

## 5. A Century of Textual-Canonical Transition

- a. The Jewish Scriptures along with some apostolic writings were being treated as having scriptural authority
  - i. e.g., 1 Clement quotes broadly from OT and NT; Polycarp to the Philippians quotes frequently from the NT
- b. Two groups of texts were in common use by mid-century: the four Gospels; letters of Paul
- c. By the end of the century the core of the NT canon was generally recognized (Gospels, Acts, Pauline epistles including Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John) while others were still being debated.

### Recommended primary source:

*The Apostolic Fathers* (various editions)

- Includes 1 Clement, seven letters of Ignatius, the epistle of Polycarp, martyrdom of Polycarp, the Didache, epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, epistle to Diognetus, and various fragments

### Recommended secondary source:

*Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church*, by Michael Kruger

- Specifically about the church in the second century; includes information on new developments, challenges, persecutions, and what made the church unique and successful.

**NOTE: No class on Dec 22 and 29**

**Next class: January 5, 2025**

# The Story of the Church

*Second Century: Christianity at the Crossroads*<sup>1</sup>

December 15, 2024

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## 1. A Century of Sociological Transition

- a. Probably closely reflected socio-economic surroundings (largely impoverished, working class and/or enslaved persons but also included some wealthy, educated, upper class)
- b. The church radically contrasted with the gender composition of the surrounding culture: women were a minority in the empire, but up to  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the church were women!
  - i. Possible reasons: Christians rejected the sexual double standard; women were included in religious gatherings and instruction; Christian opposition to female infanticide and abortion in general
- c. Large numbers of Gentile converts meant that they eventually became the majority within the church sometime during this century. This multi-ethnic, exclusive “religion” was unheard of.
- d. The total number of Christians grew from around 10K at the start of the century to about 200K at the end.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this class as well as the section headings are taken from, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, by Kruger (see resources at end of handout).

## 2. A Century of Cultural-Political Transition

- a. The parting of the ways: increasing distinction between Christianity and Judaism meant that Christianity lost the protected religious status of Jews in the empire
- b. Increasing visibility of the church in public: references in government communication (e.g., Pliny the governor of Bithynia to Trajan c. 112 AD), historical works (Tacitus c. 110 AD, Suetonius c. 121 AD), and religious/philosophical writings (many Christian writings as well as critics of Christianity like Lucian of Samosata c. 165 AD and Celsus 177 AD).
- c. Christianity's exclusive claims were considered subversive to social and political stability. This led to increasing persecution: not universally, but localized and sporadic (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch, Blandina and martyrs of Lugdunum/Lyon).
  - i. Christians became a common scapegoat. Tertullian wrote c. 197 AD: "they take the Christians to be the cause of every disaster to the State, of every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is: 'Away with the Christians to the lion!' What, all of them to one lion?" (*Apology*, 40)
  - ii. Public accusation and persecution led some Christians to defend the faith publicly. These "apologists" (from Greek, "to give a defense") spoke with opponents and wrote to explain Christian belief (e.g., Justin Martyr).

## 3. A Century of Ecclesiological Transition

- a. Development of leadership structures: from a plurality of elders in each church (e.g., Acts 20:28, elders = overseers) → a single bishop (lit. "overseer") who oversees all churches in a city/region (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch, died 110-117 AD, describes the bishop leading the elders leading the church)
  - i. The role of bishop may have developed as a way to clarify leadership within a city and battle heresy.
  - ii. Irenaeus describes "apostolic succession" at the end of the second century as the bishops *maintaining* apostolic teaching/tradition. Only in later centuries did this "apostolic succession" come to mean "having the same authority of the apostles."
- b. Christians continued to worship regularly on the first day of the week, even as their practice had been previously.

## 4. A Century of Doctrinal-Theological Transition

- a. Jesus was clearly worshiped as God, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. (e.g., Apostle's Creed used as baptismal confession)
- b. Development of understanding of Jesus's nature.
- c. The word "Trinity" is first used by Tertullian
- d. Apologists defended the faith against attacks from pagans and from heretical Christian groups. For example, Justin Martyr debated Jews and explained Christianity to Roman leaders; Irenaeus of Lyon's, *Against Heresies* (c. 180 AD) argued extensively against gnosticism.