



WHAT WAS THE ANCIENT CHURCH?



AFTER JESUS ASCENDED into heaven (in 30 or 33 AD), he sent the Holy Spirit to guide his apostles. Through these men, Jesus established his church. The apostles wrote the books of the New Testament and started churches throughout the Roman Empire. When the last apostle, John, died around 90 AD, the work of the apostles was carried on in the ancient church by the *church fathers*.

The earliest of the church fathers were friends of the apostles. One of the first fathers is Papias, a student of the Apostle John. Other church fathers like Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome also lived during John's lifetime and may have known some of the apostles. Many of the letters and books these fathers wrote still exist, and these writings help us understand the life and beliefs of the early Christians.

As Christianity spread throughout the world, the church developed different kinds of officers to perform various tasks. A *deacon* collected offerings, cared for the poor and sick, and helped

serve communion. A *presbyter* cared for the spiritual needs of a particular congregation, preaching, teaching, and baptizing. A *bishop* also preached, trained presbyters, supervised all the churches in a particular city, and represented his city at church councils. An *abbot* was a presbyter who led the congregation of a monastery, or abbey.

Some of the early Christians wrote books to defend Christianity against attacks from other religions. These writers, like Justin the Martyr, were called *apologists*. Their books are some of the earliest Christian writings. Most of them were written during the years of persecution. Some of these books were even addressed to Roman emperors, in an attempt to convince them to stop persecuting Christians.

Persecution continued for the first 300 years of the church, until Emperor Constantine declared Christianity a legal religion. Christians then became free to worship publicly. Without persecution, Christianity spread quickly throughout the empire. But so did false teaching that claimed to be Christian.

When false teachers, or *heretics*, taught ideas contrary to God's Word, the fathers corrected them. If the false teaching became a common problem within the church, the fathers would gather together to make church-wide decisions. They traveled from their local cities to hold *councils*. These councils influenced how we understand the Bible today, and they tell us that early Christians were united in their beliefs.

The most famous heretics were the *Arians*, who rejected the teaching that Jesus is God. Those who defended the truth became known as the *orthodox*. Some of the emperors after Constantine were Arian, and some were orthodox. When an Arian emperor was on the throne, the orthodox Christians, and especially the bishops, sometimes had to flee for their lives. For over fifty years, the official policy of the Roman Empire switched back and

forth from orthodox to Arian, depending on what the emperor believed. More lives were lost during those years of conflict. But the orthodox persisted in resisting the Arians until their ideas were officially declared unbiblical at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

Some of the fathers believed that the more popular Christianity became in the empire, the more the truth was compromised. They felt that many Christians had lost the physical and mental discipline to serve Christ. To keep themselves from being corrupted by the world, they formed societies, called *monasteries*, outside of normal city life. The *monks* spent their mornings in prayer and their afternoons working in the fields or hand-copying the Bible or other books. Most of what we know about the ancient church is from the books they preserved by copying.

Men and women lived in separate monasteries. We sometimes picture these monks as hermits who never left their prayer cells, but monasteries were actually busy places. Here, the monks fed the poor, cared for sick people, and provided food and shelter for travelers on the road. They were places for Bible teachers to meet and talk about Scripture. Monks even traveled distances to preach the gospel in other regions.

Monasteries became more common after the Roman Empire was defeated by Gothic invaders. The life of the last church father, Gregory the Great, who was born in 540 AD, marks the beginning of a new period in church history known as the medieval church.

We often ignore the ancient church because they seem different. Some of their ideas are foreign to us. But despite the differences, the earliest Christians have much in common with us today. Like the church fathers, we preach the gospel, feed the poor, and build hospitals. Like the fathers, modern Christians around the world are persecuted and murdered because of their faith. The perils of false teaching, sin, and evil rulers are part of our Christian heritage.

The lives of the earliest Christians are marked by love, pain, peace, war, and death. Like gladiators, they entered the arena and faced swords, wild beasts, and fire. These Christians preserved the message of Jesus' salvation and passed it on to us so we could tell others. They are the roots of our family tree of faith.