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COLLEGE



TEXTBOOK (ACADEMIC VERSION)

Lasting Legacy

COURSE: HISTORY OF THE EARLY CHURCH (HT104)

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Lasting Legacy

**The History of
the Early Church**

S. F. Fleming

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to Phil Van de Veer,
my life time friend.
Thanks for the Bible that you sent me
in my days of searching.*

Introduction

You are about to embark on a journey through the pages of the early Church. The amazing events of that era unfold before us as we begin with the facts, traditions and legends about Christ and the apostles. A passion to give their all for the Blessed Savior characterized the lives of the early church fathers and countless others. Their martyrdoms, writings, theological challenges and struggle to share the Gospel of God's love are portrayed in the chapters of this book. I hope that it is written in a manner that is worthy of those early heroes of the faith.

The approach of this work is threefold. Primarily, there is a chronological presentation of the notable figures of the early Church, beginning with Christ and marching through the generations of the apostles, apostolic fathers, apologists, and the early and later theologians of both the East and the West up to the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Biographical profiles reveal selected early church personalities to represent their contributions during the struggles and theological challenges that faced each generation. An appendix at the end of the book is designed to help the reader quickly identify and search out information on the early church leaders and others.

Secondly, some content focuses on the social and cultural backdrop of the Church in those bygone days. What were their lives like? How did they travel? What about their art? Did they have particular days of worship? What were the different beliefs? Was the true cross really discovered? Did they encounter heresies? Also, why were the Christians persecuted? Why did some actually seek martyrdom? These questions and more will be probed and considered.

Finally, we live in a day when revisionists try to alter modern perception towards the early Church with fabulously concocted notions and theories. The example profiled in this book is that of *The DaVinci Code*. The writings and actions of the early church fathers are the best defense against such contemporary, cynical fables.

I have selected various excerpts to introduce each chapter. Many of these are from the writings of the early church fathers.

May you be blessed by discovering the rich heritage and legacy that the early believers have left for the Christians of today!

Chapter One: Christ and the Apostles

“In Jesus Christ a preparatory history both divine and human comes to its close. In him culminate all the previous revelations of God to Jews and Gentiles; and in him are fulfilled the deepest desires and efforts of both Gentiles and Jews for redemption. . . . But as Jesus Christ thus closes all previous history, so, on the other hand, he begins an endless future. He is the author of a new creation, the second Adam, the father of regenerate humanity, the head of the church”¹

—Philip Schaff, 1858

A. RICH HERITAGE

The unique events surrounding the origin of the early Church are unparalleled in history! Nothing else compares to the Lord’s miraculous resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit or the stories of the disciples who went forth to the nations and to martyrdom in such a way that pagan culture was thereafter illuminated and transformed by the Gospel. We have a rich heritage handed down to us!

Disciple means “a learner or pupil,” and for modern day disciples of Christ, the study of the early Church is fascinating but also important. Why? It is intriguing for the simple genuineness of faith that was expressed, yet it is also imperative that we remember our roots, our foundation. Psalm 11:3 says, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” David F. Reagan wrote, “An ignorance of history makes [Christians] feel isolated and unconnected to the work of God,” but a study of it “provides a spiritual genealogy and connects us with saints of the past. It makes us a part of something bigger than ourselves and larger than our short lifetime.”²

A study of the early Church equips us to defend the development of Christian doctrine, debunk the myths of revisionists, and understand our Lord Jesus in a better way. Our approach to life “now” will be illuminated!

Liberation from the confines of the modern viewpoint has the potential to increase critical thinking, and this thinking, if permeated by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, may reveal new vistas of understanding for the spiritual and societal dilemmas facing us in our own age. John Briggs wrote: “If we are to be liberated from the confines of what we call ‘present,’ we must try to see life with the eyes of other centuries than our own. In that way we embrace the past in the present. We must allow the men of the past to pose their own questions rather than imposing upon them our fascinations, hopes and neuroses. Only in this way will the study of the past open up to us a larger present.”³

What are we studying when we study the early Church? We are primarily studying people: who they were, where they went, what they did, and what they taught. There is also the motivating purpose—why did they do these things? The majority of these individuals were motivated by love for God and love for fellow man. They embraced the first and second commandments of the Lord with zeal: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30 NKJV).

Some other things we might learn from the study are culture, pagan customs and religions, laws, persecution, social change, and so on; but for our interests, these primarily revolve around the people who started the Church. Because no book can share all that happened in the early Church, my intention is to highlight the traditions, teachings and insights of various significant people and the important events of the Church through the early generations in order to give the reader a sense of the marvelous heritage that we have received.

As Christians, we are privileged to have a very rich inheritance passed down to us from the early Church. There is a lasting legacy from the apostles, apostolic fathers, apologists, and theologians of the early Church that still speaks today. It impacts culture and changes the world for the better! Theological historian Philip Schaff wrote: “From Jesus Christ, since his manifestation in the flesh, an unbroken stream of divine light and life has been and is still flowing, and will continue to flow, in ever-increasing

volume, through the waste of our fallen race; and all that is truly great and good and holy in the annals of church history is due, ultimately, to the impulse of his spirit.”⁴

B. EARLY CHURCH PERIODS

The early Church began on the day of Pentecost, but the ending of that period is negotiable. Trying to establish exact dates can seem forced, mechanical and unnatural. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 was so significant that many use this as the concluding time of the early Church. Others, however, push its end all the way to the time of Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 590. Time spans normally vary with the religious traditions of those creating the periods. For instance, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants all have different views of the periods and what they represent.^{5,6}

At the beginning of the early Church, the Christian gospel message was introduced into the Jewish monotheistic culture of Israel. The surrounding cultures, however, primarily embraced idolatrous and polytheistic religions. Christians shared the love of the one true God amidst hatred, opposition and persecution. By the end of the early Church age, Christianity was victorious and was accepted as the main religion of the culture.

Brief timeline:

- | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| ➤ c. A.D. 29 | Jesus ascended; birth of the Church |
| ➤ c. 29–100 | The apostles |
| ➤ 100–c. 160 | The apostolic fathers |
| ➤ 130–c. 180 | The apologists |
| ➤ 180–325 | The early theologians |
| ➤ 325–444 | The later theologians |

C. JESUS AND THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

The birth of the Church was only made possible by the miraculous life and teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came as the “Lamb of God” (John 1:29) to take away the sins of the world. His moral character and example soaked into His disciples like water drawn to thirsty trees. Empowered by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the Church was born in a miraculous way.

Modern skeptics and myth-makers try to discredit the simple story of Immanuel born to the Virgin Mary, the One Who later as an adult healed people, raised the dead, taught as no man ever taught, proclaimed Himself to be the only begotten Son of God, died for our sins, and then rose from the dead, proving all of His claims. However, the evidence for the life and teachings of Christ is far greater than any other individual in history. The eye witnesses (1 John 1:1) gave account of Him through the sacred Gospels and Epistles of which there are more ancient text sources than any other book ever written.

Josephus (A.D. 37–100), the Jewish historian, testified of Jesus’ wonderful works, teachings, condemnation by Pilate to the cross, and resurrection, even calling him “the Christ.”

Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as had a veneration for truth. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles: he was the Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him; for he appeared unto them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had spoken of these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him: whence the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁷

—Flavius Josephus (c. A.D. 93)

A first century Roman historian, Cornelius Tacitus, noted the existence and death of Christ. We can also read the surviving fragment of Phlegon’s *Chronicles*. This first-century historian

reports on the darkness covering the earth during the crucifixion. A Samaritan-born historian, Thallus, in A.D. 52 attempted to refute the notion that Jesus had anything to do with the darkness that occurred. Mara Bar-Sepapion wrote a letter to his son in A.D. 73 comparing the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras, and Christ. There were also numerous references about Jesus by early rabbis. A second-century satirist, Lucian of Samosata, spoke mockingly of Christ and His followers. All of these simply confirm the life and times of Jesus Christ.⁸

The apostle Paul reminded King Agrippa while witnessing to him that the king already knew the things Paul was telling him about Christ “since this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). The Son of God had come to earth to save the lives of any who would follow Him and things would never be the same. The life and teachings of Christ were open for all men to investigate and judge for themselves. Dr. Simon Greenleaf, one of the principle founders of Harvard Law School, set out to disprove the biblical testimony about Jesus; but after careful examination of the *case evidence* for Jesus’ life and resurrection, Greenleaf concluded that the historical evidence verified the biblical claims and would stand up in a modern court trial.⁹

After Jesus rose from the dead, he spent forty days with His disciples, and before ascending into heaven told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Promise of the Father—the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit miraculously poured out on the seekers in the upper room. The rushing, mighty wind preceded tongues of flame above the believers who were then endued with a divine faculty to speak languages that they had not before learned. A multitude of devout Jewish men from every nation and proselytes (Gentile converts) heard the sound and were confused because each heard God being glorified in his own native language. Whereas the Tower of Babel experience recorded in Genesis brought confusion, Pentecost brought understanding! The apostle Peter then boldly preached of Jesus Christ to the crowd and about three thousand souls were saved. The Church was birthed and others were added daily (Acts 2).