirely in character (Matt 2:16).

The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of Herod the Great bore the old tyrant's seeds of self-destruction. Never quite accomplishing the political or architectural greatness of their predecessor, but always scheming and suspicious of others.

Herod Antipas, son of the above and Tetrarch of Galilee from 4 BC to 39 AD, is typical of the Herodian line in later generations. State security and public order were everything to him. Civil unrest and religious disturbances were to be avoided at all cost. Josephus writes that the Tetrarch was "alarmed" about John the Baptist because of his "eloquence" and that "the crowds...were aroused to the highest degree." (AJ xviii 118). And on at least one occasion Jesus withdrew from the public eye because of Antipas' suspicion and hostility towards Him, "**..for Herod wants to kill You.**" (Lu 13:31).

Herod Antipas was certainly crafty and dangerous. Jesus grew up and then spent a considerable portion of his years of ministry in the territory of this ruler. He called him "**..that fox..**" (Lu 13:32) and at His trial "**..answered him nothing.**" (Lu 23:9). It is no great surprise that following his unproductive questioning, "**..Herod...sent Him back to Pilate..[and t]hat very day Pilate and Herod became friends.**" (Lu 23:11,12). Even failure could be turned to political advantage.

It is therefore ironic that what brought Antipas down in the end was his unwise choice of a second wife. Sometime in the 20s he divorced his first wife to bigamously and incestuously marry his half-brother Philip's wife Herodias, who as Herod the Great's grand-daughter was also Antipas' half-niece. This yielding to lustful obsession was to prove a dreadful mistake.

It led to his imprisonment and execution of the very popular John the Baptist, which caused widespread and long-lasting resentment among the people. It led to war with the neighbouring Arab kingdom of his now-estranged father-in-law, which undermined his reputation in Rome. And finally it led to an unseemly grasping for the title of king, which caused his eventual banishment to Gaul by Caligula.

The contradictions at war within Herod Antipas are illustrated by his behaviour at the time of John the Baptist's beheading. He arrested the outspoken prophet "**..and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias' his brother Philip's wife;**" but personally "**Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man..**" When Herodias' daughter Salome performed an erotic dance at his birthday feast, she "**..pleased Herod and...his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee.**" But her request for "**..the head of John the Baptist on a platter..**" made him "**..exceedingly sorry..**" And yet, "**..because of those who sat with him, he...sent an executioner..**" (Mk 6:17,20,22,21,25,26,27).

Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and ruler of most of his kingdom from 37 AD to 44 AD, is another of the same deviant and ruthless breed. A friend of Caligula, and therefore beneficiary of the mad emperor's favour, he took over his disgraced uncle's territory of Galilee. Later he gained Judea and Samaria from the new emperor Claudius, whom he had also courted at a critical moment in the imperial succession.

He then curried favour with his orthodox Jewish subjects by rigorously persecuting the Christian church in Jerusalem. "**Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James, the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also.**" (Acts 12:1-3). Peter miraculously escaped from prison, so Agrippa had the prison guards put to death in his place, and then moved his capital to Caesarea.

There we are told, he died a gruesome death. "**So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.**" (Acts 12:21-23).

Of course these are not all of the Herods. We have not mentioned **Herod Archelaus** (4 BC – 6 AD) who Joseph and Mary had to avoid on their return from Egypt with the young Jesus (Matt 2:22). Or **Herod Agrippa II** (53 AD – 90 AD?) who was *almost persuaded* to become a Christian by the

apostle Paul, but who in the end preferred his perverted relationship with his sister Bernice (Acts 26:28)

But the pattern of this family is clear enough. On the outside much is made of public order and grand buildings, along with recognition and 'respect' for religious custom and orthodoxy. The reality underneath this false veneer is very different however. In terms of self-indulgence and unrestrained behaviour, the Herods are a provincial version of their corrupt Roman patrons, the Caesars.

"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like.." (Gal 5:19-21

The House of Annas

The reign of the Herods in Judea lasted from 37 BC until 6 AD. In that year though, Rome finally tired of Herod the Great's son Archelaus and his excesses, and so they replaced him with direct rule under a series of Roman Prefects. This meant that the contrast between Judea and the northern parts of Herod the Great's old kingdom suddenly became stark. While things in the north stayed the same under Herod Antipas in Galilee and Herod Philip II in his Tetrarchy, the south took a dramatic leap back into their Jewish past.

Apart from increased troop presence in Jerusalem and Caesarea, and a Roman bureaucrat now collecting the taxes instead of a Herod, the Jews found that the normal everyday running of their affairs had largely reverted to their own traditional institutions. The High Priest and the Temple police, the Sanhedrin or Great Council of 71, the Judean aristocracy of wealthy landlords and rich merchant families, and the Sadducees and chief priests. After years of tight autocratic rule under the Herods, the old mechanisms and positions of power had all become important again.

And when **Annas** was appointed **High Priest** by the Roman authorities in 6 AD, it was official. The boys were back in town! All positions in the Temple were allocated by the High Priest, and he effectively controlled the Sanhedrin because of his office. The High Priesthood was therefore the single most important key to controlling Jewish affairs, and Annas had won it. He was determined not to let it go easily. Because of his strategy and cunning, Annas and his family were to dominate public life in Judea for most of the remaining decades leading up to the final destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

Annas held the office of High Priest until 15 AD, when he was deposed by the Roman Procurator Valerius Gratus. He was followed by his son Eleazor from 16-17 AD, and then his son-in-law **Caiaphas**, who was appointed **High Priest** from 26 AD to 37 AD. Later members of the family to hold the position were Jonathan the son of Annas (37 AD), Theophilus the son of Annas (37 AD), Matthias the son of Annas (41 AD), and Annas the son of Annas (62 AD and 66-68 AD).

The corrupt nepotism of the Annas dynasty is confirmed by the words of a contemporary called Abba Saul :

‘Woe is me for the house of Hanin [=Annas]

Woe is me for their whisperings!...

For they are the high priests;

Their sons are the treasurers;

Their sons-in-law are temple officers

And their servants beat the people with cudgels.’ (Talmud, Pesahim, 57d.)

Essentially the House of Annas, like the rest of their class, were self-serving conservatives. They were extremely comfortable under Roman rule and so they automatically opposed anyone who appeared to threaten the *status quo*.

They were also **Sadducees** (Acts 5:17), which means that they belonged to the traditional party of hereditary priests ("**the chief priests**" in Matt 26:47 and 27:1) and leading families ("**the elders of the people**" Ibid). The Sadducees were generally aloof and aristocratic in manner. They also interpreted Scripture literally, and were therefore less popular with the people than the Pharisees—who at least tended to ameliorate the more arbitrary clauses of the Mosaic Law with the Oral Traditions.

The harshness of the Sadducees was frequently evident when they served as magistrates. Their rulings were bitterly resented because they imposed strict justice rather than applying any mercy towards the offender. They practised absolute adherence to the Written Law in cases involving the death penalty, and insisted on a literal interpretation of *lex talionis* or "**an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth**" (Exod 21:24, Lev 24:20, Deut 19:21, and quoted in Matt 5:38).

The vehicle used to exercise their power was the **Sanhedrin**, which was a Council made up of 71 members and headed by the High Priest of the day. It had authority over religious, civil, and criminal matters, and was able to enforce this authority through its own police force under "**the captain of the temple**" (Acts 4:1,3 and 5:22-27). The only power the Sanhedrin was denied by the Romans was the death penalty, which is why the trial of Jesus had to go before Pontius Pilate (Jo 18:31).

While it appears that the Great Council had some representation of Pharisees, such as Gamaliel (Acts 5:34) and Nicodemus (John 3:1), in practice it was dominated by the High Priest and other members of the ruling class, who were Sadducees. These people ruled by intrigue and fear. They were never a popular party and always nervous of causing "**an uproar among the people**" (Matt 26:5). They preferred to plot in private and manipulate the mob to their own ends.

In addition to being self-serving and manipulative, the family of Annas were basically hypocrites. They made a great show of denouncing blasphemy and tore their robes in anguish at the slightest slur on God’s holiness (Matt 26:65). But even Pilate knew that they sought to crucify Jesus because of envy and fear for their political position (Matt 27:18).

They were also great haters. Not content with the murder of Christ in 33 AD, their vendetta against the Nazarene continued far beyond His death. This payback spirit re-emerged decades later, when Annas the son of Annas used his short tenure as High Priest in 62 AD to arrange the illegal stoning to death of the leader of the church in Jerusalem, who just happened to be Jesus’ half-brother James. This act of homicidal revenge cost Annas his job, but no matter. It was personal—"family business!"

Their lack of sincerity or any real spiritual depth was to eventually betray them. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, they also destroyed the reason for the existence of a priestly caste. And so, like the rest of the Sadducees and their ritualistic and literal brand of Judaism, the dynasty of Annas the High Priest disappeared from the pages of history forever.

The truly resilient brand of Hebrew religion proved to be that of their sworn enemies, the Pharisees, who were to have a far more dangerous and long-lasting influence on the young Christian church.

The Path Of The Cross

The Path of the Cross is the practical outworking of Christ's instruction to follow Him. "**Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what advantage is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost.'**" (Lu 9:23-25). This clear instruction to take up our cross and follow the Lord is repeated throughout the gospels: in Matthew 16:24-26 and 10:38-39, in Mark 8:34-37, in Luke 14:27 as well as 9:23-25 above, and in John 12:23-26.

The key to understanding this commandment is to discern between the types of life or lives that Jesus is referring to here. By adding parentheses we can interpret the middle verse of the quotation as follows. "**For whoever desires to save his [or her self-] life will lose it [ie lose their real or spiritual lives], but whoever loses his [or her self-] lives for My sake will save it [ie save their real or spiritual lives]."**

In other words Christ is enjoining us to follow Him by doing just as He did—by laying down our own soulish or self-lives that He might live through us, and effectively displacing our old corrupt natures with His eternal love.

The apostle Paul describes the principle as it applied to him and his fellow apostles. "**We are...always carrying about in the body [or our 'whole being'] the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body [or our 'whole being']. For we who live [ie our self-lives] are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus [through His indwelling Spirit] also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you [because instead of ministering in their own fleshly strength, which is spiritual death, they were now ministering in 'the life of Jesus']."** (2 Co 4:8,10-12).

First we join with Him in the death of the cross, *and then* we receive from Him in resurrection life. In Jesus' words, "**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.**" (Jo 12:24). And this is an on-going process for Christians—not just a once-only experience but a way of life.

'..the enemies of the cross of Christ..'

Those who reject this walk of submission and obedience to the Father's will (which we have called 'the Path of the Cross'), are singled out for special censure in the New Testament.

Paul, writing to the whole church at Philippi, and specifically including "**all the saints**" as well as "**the overseers and the deacons,**" says, "**Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us as a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is in their belly [ie their real motivation is to satisfy their own fleshly desires], and whose glory is their shame – who set their mind on earthly things." (Phil 3:17-19).**

The "**enemies of the cross of Christ**" are those who refuse to let their self- lives go to the cross and die. They do not receive the resurrection life of the Lord and therefore can only minister in the power of their flesh, which is spiritual death to those whom they come in contact with. Their lives may look suitably religious on the outside, but in reality they continue to serve themselves just as they had done before they were saved. They are "**..men of the world who have their portion in this life..**" (Ps 17:14), and "**..who suppose that godliness is a means of gain..**" (1 Ti 6:5).

Jesus called these people lawless. He prophesied that many would be astonished to find themselves excluded from the kingdom of heaven because of their continued disobedience in this area. "**Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"** (Mt 7:21-23).

To minister in "**the life of Jesus**" is to be in God's perfect will, rather than our own imperfect will. This means not acting on personal impulse. The work of the Church is not initiated as a response to a particular need in the community. Neither is it prompted by the presence of certain skills or anointings within the congregation. It can only ever be legitimately performed when it is at the express direction of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God the Father gave "**..to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.**" (Ep 1:22-23).

'..He commanded them..to wait..'

Right from the very outset of the Church, believers were taught an attitude of complete obedience to the Lord. This obedience was made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Luke's Gospel records Christ's last words to His disciples before His ascension into heaven. "**Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.**" (Lu 24:49). This instruction is reinforced in the Book of Acts. "**And being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father..**" (Ac 1:4).

Despite having spent the last three years receiving Jesus' teaching, they were not yet equipped to be His "**..witnesses...in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" (Ac 1:8). They had to "**tarry**" or "**wait**" until they were "**..baptized with the Holy Spirit,**" because "**..you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;**" (Ac 1:5,8).

The importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit is made apparent when we recall the context in which Christ's instruction was being delivered. The Lord was about to leave His disciples behind on the earth. However He had already promised them He would not leave them alone.

Earlier in His ministry Jesus said, "**These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper** [Gk *parakletos* from *para* 'beside' and *kaleo* 'to call' meaning 'called to one's side' as Comforter and Counselor, who is] **the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you...when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.**" (Jo 14:25-26, 15:26, 16:13-14).

At the time of the Early Church, the Lord was (and is now) seated in the throne room of heaven at the right hand of God the Father. But He is no less the Head of His Church on earth for being situated in that heavenly position. This is because Jesus Christ directs His will for the Church through the Holy Spirit. Just as Christ was continually faithful and obedient to the will of God during His earthly ministry, so too the Holy Spirit is continually faithful and obedient to the will of Christ "**..in all things to the church, which is His body..**"

The apostle Paul therefore taught, "**..do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.**" (Ro 8:1&4). When believers walk in the strength of their non-crucified self-lives (which Paul calls '**the flesh**'), they automatically oppose the will and headship of Christ. "**I say then: Walk in the Spirit...For the flesh lusts against [or 'contends with'] the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another..**" (Ga 5:16).

TABLE #2 – THE DEVELOPMENT OF THREE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

<u>DATES IN THE EARLY CHURCH</u>	<u>JAMES AND JERUSALEM</u>	<u>PETER AND THE DIASPORA JEWS</u>	<u>PAUL AND THE GENTILES</u>
29 AD	James is originally a sceptical half-brother of Jesus	Peter is a Galilean fisherman called by Christ to be His disciple	Paul is a Pharisee and student of Gamaliel
33 AD	Christ Crucified	Christ Crucified	Christ Crucified
34 AD	Steven stoned to death by Jews	Peter and others often imprisoned/beaten	Saul holds the cloaks and breaths murder
35 AD	Persecution and dispersal of Church into Judea/Samaria	Philip evangelises and Peter and John follow	Road to Damascus (repentance) and then to Arabia
36 AD	<i>James meets Saul</i>	<i>Peter meets Saul</i>	<i>Saul visits Jerusalem</i>
37 – 43 AD	Roman-Jewish friction grows under Caligula/Claudius	Churches founded along East Medit, Cyprus, Cyrene	Saul ministers in Syria and Cilicia
44 AD	Herod Agrippa 1 executes James brother of John	Peter escapes from prison and leaves Jerusalem	
45 AD	Barnabus sent to Antioch church		Barnabus calls Saul from Tarsus to help
46 AD	Famine prophesied by Agabus begins		Barnabus and Saul minister in Antioch
47 AD	<i>James, Peter, John, meet Saul and Barnabus privately</i>	<i>Peter's mission to 'circumcised' is recognised</i>	<i>Paul's mission to 'uncircumcised' is recognised</i>
48 AD	Judaisers leave from 'Judea' and 'James'	Peter rebuked for compromise with Antioch Judaisers	Paul urges Galation churches to withstand Judaisers
49 AD	<i>Jerusalem Council - James declares....</i>	<i>Jerusalem Council - Peter agrees....</i>	<i>Jerusalem Council - Paul accepts....</i>
50 AD	Corrupt Romans and religious nationalism,		Paul crosses over from Asia into Europe
51 AD	Sicarii brigands, Judaic prophets, civil unrest		Paul tried in Corinth after Jews riot
52 AD	<i>No acknowledgment from James in Acts</i>	<i>No acknowledgment from Peter in Acts</i>	<i>Paul goes up to Jerusalem church</i>
53 – 56AD	Judaising mission sent to Corinth with letters	Peter visits Corinth but then goes on to Rome	Paul rebukes Judaising agents in Corinth
57 AD	<i>James last meeting with Paul but no real change in views</i>		<i>Paul's final visit to Jerusalem - Jews riot – Paul arrested</i>
58 – 59 AD	Roman procurators Felix and Festus		Paul imprisoned at Caesarea
60 AD	Religious nationalism increases		Paul arrives in Rome and is rejected by Jews

62 AD	James stoned to death under H-P Annas		
64 –65 AD		Peter killed during Nero's persecution	Paul killed during Nero's persecution
66 AD	Jewish-Roman War begins – Jerusalem church to Pella		
70 AD	Temple Destroyed	Temple Destroyed	Temple Destroyed
	Jewish church dies out in Decapolis	Jamnia rabbis curse Christians in liturgy	Gentile church grows in Europe, Asia, Africa

The Emergence of the Circumcision Party

Fleshly religion is generally what you can see, touch, or feel. It is in direct contrast with faith in Christ, at least as He described it.

Jesus answered the Pharisees, **"The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."** (Lu 17:20-21). And He told Pilate, **"My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."** (Jo 18:36).

Jesus was a Messiah in the mould that Isaiah had prophesied. The outward observance of physical ordinances as outlined in Mosaic Law was no longer appropriate. **"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" says the LORD. 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats.'**" (Is 1:11).

Instead the New Covenant placed the emphasis on the inward attitude of man's heart. **"For all these things My hand has made, and all those things exist," says the LORD. 'But on this one will I look: On him who is poor [or 'humble'] and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.'**" (Is 66:2).

These sentiments did not sit well with a proud and angry people like the Jews. They thought deliverance from their oppressors lay in military muscle and political revolution, and so they were not attracted to this itinerant preacher and his unarmed followers. In fact their rallying points became the very symbols of national and religious culture which the Nazarene seemed to replace. The Temple. The Sabbath. Dietary Law. Circumcision. Anything which distinguished them apart from everyone else, and identified them as the physical descendants of Abraham and the Twelve Tribes of Israel..

The pressure of religious nationalism on all Jews increased during the decades between the birth of the church at Pentecost (33 AD), and the destruction of the Herodian Temple by Roman soldiers in 70 AD. This was especially the case with those Jews who made up the first church—the church in

Jerusalem. In many ways they never broke away from the traditions of their fathers; continuing to worship at the Temple, observe the Sabbath, blanch their meat, and circumcise male babies at eight days.

So it is quite natural that Paul called those who sought to impose Jewish ritual and regulation on the Gentile churches, *'the circumcision party.'* It is also fortuitous, because the difference between fleshly religion and true faith is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the respective positions on circumcision.

To stay with Paul, "**For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise [or 'Jewishness' – a play on words because 'Jew' is literally 'praise'] is not from men but God." (Ro 2:28-29). "**For in Christ Jesus neither [physical] circumcision nor [physical] uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working in love.**" (Ga 5:6). "**For we are the [true] circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh." (Ph 3:3).****

Paul the 'unrecognised' apostle

Paul was the first significant apostle (in terms of the NT record at least) who could not lay claim to any real or historical link with Jesus before His crucifixion. This 'new' apostle could not say with the original apostles that he was one of the "**eye-witnesses of His majesty**" (2 Pet 1:16); nor that he accompanied them "**..all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out amongst us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us..**" (Acts 1:21,22).

The fact was that Paul's credentials for Christian leadership before his conversion in late 35 AD were non-existent. He truly had nothing of which his flesh could boast. Instead of a seamless record of faithful service to the Lord on the road in Palestine, there was actually a whole lot of personal history that he had to 'live down.' Stuff like "**..breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord..**" (Acts 9:1), and making "**..havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison..**" (Acts 8:3).

So bad was his reputation among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, that many preferred to believe his repentance on the dusty road to Damascus had never happened. (Acts 9:26). They were reluctant to forgive the persecutions conducted by him as an agent of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, and they were certainly not prepared to accept him as a leader or teacher. Not when they had so many amongst them with longer and far more respectable pedigrees. So most in the founding church were relieved to see him leave after a very short 'first' visit; hastily bundling him off to wherever he came from (which was Tarsus in Cilicia) before he caused any more trouble for the brethren. (Acts 9:29-30).

A fresh look at the dates

According to Paul's recollection, the sequence of events occurred as follows: "**Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days...Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabus, and also took Titus with me.**" (Gal 1:18 & 2:1).

In working out any reliable dates for these events, there are three points that need to be taken into account.

1. In both cases Paul is counting from the most significant date in his life, which was the time of his salvation in Christ approximately 35 AD.
2. In counting years, the custom was to count parts of years as if they were whole years, so that Paul's three years for example could be one complete year and only two short parts of the year before and the year after.
3. Luke's 'official' record in the Book of Acts does not necessarily include everything that the apostles did during those first decades of church history, and neither does it report every event in full.

If we take these factors into account it is possible to see a rough set of dates emerge, between the generally accepted date of Christ's crucifixion in 33AD, and the generally accepted date of the Jerusalem Council in 49AD.

- **33AD Christ is crucified,**
- 34AD the stoning of Steven,
- 35AD the conversion of Paul,
- 36AD Paul's first visit to Jerusalem,
- 37-45AD Paul retreats to Tarsus,
- 46AD Barnabus calls Paul from Tarsus to Antioch,
- 47AD Paul's second visit to Jerusalem,
- 48AD Paul writes to the Galatians after 'first missionary journey,' and
- **49AD Jerusalem Council**

These sorts of dates can not be regarded as anything more than an approximation, but they do allow us to explore the possibilities, and perhaps even open our eyes to make certain connections. The really important date for this study is 47 AD, when Paul visited Jerusalem for the second time after becoming a Christian.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul and Barnabus made this trip to deliver relief to their brethren in Judea. This followed on from a prophecy of world-wide famine given to the church at Antioch by one Agabus. This event can be pinned down to within a year or two. Luke says it happened "**in the days of Claudius Caesar**" (ie 41-54 AD) and Josephus says it occurred in the procuratorship of Tiberius Alexander (ie 46-48 AD).

But Paul sees the significance of this visit in completely different terms. He sees it, not as a public event of donating aid, but as a private meeting of "**pillars.**"

An important private meeting

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul describes the purpose and outcome of this critical meeting in these words: "**And I went up [to Jerusalem] by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain...But on the contrary, when they saw that *the gospel for the uncircumcised* [or Gentiles] *had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised* [or Jews] *was to Peter* (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabus the right hand of fellowship, that *we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*" (Gal 2:2,7-9).**

This was in essence an agreement not to interfere in one another's ministries. And Paul was now reminding all and sundry of it, including Peter. The "**pillars**" of the church had recognised Paul's apostleship to non-Jews, and they had accepted him as their equal. To Paul this meant no more

undermining and accusations from **"..false brethren secretly brought in...to spy out our liberty.."** or **"..certain men [who] came from James...who were of the circumcision.."** (Gal 2:4,12).

Letter to the Galatians

In this letter Paul is writing to a number of local churches in South Galatia that he had only recently established, but which he now hears are being misled by Jewish Christians who want the Mosaic Law observed by Gentile converts. He therefore writes, **"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different [Gk 'heteros' qualitatively different, or of a different kind] gospel, which is not another [Gk 'allos' quantitatively different, or another of the same kind]; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."** (1:6-7).

The apostle goes on to make two points which are particularly relevant to this study. The first point is that the gospel that he taught them did not have its origins in the teaching of any man. **"For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ...But when it pleased God...to reveal His Son in me...I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me."** (1:12,15,16-17).

When he did visit Jerusalem it was for a short period (fifteen days) and he met only two of the apostles (Peter and James) before his hurried departure to Tarsus. Then it was years away in Syria and Cilicia before he returned and met with the leaders of the founding church again. And even then he received no doctrine from them. **"But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me."** (2:6 NASB).

Having made clear that his teaching is not that of any party or faction, but of God, Paul goes on to the second point. Which is that although this dispute had its origin in the struggle with Judaism, the principles Paul draws out of it are not restricted to that particular issue, but applicable wherever deception corrupts pure faith. In fact the apostle equates **"the works of the law"** with **"the flesh,"** and **"the hearing of faith"** with **"the Spirit,"** to make it plain that all false religion is essentially fleshly religion.

Paul is scathing about the Galatians' willingness to take such a spiritually backward and inconsistent step. **"This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?...But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?"** (3:2-3 & 4:9).

It is inconceivable to him that anyone could take the free gift of the birth-right and then envy the son of the bondwoman. **"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."** (5:1). And yet he knows what is really going on in their hearts, as well as in the hearts of those leading them astray. **"As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh.."** (6:12).

Fleshly religion is hypocritical religion, because it does not really threaten the self-life of man. Man is still in control. It is man and not God who determines the type of sacrifice and the extent of that sacrifice. Nothing is being done to curb the power of un-crucified and unrepentant flesh in this situation. On the surface it might look as though God is being honoured, but in reality it is only man glorying in his own vanities and conceits.

Paul probably knows that many will never make the distinction between fleshly and spiritual worship, but he thunders his final warning nevertheless : "**Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.**" (6:7-8).

Council at Jerusalem

While Paul had dealt with the strife in more distant churches by letter, he still had to deal with the situation at Antioch, where similar deception had been peddled. "**And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'**" (Acts 15:1). Finally, after "**no small dissension and dispute,**" it was determined that Paul and Barnabus "**..should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.**" (Acts 15:2).

This meeting was only partially successful. At the beginning both Peter (in relating his experience) and James (by interpreting OT prophecy) stood with Paul, declaring the legitimacy of Gentile salvation free of the outward requirements of the Mosaic Law. For example the need for physical circumcision by non-Jewish converts was officially 'overruled' by the 'apostles and elders' of the Jerusalem Church.

But there was a 'political' cost. For some reason it was felt that some concessions were required from the Gentile Christians, so as not to offend the 'religious sensibilities' of their Jewish brethren.

In James' own words as he recommended the compromise: "**Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God** [i.e. should not trouble them with the requirement of physical circumcision], **but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.**" (Acts 15:19-21).

Of course there was no difficulty with the prohibition on "**sexual immorality,**" meaning 'fornication' or all illicit sexual intercourse, and including prostitution, incest, adultery, etc. But to also demand that they (v15) "**abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled,**" was to effectively limit Gentile Christians to the consumption of 'kosher' meat, or to a vegetarian diet! Virtually all meat in the public market places of the empire was offered to idols as a matter of course, and none of it was 'bled' according to strict Jewish guidelines.

While these so-called "**necessary things**" (v14) may have seemed eminently reasonable to "**some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed**" and lived in Judea (v5), they were clearly unworkable for new Christians in large pagan cities like Ephesus and Corinth. The fact that Paul soon discovered this and discarded the conditions as obsolete (Romans 14 14-23 and 1 Corinthians 10:23-33), was to cause the apostle some trouble in future years however.

The Political Situation Deteriorates

The 2 decades following on from the Council of Jerusalem were difficult ones in Palestine. The Roman procurators who came after the famine of 47 AD were hopelessly incompetent (Ventidius Cumanus 49-52AD), brutally cruel (Antonius Felix 52-60AD), competent but short-lived (Porcius Festus 60-61AD), and notoriously corrupt (Lucius Albinus 62-64AD and Gnessius Florus 64-66AD).

Jewish hostility towards the Roman regime increased dramatically under the ferocious rule of Felix. The Sicari assassins arose at that time; dedicated Jewish nationalists who specialised in the public murder of pro-Roman aristocrats with the 'sica' or dagger. There was also a proliferation of apocalyptic prophets, who stirred up the people and drew them out into the wilderness, with their talk of a final violent deliverance from the yoke of foreign domination.

It is therefore possible to understand how sensitive the Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem Church might be to claims that one of their own (i.e. Paul), was undermining respect for their traditions

throughout Asia Minor and Greece. While Paul kept a very low profile during his fourth visit to Jerusalem in 52 AD, and there is little public acknowledgment of this trip in Acts (18:21-23), the same cannot be said for Paul's fifth (and last) visit in 57 AD.

This time there was a reception waiting. Luke writes, "**On the following day** [to their arrival in Jerusalem] **Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present...And they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law, but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to their customs.'**" (Acts 21:18,20-21).

If this is representative of what was being said about Paul in Jerusalem throughout the 50's, then it is not difficult to believe that the apostle was also facing opposition from special Judean counter-missions to his work in the field. We find an example of this in Paul's multiple dealings with Christian Church at Corinth.

Crossroads at Corinth

As Paul's years of ministry continued, the physical base of his activities grew further westward from Antioch to Ephesus and Corinth, and finally to Rome. These were all big cities, with significant trading economies and consequently a constantly moving flow of people through them.

Just as Ephesus was situated at the end of a mighty trade route from the ancient empires of the east, and Rome was the commercial and political hub of the present Empire, so too Corinth and its seaports of Cenchreae and Lechaem were situated on a busy crossroads between Asia and Europe. The city sat astride the narrow isthmus joining mainland Greece (or Achaia) to the Peloponnese peninsular and dividing the Aegaeon Sea from the Adriatic. And it was here, rather than in the more 'learned' Athens that Paul chose to spend his first 'settled' period in Greece. Arriving for the first time in 51 AD, "**..he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them..**" (Acts 18:11), before moving on.

Other apostles were to pass through this important centre in the years after Paul had planted its vibrant church. Unfortunately, if Paul's subsequent letters are any indication, at least two of them were to leave an unfortunate impression in their wake.

One of these was "**..a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures...This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John...When Aquila and Priscilla heard him [speaking boldly in the synagogue at Ephesus before he left for Corinth], they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him...And...Apollos was at Corinth..**" (Acts 18:24-25,26-27, & 19:1).

The other visitor we know of was Peter, whom Paul often called 'Cephas.' The Book of Acts is silent about the ministry of Peter after the Council at Jerusalem in 49 AD. But from other sources it is apparent that the apostle to the Diaspora Jews left Judea and gradually moved westward towards his final destination in Rome. His exact route of progress towards the imperial city, and the precise timing of his journey, is of course largely speculative.

However his letter to "**..the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia..**" suggests some familiarity with at least the Jewish Christians of Asia Minor (1 Pe 1:1). This same letter also indicates that the apostle eventually made it to Rome, as Peter signs off, "**She [i.e. the Church] who is in Babylon [i.e. Rome], elect together with you [i.e. also**

Christians], **greet you..**" (1 Pe 5:13). And one of Paul's letters leaves us in little doubt that at some stage Peter touched down in Corinth (1 Co 1:12, 3:22, 9:5).

The trouble with these visitors to Corinth was that no sooner had they left than the locals formed into 'doctrinal teams.' Paul wrote, "**For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.'**" (1 Co 1:11-12).

Although the effects of their stopovers are unlikely to be directly attributable to the apostles themselves, it was clear something was going on. The concern for Paul, as he later put it, was that "**..if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!**" (2 Co 11:4).

Unravelling the Corinthian story

In looking at Paul's interaction with Corinthian Church during the 50's, it quickly becomes evident that the story is more detailed than it would seem at first glance. While the New Testament contains two documents, which we know as First and Second Corinthians, it is apparent from the letters themselves that there were at least four written by Paul during the period.

In 1 Corinthians 5:9 the apostle refers to an earlier epistle he wrote to them concerning keeping company with 'sexually immoral' people. (N.B. the meaning of this term in the NT is not restricted to its natural or physical use, but also applies to spiritual unfaithfulness and disobedience). Some time later Paul responded to news from people of Chloe's household (1 Co 1:11), and a letter from the Church itself requesting clarification on doctrine (1 Co 7:1), with a second letter which is still extant (First Corinthians).

In 2 Corinthians 2:1, 12:14, & 13:1, reference is made to a second and clearly painful visit made by Paul to the Church in Corinth, concerning disciplinary matters. Following this visit Paul wrote a stern third letter of admonishment, which is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 7:8-12, but has since been lost. Later still we know he wrote his fourth letter (Second Corinthians), vastly relieved that the Corinthians had received the admonishment contained in his third letter (7:5-6,13-16), and continuing to warn them against false teaching.

There is no real difficulty in setting this sequence of events into a chronological time-frame, because the external parameters are confirmed by other historical sources. We can be reasonably confident that Paul's first visit and founding of the Church in Corinth took place around 51 and 52 AD, because that was when "**..Gallio was proconsul of Achaia..**" (Acts 18:8) and the apostle was brought before him at that time. And by working back from Paul's two year imprisonment in Caesarea under Felix (who was replaced by the more reasonable Festus in 60 AD), we can place the apostle's last three month visit to Corinth (from where he wrote the Letter to the Romans) to about 57 or 58 AD.

- 51-52 AD Paul visits Corinth and founds Church
- 53-54 AD Apollos and Peter pass through Corinth
- 55 AD Letter A and 1st Corinthians written from Ephesus

- 56 AD Second visit to Corinth and Letter C written
- 57 AD 2nd Corinthians written from Philippi
- 58 AD Last visit to Corinth and Letter to Romans written
- 59-60 AD Paul imprisoned in Caesarea
- 61-62 AD Paul transported to Rome

Letters to the Corinthians

Right from the outset Paul makes it clear that he is writing to ‘carnal,’ which is to say fleshly, Christians. **"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people, but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal."** (1 Co 3:1-3).

The word translated "**carnal**" is Gk. *Sarkikos*, from *sarx* or ‘flesh,’ and means to have a fleshly nature. In other words it is to be sensual or soulish --not just being controlled by animal appetites, but also being governed by human nature instead of the Spirit of God. (Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words).

For Paul this is always the issue. Is it fleshly or spiritual? Is it of man or of God? Is it flesh dressed up as Spirit? Or is it Spirit stripped of flesh? And the point of division is always the Cross of Christ.

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For Jews [a ‘religious’ people] request a sign, and Greeks [a ‘worldly’ people] seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ *crucified*, to the Jews a stumbling block [or ‘offence’] and to the Greeks foolishness [or ‘absurd’], but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God." (1 Co 1:18,22-24).

It didn’t matter to Paul that those who were misleading them had "**..letters of commendation..**" (2 Co 3:1). He’d had plenty of those, and from the Sanhedrin too! Neither did it matter that they were claiming racial and theological purity. **"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often."** (2 Co 11:22-23).

It didn’t even matter that they were charismatic. Paul wrote, "**..that you may have an answer for those who boast *in appearance* and not in heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God [i.e. worship]; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you [i.e. service]."** (2 Co 5:12-13). In counterfeiting the gifts of the Spirit they were simply "**..false apostles, deceitful workers, *transforming themselves* into apostles of Christ."** (2 Co 11:13).

He had already chided the Corinthians about this issue in a previous letter. Charismatic lawlessness was ‘spiritual’ self-indulgence, and if that was what the imposters were on about then the locals should have seen through them. This was what really aggravated Paul. It was as if they wanted to be deceived, and that in exchange for an easy spiritual ride they were prepared to believe virtually anything.

"For you put up with fools gladly, *since you yourselves are wise!* For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face. To our shame I say that we were too weak for that!" (2 Co 11:19-21).

Letter to the Romans

During Paul's last three month visit to Corinth, Paul wrote his all-important letter, "**To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints!**" (Ro 1:7). Because of the apostle's long history with the Corinthians over Christian doctrine, it is a reasonable assumption that much of what he was teaching them in this final period, was to find its way into his letter to the Romans.

If this is the case, then it is also not surprising that this letter contains some of the most foundational teaching on the Path of the Cross that is to be found throughout the whole New Testament. Chapters 6, 7, and 8, of Romans are particularly focused on this issue.

First Paul makes it clear that it is our ongoing identification with Christ's death that ensures our appropriation of His resurrection life. "**Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.**" (Ro 6:3-7).

Secondly he goes on to point out that an attitude change is required for this exchange or transformation to take place in our normal daily lives. It means an effective re-dedication of ourselves, and a willingness to let self-interest die. "**For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore...do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God...For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.**" (Ro 6:10-11,13,19).

Thirdly the apostle explains that this process of sanctification is not instantaneous, and illustrates the constant struggle between the old and the new natures from his own experience. "**For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice...I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.**" (Ro 7:18-19,21-23).

Fourthly Paul tells us that it is the Lord's work and not ours! To affect holiness, by changing our outward behaviour and conforming to the certain group standards (no matter how commendable), is to simply enshrine self. "**O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!...Therefore brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.**" (Ro 7:24-25 & 8:12-14).

And fifthly Paul reminds us that no matter how long or arduous the Path of the Cross will seem to us at times, we should never lose hope in God or trust in His purposes. "**And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren...For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" (Ro 8:28-29,38-39).

The End Of An Era

The decade of the 60's AD was to mark an important transition in the life of the First Century Church. The end of the decade would bring the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the final schism between Judaism and Christianity.

It was also the period when the three apostles we have been considering were killed. James was the first to go in 62 AD, at the behest of the High Priest Annas the son of Annas, who had in turn been appointed by Herod Agrippa II. Then Peter and Paul in 66 or 67 AD, both at the command of the Roman Emperor Nero Caesar.

The deaths of these three meant a serious break in continuity, at least in human leadership terms, for the Jewish and Gentile churches. But perhaps more interestingly, it provided a real test for which doctrinal emphasis would survive the men who had propounded them.

Three men

Before we go on to report the various outcomes however, it might be wise to first correct an over-simplified view of the main players.

Paul was a man like any other. He was quick to stand on his authority as an apostle anointed by the Spirit, but we have seen he was equally ready to admit that he had struggles with his flesh. So he would be the last to maintain a party spirit or claim that he was the only one who got it right. His incredible volume of work makes up a large proportion of the New Testament, and we may often only see one side of a debate that was continually changing and maturing on all sides. But when all is said and done, he does appear to have been extra-ordinarily faithful to his commission of preaching "**Christ crucified.**"

Peter was certainly a man like any other. He is a character who gives great encouragement to normal believers, who are sometimes overwhelmed by the ugliness of their flesh. A true traveller along the Path of the Cross, Peter's 'old man' was frequently exposed for all to see. And yet he never withdrew his submission. Instead he 'copped it sweet,' and then putting his failures and embarrassment behind him, he marched steadfastly on. So it would be inaccurate to cast this "**pillar of the church**" as either ignorant of, or opposed to, the refining work of Christ in us.

In his own words, "**Therefore since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has *suffered in the flesh* has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but *for the will of God.***" (1 Pe 4:1-2).

Neither should James be dismissed as some sort of die-hard traditionalist. Although his letter in the NT has often been misinterpreted as promoting a 'gospel of good works,' in truth it is an injunction to absolute obedience to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. However James was a man under great pressure, representing the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem over a long period of increasing political tension and disarray. His illegal execution caused great outrage in Judea, where he was a widely respected community leader. Nevertheless there were disturbing tendencies apparent in the Palestinian congregations, and these were never satisfactorily rooted out.

Having separated the personalities of the three apostles from the different approaches to doctrine that were current during their lifetimes, it should now be possible to go on and analyse what occurred without judgment.

Jerusalem is destroyed

The year 66 AD was really the beginning of the end for the Jewish people, at least as far as continuing to occupy their homeland was concerned. Riots broke out in Caesarea Maritima, Jewish bands attacked Roman legionaries in Jerusalem, the Romans then left, and the revolutionary

nationalists were quickly in control. Of course things could not continue like this forever. Rome would be back, and it was inevitable that the whole futile rebellion would soon end in bloodshed and smoking ruins.

According to Eusebius (a 4th century 'church' historian who is in this case quoting 2nd century sources), "...the people of the church of Jerusalem, in accordance with a certain...revelation to approved men there, had been commanded to depart from the city before the war, and to inhabit a certain city of Peraea. They called it Pella." (Eusebius' Histories Ecclesia, III 5 3). Someone had remembered Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:15-20, and so the Jewish Christians withdrew from Jerusalem before the Roman Legions and their siege-mounds could make their final appearance!

This Church 'in exile,' still with a strictly Jewish membership, continued after the war of 66-70 AD with Rome, but apparently became more and more legalistic. Second century Christians called them Ebionites, from a Hebrew word meaning 'poverty.' They had lost sight of Jesus as their complete and sufficient sacrifice, and so their name Ebionite implied a poverty of faith in Him as their 'living' Saviour. The few of them that remained after the second Roman-Jewish war of 132-135 AD, were dispersed with the rest of the Jewish population at that time, and disappear from the pages of history.

Meanwhile traditional non-Christian Jews reacted with anger and hatred at what they saw as the abandonment and betrayal of Jerusalem by the Jewish Christians. From this point on the separation between Judaism and Christianity was to become absolute. No Christians were henceforth welcome in Jewish synagogues. This position was formalised by a Council of Jewish Rabbis at Jamnia about 80 AD. This meeting devised a prayer (or curse) called Benediction 12, to be recited each week in synagogues.

"For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, *and the Nazarenes and the minim perish as in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life* and with the righteous may they not be inscribed. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant." All those decades of painful and costly compromise had been to no avail.

On the other hand we are aware of the dramatic spread of Christian churches throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe, during the remainder of the century and beyond. All distinction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in this section of the Church seems to disappear from this point on. Judaism was no longer a subtle or corrupting threat. You were either one or the other. A Christian or a Jew. In God's Church or out of it. The distinction was no longer blurred.

But the flesh lived on.

A postscript to Philippi

Paul's letter to the Philippians provides us with strong confirmation of the central premise of this whole study. Which is that it doesn't matter what the deception is called—underlying them all is un-crucified flesh and an attitude of rebellion against God's dealings.

Paul was aware of this in every one of his battles against Judaism. In fact he was so aware of it that even when he was no longer specifically fighting the Jewish traditionalists, he used the same illustrations and arguments. This is evident in this letter written from a prison in Rome circa 62 AD, and directed towards a Roman Colony in Macedonia without any significant Jewish population or synagogue (Acts 16:13).

There is no record or likelihood of Judaism ever being a threat in Philippi, and yet Paul uses the same sort of language as in his other epistles. For example, "**If anyone else thinks he may have**

confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." (Phil 3:4-6).

The reason Paul feels comfortable going on like this to a predominantly non-Jewish audience, is that the issue he is addressing remains fundamentally the same. Judaism is just one example of resistance to the Path of the Cross. There is a truth that is common to all Christians, no matter what their backgrounds or current doctrinal positions. And that is the truth that *the flesh is of no real value in our spiritual walks, and so must be let go to the Cross*, in order for us to receive the resurrection life of Christ.

"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ...and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ Jesus...*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected*; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me...Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern" (Phil 3:7,8-9,12,17).

As Time Goes By...

The ordinary people of the Roman Empire in the latter part of the first century, shared a similar view of their political masters to their predecessors under the Caesars. To put it briefly, they practiced a policy of avoidance. If you ran into a government official, other than at tax time, then it certainly wasn't deliberate on your part. An accident or tragedy perhaps. But not the sort of thing you would normally set out to arrange.

This too was the Christian experience. Persecution of Christians began in the 60's under Nero and was to continue in a sporadic fashion throughout the following decades. But this harassment was almost like an after-thought—a sort of by-product of Christian origins in Jewish monotheism. It was not until the second and third centuries that the sheer numbers of Christians throughout the Empire prompted Roman savagery on a deliberate and awesome scale.

It was more the case that officialdom was unpredictable and dangerous for everyone in society. So it was sensible for the Christians at this time to continue to pray for their rulers and civil peace, while maintaining a low public profile to avoid unnecessary confrontations with authority.

Very little was known by the community at large about Christianity during this period, and it was often confused with Judaism. For example, "...Since the Jews were continually making disturbances at the instigation of *Chrestus*, he [ie Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome.." (Seutonius, 'Vita Claudius' xxv 4). Tacitus called Christianity a "foreign superstition" (Annales, xiii 32), and was appalled that it "...again broke out, not only in Judea, *the source of the evil*, but also in Rome.." (Annales xv 44).

This confused public view of Christianity continued throughout the reigns of the Flavian emperors, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, from 69 to 96 AD. Christians were seen as a troublesome sub-sect of an already troublesome national religion. Both Jews and Christians were persecuted throughout these years, not because of their religion, but because of their perceived "*atheism*." In other words, both groups refused to worship the '*Divi*' (or deified emperors) as gods. This was then interpreted by the state as clear evidence of their political disloyalty and sedition..

Vespasian and Titus

The House of Flavius was not high-born. Although extremely competent in a military and administrative sense, the Flavians brought no patrician status to the imperial office, as the Caesars had done. It was therefore important to their future as a political dynasty that the position of Emperor gave them status.

So elaborate titles were invented, 'discretionary' powers were asserted more frequently, 'honorary' positions were sought and occupied, and the process of 'adoption' was used to invest it all with a character of inheritability. A particularly important part of this legitimising process was the Flavians' insistence upon 'emperor worship' as the test of a citizen's loyalty to the state. Their shrewd minds saw 'divinity' as a political asset, and their social insecurity demanded that their individual personalities be 'reverenced' by all their subjects.

Titus Flavius Vespasianus, or Vespasian, was born in 9AD and ruled from 69 to 79 AD. He was the son of a provincial Roman knight who had been a tax collector. As the commander of *Legio II Augusta*, Vespasian played a distinguished part in the conquest of Britain under Emperor Claudius. He later served as a rigorously tax-reforming Pro-Consul of Africa, but then lost imperial favour after falling asleep during one of Nero's interminable concerts. His career recovered in 67 AD when he was appointed to crush the Jewish rebellion, a bloody regional conflict which had already seen two Roman armies retreat.

Vespasian was given 3 legions and a large number of auxiliary troops for his important task. Within two years he had managed to subdue nearly all of Judea except Jerusalem. But on hearing of Nero's suicide in June 68 AD, he suddenly stopped fighting and withdrew to Syria to consult with the governor there. The next year or so was an incredibly confusing time in the Empire, with up to 4 rival claimants for the position of Emperor. Vespasian bided his time and quietly plotted.

In July 69 AD the two legions in Egypt declared Vespasian to be their Emperor, followed a few days later by the legions of Syria and Judea. Vespasian immediately left Antioch for Alexandria, where he held up Rome's supply of grain. During August the armies on the Danube declared in his favour and marched on Rome. By the end of December the Roman Senate had conferred all imperial powers upon him under the first statute of its kind—*Lex de Imperio Vespasiani*.

Early in 70 AD Vespasian sent his son Titus back to Judea, to finish the job he had begun. By August 70 AD Titus had succeeded in reducing the city of Jerusalem (and its imposing Temple complex) to ruins, and driven its starving Jewish inhabitants out into the country-side. There was a moment of disquiet when his victorious troops asked Titus to take them back to Italy, but wisely the Emperor's son returned to Rome alone.

Although he was denied an independent triumph at the time, Titus was to become the virtual partner of his father during the remainder of his rule. Together they strengthened the Empire with taxation reforms, extension of Roman citizenship to many provincials, and consolidation of military borders along the north and in the east.

Vespasian died in 79 AD. During his last illness he is reputed to have said, "*Vae, puto deus fio,*" or "Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god."

Titus survived his father as Emperor by only two years, contracting a fever and dying in 81 AD. It was a brief reign, marked by the volcanic eruption which buried Pompeii, and another destructive fire in Rome. Nevertheless his popularity amongst the citizens and troops ensured his rapid 'deification.'

Domitian the Tyrant

Domitian was 11 years younger than Titus, and of very different character. When he came to power in 81 AD, he had been overshadowed by his popular older brother all his life. He was never to let go the bitterness and resentments he accumulated over that period, and his extreme suspicion of others was to lead to his eventual assassination in 96 AD.

Titus had suppressed the Jewish revolt, had an affair with the seductive Jewish princess Berenice, and shared Vespasian's authority as consul, censor, and tribune. Whereas Domitian had begun badly with certain excesses early in Vespasian's reign (eg by trying to claim another's military campaign to his own credit), and thereafter seemed to be excluded from centre-stage by both his father and his brother. These 'slights' festered in Domitian over the years, and by the time he took over as an Emperor in his own right, he was already unbalanced.

Domitian's constant fear of conspiracies meant that all the pillars of his palace were made of white reflective marble, so that he could always see behind him. He enjoyed conducting dinner parties at which all the equipment was black, in order to terrify his guests into speculation about which one of them he had already commanded to be executed in the morning. One of his most remarked upon personal habits was the pinning of live flies with his stylus, only to torment them by tearing off their wings. But what really disturbed those around him was his absolute insistence on being addressed at all times as '*dominus et deus*,' or "Master and God."

The end of Domitian's reign saw these cruel and paranoid tendencies worsen. Historians point to the revolt in 89 AD of the governor and army in Upper Germany as a turning point in this regard. Certainly the years from 93 to 96 AD were a period of particularly brutal repression, with a number of executions and vigorous use of the charge of '*majestas*' (treason) against the senatorial class. In 95 AD Domitian executed his cousin and banished his niece on suspicion of "atheism and Jewish sympathies." This was despite the fact that they were the parents of the childless Emperor's nominated heirs.

And it is about this time that we can most sensibly place the words of John the Apostle in the Book of Revelation. "**I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was [a prisoner] on the island of Patmos, for [the crime of declaring] the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.**" (Rev 1:9).

John the Elder

The author of the fourth Gospel was born the younger of the two sons of Zebedee, who was a fisherman from Bethsaida on the Sea of Galilee. John and his older brother James were amongst the first disciples to be called by Jesus. But while James was to be killed during the oppression of the church at Jerusalem by King Herod Agrippa I in 44 AD, John was to live on until the end of the century.

As disciples before the crucifixion, the brothers' forthright personalities were hard to hide. Jesus gave them "**the name Boanerges, that is, 'Sons of Thunder'**" (Mk 3:17), and it appears they were

quick to take offence. When a Samaritan village refused to receive their Lord, it was James and John who suggested commanding down fire from heaven to consume them (Lu 9:54).

They were also anxious to be publicly recognised as His favourites, and this caused friction with the other disciples. **"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, 'Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask...Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory'...And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John."** (Mk 10:35,37,41).

Nevertheless, John was often present at significant times when others weren't, (such as the Transfiguration of Christ in Matthew 17:1-2), and seems to have been very close to His Master. This respected position continued after the Ascension. He was together with Peter when they were arrested in the Temple and testified boldly before the Sanhedrin. He and Peter were also sent to Samaria by the other apostles to investigate the fruits of Philip's evangelism there (Acts 8:14).

After the execution of his brother James by Herod Agrippa in 44 AD (12:1-2), John is not mentioned again in the Book of Acts. He is called one of the **"pillars"** of the church in Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:9), which gives us a reference to 48 AD. But after that the NT history of the church is silent.

We now have to pick up the thread from other sources. Obviously John was no longer in Jerusalem after 66 AD, because at that time the whole Christian Church left the doomed city in obedience to prophecy. We can only speculate as to the apostle's movements from there until his next reported stop at Ephesus. Once in Ephesus though, the evidence becomes quite strong.

Irenaeus, who was a 'hearer' of Polycarp, who was in turn a 'disciple' of John, wrote "John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence in Ephesus in Asia." (Adv. Haer. 3.1.1). Clement of Alexandria mentions John's return from Patmos to Ephesus on the death of the Roman tyrant Domitian (Quis dives Salvos, 42). And Eusebius reports the tradition that after returning from exile on Patmos, he lived for a long time in Ephesus, before finally dying in the time of Emperor Trajan (Eccles Hist 3:20,23).

The Gospel according to John

It is most likely that John wrote his Gospel before he was banished to Patmos, which would place its time of writing in the early 90's AD. It is a unique document, full of insight into the character and motives of Jesus, and quite different in content from its predecessors by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

John, as well as most of the rest of Christianity, was probably already familiar with the earlier records of the life and ministry of Jesus on earth. (Mark 58AD? Luke 61AD? Matthew 65AD?). And so he supplied new material not yet well known. Material which he was particularly well placed to supply, as **"..the disciple whom Jesus loved...who also had leaned on His breast at the [last] supper.."** (Jn 21:20).

The book John wrote presents Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, *who became flesh*, but remained in His Father's will. In John's account, the Lord obediently reveals His Father in heaven. Throughout all the years on the road with His disciples, Christ consistently points *beyond Himself* to the One who sent Him.

"And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies...For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God...the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner...For the Father loves the Son, and shows

Him all the things that He Himself does...I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him...I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things...for I always do those things which please Him. (Jn 3:32,34; 5:19-20; 8:26,28,29).

Another unique aspect of John's Gospel is the writer's revelation of the Holy Spirit as "Comforter" or "Helper." Jesus said, "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you **another** [Gk *allos* meaning 'another of the same kind'] **Helper** [Gk *parakletos* meaning 'called to one's side'], **that He may abide with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.**" (Jn 14:16-17).

The Holy Spirit is "**another Helper,**" which is to say He is 'another of the same kind' as Jesus. Just as Christ was sent, so too was the Spirit. Christ represented God the Father on earth and so now the Holy Spirit represents Lord Jesus on earth. Christ performed God's perfect will on earth as His divine agent, and now the Holy Spirit acts in the Lord's physical absence, bringing about exactly the same conditions He would bring about if He was still here.

Neither does the Spirit draw attention to Himself. Instead His mission is to glorify Jesus. "**However, when He, the Spirit of truth has come...He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak...He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.**" (Jn 16:13,14).

John's first letter

Right from the beginning this first letter (probably written shortly after the Gospel), has been highly regarded by Christians. Polycarp, the 'disciple' of John, quotes it (Ep. Phil. 7). Papias, a friend of Polycarp and fellow 'disciple' of John, also "used testimonies from the First Epistle of John." (Eccles Hist 3:39).

And yet this letter is contradictory in purely logical terms. It does not make sense, unless it is read in the context of two natures at war within each believer—the flesh on the one hand and the Spirit on the other. For example, how do we reconcile 1 Jn 1:6; "**If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth**"; with 1 Jn 1:8; "**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us**"?

According to John, "**He who says He abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.**" (2:6). And that means letting the old nature of sin and self-interested flesh go with Christ to the Cross. "**By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.**" (3:16).

John is not talking about physical martyrdom here. Neither is he advocating abstinence from all physical pleasure. Rather he is urging believers to recognise the critical importance of the battle within and how it effects our daily lives. He also goes on to link the outcomes of these battles in each individual Christian, with the spiritual health of the Church as a whole.

John sees a strong link between un-crucified flesh and deception. At a fundamental level he relates sin to straight-out disobedience. For instance he says, "**Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.**" (3:4). The old corrupt nature of sin within us is inherently

lawless, or disobedient to God's authority. If we do not know this, and if we are not aware that Christ walked before us in such a way that we might be over-comers in Him, then we open ourselves up to all sorts of deception.

Jesus came in the flesh

Many commentators have misjudged John's purpose in writing his first letter. They have interpreted it as a specific response to a particular doctrinal problem. Much has been made of a heresy called Docetism, which denied that Jesus actually became flesh and blood, and a shadowy figure called Cerinthus, who apparently promoted a version of this deception.

Such an approach does nothing to reveal the truths of Scripture to the earnest reader. This letter should not be relegated to the status of simply refuting some obscure theological error. It is much more important than that. The point that John is making is in reality a broadly sweeping one.

The apostle declares that Christ the Son of God came in the flesh, so that mankind could truly be set free from the bondage of his sin/self nature. In other words, because Jesus Himself became a mere man, our reconciliation with God the Father has moved from being an issue of theory, to one of real practice. It is now possible for us to *follow* Him to the throne-room of heaven.

John warns that such a revolutionary truth will be actively opposed by all the supernatural forces at Satan's disposal. **"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."** (4:1-3).

The way that we test the spirits is to listen to who or what they testify to. The true "**spirit of God**" always testifies that "**Jesus Christ has come in the flesh**," whereas "**the spirit of the Antichrist**" is loathe to confess that fact. To take this one step further, since the main focus of Jesus' ministry on earth was His obedient walk to the Cross, it follows logically that His Spirit also continually points to that walk. In contrast however, the whole idea of obedience to the path of crucifying the self-life is repugnant to the lying spirit of the imposter, (just as it is to the human flesh he so successfully manipulates).

To summarise these verses then, "**the Spirit of God**" testifies to the Path of the Cross, while "**the spirit of the Antichrist**" does anything to oppose it. An example might be that of a believer receiving an 'inspiring' prophecy. The prophecy predicts that the believer is to be mightily used by the Lord in a world-wide ministry, with thousands of people coming into the kingdom through his preaching. While it might appear that the motive of bringing thousands to Christ is pure, in reality it is *the preacher* who gets the glory in this vision. Therefore the author of this prophecy is unlikely to be the Holy Spirit.

What is born of God within us hears the Holy Spirit and recognises His truth. But the flesh hears what it wants to hear and is easily seduced. John writes, "**He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know *the spirit of truth* and *the spirit of error*."** (4:6).

The Last Book

The book known as Revelation is placed last in the New Testament, and this is appropriate. The last book to be written (post 96 AD), it is also the most open ended and looks far beyond the immediate time of its physical composition.

Its author was the divinely inspired John, who calls it, "**The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which shortly must take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.**" (Re 1:1-2).

From this introduction we know that this is a book that will not reward literal interpretation. The Lord "**..sent and signified** [Gk *semaino* meaning 'to give a sign' or 'express by signs'] **it..**" And although John places his physical presence firmly on "**the island that is called Patmos,**" he also makes it clear that he was "**in the Spirit**" to receive this material (Re 1:9,10). In similar fashion we must rely on the Holy Spirit to unravel the vivid symbolism of its pages.

However it would not be wise to discount the circumstances of the book's writing entirely. After all, God uses human vessels, and the processes of inspiration and interpretation are not untouched by who we are in the flesh.

For example John as a young Jewish man, and then a disciple of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, would have been immersed in Old Testament Scripture as a matter of course. This familiarity with the Prophets and their writings is quite obvious in Revelation, which draws deeply from the images of Daniel and Isaiah in particular.

Letters to the churches

Another reason not to completely ignore the John's contribution to Revelation is contained in Christ's communication with "**the seven churches that are in Asia:**" (1:11). Each of the cities mentioned in this passage—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—were actually in existence at the time of John's imprisonment in the 90's. It is also more than likely that each contained a local Christian church.

In a broader sense it is generally accepted that each of these 'churches' represents a *type* of the various 'churches' to come, with each of these *types* manifesting themselves at some later stage in Church History. In other words, they are seen as prophecy--a foretelling of events by the Good Shepherd of a greater flock.

Without diminishing that overall understanding, it is also possible that John (with his personal knowledge of the time) provides us with some important clues to church life at the end of the first century. Because of John's residence at Ephesus, it is not unreasonable to assume he was aware of the fellowships in the surrounding cities. And given his spiritual stature as one of the original apostles and an active elder, it is likely he was familiar with their local character and something of their struggles. The severe tone of Christ's messages to the seven churches may well have brought some of those specific issues back to the old man's mind.

Deeds of the Nicolaitans

The first of Christ's declarations is addressed to "**..the angel of the church of Ephesus..**" (2:1). The Lord is pleased with some aspects of this church's spiritual witness, saying "**I know your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them to be liars.**" (2:2). And "**..this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**" (2:6).

The third of His declarations is addressed to "**..the angel of the church in Pergamos..**" (2:12). While pleased with their steadfastness under persecution, the Lord goes on. "**But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.**" (2:14-15).

The name Nicolaitans is mentioned only twice in the whole of the Bible, and we have just quoted them both. This begs the question, 'Who were these people?' and what was their influence on the Early Church? Clearly Christ knew all about them, because he hated their deeds and doctrine. It also seems reasonable that John was aware of them, because he did not ask anything about them. And we can probably assume that contemporary Christians were also aware of them, because John offers no further explanation of their practices or beliefs to his readership.

Various attempts have been made over the centuries to identify the Nicolaitans.

- Some early commentators took them to be followers of Nicholas of Antioch, one of the seven deacons and a Jewish proselyte (Ac 6:5), who is said to have 'apostatized' (but there is no evidence of this 'falling away' by Nicholas ever having taken place).
- Later commentators interpreted the name symbolically, to mean corruptors or destroyers of the people, and therefore synonymous with the Balaamites (close, but translation principles are a bit stretched here).
- More recent commentators consider that someone unknown but called Nicolas founded a sect, which then became known by his name (which tells us nothing at all!).

There are however two clues within the texts themselves. One is the linkage between verse 6, which names the Nicolaitans, and verse 2, which seems to refer to them but not by name. First verse 6 : "**But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**" Now verse 2 : "**And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them to be liars.**" The linkage in this case is between the Nicolaitans and false leadership.

Second is the link between verse 14, which names Balaam, and verse 15, which appears to establish a causal relationship between that doctrine and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. First verse 14 : "**But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam..**" Now verse 15 : "**Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.**" The link in this case is between the Nicolaitans and false teaching.

Nothing much has changed

At this point, it is useful to consider the 30 or 40 years previous to John's writing of Revelation. What had been the preoccupations of the Christian Church over that period? While we cannot establish the answer to this with absolute certainty, it is probable that what burdened the Church in the middle of the century, was still burdening the Church at the end of the century (as well as the years in between).

One of the strongest pieces of evidence for this is found when we compare the early part of Revelation (ie Christ's letters to the seven churches in Asia), with Peter's Second Letter and a similar letter written by Jude (which were both written several decades earlier). It soon becomes obvious that each of the authors are dealing with essentially the same things—false leadership and false teaching.

While John speaks of exposing false apostles, Peter and Jude both note those who **"despise/reject authority"** and **"speak evil of dignitaries."** (2 Pe 2:10 and Jude 8). The word **"authority"** is from Gk *kuriotes*, from *kurios* meaning 'a lord.' In the NT it refers to one who possesses dominion in the spiritual realm. The word **"dignitaries"** is from Gk *doxa*, meaning 'glory,' and referring here to those who manifest Christ's glory.

In other words, false leaders **"despise," "reject,"** and **"speak evil of"** those in the Church who are obediently operating in Christ's delegated authority—those who have been 'prepared' by Christ and are content to be 'hid' in Him.

As we can see, neither **"authority"** nor **"dignitaries"** have any connotations of 'official grandeur' in the original Greek. Those to whom Christ has truly delegated His authority are rarely seen in this sort of context. Rather it is those who wish to depose them who are more comfortable with the 'politics of position'; **"especially those who walk according to the flesh...[who] are presumptuous, self-willed."** (2 Pe 2:10).

Similarly, while John connects **"the doctrine [or 'teaching'] of the Nicolaitans"** with **"the doctrine [or 'teaching'] of Balaam,"** Jude and Peter warn of those who **"mouth great swelling words"** and **"speak great swelling words of emptiness."** (Jude 16 and 2 Pe 2:18). The phrase **"great swelling words"** has at its centre Gk *huperonkos*, which is an adjective used to describe something swollen or of excessive size (imagine an over-inflated balloon). Peter's additional word **"emptiness"** is from Gk *mataiotes*, meaning 'emptiness as to results' or 'void of result.'

False teaching sounds good but it provides no lasting spiritual benefit. Those who propagate it are, **"clouds without water, carried about by the winds** [ie promising much but producing nothing]; **late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame** [ie all that they leave behind them is likened to the dirty foam left on the beach after rough weather]; **wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever."** (Jude 12-13).

The Doctrine of Balaam

Another direct link between the earlier writings of Peter and Jude and the later work by John, is provided by their shared interest in the OT character Balaam.

Peter says of false teachers, **"They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;"** (2 Pe 2:15). Jude says of them, **"For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah."** (Jude 11). And John talks of **"Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality."** (Re 2:14).

Balaam was essentially a 'prophet-for-hire.' He predicted the future, practiced sorcery, and cursed people; all for money. But he was more than simply venal. He was also cunning and manipulative.

The continued refusal of God to allow him to curse the Children of Israel finally wore Balaam down, and in the end he left without cursing them. On the surface then, it looked like he was being obedient. However Balaam's heart was mixed. On the one hand God was God, and He seemed determined to support Moses and his motley collection of refugees. On the other hand, Balak was king of Moab and had sent an embassy to Balaam, "**..with the diviner's fee in their hand..**" (Numbers 22:7).

When it came down to it, Balaam still wanted to placate the (by now) angry king and his nobles. So before his departure he threw them a conciliatory bone, advising his 'clients' to corrupt those he could not curse.

It therefore came to pass that, "**..these [ie Moabite] women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD..**" (Nu 31:16). While "**..Balaam rose and departed and returned to his place...Israel remained...and the people began to commit prostitution with the women of Moab...and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.**" (Nu 24:25 & 25:1,2).

No matter what God said, or how many times He said it, the 'political realities' spoke differently to Balaam. The scheming prophet was an 'appeaser of men'—a 'man-pleaser.' He really wanted to give them what they wanted to hear.

Symbolic or literal?

It seems sensible at this point to summarise the position so far.

The writings of Peter and Jude (60's AD) and John (90's AD) are linked by the twin concerns of false leadership and false teaching. And because these two periods share the same concerns, we can reasonably assume this was also the case for the intervening 3 decades. In addition, all three writers make specific mention of the OT character of Balaam. This indicates that the false leaders and false teaching then prevalent in the NT church were not unpopular. In fact they were probably just what the people wanted.

However it does not necessarily follow that the young churches were literally involved in idolatry and fornication during that time. Discerning between what can be interpreted symbolically and what is strictly factual is often a fine balance (and in many cases both can be legitimately applied to the same piece of Scripture).

Nevertheless in the case of the Book of Revelation at least, we need to recognise the extensive use of 'code' words and phrases. It is, as John makes clear at the start, a book of 'signs' or symbols. It is appropriate to therefore consider his words carefully.

Balaam's stumbling-block

John says Balaam, "**..taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.**" (2:14).

Historically there is plenty of evidence that the issues of idolatry and fornication were unavoidable in Roman society. Gaudy pagan religions and their encouragement of sexual licence, were in vivid contrast to the Christian emphasis on personal faith and marital fidelity.

It is also true that Gk *porneia*, translated as "**sexual immorality**" here and "**fornication**" in the Authorised Version, means illicit sexual intercourse. Sexual activity becomes illicit when it is no longer conducted within the confines of marriage. "**Marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators [Gk *pornos*] and adulterers [Gk *moichos*] God will judge.**" (Heb 13:4).

However neither can we ignore the obviously symbolic uses of this word elsewhere in the text. The word/concept 'adultery' (Gk *moicheia*) is often used in the Bible as an allegory for spiritual disobedience and unfaithfulness towards the Father. In just the same way, the word/concept 'fornication' is used to symbolise the sort of illicit and dishonest behaviour that leads to spiritual contamination.

For example, John says later of the Woman Babylon, "**..the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication,**" and "**..the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her..**" (Rev 17:2 & 18:3). This does not mean that the Harlot is an international hawker of 'spiked' beverages, or that she cannot resist the 'advances' of royalty.

The Woman Babylon is a spiritual entity incorporating the power of the world and false religion. Fornication with her represents the spiritual corruption of man, who is allured away from God by the false glamour of her wealth and influence. The word 'fornication' is therefore no longer describing a physical act. It has now been used metaphorically to describe a spiritual process.

This is the case with Balaam's "**stumbling-block.**" The "**sexual immorality**" John is referring to here is the churches' dangerous 'flirtation' with a source of spiritual impurity. This understanding is reinforced if we consider the other half of the quotation. The phrase, "**..to eat things sacrificed to idols,**" means *partaking of* or *ingesting* what has already been dedicated to someone else. John is again referring to a practice that contaminates man and dishonours God.

In other words, the Church is being forbidden the use of anything in God's service that does not give the glory to Him and Him alone. It is His perfect work and only He can undertake it. "**Not by [human] might nor by [any other] power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts.**" (Zech 4:6). We cannot mix flesh and Spirit—the world's ways with God's ways—human 'strengths' with Divine 'weakness.

The same debate

Earlier in the century, the apostle Paul fought against many fleshly encroachments on the 'pure' and 'original' gospel he preached. Now, nearly 50 years later, John the Elder is doing the same.

The threat, as Paul and John see it, is not the state of Rome. Both men suffered imprisonment in the Empire and had grounds for animosity towards their captors. But their respective physical misfortunes barely rate a mention. Instead they focus on the real battle, which is with the enemy 'inside the gates.'

The names may have changed over the decades. It is no longer Paul resisting "**the circumcision party**" or "**certain men from Judea.**" Now it is John warning of "**the Nicolaitans**" and "**the doctrine of Balaam.**" But in reality it is exactly the same conflict. "**For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another.**" (Gal 5:17).

Flesh always serves itself. It is incapable of selfless service and therefore it is incapable of being perfectly obedient to God. Moreover flesh is adept at disguising itself in any form that it calculates will most richly reward its sense of self. Religious office acts like a magnet where human nature is concerned. On face value it may seem a suitably humble vocation, but in reality it feeds a ravenous desire to receive the approval and respect of others.

Those who mislead in this way are likely to have begun well. However they are doubly condemned by their subsequent reversion to the ways of their flesh and the world. As Peter observed, "**For it would have been better for them not to have known *the way of righteousness* [which is the path of resting in the Lord's righteousness, rather than striving in the strength of their own flesh to achieve self-righteousness], than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment**

delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'" (2Pe 2:21-22).

Jude made similar observations. "**These are sensual** [ie soulish or fleshly] **persons...walking according to their own lusts** [ie seeking to gratify personal desires]...**and whatever they know naturally** [ie according to the mental faculties of their 'old man']...**in these things they corrupt themselves.**" (vv19,16,10). He also recommended discernment to the Church, saying, "**..on some have compassion, making a distinction** [in other words, make allowance for those blatant displays of flesh that are at least an honest reflection of the human being within]; **but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.**" (vv22-23).

But the final word belongs to John. In two profound verses, the old apostle summarises the essential nature of those who should have charge of the Church.

- In Revelation 12:11, "**And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their** [old] **lives to the death** [ie they did not resist the Lord's work of preparation in them, but let Him take their fleshly strongholds one by one to the death of the Cross]."
- In Revelation 14:4, "**These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins** [ie they have only one master, to whom they are totally obedient]. **These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being first-fruits to God and to the Lamb** [ie they were brought out of the pool of humanity for the express purpose of becoming 'separated unto God']."

And So It Goes On ...

This excursion through early church history began in 33 AD. That is the generally agreed date of Christ's crucifixion, as well as His subsequent empowering of the Church at Pentecost. The New Testament account of this period then ends approximately 65 years later, with the death of John about 98 AD.

Without the inspired writings of these reliable witnesses, the account of our spiritual forefathers quickly degenerates into confusion and contradiction. The true record of what happened seems to disappear into a violent whirlwind of doctrinal disputes, spiritual pride, and vested interests. Nevertheless, by discarding the centuries-old weight of academic controversy and official censorship, it is still possible to piece together a reasonable idea—at least in terms of a general trend.

The underlying premise of this study has been that the Flesh opposes the Spirit, and that this simple formula provides the key to our understanding the Church's experience. We have therefore avoided looking at the past in terms of doctrinal heresy. Complicated labels and definitions do little to uncover the real nature of the struggle. Instead they only succeed in clouding it.

With this in mind, it is possible to assume that the struggles that dominated the lives of those who lived during the next 35 years (ie from 98 to 133 AD), were still essentially the same as those which had preoccupied the saints who had lived before them. If this is in fact the case, then we should be looking in the extant literature of the time for three main factors, each of which we have already observed to be consistently present at the time of the NT writers.

The first piece of evidence we need is continued Roman indifference to the Christian Church. This supports the notion that the battle was (and is) an internal one and that external pressures had little to do with the eventual outcome.

The second piece of evidence required is the presence of church ‘officialdom;’ or an attitude of reverence for people, reputation, and position. If there is false leadership, which is to say leadership based on the qualities of the flesh rather than those of the Spirit, then false teaching and deception will not be far away.

And finally we will want evidence of genuine silliness – which is to say particularly absurd theology. This is what will really betray the presence of unrestrained religious flesh. (God the Father often allows the human heart to have its own way in order to fully expose the corruption at its core).

Roman indifference

Trajan (ruled 98-117 AD) and Hadrian (ruled 117-138 AD) were the two most notable Roman Emperors in a succession of five who were later called "the good emperors." They were talented generals and diligent governors, consolidating imperial boundaries and reforming state institutions.

Their fundamental interest lay in a quiet ordered society, free of civil unrest. However Roman Law had come into disrepute because of the practise of bringing false charges against citizens in order to discredit them. Those who brought these unsubstantiated claims were hoping to gain financially (or politically) at the expense of those they attacked. Neither Trajan nor Hadrian were prepared to tolerate this.

Trajan wrote to Pliny the Younger, who was his governor in the province of Bithynia about 112 AD. The emperor commanded Pliny to continue "in *examining* the cases of those denounced to you as Christians... They are not to be sought out; if they are informed against, and the charge is *proved*, they are to be punished... if anyone denies that he is a Christian, and actually proves it... he shall be pardoned as a result of his recantation... Pamphlets published anonymously should carry no weight in any charge whatsoever. They constitute a very bad precedent, and are also out of keeping with this age." (Plin. Epp. X xcvi).

Hadrian wrote in similar vein to Minucius Fundanus, who was Proconsul of Asia around 125 AD. "Now, if our subjects of the provinces are able to sustain by *evidence* their charges against the Christians, so as to answer before a court of *justice*, I have no objection to their taking this course... On the other hand, I emphatically insist on this, that if any one demand a writ of summons against any of these Christians, merely as a slanderous accusation, you proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in proportion to the gravity of his offence." (Eus. H.E. IV. ix).

It is clear from these references that there was not going to be any ‘open season’ on Christians as long as Trajan and Hadrian were in power. While it is true that believers were not particularly popular within the empire, neither were they allowed to be treated as regular scapegoats for society’s ills.

Church ‘officialdom’

The question of authority within the Church has always been a pivotal issue. Denominations have split, purges have been launched, and wars have been fought. Opinions and practice are diverse, united only by what they are not, which is the pattern set out in Scripture.

The NT model of the Church is the human body. Jesus Christ is the Head, and the many different members are all co-ordinated by the central nervous system of the Holy Spirit. Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, and Elders (Pastors and Teachers), have been ‘separated’ and ‘prepared’ to exercise the Lord’s delegated authority as His ministers (ie servants). They have been purged of impetuous flesh and trained to walk in obedience to the leading of His Spirit.

Men (and women) have always had trouble with this model. Even before John the Elder had died at Ephesus, there was an attempt to redefine church government in Old Testament terms. About 95 AD Clement of Rome (later to be recorded as third in the line of papal succession) wrote a detailed letter to Christians at Corinth.

"To the high priest are given his special ministrations, a special place is reserved for the priests, and special duties are imposed upon the levites, while the layman is bound by the ordinances concerning the laity. Let each of you, brethren, *in his own order* give thanks to God with a good conscience, not transgressing *the appointed rule of his service*, in reverence." (Cl. Ep. Cor. xl.).

As well as blurring the distinction between the NT and OT patterns of leadership, Clement also promoted a more rigid view of the role of bishop. "Our apostles knew also...that there would be strife over the dignity of the bishop's office. For this reason therefore...they appointed the aforesaid, and after a time made provision that *on their death* other approved men should succeed to their ministry. (Cl. Ep. Cor. xlv).

Direct diocesan rule by a single bishop was not far away. In 112 AD Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter to the Church in Smyrna. In his letter Ignatius was adamant that there was only ONE bishop in the city of Smyrna, and that nothing worthwhile could be achieved in the Smyranean Church without him.

"Let no man perform anything pertaining to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist [ie Communion] over which the bishop presides, *or to one whom he commits it*...It is not permitted either to baptize or hold a love-feast apart from the bishop." (Ig. Ep.Smyr. c. viii).

Authority in Christendom was now the province of a single man, as well as those who owed their position to him. This power was then transferred from one man to the other by the physical process of 'laying on of hands'. (In order for episcopal legitimacy to be established, it had to be possible to trace a line of back through the preceding bishops to the original apostles, known as the principle of 'apostolic succession'.")

Extreme Silliness

In a superficial sense, it could be said that the first century of the church's existence was a thrice-repeated story of the fight against individual heresies.

- 33AD to 66AD – Paul combats the influence of traditional Judaism
- 67AD to 99AD – John struggles with Nicolaitans and Balaamist doctrine
- 100AD to 133AD – The battle with Gnosticism begins; the Syrian type taught by Saturninus about 120AD; the Egyptian type taught by Basilides about 130AD; and the Latin type taught by Valentinus about 140AD.

That is certainly how conventional church historians have seen the issue. One of the most influential and earliest recorders of Christianity is Irenaeus of Lyons. He wrote at the end of the second century, looking back at the years since the death of John the Apostle and Elder at Ephesus. So important did he see the battles against numerous heresies, that he called his major work 'Adversus Haereses' – or 'Against Heresies.' His obsession with the multitude of deceptions, and the apparent need to deal with each and every one on an individual basis, led him to an extreme position on Christian unity.

"This we do by pointing to the apostolic tradition and faith that is preached to men, which has come down to us through the *successions of bishops*; the tradition and creed of the greatest, the most ancient church, the church known to all men, which was founded and set up at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul. For *with this church*, because of its position of leadership and authority, *must needs agree every church*, that is, the faithful everywhere; for *in her the*

apostolic tradition has always been preserved by the faithful from all parts." (Ir. Adv.haer. III. iii. 1).

This claim is of course a logical and historical absurdity. Being able to recite a list of names as evidence of 'apostolic succession,' does little to guarantee the faithful transmission of spiritual truth to subsequent generations. In fact any 'unified' or pyramid-shaped authority structure such as this will almost certainly ensure the perpetuation of doctrinal error. Only this time they will be the bishop's! Rome has many examples of this, ranging from the myth of priestly celibacy to the blasphemy of praying to Mary.

There is no protection from deception in the false refuge of denominationalism. The comfort which comes from subscribing to one particular 'version' of doctrine is illusory. To trust in certain people or institutions to do the discerning for you is naïve. Only the prolonged stripping away of the flesh by the discipline of the Holy Spirit (ie the Path of the Cross) can really prepare and equip the saints to walk "**in spirit and truth.**"

Footnote to 'gnosticism'

It is probable that those who continued to follow Christ along the Path of the Cross during this last third of the first 100 years, would have come under increasing suspicion from those around them. Pressure to submit to episcopalian authority and conform to 'doctrinal orthodoxy' must have been quite intense at times.. Anything at all to eradicate what must have seemed to fleshly Christians as dangerously radical – dependence on the Holy Spirit and His disciplining work.

In this context, the specific variations of Gnosticism may well have served to further discredit those who walked on the path. In its simplest form, Gnosticism was an attempt to synthesise Christianity with the Mystery Religions of the ancient world. Its name is from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning 'knowledge,' or *gnostes*, meaning 'one who knows.' A common feature of Mystery Religions is that spiritual knowledge is restricted to a select few.

Gnostics argued that the ability (or at least the potential) to 'know' is present in all men. This capacity is pure, or 'spirit,' but trapped in a prison of impurity, or 'matter.' Variations on this central theme led to two extreme forms of behaviour. One expressed the belief that since matter was impure, then all physical pleasures should be avoided – ie asceticism. The other took the view that since it was only spirit that counted, then it was of no real consequence what physical pleasures were indulged in – ie licentiousness.

While both of these positions had been denounced by Paul in Scripture (Col 2:20-23 & Rom 6:1-2), it is also possible to see how certain of his teachings could be distorted to look like Gnosticism.

For example the Path is about surrendering to the Lord's work in us, rather than striving to live up to certain legal principles. Paul says it is, "**..by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body..**" (Rom 8:13) and this may have been misrepresented by some to suggest "a licence for unholy living." Some have argued that John's condemnation of the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans in Revelation 2 was a later attempt to contain just such an outbreak.

Similarly those who stayed away from the theological conventions and religious festivals may easily have been suspected of "unhealthy self-denial" in their isolation. The Song of Solomon illustrates the opposing work of many believers to one who has just been called to separate themselves in obedience to the Lord. The Shulamite says to her Beloved, "**Lead me away!**" but the Daughters of Jerusalem try to draw her back. "**We will run after you...We will be glad and rejoice in you. We will remember your love more than wine...We will make you ornaments of gold with studs of silver.**" (1:4:11).

Even without these particular levers for slander and mistrust, it is possible to see how those who followed a personal (and therefore essentially private) walk with the Lord, would provoke the hostility of the bishops. And how quick those bishops might be to brand the insights of Paul and John as *gnosis* or "special knowledge."

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This book makes interesting and often exciting reading. It opens up the sequence of background events occurring as the NT books are actually being written. It also makes good use of the comments of others who were observing the scene at the same time. Very useful in studying Paul's ministry and has considerable insight in parts. However in the end it fails to develop those insights and break through.

Henry Bettenson (ed), Documents of the Christian Church, Second Edition, (Oxford University Press, 1963).

An absolutely priceless collection of Early Church documents for the average reader and bible student. Unfortunately now out of print.

Henry Chadwick, The Early Church, Vol 1 of The Penguin History of the Church, Revised Edition, (Penguin Books, 1993).

This the traditional view of church history and for gleaning only. Nevertheless well written with some interesting quotes and occasional brilliance.

Philip Comfort (ed), New Commentary on the Whole Bible, New Testament Volume, (Tyndale House, 1990).

The classic biblical commentary by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, has now been "totally revised and updated"! In many respects the older version is still superior to the new. However the Introductions to each NT book are very good in this revised volume. They bring the understandings and assumptions of modern scholarship to within the ordinary reader's grasp, but without seeming to destroy what is valuable and true.

General References

PC Study Bible, Version 2 for Windows, (Bible Soft, Seattle, 1993-1995).

Really easy to use and with a wide range of useful references - bible versions, dictionaries, commentaries, concordances, etc.

Britannica CD 98, Multimedia Edition, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 1994-1997).

Quite extensive resource with good articles, but generally unsympathetic to Christianity.