

Introduction to Church History

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo L. Gonzalez.)

Acts 28 –

- ...doesn't really have a proper conclusion...
- This is because the expansion of the Gospel is ongoing, and WE are called to "write the next chapter".

Discussion – Why study church history?

- _____
- _____
- Illustration of wearing tinted glasses. The only way to avoid the conclusion that the whole world is tinted red or gray or green is to be aware of the tint in the lenses of your glasses!
- Not being aware of our Christian heritage and church history is like being mentally and spiritually color blind.

Galatians 4.4 – "...the fullness of time..."

If we are going to understand Christianity and the church, if we are going to understand what "the fullness of time" was, we will have to understand the world in which Christianity found fertile soil to grow.

- Palestinian Judaism
- Greco / Roman world

Palestinian Judaism

- Israel / Palestine was a land of strife and conflict because it was at the crossroads of major trade routes that joined Egypt with Mesopotamia and Asia Minor with Arabia.
- Alexander the Great and Hellenism
 - Alexander born in 356 BC
 - He conquered the Persian Empire by 329 BC. This gave him control of Palestine.
 - Alexander enacted a policy of "Hellenism" ... the imposition of Greek language and culture...
 - This was stiffly resisted by the Jews. In fact, "... the history of Palestine from the time of Alexander's conquest to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 may be seen as the constant struggle between Hellenizing pressures on the one hand and Jewish faithfulness to their God and their traditions on the other." (Gonzalez, pg. 8)
 - The height of this resistance was Maccabean Revolt in the second century BC.
 - Eventually, in 63 BC the Romans intervened in the strife in Palestine by conquering the land and deposing the last Maccabean ruler, Aristobulus II.
- Religiously, the Romans were relatively tolerant.
- They gave some political authority to the descendants on the Maccabees. In fact, Herod the Great had some claim to this lineage.
 - In an effort to promote loyalty to Rome, Herod built temples in Samaria and Caesarea on honor of Roma and Augustus.
- **HOWEVER...**
 - The Romans required that local gods be absorbed into their "pantheon", acknowledging something like "our god is just the same as other gods but by a different name."
 - AND... local peoples had to acknowledge the "deity" of Caesar.
 - These things combined to help unify the Empire.
 - How do you suppose the Jews felt about these requirements?

- To the Romans it seemed like the Jews were ready to rebel at the drop of a religious hat!
 - In fact, during Jesus' childhood there was an uprising and the Romans destroyed a city in Galilee near Nazareth and crucified 2,000 Jews!
- **Religious sects that arose in this environment of oppression:**
 - **Pharisees –**
 - emphasis on the law
 - arose during the Babylonian captivity
 - **Saducees –**
 - accommodated the political powers that be
 - centered on the Temple
 - the power brokers until the destruction of the temple was destroyed in 70 AD
 - **Zealots –**
 - fighters and rebels
 - **Essenes –**
 - separatists
 - Qumran community, Dead Sea Scrolls
 - The Pharisees were the most prepared to survive the destruction of the Temple because their roots went back to the time of the Babylonian captivity when there was no temple.
- **Diaspora Jews**
 - By the time of Jesus there were sizeable communities of Jews in every major city in the Roman Empire.
 - They even built a temple in Egypt in the 7th Century BC, and another one in the 2nd Century BC.
 - They needed a Greek translation of the Old Testament – The Septuagint... LXX... This was the translation of the Old Testament that Jesus and the Apostles used and that is most often quoted in the New Testament.

The Greco Roman World

- unprecedented political unity
- Pax Romana – peace, ease of travel
- persecution of the church because of Emperor Worship

What happened to the Jewish Christians who stayed in Jerusalem?

- Roman oppression vs. Jewish zeal made Jerusalem a pressure cooker for Jewish converts to Jesus.
- When the Jewish rebellion broke out in 66 AD that eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, the Christians in Jerusalem moved to Pella in Jordan. The leaders of the church had already moved there shortly after the martyrdom of James the brother of Jesus in 62 AD.
- During the decades in the desert in Jordan, these Jewish Christians were influenced by other religious sects with Jewish roots. And when they were written about later by Gentile Christians they referred mostly to their heresies and strange customs.
- This community of Christians basically faded away by the 5th Century AD.