

Goals

Christianity is a very diverse religion today. Most of us know of Christian churches from different denominations—the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church—to name a few. How did we get so many versions of Christianity? You may find it hard to imagine a time when the Catholic Church was the only church in the world. However, that was the case until the tenth century, when the Orthodox Church broke away from the Catholic Church in the West. All the various Protestant churches did not come into being until as late as the sixteenth century. This section follows the history of the Christian church as it divided into many branches. We look at the conflicts and controversies that caused major schisms within the churches. As we study this, we should think about our church, and learn from the mistakes of the past. Through prayer and knowledge, we can avoid the pitfalls that beset the secular churches around us.

Teacher Devotional

We are surrounded by many different types of Christianity today. It is extremely important to uphold our true doctrines, and not allow ourselves to be swayed by arguments of other denominations. As we study some of these denominations, let us take note of where they have departed from the teachings of the Lord. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked the Father to “sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17). The prophet Isaiah also tells us: “The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever” (Is 40:8). The word of God is therefore the only truth we must abide by, and His word endures forever. Man may try to twist the word of God to suit them, but they will never change the truth of His word. We should continue to pray together and ask the Lord for His guidance, so we may understand His truth ever more deeply.

Standing Firm Against the Tide

*“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong.”
(1 Cor 16:13)*

The Development of Christianity

Listed Scriptures

Ps 32:8,9; Is 30:1–17; 1 Tim 4:1–5

Lesson Aim

- 1) To understand some of the events that led to believers falling away from the truth.
- 2) To understand that Satan works in subtle ways, and we must always be watchful.

Memory Verse

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Pet 5:8)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Ps 73, 1 Tim 4:1–5; 1 Pet 3–4

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D



Despite persecutions and heresies, the early Christians preached the gospel with single-minded intensity. The earliest believers were poor, uneducated people. The fortunes of the church turned as a growing number of people from upper class society began to convert to “the Way.” Some of these educated converts became the apologists, writing about Christianity, defending their faith to the emperors and the public. These were the Apostolic Fathers, also called the Church Fathers. The Apostolic Fathers came a generation after most of the first apostles died. They became key figures of the church, influencing decisions about doctrines and beliefs that grew out of the chaos of persecutions and heresies.

The writings of the apologists helped promote Christianity to many learned people. By the end of the second century, the new faith was well on its way to becoming a force to be reckoned with in the Roman Empire. This may be one reason for the

periodic severity of persecutions, especially under Emperors Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260) and Diocletian (284-305). However, as more and more intellectuals converted, the influence of the religion grew, until a landmark event happened. An Emperor of Rome converted to Christianity.

With the conversion of Constantine in 312 AD, the world's view of Christianity changed. After Constantine became the Emperor of Rome, he pronounced an edict making Christianity a legal and respected religion. Following this, Christianity spread throughout the empire like wildfire, gaining converts from all levels of society. The Catholic Church became a powerful institution in Roman society, with the Bishop of Rome holding power that gradually equaled the Emperor's.

This seemed like a blessing from God. After all, His church could now expand freely, and multitudes could worship Him openly in peace. Unfortunately, this freedom came at a price. The price came in the form of compromises to the original beliefs and teachings of Christ and the apostles. Eventually, around the 10th century, the Catholic Church divided into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church due to opposing views of what the truth should be. The truth was lost as humans tried to interpret God's will using their own wisdom.

W A R M U P



Because Christianity has been around for so many centuries, it is hard for us to know much about it other than what we know today. But when we study its history, we come to realize that many aspects of this religion have been changed over time, often to suit the needs of the people. If we compare present day Christianity to that of the early apostolic church, we see that we have drifted extremely far away from God's teachings.

When John Paul II passed away in 2005, many followers expressed that they wanted a more liberal Pope, someone who would embrace the trends of today. It seems that the trend of Christianity is to modernize and conform to the world, rather than sticking to the truth. This is why it is important for us to know our history, how it has been changed by people over the course of time, and understand God's words so that we can keep the truth, no matter what the world thinks and believes.

"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal 1:6,7).

These were prophetic words indeed. Most scholars believe that Paul was executed around 64 AD, during the intense period of Nero's persecution. A short hundred years later, his words would have applied to most Christians. Unfortunately, by that time, most Christians would not have thought so. They still believed that they kept the true faith. There were many reasons for this happening. In this lesson, we will look at three key events that contributed to the loss of truth.



Part 1

The Apologists and the Veneration of Martyrs

The apologists were admired and respected because they debated doctrines with the pagans and Jews who constantly attacked Christianity. Poorer, less educated believers allowed themselves to be led by these intellectual converts without questioning whether their teachings were according to the teachings of Christ and the apostles. One reason for this was that the apologists, these Apostolic Fathers, were very willing to die for their beliefs rather than deny Christ.

There were always Christians willing to die for their faith. These people are called martyrs. Stephen was only the first of countless thousands of Christian martyrs. The martyrdoms of Peter and Paul were given special significance by the churches. There were other important martyrs. The following is a description of the martyrdom of Polycarp, taken from *History of the Church (IV 15)* by Eusebius, one of the church historians who lived at the time:

Polycarp

He stepped forward, and was asked by the proconsul if he really was Polycarp. When he said yes, the proconsul urged him to deny the charge.

"Respect your years!" he exclaimed, adding similar appeals regularly made on such occasions: "Swear by Caesar's fortune; change your attitude; say: Away with the godless!"

But Polycarp, with his face set, looked at all the crowd in the stadium and waved his hand towards them, sighed, looked up to heaven, and cried:

“Away with the godless!” The governor pressed him further:

“Swear, and I will set you free: execrate Christ.”

“For eighty-six years,” replied Polycarp, “I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

“I have wild beasts,” said the proconsul. “I shall throw you to them, if you don’t change your attitude.”

“Call them,” replied the old man. “We cannot change our attitude if it means change from better to worse. But it is a splendid thing to change from cruelty to justice.”

“If you make light of the beasts,” retorted the governor, “I’ll have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude.”

Polycarp answered: “The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished: there is a fire you know nothing about—the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want.”

The proconsul was amazed, and sent the crier to stand in the middle of the arena and announce three times:

“Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” ...Then a shout went up from every throat that Polycarp must be burnt alive... The rest followed in less time than it takes to describe: the crowds rushed to collect logs and faggots from workshops and public baths...When the pyre was ready...Polycarp prayed:

“O Father of thy beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know thee, the God of angels and powers and all creation, and of the whole family of the righteous who live in thy presence; I bless thee for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that in the number of the martyrs I may partake of Christ’s cup, to the resurrection of eternal life of both soul and body in the imperishability that is the gift of the Holy Spirit...”

When he had offered up the Amen and completed his prayer, the men in charge lit the fire, and a great flame shot up.

Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna (Izmir in modern Turkey), became a martyr at the age of around eighty-six, around 156–160 AD. His eagerness to meet death for his faith was a common attitude amongst many Christians. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, saw his journey to Rome for execution as imitating the Lord’s last journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Martyrdom came to be seen as the ultimate sign of discipleship, and many Christians did not flee when persecutions came to their city.

Polycarp’s church celebrated the event of his martyrdom annually. This was not unusual, as followers of other celebrated martyrs did the same thing. In fact, martyrs became so revered that later, a belief developed that prayers to God addressed through the martyrs were especially effective. This later grew to the practice of the veneration (the reverence of a sanctified and holy being) of the martyrs. Events of persecutions became embroidered in the telling, the scale and extent of earlier executions became exaggerated. The numbers of the martyrs and their sufferings grew with each telling, and stories of fantastic miraculous happenings appeared with each account.

Converts from paganism contributed to this too. They brought their own superstitions and beliefs into the church, so that martyrs began to take on the role of the gods of pagan cultures. Possessions of martyrs were preserved lovingly. People believed that these possessions had the power to work miracles or guarantee special blessings to believers. Eventually, although not all church leaders approved of the veneration of martyrs, the practice grew to immense proportions amongst the believers.

Thoughts For Discussion:

1. Review the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Which of the commandments have been broken with the belief in the veneration of martyrs?
2. Refer to the memory verse for this lesson. How do you think the “roaring lion” has devoured believers through their beliefs and practices described above?



Part 2

Theologians of the Early Church

The teachings of the church kept evolving after the death of the apostles. Theologians of the church grappled with what the central beliefs of Christianity should be in turbulent times. What, for example, should be done about believers who denied their faith under threat of torture and death? What of those who gave in and sacrificed to idols to save themselves or loved ones from horrific deaths? These were the “lapsed,” people who did not take the noble path of martyrdom. Church leaders had to come up with a solution to the many who repented after a series of persecutions had passed. During these times, many church writers contributed to the evolution of Christian doctrines that gradually led further and further away from the original teachings of Christ and the apostles.

One such writer was Tertullian, the first major Christian author to write in Latin. He lived around the mid-second to third century. He was a key person in developing the doctrine of the Trinity. He developed this doctrine as he wrote against the heretic Praxeas. Tertullian also attempted to defend the use of the Old Testament by Christians, and explain the oneness of God the Creator and Savior.

Another writer was Irenaeus. Like the writers of the letters in the New Testament, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, tried to counteract the influence of the heretics by writing against their teachings and warning the believers of the errors of these heretics. The passage below was written by Dr. Everett Ferguson, a Professor of Church History in Texas. Read the arguments Irenaeus made against some heretics:

Irenaeus

Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor and studied under Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna. He then went to Gaul where he became Bishop of Lyons in AD 177. His books aimed to counteract the Gnostic ideas common in this region. Two major writings by Irenaeus survive: Against Heresies (‘Five Books Exposing and Overthrowing the So-Called “Knowledge”’) and Proof of the Apostolic Preaching, an instructional book, demonstrating that the basic Christian faith fulfills the Old Testament. Irenaeus stressed the fundamental Christian doctrines that were being challenged by Gnosticism: that the world was created by one God; that Jesus Christ, son of the Creator, died to save men; that there will be a resurrection of the body. He appealed to the historical roots of the Christian faith, and argued that Scripture contained a succession of covenants through which “one and the same God” pro-

gressively revealed his will to men, as they were ready to receive it.

Irenaeus developed the idea that Christ, fully man as well as fully God, retraced the steps of Adam, with a different result. Because Christ passed through every age of life, all humanity shares in his sanctifying work. The Gnostics claimed to possess secret traditions passed down from the apostles. To counter this, Irenaeus developed an argument involving another kind of apostolic succession. He claimed that the churches preserved public, standard beliefs handed down from apostolic times by the teachers in the churches. Irenaeus thus developed Christian theology in several ways; for example, the “canon (or rule) of truth” preserved in the church as the key to interpreting Scripture; his view that the Eucharist (the Holy Communion) contains “an earthly and a divine reality;” and the place of the virgin Mary (the new Eve) in his theology. At the same time he tried to base his teachings and arguments on Scripture.

There were some important developments of Christian doctrine in this passage. However, two we should be familiar with are:

- a. Irenaeus’ focus on apostolic succession, which led eventually to the formation of Papal authority (the Pope as head of the Roman Catholic Church)—Roman Catholics believe that the Pope is the direct spiritual descendent of Peter;
- b. Irenaeus’ theology of the virgin Mary as the new Eve—this led to the importance of the Virgin Mary in Catholic worship.

Thoughts For Discussion:

1. How do you think the “roaring lion” used the Christians’ defense against heretics and other attackers to undermine the truth?



Part 3

Conversion of Constantine

The single most significant event for Christianity in the early centuries was the conversion of a future Emperor of the Roman Empire—Constantine. Constantine was sympathetic towards Christians because his mother was a convert. He had defeated a rival named Maxentius at the famous battle at Milvian Bridge in 312 AD. It was just before this battle that the conversion experience took place.

Constantine related his experience to the church historian Eusebius towards the end of his life. It seemed that Constantine was alarmed by reports of Maxentius’ possession of mysterious magical arts. He prayed to the “Supreme God” for help. On

the eve of the battle, as Constantine was walking about at noon, he saw a vision. It was the sign of a cross in the noonday sky “above the sun,” and with the sign were the words, “Conquer by this” in Latin. That night Constantine had another vision, a vision of Christ appearing to him in a dream commanding him to use the sign as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies. He obeyed, and was victorious.

This made Constantine the sole master of the West (the area surrounding Rome). He then went on to meet his rival Licinius, who had control of the East of the Roman Empire (the area around Palestine), and was also victorious. Thus, in 323 AD, he became the sole emperor of the whole Roman Empire. He established his seat of power at Byzantium, later known as Constantinople, now Istanbul.

Although Constantine embraced Christianity and treated it as a favored religion in his empire, he did not let go of his previous pagan beliefs. His own favorite god, the Unconquered Sun, seemed to have been integrated in his beliefs with the worship of the Son of God in Christianity. In 321 AD, he established a day of rest on the first day of the week, and called it “the venerable day of the Sun”—that is, Sunday. Christian leaders of the time did not wish to alienate their latest, most powerful ally, and eventually changed the Sabbath day to Sunday in order to align their day of worship with the rest of the pagan world. They conveniently used the key event of the resurrection of Christ on Sunday as the reason for the change, stating that the resurrection was so important that it was right to change the day of rest in order to remember it.

Christian artwork of the time also made it easy to blend paganism with Christianity. Christ, for instance, was often portrayed with the sun shining around his head like a halo. He was even portrayed as the sun god in a chariot. From sun worship came the celebration of Christmas on December 25, the birthday of the sun. The celebration of Saturnalia, the Roman winter festival of December 17–21, provided the basis for later Christian practices of exchanging gifts and lighting candles.

The importance of Mary in Christian worship probably grew because there were parallels in paganism. Some believe that the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana) transferred itself to the veneration of Mary. Another pagan goddess was the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was known as the “universal mother,” the “Great Virgin,” and the “Mother of the God.” It seemed natural that such pagan parallels would transfer itself to Christianity so that the worship of the Virgin Mary took a significant place in Christian worship in the Catholic Church.

Thoughts For Discussion:

1. The conversion of a powerful figure such as Constantine would seemingly change the fortunes of the early church for the better. However, as we have seen above, this was another subtle way for the “roaring lion” to devour many Christians. Indeed, the true church could no longer be found on earth, and would not appear again until the True Jesus Church was established by the Lord Himself. Use the information given in this section to list the ways in which the “roaring lion” subverted the truth even in an atmosphere of religious freedom.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING



See Thoughts For Discussion under each Bible Study section.

LIFE APPLICATION

The Roaring Lion



As a group, discuss the following question: “How does the ‘roaring lion’ devour, undermine and subvert believers and the truth within our present-day society of religious freedom?”

Teaching Tips

Leave a few minutes for students to plan for the fellowship. They may wish to check their progress in preparation with their group, or ask advice. The fellowship for which the students have prepared over the past weeks will take place next week, after lesson 6. See Lesson 1 Life Application section.



There are many things today that seem good for us. However, we must learn to discern between God's will and the subtle manipulation of the devil. As we continue to enjoy the fruits of technology, we need to be aware of the evils inherent in technology. The computer is a useful tool, but also a dangerous weapon of Satan if we wander into unsuitable sites or make contacts in chat rooms that are unwise. Even democracy can be a weapon of Satan. Witness the way society accepts homosexuals, even within secular churches. Single parenthood is an accepted alternative to traditional two-parent families. These are only two examples of the many dangers facing us today. We must be diligent in seeking the will of God so that we keep to His truth. Let us pray and ask God to guide us and keep us safe.

Catholicism

Listed Scriptures

Josh 6; 1 Sam 15; Mt 3

Lesson Aim

- 1) To understand that we will lose the way to salvation if we disobey God's teachings.

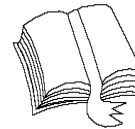
Memory Verse

"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of ram." (1 Sam 15:22)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Jer 23:9-40; 2 Pet 2; 1 Jn 2-3

BIBLE BACKGROUND



The word "catholic" originally referred to a united, global community of believers. Hence, the early church that existed after the death of the Apostles was called the Catholic Church. Up to the eleventh century AD, there was only one church. Deep-rooted differences in theology led to the first major schism (division) within the church.

Apart from heresies, the Catholic Church struggled with controversies about beliefs. One major controversy that plagued the church during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries was about the humanity of Christ. Debates raged regarding how Christ, the Son of God, was God Himself (the doctrine of the Trinity), and how he was both man and God (the doctrine of the person of Christ, or Christology).