
FROM PENTECOST TO THE PRESENT

An Apostolic Church History

WEEK 3 — HOLDING THE FAITH UNDER FIRE

The Post-Apostolic Church · A.D. 100 – A.D. 325

Member Study Guide & Outline

Life Church of New Jersey | Word of Life Apostolic Center | Old Bridge, NJ

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE Follow along as the lesson is taught. The outline mirrors the teaching point by point. Key terms are defined for you, every Scripture is printed in full (KJV), and there is room in the margins and note lines to write down what stands out to you. You do not need to have read anything in advance — everything will be explained.

THE BIG QUESTION FOR THIS WEEK

If the apostles preached one God fully revealed in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), how did the church end up, by A.D. 325, with the language of three divine persons? When did the words change — and why?

I. The World the Church Inherited (A.D. 100)

A. The Roman Empire

- Christianity was illegal — not always actively hunted, but always against the law and always dangerous.
- Christians were accused of three things: **atheism** (no idols), **cannibalism** (the Lord's Supper misunderstood), and **treason** (refusing to worship Caesar).

B. The Church Was Growing

- Despite the danger, the gospel spread fast: Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Corinth, Ephesus, Smyrna, Jerusalem, even Lyon in Gaul.
- No printed Bibles. No church buildings. Believers copied the apostles' letters by hand and passed them from congregation to congregation.

C. A Threat From Inside

- False teachers were entering the church — not with swords, but with ideas that reshaped the gospel into Greek philosophy. This inside threat is the main story of this week.

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” — 1 John 4:1 (KJV)

MY NOTES: What stands out to you about how the early church lived under pressure?

II. What Is a Heresy?

KEY TERM Heresy — a teaching that sounds Christian but gets a key truth wrong in a way that damages the gospel.

Heresies are dangerous not because they are all wrong — but because they are mostly right. A little poison in a lot of good food is still poison.

A. The Apostolic Faith (what the apostles taught)

- God is ONE (Deuteronomy 6:4).
- Jesus is fully God in the flesh.
- Baptism in the name of Jesus; receiving the Holy Spirit; a life of repentance and holiness.

B. What Heresies Do

- Attack the oneness of God, OR deny Christ's real humanity, OR deny Christ's full deity.
- Replace the plain words of Scripture with human philosophy; add man's ideas to God's revelation.

C. Why It Matters to Us

- We fight the same battle today. These ideas never fully died — they only change their names.
- Every generation must decide: do we believe what the apostles taught? Acts 2:38 is still the standard we test everything by.

III. Three False Teachings the Church Fought (A.D. 100–200)

A. Gnosticism — DEFEATED

1. **Who:** From the Greek *gnosis* = “knowledge.” Led by Valentinus and Basilides.
2. Taught: salvation comes by secret knowledge; Christ only seemed to have a body; matter is evil; no need for water baptism.
3. **The answer:** Irenaeus of Lyon refuted it (c. A.D. 180). Jesus had a real body and shed real blood — His death actually saves us.

KEY TERM Docetism — the Gnostic idea that Christ only appeared (Greek *dokeo*, “to seem”) to have a body. If His body wasn't real, His death wasn't real — and we are not saved.

B. Adoptionism — REJECTED

1. **Who:** Theodotus, and later Paul of Samosata (a bishop, c. A.D. 260).
2. Taught: Jesus was a normal human man whom God “adopted” and empowered at His baptism — but not God Himself. They had the oneness of God right, but denied Christ's full deity.
3. **The answer:** We reject this. Paul of Samosata was condemned by the Synod of Antioch in A.D. 268 (remember this date — it returns at Nicaea).

“For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” — **Colossians 2:9 (KJV)**

C. Marcionism — REVEALING

1. **Who:** Marcion (c. A.D. 144). Threw out the entire Old Testament; said the God of the OT was evil and different from the God of Jesus.
2. **The key fact for us:** When the Marcionites left the church (c. A.D. 144), they kept baptizing “in the name of Jesus Christ.” This proves Jesus-name baptism was still the universal practice at that date.
3. **Source:** David K. Bernard, *History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 1, p. 39.

MY NOTES: Where do you see “mostly-right” teachings pressuring the church today?

IV. The Montanists: A Warning and a Witness (A.D. 170–200)

A. What They Got Right

- Montanus led a renewal movement in Asia Minor emphasizing the Holy Spirit, prophecy, and speaking in tongues.
- They warned that the institutional church was losing prophecy and tongues.
- They emphasized strict holiness of life.
- They were **ORIGINALLY Oneness** (modalist) and did **NOT** use the trinitarian baptismal formula.

B. Where They Went Too Far

- Extreme self-denial; eventually forbidding marriage.
- Montanus claimed to be the final prophet before the end.

C. The Key Detail — Remember the Name Tertullian

- Tertullian, the man who later invented the word “Trinity,” first opposed the Montanists — then joined them. The inventor of Trinitarian language ended up in a Spirit-emphasis movement that began as Oneness. (He returns in Section VIII.)

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh... and they shall prophesy.” — Acts 2:17 (KJV)

Lesson: Hunger for the Spirit is good and biblical — but it must stay under the authority of Scripture. Fire without a fireplace burns the house down.

V. The Apostolic Fathers (A.D. 90–150)

The leaders who came right after the apostles — several knew the apostles personally. They show us a church that was still fully apostolic.

A. Clement of Rome (c. A.D. 96)

- Wrote the earliest church letter after the New Testament. Called Jesus “our God.” Baptism in Jesus’ name was standard.

B. Ignatius of Antioch (martyred c. A.D. 108)

- Wrote seven letters while being taken to Rome to face the lions. Repeatedly called Jesus “our God.” Fiercely defended the reality of Christ’s body against the Gnostics.

C. Polycarp of Smyrna (martyred c. A.D. 155)

- A disciple of the Apostle John himself — the living link between the apostles and the next generation. (His martyrdom is Section VI.)

KEY TERM The chain of witness — Jesus → the Apostle John → Polycarp → Irenaeus. Only two handshakes separated the second-century church from the Lord.

Take-home point: In A.D. 90–150 the church called Jesus “our God” plainly and directly. No “Trinity.” No “three persons.” No philosophical vocabulary. David K. Bernard notes their language “corresponds closely to modern Oneness.”

VI. The Martyrdom of Polycarp (February 23, A.D. 155)

“Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?” — Polycarp of Smyrna

A. The Story

- Smyrna, during the public games, in a wave of persecution. A younger man, Quintus, had volunteered for martyrdom — but broke and denied Christ when he saw the beasts.
- Polycarp, 86 years old, was brought before the Roman governor, who urged him to save himself: “Swear by Caesar. Curse Christ, and I will release you.”
- Polycarp answered with the words above. He refused to be nailed to the stake — he said Christ would hold him steady. He stood in the fire and prayed until a soldier pierced him.

B. Why It Matters

- The church at Smyrna wrote it all down: the oldest detailed Christian martyr account outside the New Testament.
- Courage in the fire was the last chapter of 86 years of quiet faithfulness. Faithfulness under pressure is built in the ordinary years.

MY NOTES: *Where is God asking you to be faithful right now, when no one is watching?*

VII. The Age of Martyrs (A.D. 64–313)

Nearly 250 years of intermittent persecution — ten major waves, from Nero to the Edict of Milan.

A. The Pliny Letter (c. A.D. 112)

- A Roman governor, Pliny the Younger, wrote Emperor Trajan for instructions on Christians. A pagan official describing the church from the outside.
- He tortured two deaconesses and found no crime — only people *“singing hymns to Christ as to a god”* and pledging not to sin. Those who would not recant were executed. They died for worship.

B. The Decius Persecution (A.D. 249)

- The first EMPIRE-WIDE persecution. Every citizen had to sacrifice to Roman gods and receive a certificate proving it.
- Thousands caved. Those who surrendered their Scriptures were called *traditores* (“those who hand over”) — the origin of our word **traitor**.

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” — Tertullian, c. A.D. 197

VIII. The Greek Apologists: The Hinge Point (A.D. 130–180)

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT TURN IN TONIGHT'S STORY

A. The Situation

- To reach Greek philosophers, the Apologists borrowed a Greek idea — the LOGOS (divine Reason) — and said, “The Logos you have discussed for 500 years IS Jesus Christ.” Clever — but it came at a cost.

KEY TERM Logos — Greek for “Word” or “Reason.” John 1:1 uses it rightly of Christ. The Apologists borrowed the philosophers' loaded version — and imported their assumptions with it.

B. Two Answers to One Question

1. **What Scripture says:** “God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16). ONE God, fully present in Jesus. No second divine being.
2. **What Justin Martyr said:** the Logos is “another God... numerically distinct” — a SECOND divine being, subordinate to the Father.

C. Why It Is a Hinge

- Once you have a second, lesser divine being, someone will eventually ask: is he as eternal as the Father? Two hundred years later, Arius answered “no” — and the crisis of Nicaea was born.

Lesson: Words shape beliefs. The vocabulary the church adopts in one generation becomes the theology its grandchildren inherit.

IX. The Monarchians: Your Apostolic Ancestors (A.D. 180–260)

KEY TERM Monarchian — from monarchia = “sole rule.” They insisted the one God rules alone — there is no second divine being.

A. The Most Important Admission of the Period

- Tertullian — the man who invented the word “Trinity” — admitted in *Against Praxeas* (c. A.D. 213):

“The simple majority of believers are startled at the [Trinitarian] teaching... they accuse us of preaching two or three gods.” — Tertullian, Against Praxeas

- Meaning: before Nicaea, the MAJORITY of ordinary believers held the oneness of God. The Trinitarian vocabulary was the new thing — and most believers resisted it.

B. Named Leaders

1. Noetus of Smyrna (c. A.D. 200): confessed the full deity of Christ AND the oneness of God at the same time.
2. Praxeas: carried the teaching to Rome and North Africa (Tertullian's whole book was written against him).
3. Pope Callistus (Bishop of Rome, 217–222): his own opponent, Hippolytus, records that Callistus held Oneness (“Sabellian”) views. The Bishop of Rome was functionally Oneness.

Take-home point: We are not the newcomers or the strange offshoot. We are the continuation of what the majority of the early church always believed.

X. Constantine: The Empire Embraces the Church (A.D. 312–325)

A. The Timeline

1. A.D. 312 — Battle of Milvian Bridge. Constantine claims a vision of the cross: “In this sign, conquer.”
2. A.D. 313 — Edict of Milan: full legal toleration. After 250 years, the persecution ends.
3. A.D. 324 — Constantine becomes sole emperor. Christianity goes from tolerated to favored.
4. A.D. 325 — He calls and presides over the Council of Nicaea — though he is not yet baptized.

B. The Two Sides

- **The Mercy:** The end of persecution was a genuine mercy. Christians could finally worship openly. We do not minimize this relief.
- **The Danger:** When an emperor presides over theology, politics shapes doctrine. Constantine wanted UNITY, not necessarily biblical truth. He was finally baptized on his deathbed — by an Arian bishop.

Key sentence: “It was Constantine — not the apostles — who summoned the first great council of the church.”

XI. Arius and the Crisis That Split the Church (c. A.D. 318)

A. The Logical Chain

- Justin (“Christ is a second God”) → Origen (“the Son is subordinate”) → Arius (“there was a time when he was not”).

B. What Arius Taught

- Slogan: “*There was a time when He was not.*” Jesus is the greatest creature — but a creature, not truly God.
- The danger: if Jesus is a creature, He cannot save us. Only God can forgive sin. The church was right to be alarmed.

C. The Apostolic Answer

“*For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.*” — **Colossians 2:9 (KJV)**

- The answer was already in Scripture 300 years before Arius asked the question. ONE God, fully present in Jesus — no second being to argue about.

Key insight: Arianism was not a corruption of the Logos theology — it was its conclusion. The Monarchians had already prevented it by insisting God is simply ONE.

XII. The Council of Nicaea: An Honest Assessment (A.D. 325)

The facts: ~300 bishops, called by Emperor Constantine, opened May 20, 325, in Nicaea (modern Turkey). Arius was exiled. The key word chosen was *homoousios* (“of one substance”).

A. Where Nicaea Was Right

- Jesus Christ is FULLY and TRULY God. Arius was wrong — Christ is not a creature. The Son is “true God of true God.”
- The Apostolic tradition stands with Nicaea on this completely. We are NOT Arians — we fully confess the deity of Jesus Christ.

B. Where Nicaea Fell Short

- “*Homoousios*” is not a Bible word — and the same word had been **condemned** at the Synod of Antioch in A.D. 268.
- An unbaptized emperor presided; bishops were pressured with exile to agree; Greek philosophy — not Scripture — set the terms.

KEY TERM *Homoousios* — Greek for “of one substance / same essence.” Chosen to define orthodoxy at Nicaea, though it appears nowhere in the Bible and had been rejected by an earlier council.

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh...” — 1 Timothy 3:16 (KJV)

The balanced verdict: Nicaea was right about the destination (Jesus is fully God) but took a wrong road to get there — philosophy and political force instead of Scripture.

XIII. How the Baptismal Formula Changed

Every baptism in the Book of Acts is in the name of Jesus. Watch the words spoken over the water change over 225 years — and notice the WORDS changed only after the THEOLOGY changed.

1. **A.D. 90–140:** “In the name of the Lord / the Son of God” — Clement, Ignatius, Hermas.
2. **A.D. 144:** “In the name of Jesus Christ” — the Marcionites kept this when they left, proving it was still universal (Bernard, Vol. 1, p. 39).
3. **c. A.D. 150:** “Father + Jesus Christ + Holy Spirit” — Justin keeps Jesus’ name but adds titles, driven by Logos theology.
4. **c. A.D. 200+:** “Father · Son · Holy Spirit” — the name of Jesus recedes; titles replace it.
5. **A.D. 325+:** “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” — after Nicaea, the titular formula becomes official.

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” — Acts 2:38 (KJV)

Take-home point: The formula shifted only AFTER the theology shifted. We baptize in Jesus’ name because Acts 2:38 is the apostolic standard — we did not invent it; we returned to it.

XIV. Four Things History Teaches Us Tonight

1. **Courage is required.** The real test is whether our faith produces people who can say, in the hard moment, “He has done me no wrong.”
2. **Words shape beliefs.** The vocabulary we adopt becomes the theology our children inherit. We speak the way the Bible speaks.
3. **Majority is not truth.** Before Nicaea the majority were Oneness — Tertullian said so. Councils and majorities do not set truth; Scripture does.
4. **The promise still holds.** The church survived Nero, Decius, Diocletian, and the Arian crisis. Same gospel. Same name. Same Spirit. The gates of hell have not prevailed.

MY NOTES: Which of the four lessons speaks to you most right now — and why?

XV. Discussion & Scripture to Memorize

A. Discussion Questions

1. What in tonight's history surprised you the most — and why?
2. Polycarp held for 86 years. What area of your life needs that kind of long-term faithfulness right now?
3. Tertullian admitted the majority were Oneness before Nicaea. Does that change how you think about the “minority position” label?

B. Memorize This Week (KJV)

“God was manifest in the flesh...” — **1 Timothy 3:16**

“In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” — **Colossians 2:9**

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...” — **Acts 2:38**

C. This Week's Assignment

- Read Acts 2 and count every reference to the name of Jesus.
- Read the Nicene Creed online. Note which words appear in the Creed that you cannot find anywhere in the Book of Acts. Bring one observation to next week.

ONE FAITH. ONE GOSPEL. ONE CHURCH.

Next Week — Week 4: The Long Eclipse: The Medieval Church · A.D. 325–1500