

Lesson 44: The Maturing of the Church

Previously...

At Pentecost, God the Holy Spirit started the church by indwelling Jesus' Jewish disciples. Later, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles step by step to take the gospel to the Samaritans (half-Jews), Gentiles and also Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem. God was showing them that His message of salvation was meant for the whole world.



Today, the church has been around for 2,000 years. The Bible tells us that all believers from every age since the start of the church have been baptised in the Holy Spirit (Romans 6:3–4).



This means all believers are connected to Jesus and to each other by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The church is the universal body of believers across all time. This is what Paul said.

1 Corinthians 12:12–13

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.

Paul also noted that some of the foundational gifts that Christ gave the church, through the Holy Spirit, are people who would teach and train Christ's body to become united and mature in faith.

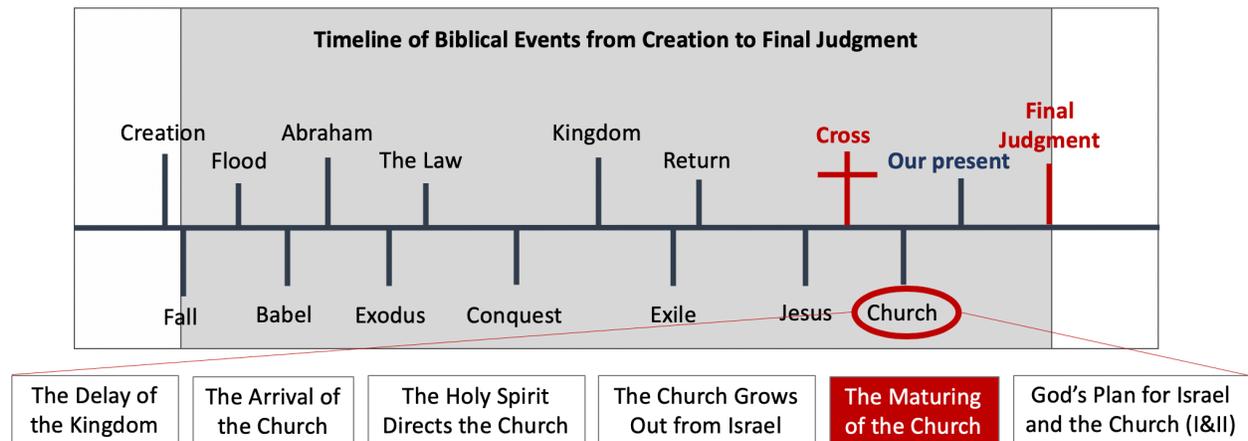
Ephesians 4:11–14

¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.

The function or purpose of these gifts was to equip believers so that they could carry on evangelising, training, growing and serving each other. The goal was to guide the church into a good understanding of God’s Word and towards Christ-like maturity.

In Acts, we learnt what happened at the start of the church. But what happened after those years?



In this lesson, we will see how God helped the church grow and mature over four time periods:

	1 st Period	2 nd Period	3 rd Period	4 th Period
Start of the Church at Pentecost	The Time of the Apostles	The Early Church Leaders	Middle Ages till the Reformation	Reformation till modern day
			 Protestants	
AD 33	AD 100	AD 600	AD 1600	Today



1st Period

The Time of the Apostles (AD 33 – 100)

The early church did many things well, but it was also immature. For example, it took time for the apostles to:

- Realise they had to take the gospel to the nations.
- Understand they no longer needed to follow the rituals and practices of the Mosaic Law.
- Adjust to fellowshiping with Gentiles.

Four important things happened during this period.

I	II	III	IV
			
The church and Judaism no longer share the same beliefs.	The apostles write the New Testament.	The church recognises the canon as God's Word.	Certain spiritual gifts become less important.



I. The church and Judaism no longer share the same beliefs

After Pentecost, the Jews who were the new church were still very much Jewish. They continued to worship at the Temple and follow Mosaic Law.

But these believers' lives were also different from the other Jews (Acts 2:42–47). They had:

- the apostles' teaching
- signs and wonders
- great trust and harmony between them and
- growing numbers as unbelievers came to faith and joined them.

The unbelieving Jews reacted badly to these new believers. Many didn't agree with how these Christians were explaining the Scriptures.

Throughout the Old Testament, idol worship was a huge problem in the lives of the Israelites. However, from God's discipline during the exile, they finally learnt not to worship false gods and to only worship Yahweh and be loyal to Him. But this fear of worshipping other gods hardened into a refusal to acknowledge that Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah pointed to Yahweh as being the one God with a personal plurality within Himself (that is, Yahweh is one God but has three Persons within Himself).

Example 1

In the past, the Jews understood that Isaiah 53 was talking about how the Messiah would suffer.

Isaiah 53:2–3

² My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot,
like a root in dry ground.

There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance,
nothing to attract us to him.

³ He was despised and rejected—
a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.
He was despised, and we did not care.

Because the church used this passage to explain that **Jesus** is the suffering Messiah, the Jews that rejected Him insisted that He couldn't have been the Messiah. Why? Because, whether He suffered or not, Jesus did not bring about the prophesied Kingdom of God.

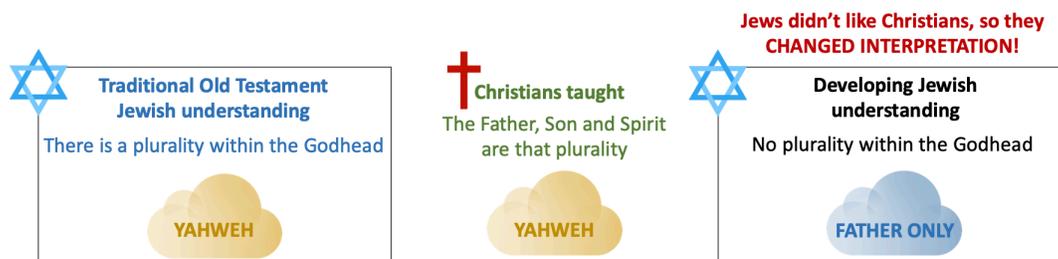
Later, these unbelieving Jews began a process of reinterpreting this passage as well as others used by Christians. They said the "servant" in Isaiah 53 is the **nation of Israel** who has had to endure immense suffering at the hands of Gentile enemies. This is not correct.



Example 2

The Old Testament Scriptures show that God has a plurality in His nature. He has a three-in-one, or triune character: God is Father, Son and Spirit.

Later on, when Christians started to teach this, the Jews changed their teaching to be different. They started to insist that Yahweh is God alone. There is no Son or Spirit! This is also wrong.



By AD 1100, Judaism had reinterpreted Old Testament Scriptures so their beliefs about Isaiah 53 and similar passages about the Messiah no longer matched Christian belief.

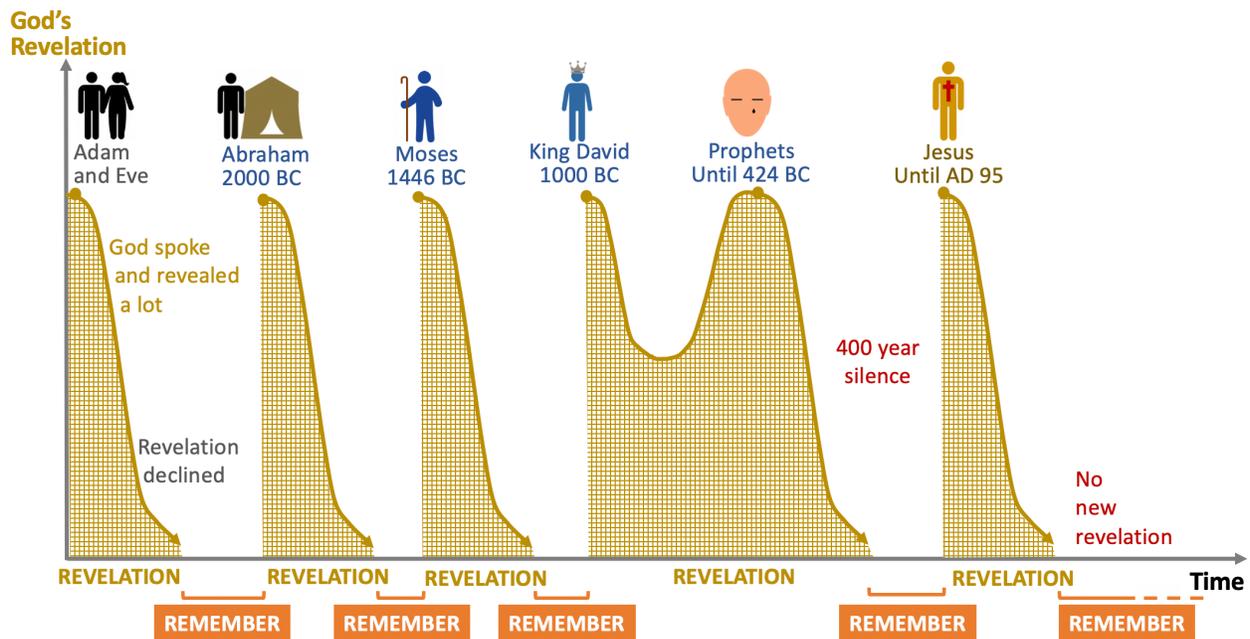


II. The Apostles write the New Testament

In the Old Testament, we saw how God communicated with Abraham, Israel, the kings and the prophets. We learnt these things about God’s revelation.

God’s revelation is		Notes
1. Verbal		God reveals His thoughts publicly in a language that people can understand.
2. Personal		God speaks to people and He expects them to respond.
3. Historical		God only speaks at certain times. He does not speak continuously.
4. Comprehensive		God speaks about every area of life, not just the spiritual or religious areas.
5. Prophetic		God tells people things they do not and cannot know unless He reveals them.

We also learnt that the way God communicates with man is with a “reveal and then remember” pattern (Exodus 12:14–27). This is because God does not publicly reveal Himself to each generation. Rather, He expects mankind to remember what He said and then pass it on to the next generation.



And for this, God chose Abraham's family for the job of recording His words and His history and truth (Genesis 12:1–3).

Romans 3:1–2, 9:4–5

¹ Then what's the advantage of being a Jew? Is there any value in the ceremony of circumcision? ² Yes, there are great benefits! First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God.

⁴ They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's adopted children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave them his law. He gave them the privilege of worshipping him and receiving his wonderful promises. ⁵ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as his human nature is concerned. And he is God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.

The Jews recorded the Old Testament.

And in this time of the apostles, God also made the Jews responsible for recording His New Testament revelation. Through this, we learn three more things.

God's revelation is	Notes
6. Apocalyptic 	God ended both the Old and New Testaments with apocalyptic revelation about how history will end.
7. Written 	God led the apostles to teach His Word through writing instead of just verbally.
8. Fixed 	God gave believers a completed and fixed canon of Scripture to live by.



6. God's revelation is apocalyptic

Old Testament

When the writing of the Old Testament was nearly completed, Yahweh gave His prophets special visions and dreams about the future. He told them to write these down. These writings were "apocalyptic", meaning they "unveil" things that people did not know.

Apocalyptic writings were different from the usual Old Testament prophetic writings. The prophetic writings contained long passages about Israel's disobedience and God's cursings based on the Mosaic Covenant. But apocalyptic writings contain unconditional assurances that long-range prophecies and promises would be fulfilled. Also, there was often an interpreting angel who explained some of the apocalyptic symbols to the prophet.

Why did God do this? He wanted to give believers long-range endurance even as they suffered under hostile, anti-God, pagan environments. God wanted them to know that He is and will always be in control, so they had good reason to hope. We find these apocalyptic writings in parts of the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.



New Testament

The same thing happened at the end of the New Testament. Yahweh gave advance world history to the apostle John through visions while he was exiled on the isle of Patmos (a small Greek island on the Aegean Sea). God promised that Jesus will return to put an end to evil forever and believers will live with Him in peace and joy for all of eternity future. John recorded all this information in the book of Revelation.

Again, God did this to give hope and stability to believers.

The New Testament believers knew that God had ended the Old Testament revelation with apocalyptic information.

So when God gave apocalyptic information to John, believers realised that Yahweh was again ending His public revelation.



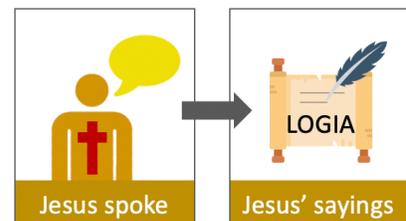
7. God's revelation is written

At this point, the believers knew it was time to collect all the available revelation into a canon, that is, a written collection of the approved words from God.

Here is how it happened.

At first, when Jesus was on earth, He would teach the Jews at specific times and places. However, this meant that others who were not there would not know what He had taught.

So believers started creating documents called "logia" which was a collection of what Jesus said. We can think of them as being similar to personal "sermon notes". These were passed around the churches.



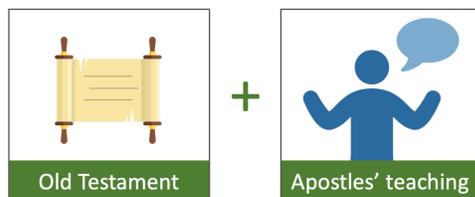
In the book of Acts, Paul may have referred to this.

Acts 20:35

And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Nowhere else does Scripture record Jesus saying these words, so it is possible a believer had recorded them as his own "sermon notes" and shared them around. In any case, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to include this quote in the New Testament, showing that Jesus did indeed say those words.

After Jesus' time, the church relied on both Old Testament Scripture and the oral teachings of the apostles.



For example, Paul used the Old Testament to teach:

Acts 17:2–4

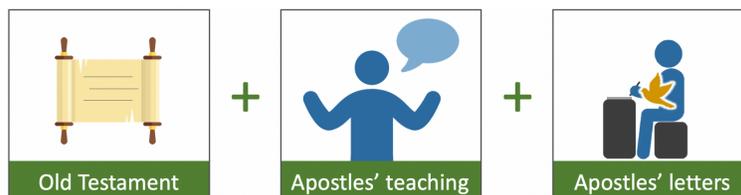
² As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. ³ He explained the prophecies and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." ⁴ Some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women.

But Paul also preached from what Jesus Himself had taught him:

Galatians 1:11–12

¹¹ Dear brothers and sisters, I want you to understand that the gospel message I preach is not based on mere human reasoning. ¹² I received my message from no human source, and no one taught me. Instead, I received it by direct revelation from Jesus Christ.

Besides teaching from the Old Testament and preaching on what Jesus had taught them directly, the apostles also began writing letters to people and churches.



In fact, all believers were told to pay close attention to what the apostles taught verbally as well as to what they wrote. This is what Paul said:

2 Thessalonians 2:15

With all these things in mind, dear brothers and sisters, stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter.

What did the apostles write in their letters?

i. They wrote down more information that Jesus revealed to them after He ascended to heaven.



While on earth, Jesus had promised His disciples that after He ascended to heaven, He would send the Holy Spirit to teach them more.

John 14:26

But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.

And just as He promised, the Holy Spirit did come to remind and reveal more.

For example, this is what Paul said.

Ephesians 3:3–5

³ As I briefly wrote earlier, God himself revealed his mysterious plan to me. ⁴ As you read what I have written, you will understand my insight into this plan regarding Christ. ⁵ God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by his Spirit he has revealed it to his holy apostles and prophets.

2 Corinthians 12:1–4

¹ This boasting will do no good, but I must go on. I will reluctantly tell about visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know—only God knows. ³ Yes, only God knows whether I was in my body or outside my body. But I do know ⁴ that I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.

Paul was not one of the disciples who followed Jesus while He was on earth. But Jesus brought him to paradise (the “third heaven”) later. There, God taught Paul personally and gave him more information to share with other believers. So these things that he learnt from Jesus was what Paul wrote in his letters.

ii. The other apostles also answered questions that the churches had asked or sent in a letter.



The apostles replied to churches through letters. They knew that the letters they wrote would also be very helpful for other churches. So they told the ones who received their letters to share them with others.

Colossians 4:16

After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.

1 Thessalonians 5:27

I command you in the name of the Lord to read this letter to all the brothers and sisters.

In this way, the epistles (or letters) started to be passed around all the believers. Churches also started making copies of the letters so each church could keep their own copy.

Each epistle was different, showing how the apostles used different parts of God's truth to teach, counsel and respond to various questions. And together, all these epistles were God's Word given by Him to equip and train believers to do "every good work".

2 Timothy 3:16–17

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

**8. God's Revelation is Fixed**

Later on, as the apostles and other witnesses to the life of Jesus began to die, the church knew it was important to carefully keep all the records they had. These were records of what happened when Jesus was on earth as well as records of what the apostles taught.

This was what Luke, a doctor and travelling companion of Paul, wrote.

Luke 1:1–4

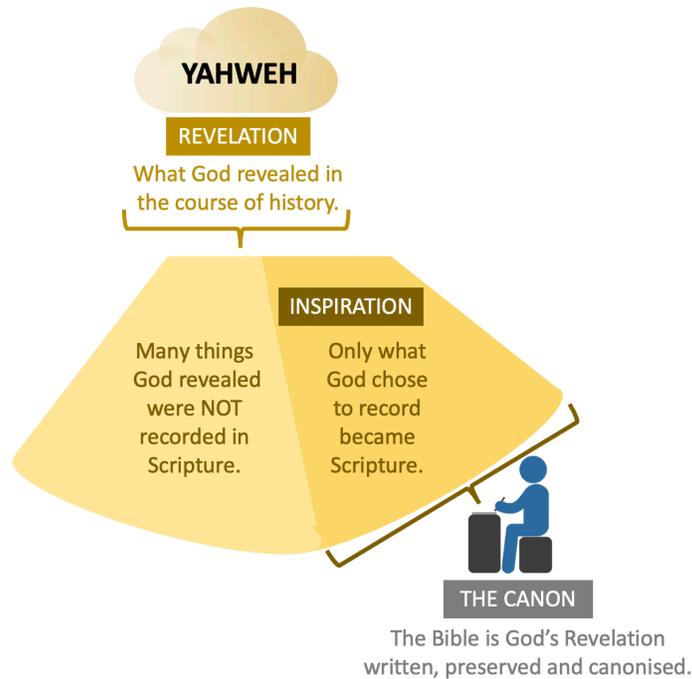
¹ Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. ² They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples.

³ Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, ⁴ so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.

Luke was one of those who made such a record. He was a very careful historian, so he too, interviewed the people who knew Jesus and then wrote a detailed account of his research.

This was what God did to make sure His words were recorded.

However, just as it was during the writing of the Old Testament canon, during the New Testament time, Yahweh revealed a lot of information but not everything was recorded as Scripture.



For example, we know that Paul wrote more letters to the Corinthians than the two that are included in the Bible. This is what he said.

1 Corinthians 5:9

When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin.

Although this letter is called 1 Corinthians, Paul mentioned that he wrote an earlier one to them. Where is that letter?

Also, in Colossians 4:16, Paul mentioned the letter he wrote to the church in Laodicea, but again, where is that letter?

In His wisdom, God the Holy Spirit guided the church to only collect certain books and letters together. This collection then is considered the inspired Word of God that forms the New Testament.

In fact, the New Testament is considered the “mind of Christ”.

1 Corinthians 2:10–16

¹⁰ But it was to us that God revealed these things by his Spirit. For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God's deep secrets. ¹¹ No one can know a person's thoughts except that person's own spirit, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit. ¹² And we have received God's Spirit (not the world's spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us.

¹³ When we tell you these things, we do not use words that come from human wisdom. Instead, we speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit's words to explain spiritual truths.

¹⁴ But people who aren't spiritual can't receive these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can't understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means. ¹⁵ Those who are spiritual can evaluate all things, but they themselves cannot be evaluated by others. ¹⁶ For,

"Who can know the LORD'S thoughts?
Who knows enough to teach him?"

But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ.

So, although the New Testament was written by the prophets and apostles, it is not considered the words of men. The Bible says that the message comes straight from the mind of Jesus!



During this time period, God led the church to complete and confirm or fix the canon of Scripture. Why? God knows that believers can only live in security if we have Scripture that remains unchanged. We need to be able to confidently rely on the Bible as our source of truth. This is why God's revelation to man was fixed.

After the writings of the apostles and prophets were completed, the next issue was for the church to understand that the New Testament was God's Word.



III. The church recognises the New Testament canon as the Word of God

Old Testament canon

From the beginning, the church had already accepted all the Old Testament books that the Jews recognised as Scripture.

Note: There were other Jewish books like 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit and others that the Jews didn't recognise as Scripture, so at this point, the church did not accept them either.

New Testament canon

While the New Testament books were being written, the apostles were already accepting each other's writings as God's Word. This is because they all knew who God's chosen apostles and prophets were. For example, Peter considered Paul's writings as Scripture:

2 Peter 3:15–16

¹⁵ And remember, our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him— ¹⁶ speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction.



Paul's Letters
= God's Word

Paul too, also treated the other New Testament writers' words as God's Word. For example, he quoted from both the Old and New Testaments and called both "Scripture".

<p>1 Timothy 5:18 <u>For the Scripture says</u>, "You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain." And in another place, "Those who work deserve their pay!"</p>	<p>Quoted from Deuteronomy 25:4.</p> <p>Quoted from Luke 10:7, written by Luke.</p>
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God had chosen His New Testament Scripture writers, and the Holy Spirit had inspired their writing. But once these apostles and prophets died, no one else was authorised to write Scripture.

The church then realised that their final authority was now the Word of God.

In fact, they understood that God's revelation was given to mankind once. And it was completed and meant for all time. This is what Jude, the half-brother of Jesus wrote:

Jude 3

Dear friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to his holy people.

With the canon fixed, God's written Word becomes the final authority for leading and guiding the church. Oral teaching, church traditions or other writings about God that are not part of Scripture do not have the same authority as God's Word. Even Paul said that as an apostle, he could not teach anything different from what had already been written down.

Galatians 1:6–9

⁶ I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News ⁷ but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ.

⁸ Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. ⁹ I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed.

No one, human or spirit being, is allowed to teach anything other than what is recorded in God's Word. No other teaching, tradition, writing or thinking has the same authority as Scripture.

The final important thing that happened in this first time period had to do with spiritual gifts.

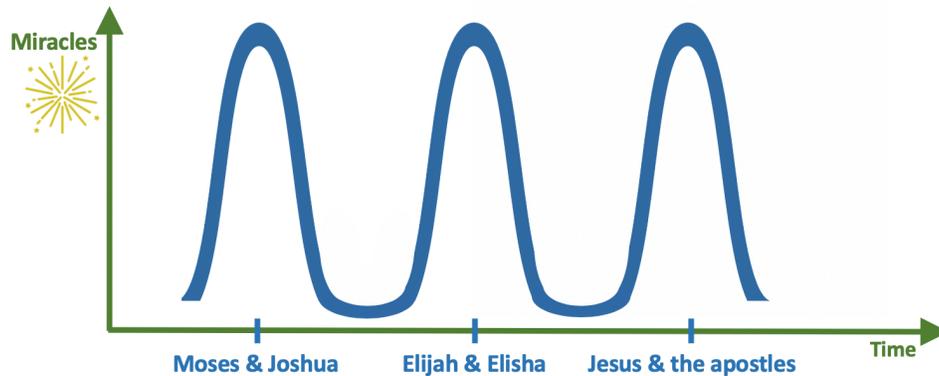




IV. Certain spiritual gifts become less important

When the Holy Spirit started the church, He gave God’s chosen apostles and prophets miraculous gifts: prophecy, miracle healings, and the ability to speak in foreign languages. These “sign gifts” were to show that the apostles had authority to represent God (2 Corinthians 12:12).

In fact, these “sign gifts” were what God had always given to His chosen prophets. Looking at Bible history, we see only three periods with a high number of miraculous signs and wonders. These were the exact times when God was showing people who His chosen prophets were.

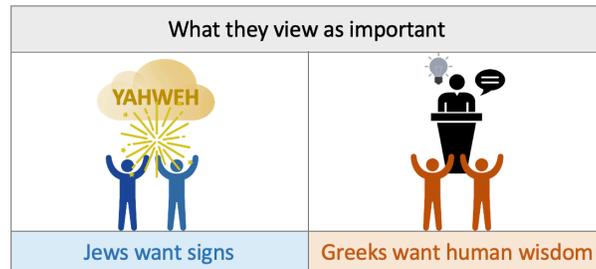


God’s chosen representatives	Moses & Joshua 1441–1390 BC	Elijah & Elisha 870–785 BC	Jesus & the apostles AD 25–95
Event	God forms the nation of Israel Exodus 19:8, 33:13; Deuteronomy 4:6–8	Decline and Fall of Israel due to unbelief and disobedience 1 Kings 17	Separation of the church from Israel The book of Acts
The miracles proved that these people were speaking for God	Moses Exodus 4:1–9, 29–31 Joshua Joshua 3:7	Elijah 1 Kings 17:1, 18:36 Elisha 2 Kings 5:8	Jesus Mark 2:7; John 14:11, 20:30–31 Apostles 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4
God’s message was for:	Pharaoh Exodus 7:17, 8:19 Israel Exodus 6:6–7, 14:31	Israel 1 Kings 17:24, 18:36	Israel John 10:37–38; Acts 3:1–9 The Church Acts 10:44–48, 15:8–9
These groups learnt about God through the miracles	Israel Exodus 14:13–14 Egypt Exodus 11:7, 14:4 Nations Exodus 9:16; Joshua 2:9–11	Prophets of Baal and People of Israel 1 Kings 18:38 Nations 2 Kings 5:15	Israel Matthew 8:26–27 The Church Acts 5:1–11; 1 Corinthians 15:3–6

But why did God choose to use miracles to prove who His representatives were? It is because the Jews always want signs from God. This is what Paul said about the difference between Jews and Greeks and what they see as important.

1 Corinthians 1:22

It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom.



However, once people accepted the authority of the prophets and God had finished giving His new revelation, the miracles decreased. This is what happened in the New Testament:

1. The healings, prophecies and speaking in foreign languages decreased as more and more Scripture was recorded (this was discussed in Lesson 43).
2. There were miraculous prison breaks at the start of the church. For example:
 - the apostles in Acts 5:17–21
 - Peter in Acts 12:1–18
 - Paul and Silas in Acts 16:25–26.



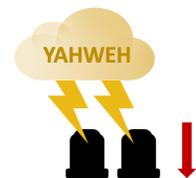
But these miracles soon stopped. In fact, all the apostles, perhaps except for John, died as prisoners of Rome.



3. Even the sudden death judgments gradually stopped. For instance, at the beginning of the church we see that:
 - Ananias and Sapphira died suddenly (Acts 5:1–11)
 - Herod Agrippa died suddenly (Acts 12:20–23).

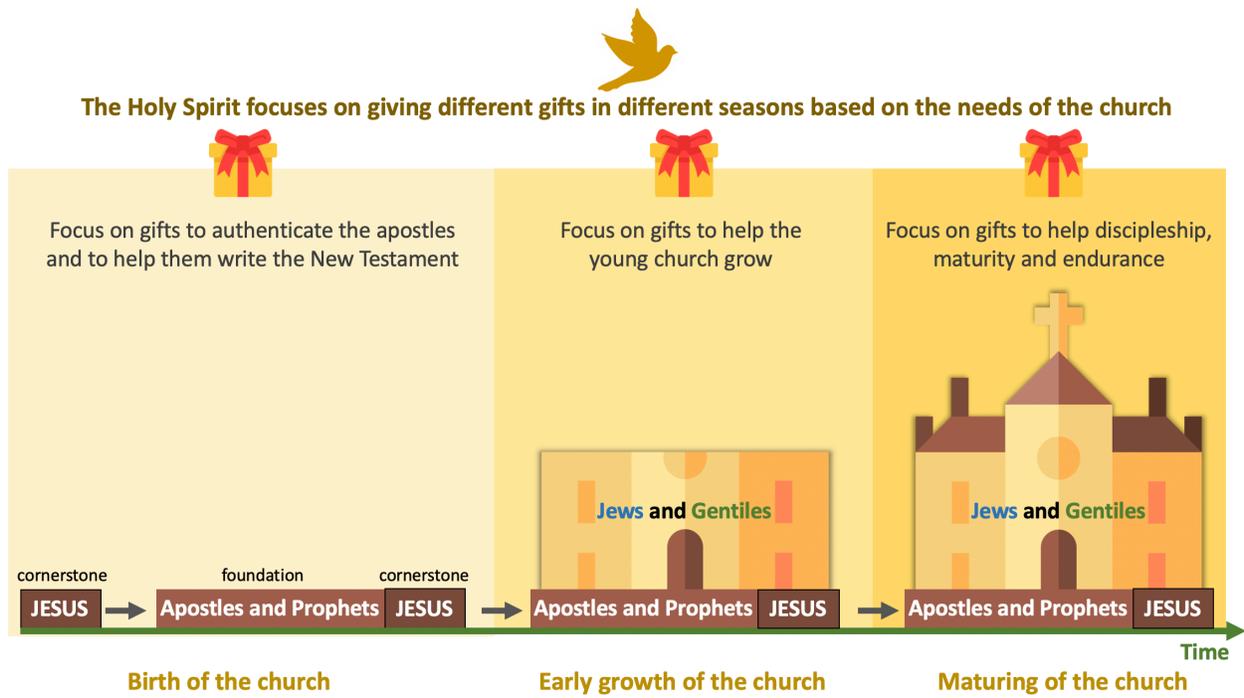
But once the church was established, we see that those who were enemies of the church were no longer killed immediately. For example:

- Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:19–20 and 2 Timothy 4:14–15
- Diotrefes in 3 John 1:9–10.

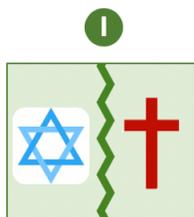


Paul taught the church that the reason why the Holy Spirit gave spiritual gifts to believers was to build the church (Ephesians 4:11–16).

So once the apostles had finished writing the New Testament and died, the church came to understand that these “sign gifts” were no longer to be expected because God had completed His revelation to mankind.



In summary, these are the four important things that happened during the first period of the Times of the Apostles.



The church and Judaism no longer share the same beliefs.



The apostles write the New Testament.



The church recognises the canon as God’s Word.



Certain spiritual gifts become less important.



2nd Period

The Early Church Leaders (AD 100 – 600)

As more people believed in Jesus, churches grew throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Asia Minor and Europe.



All believers were joined together by a shared faith in Jesus as the Saviour and Creator-God of the world and they:

- followed a lifestyle of high morals based on Jesus' teachings
- kept Jesus' instructions about baptism and communion
- treated the Bible as their authority
- taught each other God's Word.

Lived a moral lifestyle	Obedied Jesus' instructions	Treated Bible as the authority	Taught God's Word

Most importantly though, from this period onwards, the Holy Spirit started guiding the church to more clearly understand God's truth in Scriptures.

How did He do this? He used heresy (a heresy is a lie about God's truth).



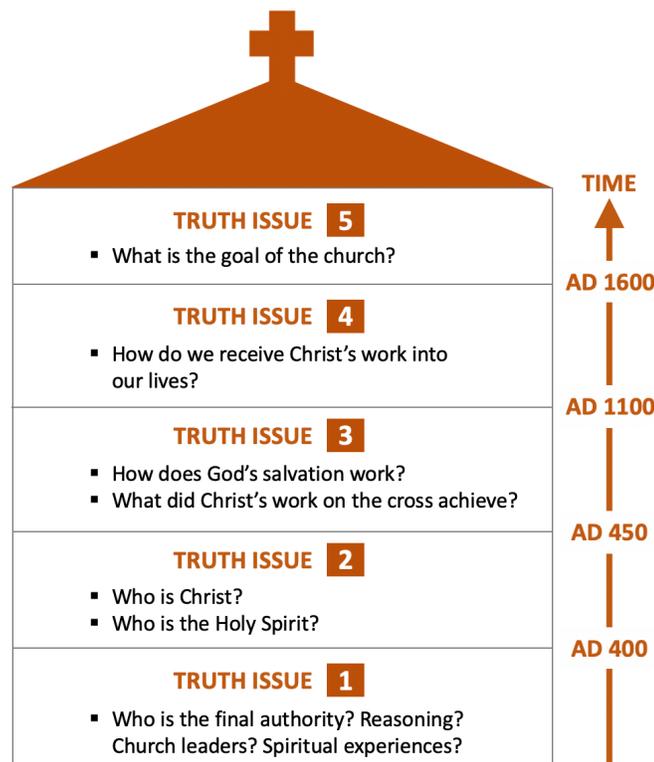
When people started saying things about God and the Bible that were false, believers had to reaffirm the truth and refute the false teachings. They had to study Scripture carefully to distinguish between right and wrong ideas about God.

Believers would gather to officially discuss these heresies. Some of these formal discussions (or councils) took many years. But after the discussions, the church would announce and teach the truth clearly to all believers.

So, ironically, the Holy Spirit used heresies to force the church to study its Bible well and work hard at clearly communicating God's truth!

And the way the Holy Spirit did this was very organised and meaningful.

Here is a summary of the critical issues that the church clarified over the course of its history.



It was during this time that the church took God's truth from different parts of the Bible and gathered them under topics called doctrines.

Believers did this so that they would be better able to understand what the whole Bible taught about these topics. Here are some examples:

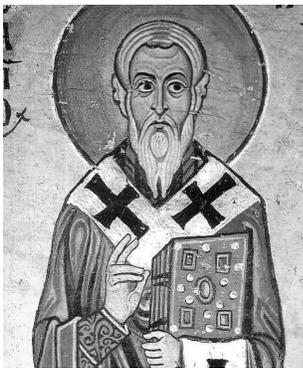
- the doctrine of God
- the doctrine of sin
- the doctrine of salvation, etc.

The Holy Spirit forced the church to settle these major doctrines or teachings as it dealt with the different heresies it faced.

The early church leaders played a very important part in this work. These leaders were called "episkopos" and "presbyteros" in the New Testament, which are translated as overseers, elders, or bishops. These names mean the same: they are all leaders of the church. (See for example: Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1–2; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1.)

Here are a few of the early church leaders who helped clarify believers' understanding of God's Word. They came from different parts of the world but they all studied their Bible to slowly come to a clear understanding of God's truth.

(Note: Their key contributions are in red.)



Ignatius of Antioch (about AD 35–107)

- Disciple of apostle John.
- First to use the word "catholic" for the church, which means "universal".
- Died a martyr's death.
- **Defended Christianity against Docetism. (A heresy that Jesus was not really human.)**



Polycarp of Smyrna (about AD 69–155)

- Disciple of apostle John.
- Died a martyr's death at age 86.
- **Fought against false teachings of the Gnostics and Marcion (we will discuss this below).**



Justin Martyr (about AD 100–165)

- Appealed to the emperor for justice and freedom for Christians.
- Died a martyr's death (that is why he is called "martyr").
- Taught that the Bible is better than all other areas of knowledge, including philosophy.
- Taught Christians that they did not need to reject whatever was good in the culture they lived in.



Irenaeus (about AD 130–200)

- Disciple of Polycarp.
- Sent to Gaul (France) as a missionary and became Bishop of Lyons around AD 178.
- Wrote a lot but he is most famous for his book "Against Heresies" where he defended the truth against heresies like Gnosticism.



Tertullian (about AD 160–215)

- Known as the father of Latin theology.
- Insisted that the Bible belongs to the church and that only the church has the right to explain it.
- Clarified the explanation of the Trinity to help Christians understand God's nature.
- Wrote one of the best defences of Christianity of his time, called, "The Apology" (which means "The Defence").



Origen (about AD 185–254)

- Brilliant Bible teacher from Alexandria, North Africa.
- Most prolific (wrote the most) writer in the early church.
- Insisted that the Bible is God's Word and believers must teach the whole Bible.
- First to put together the doctrines in a systematic way.
- Influenced by philosophy and he started to interpret the Bible allegorically (he said that parts of the Bible are just stories and did not actually happen in real life). This led to problems later in the history of the church.

What are the important Bible truths that the church leaders worked out during this time period?

TRUTH ISSUE 1

- Who is the final authority? Reasoning? Church leaders? Spiritual experiences?

How did the church figure out the right answer to this question?

It started with the heresy of a wealthy shipowner named Marcion. He was the son of the Bishop of Sinope, a town near the Black Sea.

Around AD 140, Marcion went to Rome. People got to know him because he donated a lot of money to the churches.

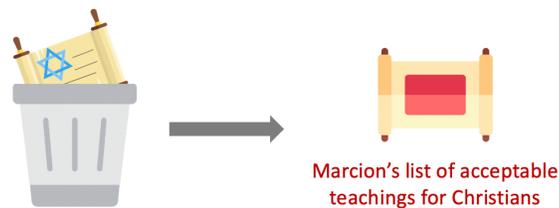


Marcion was an excellent speaker, but he didn't like the God of the Old Testament.

- He thought the God of the Jews was an evil god who created a world full of evil and suffering.
- He thought since Jesus was good and loving, Jesus could not be the Yahweh of the Old Testament.

So he told people to throw out the Old Testament and any other writings that had Jewish views.

He then compiled his own list of acceptable writings for Christians. His teachings were heresies, that is, false teachings! Believers were confused!



- So the Bishop of Rome threw Marcion out of the church and the churches returned the money that Marcion had donated.
- But more importantly, the churches got together to confirm what was Scripture.

Because of Marcion, the church began to compile a list of writings that were considered inspired by God.

It is important to know that the church did not create the canon but it officially recognised the books that were inspired by God and were already in use by churches.

- **Old Testament:** At this point in time, the Hebrew Scriptures, the same ones used by the Jews, were already accepted by the church.
- **New Testament:** The New Testament writings were completed by AD 95 after the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation. The churches had already been sharing the manuscripts and letters they had from the apostles and their friends. However, the churches had not yet come together to confirm what should be included in the final New Testament canon.



So how did they know which writings should be included in the New Testament canon?

They used a series of questions. The list of writings that passed the test became known as the canon.

Examples of questions used:

1. Did an apostle or someone who had close contact with an apostle write it?
2. Did believers read and use it, especially in worship?
3. Did the writing have authority in itself and the power to change lives?

This is how the Holy Spirit helped believers recognise what was part of the canon.

By AD 250, the New Testament we are familiar with was widely recognised by the church and official recognition by the church as a whole came in AD 397.

When the early Church accepted the New Testament

AD 100	AD 200	AD 250	AD 400
<p>The New Testament was completed but had not yet been collected together.</p> <p>Churches taught with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The four Gospels • Paul's letters and • other letters and oral teachings. 	<p>An important church, the church in Rome, used a lot of the New Testament.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Gospels • Acts • Romans • 1 & 2 Corinthians • Galatians • Ephesians • Philippians • Colossians • 1 & 2 Thessalonians • 1 & 2 Timothy • Titus • Philemon • James • 1, 2 & 3 John • Revelation 	<p>Origen mentioned the list of New Testament books.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Gospels • Acts • Romans • 1 & 2 Corinthians • Galatians • Ephesians • Philippians • Colossians • 1 & 2 Thessalonians • 1 & 2 Timothy • Titus • Philemon • Hebrews • James • 1 & 2 Peter • 1, 2 & 3 John • Jude • Revelation 	<p>At the formal meeting of church leaders (Council of Carthage in AD 397), the New Testament was fixed for all the churches of the western Roman Empire.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Gospels • Acts • Romans • 1 & 2 Corinthians • Galatians • Ephesians • Philippians • Colossians • 1 & 2 Thessalonians • 1 & 2 Timothy • Titus • Philemon • Hebrews • James • 1 & 2 Peter • 1, 2 & 3 John • Jude • Revelation • Apocrypha*

* **Note on the Apocrypha:** At the Council of Carthage, the church leaders also added extra Jewish books to the Bible. These writings were written approximately 300–100 BC and the authors are mostly unknown. Since the beginning of the church till that point in time, the church had not accepted these books as Scripture (because the Jews also did not accept them as Scripture) but at this council, they included them as part of the Bible.

Till today, the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches have these extra books in their Bibles.

During the Reformation in the 1500s (which we will discuss later), the Protestants corrected this mistake that the church had made and got rid of these extra books. These books are now known as the Apocrypha (meaning “secret” or “non-canonical”).

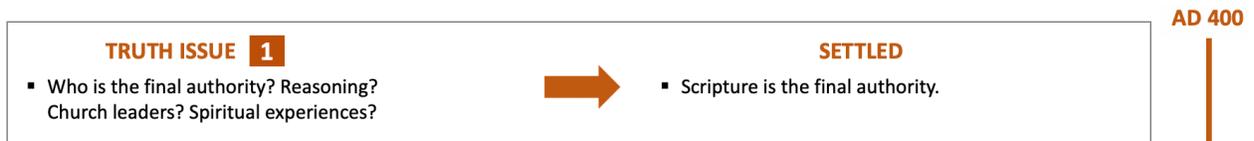
Because of what the Protestants did, the Roman Catholic Church made their stand and again affirmed these extra books at the Council of Trent in 1546.

When the apostles were alive, their oral teaching was treated as equal to God’s authority because they were God’s representatives. That was the right thing to do.

But once they all died, the church realised that the oral authority was gone. There were no more apostles and all they had left were the writings of the apostles.

So the church came to the conclusion that the final authority on truth was God’s Word. It could not be mankind’s reasoning, feelings or man’s word.

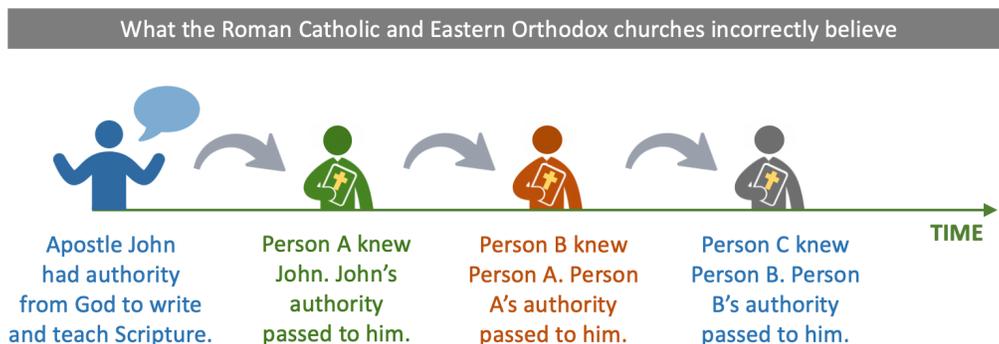
This was how this first big truth issue was settled: Scripture is the final authority on God’s truth.



However, some parts of the church, like those that later became known as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, did not agree.

They insisted that when the apostles died, their oral authority was handed over to other people in church leadership.

For example, church leaders who knew the apostle John also had the authority. And later, people who knew the leaders who knew the apostle John were given this authority. This is how they believe that the authority is handed down from generation to generation.



This is why, till this day, many people in these churches treat the words of their leaders as having the same authority as the Word of God. However, this is wrong thinking. God closed the canon and did not give others the permission to add to His Word.

During this second period of the early church leaders, another doctrinal issue was also settled.

The church was clear about who Yahweh is. But what did the church understand about who God the Son and who God the Holy Spirit is?

TRUTH ISSUE 2

- Who is Christ?
- Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit pushed the church to clarify their understanding about God by throwing more heresies at them. For example:

Heresies	What the people who believed these heresies taught
<p>Gnosticism From the Greek word for “having knowledge”.</p>	<p>They claimed that the Supreme Being did not create the physical world because all things physical are evil and only spiritual things are good. (This thinking started in Greek philosophy.)</p> <p>They also believed people needed secret knowledge in order to be saved.</p>
<p>Ebionism From the Hebrew word for “poor”.</p>	<p>They insisted that Jesus was not God but only a man.</p>
<p>Docetism From the Greek word for “illusion” or “phantom”.</p>	<p>They said that Jesus was not really human. His body was an illusion. He only appeared to be human.</p>

So the church worked hard to study the Bible and respond to these heresies.

To help believers understand God’s truth accurately, the church then wrote a “confession of faith” for believers to learn.

The confession of faith contains truths that all Christians must believe and remember.

This early confession of faith became known as the Old Roman Creed (because it was used by the church in Rome). Later on, it was expanded and became known as the Apostles’ Creed.

The following table highlights how the statements of the creed on the left column are a response to heresies on the right column.



The Old Roman Creed Refutes Heresies and False Teachings



The Old Roman Creed	Heresies it was fighting against
<p><i>I believe in God the Father Almighty;</i></p> <p><i>And in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord;</i></p> <p><i>who was born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary</i></p> <p><i>Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried, on the third day rose from the dead, ascended into heaven,</i></p> <p><i>sits at the right hand of the Father, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead;</i></p> <p><i>And in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh.</i></p>	<p>Gnosticism: The Supreme Being did not create the physical world, which is evil.</p> <p>Ebionism: Jesus was only a man.</p> <p>Gnosticism: Jesus could not be born of a human being because he was a spirit.</p> <p>Marcionism: Jesus was not born of Mary but he just appeared.</p> <p>Docetism: Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and only seemed to physically die but he was really a pure spirit who cannot die.</p> <p>Gnosticism: Man needs special knowledge to be saved from eternal death.</p> <p>Marcionism: Jesus will not judge the world because he is all-loving.</p> <p>Gnosticism: The spirit is saved, not the flesh which is evil and should be destroyed.</p>

In working through the Bible and fighting these heresies, the church also came to a clearer understanding of the Trinity and who God the Son and who God the Spirit are.



Believers today might expect that these early heresies had already been dealt with and settled. Unfortunately, many are still present today!



Recycled
heresies
today

For example, there are those within the modern church who believe and teach that Jesus will not judge the world because He is all-loving. This is an example of “recycling” the heresies of Marcionism!

This is very sad. If modern-day churchgoers would spend some time learning church history, they might see that their own false thinking had been judged by the early church as being heresies. Perhaps then they would change their wrong thinking instead of spreading it to others!

However, the Bible already warned us in the book of Acts that this would happen, that there would always be false teaching and heresies even after we think it’s been “settled”.

Acts 15: First church council in Jerusalem.

Problem: Some Jews were teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised and must follow Mosaic Law to be justified.

Settled (or rather, they thought it was settled): Peter and the elders with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, agreed that Gentiles did not have to follow Mosaic Law to be justified. They also gave some instructions on how Jews and Gentiles can enjoy fellowship together peacefully.



Acts 21: Jews again get angry about circumcision and the Mosaic Law issue.

Result: This led to an angry mob of Jews which led to Paul being arrested and shipped off to Rome!



Though the issue of Gentiles following Mosaic Law was settled in Acts 15, it came up again in Acts 21! In fact, it appears that Paul was fed up by it. This is what he wrote to Titus.

Titus 3:9

Do not get involved in foolish discussions about spiritual pedigrees or in quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. These things are useless and a waste of time.

Nevertheless, through the centuries, this issue has popped up again and again!

Just as with the Old Testament Israelites, believers need centuries to learn and accept God’s truth!

During the early years of Christianity, the number of churches grew across the Roman Empire. After Emperor Constantine became a believer in AD 312 (according to his own words), he helped to settle serious heresies by calling for councils, or church meetings. These councils often met for several sessions over a number of years.



At times, the emperor would pay the expenses for these councils so church leaders from across the empire could gather.

Hundreds of pastors and leaders would debate and sometimes argue for the sake of affirming the truth and refuting heresies.



Through these councils, the Holy Spirit was a patient teacher, helping the church to clarify the truth. Here are some examples of the councils.

Church Councils Agree on Doctrine and Truth				
Issue	Is Christ God?	Is the Holy Spirit God?	Is Christ One Person?	Is Christ both Human and God?
	Council of Nicaea	Council of Constantinople	Council of Ephesus	Council of Chalcedon
	325	381	431	451
Decisions Reached	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus is God • Arianism is heresy. It teaches that Jesus is not God but is the highest of all created beings. • Developed the Nicene Creed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holy Spirit is God • Nicene Creed is updated to say that the Holy Spirit is God. • Clarified the doctrine of the Trinity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus is one person, both God and man • Nestorianism is heresy. It teaches that Jesus the man is joined with God the Son, so they are two persons united in one body. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus is fully human and fully God, two natures in one body without mixing. • Monophysitism is heresy. It teaches that Jesus' human nature was absorbed into his God nature.



3rd Period

The Middle Ages till the Reformation (AD 600 – 1600)

The next issue the Holy Spirit dealt with was in this time period.

TRUTH ISSUE 3

- How does God's salvation work?
- What did Christ's work on the cross achieve?

It was about the church’s understanding of what happened at the cross. Two different understandings developed during this time. The church debated this for many years before it came to the right understanding of Jesus’ work on the cross.

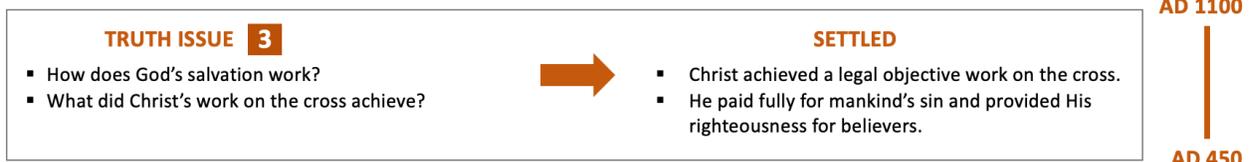


Objective View: Legal or Judicial Effect of the Cross	Subjective View: Emotional or Personal Effect of the Cross
<p>This is a legal understanding of Jesus’ work.</p> <p>The Creator-God, in His heavenly courtroom, can declare mankind righteous because Jesus came as the perfect and sinless substitute to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pay for man’s eternal death penalty and to • impute (deposit) His perfect righteousness to the lives of those who trust God. 	<p>Jesus’ work affects the human heart.</p> <p>When people think of the great sacrifice that Jesus did on the cross on our behalf, it causes them to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feel grateful towards God and then • they want to live well for God.
<p style="text-align: center;">CORRECT</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">INCORRECT</p>



The church finally rejected the subjective view of the cross.

While believers may experience deep feelings because of the cross, this emotional idea ignores the objective, legal courtroom work of Christ. It reduces Jesus’ death and resurrection to a personal “spiritual experience in the heart of the believer”.



However, while the church was able to sort out some of these important problems, the church did not always get everything right.

A problem that started in the Middle Ages

Jesus told believers that they should practise baptism and communion as simple reminders of His work on the cross.

But by the Middle Ages, the church changed the meaning of baptism and communion! For example:



BAPTISM

Early Church taught:	Church in Middle Ages taught:	
 Faith in Jesus →  Baptism is a public confession of faith	 Faith does not matter	 Act of baptism removes sin

Because of this incorrect understanding, the church in the Middle Ages started baptising babies, so that they could receive God's forgiveness. To the church, faith was not important. In fact, the Word of God became less important.

COMMUNION

Early Church taught:	Church in Middle Ages taught:	
 Bread and wine represents body and blood of Jesus	 Bread actually becomes body of Jesus	 Wine actually becomes blood of Jesus

The church in the Middle Ages believed that every time believers took communion, Christ was repeating His sacrifice by dying on the cross again. This is totally opposite of what the Bible teaches!

Hebrews 10:12

But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand.

The church changed baptism and communion into "sacraments" (religious ceremonies) where they believed that doing these acts **actually** pours God's grace into believers.

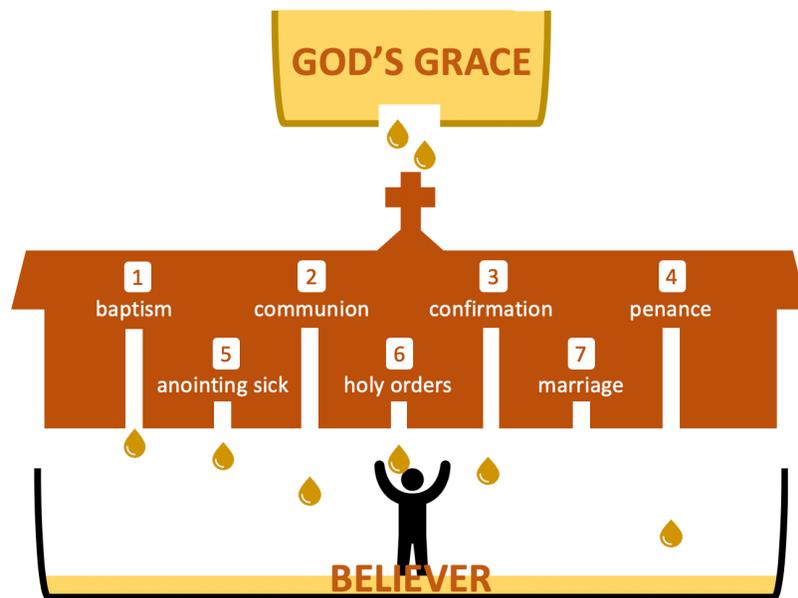
The church had made a major mistake in its doctrine! This is not what the Bible teaches!

And even though the church started with baptism and communion, it went on to add another five sacraments for a total of seven:

1. Baptism
2. Communion
3. Confirmation (formal acceptance into the church)

4. Penance (confessing one's sins to a priest)
5. Anointing the sick (the priest anoints the sick or dying with oil which also provides forgiveness of sins)
6. Holy orders (Becoming a priest)
7. Marriage

The church taught that these church sacraments provided mankind with God's grace. This meant that the church was now the mediator (middleman) between God and man, instead of Jesus!



WHAT THE CHURCH INCORRECTLY TAUGHT

This meant that everyone, both kings and common people, had to go through the church for justification and the forgiveness of sins. This false teaching made the church very powerful because everyone now needed the church. All of life was under the control of the church!

The Reformation (1500s to 1600s)

This problem got worse over time because believers struggled to understand how to be saved. Did the church's sacraments save people? Or was it Christ? Is the cross all that people needed?

In other words, how do people become justified?

How can a person be justified?



TRUTH ISSUE 4

- How do we receive Christ’s work into our lives?

This big problem with the church was the issue that started what became known as the Reformation (reform means to change).

Led by the Holy Spirit, believers like John Calvin, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli studied Scripture carefully and concluded that God’s salvation was applied to people by faith in Jesus Christ alone and nothing else.



John Calvin



Martin Luther



Ulrich Zwingli

These men fought the church on this issue and as a result, the western church split.



- The believers who were trying to reform the church became known as Protestants (from the word “protest”). This is their firm belief regarding justification.

<p style="text-align: center;">TRUTH ISSUE 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do we receive Christ’s work into our lives? 		<p style="text-align: center;">SETTLED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Christ’s work is accepted by faith alone. ▪ Man’s work is not involved.
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AD 1600

AD 1100

- Those who stuck to the medieval theology then continued on as the Roman Catholic church.

Another important thing that happened during the Reformation was that reformers realised ordinary believers needed the Bible in their own languages so that they could learn how to receive Christ’s work into their lives and how to walk by faith. So the reformers encouraged translating the Bible and also teaching people how to read. The printing press was invented around this time, making translated Scripture even more accessible and available. It became easier for believers to read and study God’s Word for themselves. It was at this point that many Christians could see for themselves the errors they had previously been taught.



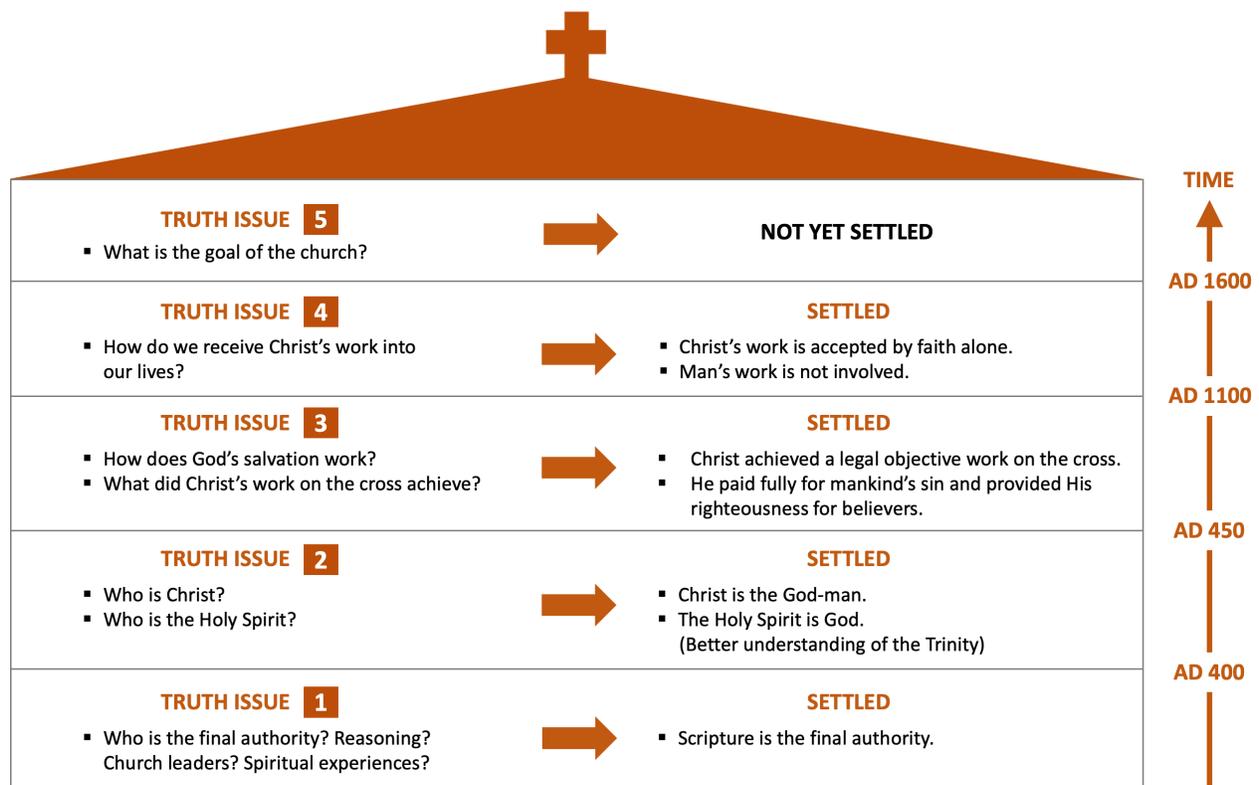
4th Period

Reformation till Modern Day (AD 1600 – present)

In the first 2000 years of church history, the first four major doctrinal areas had been settled. Although questions in these areas do come up again every now and then, overall, the church knows what is truth and what is error.

At the time of the reformers, their main focus was the question of how to be justified.

However, they didn't have the time nor energy to settle other questions.



So, today, there still remains one big question that has not been settled through any council: what is the goal of the church?

Thankfully, God has not left us guessing. He gave us apocalyptic writing that is exactly about the purpose and destiny of the church. We will study this in the upcoming lessons.

Does each generation of believers need to reinterpret Scripture so that it makes sense for them?

The Bible is God's truth for all believers in all generations. However, many believers feel that the world we live in today is nothing like the world in Bible times.

So some churchgoers feel that they need to adjust certain Scriptures to make it more meaningful for their generation.

Why do they feel that they can do this?

Perhaps it is because they see that some apostles do take Old Testament Scriptures and seem to give these passages new meaning in order to teach New Testament believers some truths about God.

Example 1

<p>Writer: Prophet Isaiah</p> <p>Writing to: Israel</p> <p>Topic: When God would restore the Kingdom by sending the Messiah</p>	<p>Writer: Apostle Paul</p> <p>Writing to: Church in Corinth</p> <p>Topic: Do not ignore God's gift of salvation</p>
<p>Isaiah 49:8a This is what the LORD says:</p> <p>“At just the right time, I will respond to you. On the day of salvation I will help you. I will protect you and give you to the people as my covenant with them.</p>	<p>2 Corinthians 6:1–2 ¹ As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. ² For God says,</p> <p>“At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.”</p> <p>Indeed, the “right time” is now. Today is the day of salvation.</p>

Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, explaining that God the Father graciously gives believers the gift of salvation in the same way that He will one day graciously answer or respond to the Messiah's request (in Isaiah 49) to save Israel and bring in the Kingdom.

In saving Israel, the Father and the Messiah do a very significant work. In saving church-age people, the Father and the Son also do a very significant work. Paul was not taking promises about Israel and applying them to the church. He was showing the pattern of how salvation is always a great work involving the Father and the Son (the Messiah).

Example 2

Writer: King David
 Writing to: Yahweh (a song)
 Topic: Yahweh receiving gifts of plunder (things won in a war) from His defeated enemies

Psalm 68:18

When you ascended to the heights,
 you led a crowd of captives.
 You received gifts from the people,
 even from those who rebelled against you.
 Now the LORD God will live among us
 there.

Writer: Apostle Paul
 Writing to: Church in Ephesus
 Topic: Paul changed one word in the quote to say that Jesus frees people from Satan and the Holy Spirit will give these believers spiritual gifts

Ephesians 4:7–8

⁷ However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.
⁸ That is why the Scriptures say,
 “When he ascended to the heights,
 he led a crowd of captives
 and gave gifts to his people.”

When King David wrote Psalm 68, he pictured Yahweh as a victorious warrior. The apostle Paul took that same victorious warfare image and applied it to Jesus, God the Son. While David referred to nations (Israel and Egypt), Paul referred to the spiritual realm.

When some churchgoers notice these examples of how Paul and even Peter (Acts 2:17–18) made use of Old Testament passages to address New Testament believers, they think they can do the same and adjust the meanings of Old Testament passages.

They believe that they are also allowed to create new spiritual meanings for key phrases and concepts like:

- Kingdom of God
- The covenants of Israel (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Land, Davidic, New)
- Nation of Israel
- The throne of David
- And more.

But is this really the right way to treat God’s Word? No.

- We cannot change the words of God.
- And we cannot change the original meaning of the text.

If we do, then we become the authority over God's Word. This is not correct. Rather, God's Word has authority over us.



Then how is it that Paul, Peter and the other apostles seem to have changed the original meaning of the text? This is because:

- God chose and authorised the apostles to write the New Testament.
- God the Holy Spirit supernaturally wrote the Old Testament and He guided the apostles in using that Scripture to show the pattern of how God works. The way that God worked in the Old Testament is reflected in the way He works in the church age. When the apostles quoted Old Testament passages, they were comparing what God had done in the past or had promised to do in the future, with what He was now doing with New Testament believers.



However, since the close of the New Testament canon, there are no more Holy Spirit-approved Scripture writers. This means that we are not free to do what the apostles did. In addition, we cannot reinterpret or change the meaning of God's Word. We are not authorised prophets of God. No one today has the apostles' authority.

Therefore, we need to do our best with the help of the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture in its plain, historical meaning. In addition, when we recognise that much of the Old Testament is a legal and historical record of the actions, words and behaviours of two parties (Yahweh and Israel) tied together in a series of contracts, then the only way to read this historical record is with a literal understanding and interpretation.

God intends to communicate a specific message with His eternal Word. And He will help us understand when we sincerely and humbly seek Him.

Psalm 119:130

The teaching of your word gives light,
so even the simple can understand.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions as a group or use them for personal reflection.

1. Did you notice how the church's journey of understanding Scripture is similar to the individual believer's faith journey? When you see how long and hard the church had to work to understand God's truth, how does that help your own faith journey?
2. Over the church's 2000-year history, it has encountered many errors and heresies. How do we ensure we do not fall into heresy? How do we know that what we believe is true and accurate to God's Word?
3. Reflection exercise: Think back on who has taught you about God and the Bible—the teachers, pastors, small group leaders and authors who have helped you. Take time to learn about their background and history. Who or what were their influences? Identify the theology of their church, denomination, Bible school and system of theology. Knowing their backgrounds more deeply helps you understand their teachings in context. Just as church history is impacted by men and women with different understanding of Scripture, so too our personal understanding is shaped in the same way.



Pre-reading for next lesson: Deuteronomy 4:25–31; Daniel 9:20–27; Zechariah 14:1–14; Matthew 23:37–24:51. (We have studied these passages before but now we want to study them in relation to the Tribulation.)

Endnotes

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Page 32: The middle image “Martin Luther” by Lucas Cranach the Elder. 1529. Public domain work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Martin_Luther_by_Cranach-restoration.jpg (Accessed 28 Aug 2020.)

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