

LESSON 2 The History of the Church

In the first lesson, we saw the church from the viewpoint of eternity. God planned the church, and at the right time He revealed His plan. In spite of problems we might have now, God is working in His church. One day, God will finish His plans for the church. Jesus will come to earth again and will take the church to be with Him in heaven.

Now, we will look at the church from the viewpoint of the earth. When Jesus said, “I will build my church,” He implied establishing the church here on the earth. In this lesson we will take a brief look at what happened from Pentecost to the present.

We can learn much from history. It is exciting to see how the church grew. But, as we will see, there were problems along the way, and these problems teach us many lessons.

The Plan

- A. The Birth of the Church
- B. The Church Is Damaged
- C. The Church Reformed
- D. The Revived Church

The Goals

1. Describe what happened on the Day of Pentecost and the events that followed.
2. Explain why problems developed in the church.
3. List three biblical teachings that Martin Luther restored.
4. Explain why revival was needed.

A. THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Goal 1. Describe what happened on the Day of Pentecost and the events that followed.

Pentecost was an important Jewish holiday that was celebrated at harvest time. Many people traveled great distances to be in Jerusalem. On the first Pentecost after Jesus rose from the dead, His followers gathered in Jerusalem, and something special happened! Read Acts 2:1–5 for a record of what occurred at that time:

Application

1 After reading Acts 2:1–5, answer the following questions:

a) When did this take place?

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b) What two strange things happened in the room?

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c) What happened to the disciples?

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2 What was the reaction of the crowd (Acts 2:13)?

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3 How did Peter explain to the crowd on the Day of Pentecost who the Messiah was (Acts 2:36)?

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4 Circle the letters in front of the statements below that tell what the early believers did (Acts 2:42).

- a)** They learned from the apostles.
- b)** They prayed together.
- c)** They had fellowship.
- d)** They argued with each other.
- e)** They ate together.



The church had a wonderful beginning. There were many new converts (Acts 2:41), and the church grew daily (v. 47). But very soon trouble started. God’s enemies fought His church. The book of Acts records some of the suffering (4:23; 5:17–18).

People told lies about the believers, and the Roman government did not like the Christian groups. The Christians were accused of being bad citizens, and many of them suffered, were tortured, and killed. But truth cannot be killed.

The believers were forced to leave their homes; they went to Parthia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Libya, and even to the capital city, Rome. Everywhere they went, they told of what God had done. Thus, new groups of believers were started in many places.

Application

5 In spite of the trouble, what happened to the church?

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The Church is Made Legal

Much of the book of Acts tells us how the message spread. It describes the work of Paul and Peter. Many of the books of the New Testament are letters that Paul wrote to the new churches. There were so many Christians in the Roman Empire that even some of the emperors were influenced by the Christians. For instance, Emperor Constantine (some 300 years after the birth of Christ) made Christianity legal. Many people joined the church because everyone else was joining. Some did not even know God. They joined the church as people would join a club, without really becoming Christians. Of course this caused some confusion, because the true church is made up of those who accept Christ.

In spite of confusion, there was at all times a true church, made up of faithful Christians. And it grew rapidly. With this growth came the need to organize the church so the people could work well together. The widows needed help, so deacons were chosen (Acts 6:1–4). The church had other needs too. It needed to be protected from evil men, and from men who did not teach the truth. The bigger churches needed to help the smaller ones. They needed to be better organized to work together in unity.

Application

- 6** Circle the letter in front of the answer that best completes this sentence. The church needed to be organized _____
- a)** because the emperor became a Christian.
 - b)** so it could better provide help, protection, and unity.
 - c)** to make it legal.
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B. THE CHURCH IS DAMAGED

Goal 2. Explain why problems developed in the church.

As time went on, the Christian emperors (rulers) tried to control the church, and the church became involved in politics. Church

leaders, called bishops, fought to have power in the big cities. Some people in the church had forgotten its purpose for being.

About 500 years after the birth of Christ, Rome itself was destroyed. By A.D. 1000, Christians in the East had nothing to do with Christians in the West. Some Christians withdrew to get away from sin, which was found both outside and inside the church. They separated themselves from the world and from less spiritual Christians. They entered special communities called *monasteries*. Monasteries usually had high walls around them to keep the world outside.

Was it good for Christians to live in a monastery? This question is hard to answer. There were some good things that came from monasteries, and some bad. Sometimes monasteries were centers of learning. Sometimes the people from them were the first to take the Christian teaching to a new area. They helped to bring the gospel to Europe about A.D. 500, to England about A.D. 700, and to Scandinavia about A.D. 1000.

But there were also problems. Monastery walls separated people inside from people in need outside. They could not help the world this way. The men and women inside were often more concerned about their own souls than those of others. Monasteries sometimes became places of sin, for walls could not keep out sin.

Application

- 7** Circle the reason that best explains why the church began to have problems.
- a)** It got too big.
 - b)** People quit going to church.
 - c)** The church forgot that it was supposed to minister to peoples' needs.
 - d)** The Christians wanted to be with sinful people.
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C. THE CHURCH REFORMED

Goal 3. List three biblical teachings that Martin Luther restored.

Doctrinal errors also plagued the church as pagan or ungodly ceremonies replaced the freedom of the Holy Spirit. Pagan religions were changed a little so they appeared to be Christian. Membership in the church organization became more important than a godly life. Baptized people were considered Christians even if they did not live like Christians. Amidst this, some godly men tried to call the church back to biblical truth and were rejected. When God sent revival, leaders were often put to death.

Changes in Teaching

But in the early 1500s, a spiritual change began with a man named Martin Luther who lived in a monastery. Luther had tried to find God. He obeyed the church; hid from the world; starved himself; and even beat his body. But he could not find God. After several years, he started to study the Bible. There he found his answer: ““The righteous will live by faith”” (Romans 1:17). By faith, Martin Luther was put right with God! His followers, called *Protestants*, explained their teaching by saying, “Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone.” By *Scripture alone* they meant the Bible, not tradition, should be their guide. By *faith alone*, they meant that people are made right with God by faith. Humans could do nothing in themselves to earn God’s favor. By *grace alone*, they meant that people were put right with God by what Christ did on the Cross. God gives freely to those who believe.

Application

8 Why was revival needed in the church?

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9 List the three biblical teachings that Martin Luther restored.

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Changes in Organization

Luther encouraged the return to biblical teachings and practice. Pagan practices were rejected, and idols were taken out of the churches. Men and women in the monasteries were sent out to work in the world. Protestants turned away from actions not found in the Bible. The leader of the church in the West rejected this movement. But Luther said, “We must obey the Bible rather than man!”

Protestants soon found they, too, needed organization. Therefore, different kinds of organizations developed because each country had its own way of doing things. Some Protestants wanted to keep the system they had known. They wanted a strong leader who told the area leaders what to do. The area leaders, in turn, told others. This is a form of organization with strong central leadership.

In Switzerland, where John Calvin led the Protestants, another form of organization developed. Switzerland had a long tradition of allowing its citizens to choose their own leaders. Church organization under Calvin allowed the people in the churches to choose their own leaders, who in turn chose area and national leaders. This form of organization gave more power to local leadership.

Another form of organization developed in other parts of Europe. This group wanted no authority beyond the local believers. They wanted neither a national leader nor contact with their kings. This form gave more power to each individual congregation. Each group tried to find biblical support for its system, and they all found some!

The New Testament does not say exactly what kind of organization a church should have. Organization should meet the need of the group. If a Christian feels that he is especially spiritual

because he wants a certain kind of organization, he is wrong. The church at Corinth also had this problem (1 Corinthians 1:12). The most important parts of church organization, as the Corinthians found, are harmony and love.

Application

10 Circle the letter in front of each true statement.

- a) Growing churches need organization.
- b) There are several kinds of good organization.
- c) Organization should meet the needs of the people.
- d) Harmony and love are more important than the type of organization.

Find out what the church organization is like in your area. Does it serve to meet needs of your area? Fit into it and support it.



D. THE REVIVED CHURCH

Goal 4. Explain why revival was needed.

From the time of Martin Luther's reformation, new revivals have come to the church. God has raised up new movements to teach from the Word truths that were not being taught. Let us look at two such movements.

Evangelical Movement

At a time when church problems were great and morals were very low, God called John Wesley. In England at that time many people called themselves Christians. They were church members but not true Christians. John Wesley preached that they must experience God. When there was no building to preach in, Wesley preached outside. He reached all classes of people with the gospel. He traveled by horse all over his country. He also wrote books, started schools, and helped those in need. Wesley brought spiritual change to the nation. There was less

crime. Alcoholism disappeared in some areas. Families were strengthened.

Application

11 Why was revival necessary in Wesley's day?

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Think about the spiritual needs in your area. Does your church need a revival? Pray that God will raise up a Christian like John Wesley for your area.

Pentecostal Movement

During the nineteenth century, the church sent out many people to preach in new areas. Missionaries from America and Europe established new churches in Africa, Asia, and on the islands.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, God poured out His Holy Spirit on the church. It happened in many parts of the world at the same time. Many Christians experienced what the first disciples experienced at Pentecost—the baptism in the Holy Spirit. They received the gifts of the Spirit and the power to witness. This movement is known as the Pentecostal movement. It has now spread around the world. Since about 1950, the experience has been reported in many different groups of believers. This movement is helping to prepare the church for the coming of Christ.

Application

12 What is the spiritual experience for which the Pentecostal movement is known?

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I hope this brief history of the church has helped you. Sometimes the church has done things that did not glorify God.

We must learn from the past and not repeat the same errors. We must also be understanding of Christians who belong to other groups. Organizations may differ, but we can all belong to Christ.

For the Christian, guidance does not only come from history, but from the whole Bible. In the next lesson, we will look at what the Bible says about the church. Before we leave this lesson, let us pray that God will use us to work in His church in our local area.

Check Your Answers

12 Being filled with the Spirit

- 1 a) On Pentecost day
- b) There was a noise, and there were tongues of fire.
- c) They were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in an unknown language.

11 There were church members who were not really believers.
Morals were low.

2 Some made fun of the believers.

3 Peter said, ““God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.””

10 All these statements are true.

- 4 a) They learned from the apostles.
- b) They prayed together.
- c) They had fellowship.
- e) They ate together.

9 (In any order):

Scripture alone

Faith alone

Grace alone

5 The church grew.

8 Because there were many errors in practice and teaching

6 b) so it could better provide help, protection, and unity.

7 c) The church forgot that it was supposed to minister to peoples' needs.

