

What Happened to the Church Established By Christ and His Apostles (2)?

By Victor Beshir

Third: Where Is the Church of the New Testament?

Many are eager to know about what happened to the church of the New Testament and where it is now. Many more ask specifically about what happened to the church between the apostolic age and the Reformation era. To answer these questions, Let us visit the landmarks of Christian history:

1. Christ taught His disciples not from a book but He delivered a life and taught them all that was related to church life. All the disciples had one faith, which they delivered to all the nations and exhorted them to keep; 'I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 1:4). This epistle was written around year 68 AD, while the last book of the New Testament was written at the end of the first century. Therefore, the faith that he was talking about was not written at that time. The church delivered a verbal teaching, which is called the Tradition. Therefore, Jude here refers to the verbal teachings, the Tradition. In fact, writing the book of the New Testament started many decades after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, either to answer specific questions or to discuss a topic or to address certain needs of certain people or to present a summary of Christ's life, but these writings never intended to be encyclopedic and to replace the oral Tradition.

However, by the beginning of the Second century, all the writings of the New Testament were completed, and the fathers of the church considered them authentic writings inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they were collected to form the Holy Bible, and considered as the church first and most important reference. While the early church considered the writings of the New Testament as inspired books, it didn't drop off the Tradition. Surely, the Tradition wouldn't contradict the New Testament, since it was the source for the writings of the New Testament. Until today, we still go back to the early church Tradition to find more about its faith, dogma, worship, and the rest. Thanks to God, there are plenty of these writings, which support the oral Tradition that are still handed down in great carefulness and sincerity from one generation to the next in the Orthodox churches.

2. The church lived as a guardian of the one faith and common dogma until the schism in year 451 A.D. During this period if a new teaching would appear, representatives from all the churches would meet to discuss the new teaching and either accept it or reject it. For example, when the Arian Controversy appeared, which denied the divinity of Christ, 318 bishops from all churches in the world met in the Nicene Council in 325 A.D. and rejected the Arian teaching. All Christians in the entire world at this period had the same faith. A Christian could go to any other church and had communion there without any restrictions. There were no theological differences between the churches. The church was one Apostolic Catholic Church. The word "Apostolic" refers to its establishment by the apostles of the Lord, and "Catholic" refers to its universality.

3. The sad schism of the church took place in the Chalcedon Council (451 AD) over the issue of the nature of Christ. Contemporary studies show that the discussions in this council were misleading because of misunderstanding and miscommunications among the churches. One group was using Greek theological idioms while others were using Latin expressions, and because of the two languages and other reasons the schism took place. The result of this schism was division of the Church into two camps; the Oriental Orthodox Churches and what I call it here for the purpose of this study the Western Churches.
4. The Western Churches split in 1054 AD into the 'Roman Catholic Church' and 'Eastern Orthodox Churches' because of many heresies that crept into the Roman Catholic Church.
5. After centuries of deviation from the original teachings and corruptions, the 'Roman Catholic Church' in the sixteenth century suffered another severe schism by the Reformation starting in 1517 A.D.
6. In 1529, the Church of England was separated from the Roman Catholic Church, forming the Anglican Church.
7. The reformation was the basis for all the Protestant churches. **In 1720 A.D. the Protestants began** what they called '**Evangelical Renewal.**' From that time on, many Protestant churches started to be referred to as Evangelical. Therefore, sometime both words Evangelical and Protestant are used interchangeably. The number of Protestant churches today is about 900 denominations and sects. Mostly, these churches follow their own leader(s) in what they believe and worship. The leaders tried hard to understand the Bible and its teachings, using commentaries of the Reformation fathers, who had declined all church mysteries (sacraments) and other teachings and rituals based on their sad experience with the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages in Europe. The result is a total loss of the spiritual treasures the church lived by since the days of Christ. The lost of links to the apostolic church left the Protestant churches with many missing components of the faith that was for all delivered by the saints (Jude 1:4). Moreover, they are lacking the great channels of Christian spirituality that were eliminated by the reformation movement because of historical circumstances, such as the mass and other rituals.

The faith that was once for all delivered by the saints is a whole comprehensive package that needs to be kept together in contact. You can't choose and pick what you like and drop what you dislike. The faith was delivered by the saints (the apostles of Christ) does not include theology only but ways of life too, because you can't separate faith from life.

In my opinion, the delivered faith looks like a complete recipe. If you change a part of the recipe, it is no longer the same recipe; you lost it.

With about 900 Protestant churches existing today, you see in them all kinds of beliefs. The principle of Protestantism of leaving it up to the individual freedom to chose opens rooms to individual guessing and conclusions without having a solid guide reference. As one Evangelical preacher put it, "After a careful reading in the Bible during the last two

years, I discovered that what I used to teach people, telling them that this is what the Lord teaches, was the exact opposite of God's teachings."

The reformation opened the door to individual Bible interpretation and to all sorts of dogmatic changes. Once a church allowed one change to the faith, sooner one change would lead to another, until the faith is no longer the same and consequently the divine teaching suffers. This exactly what happened in the Reformation movement when they decided to ignore what was delivered from the early church, thinking that having the Bible only would protect the faith, and forgot that even the devil can use the Bible to deceive people, as he tried to do with Christ after He fasted for forty days in the wilderness.

Today there are about 900 evangelical (Protestant) sects, each proclaims that it follows the Bible and it knows the truth, while in fact they ended up in 900 different theologies. It doesn't need a genius to discover that they are not talking about the same comprehensive teaching, but 900 ones. Also, the proclaim of following the Bible teaching is misleading, for how could they follow the same Bible teaching and ended up with hundreds of different teachings.

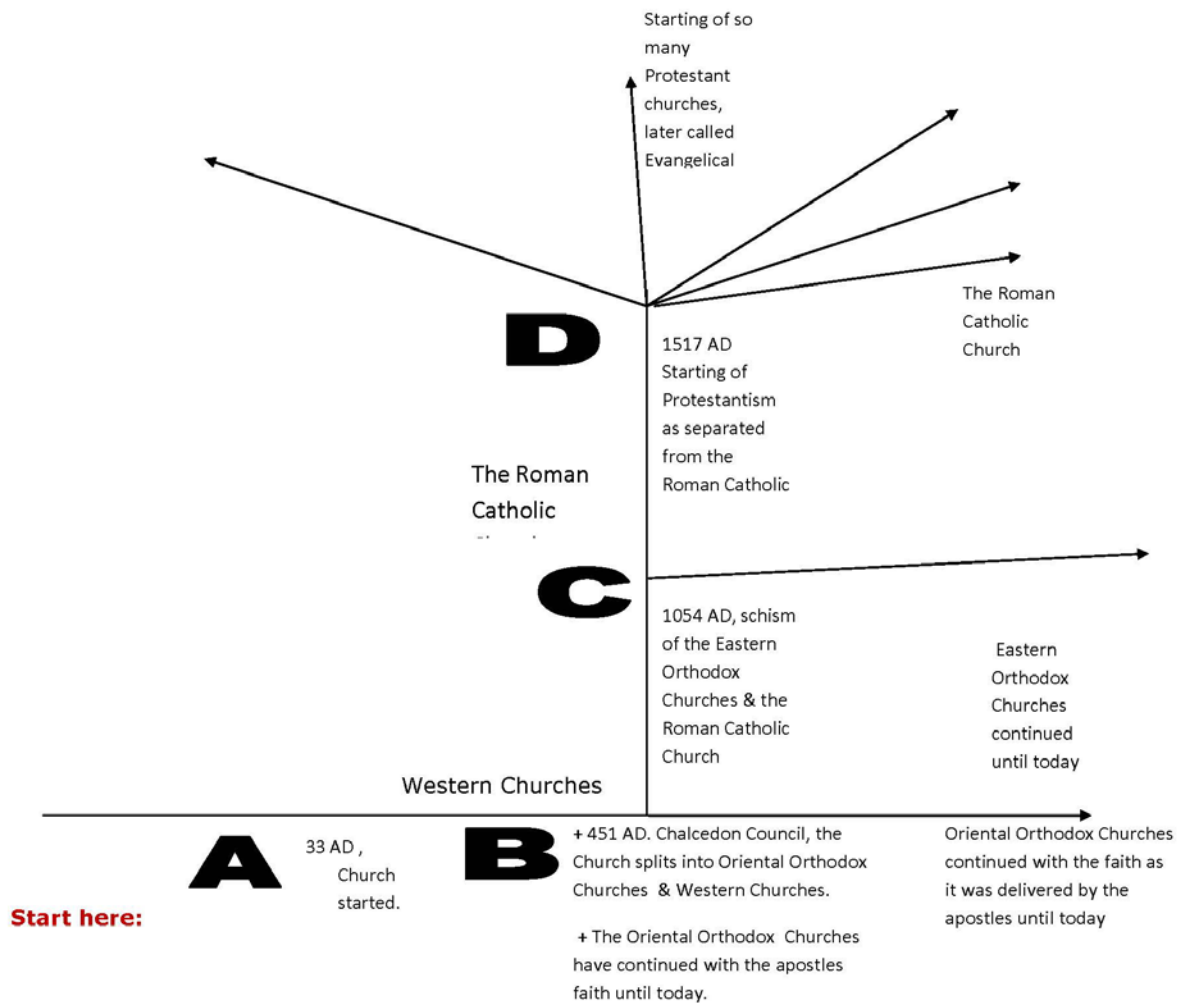
The truth was delivered about 2000 years ago and had a solid standard reference to consult. However, to eliminate the divine Tradition that was received from the apostles, started a new dogma, and eliminated the standard reference, destroyed the essence of the faith and crippled the spiritual life. Sadly, the Reformation movement did that driven by historical, social, and psychological reasons rather than theological or dogmatic reasons.

Someone can't work as a judge because he read the laws only. He must know how individual laws were interpreted and applied. Also, a person can't prepare a doctorate dissertation in a science without understanding all the general laws, theories, and history of that branch of science he/she is dealing with. Similarly, a person before starting an evangelical church should first understand the Bible and interpret it correctly based on the divine teaching that was delivered by the saints, the life of the early church, and all the treasures the church has been entrusted with for 2000 years. Following this method, a person will realize that he has no authority to start a new church but he better follow the Church established by Christ.

I think by now you agree with me in that proclaiming following the Bible is not a guarantee of having the right faith, but using the right interpretation of the Bible is the guarantee, and there is no right interpretation for the Bible without going back to the delivered faith and the standard reference of the first church.

8. The 'Oriental Orthodox Churches' have never split. Neither had they any deviation from the original faith. It did not accept any heresies. So, it kept the mysteries of the church and the great delivered spirituality methods given by our Lord through His apostles. Therefore, these churches represent a true icon of the church established by the Lord and His apostles.

Church History Diagram:



Notes:

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A 33 A.D Day of Pentecost

b 451 A.D. Chalcedon Council:

Roman Catholic & Western Churches accepted the declaration of the council. But, the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, Armenian Orthodox Churches) continued with the faith handed down from the early church

C 1054 AD schism: The Eastern Orthodox Churches separated from the Roman Catholic Church. Since then it had no connection to the heresies and corruption happened in the Roman Catholic Church.

d 1517 AD Starting of Protestants Reformation as a reaction to the heresies and corruption of the Roman Catholic Church in the middle ages.

Reviewing the diagram of the Church History, you see a horizontal line depicts the one church that started, in point **a** in the diagram, in 33 A.D. with Day of Pentecost, and

continued as one church until point **b** in the diagram, in 451 A.D. Then you notice the place where the first schism happened in the church in 451 A.D. at the Chalcedon Council. From this point, you see the original horizontal line continues that refers to the continuations of the Oriental Orthodox Churches with the same faith, and another vertical line that derived from the original horizontal line, which depicts the Western Churches.

Following the line depicted the Western churches, you will see the second division happened at point **c** in the diagram, in 1054 A.D. Now, please pay attention to the two lines drawn out of the line that depicts the Western Churches; one horizontal line depicts the 'Eastern Orthodox Churches,' and another vertical line points to the Roman Catholic Church.

Referring to point **d** in the diagram, in 1517 A.D., the Reformation branched out from the Roman Catholic Church. Later on, many churches branched out from the Reformation, as depicted by many branches with the name 'Evangelical Protestants.' When you carefully examine the drawing, you will find that the Coptic Church and the other Oriental Churches still drawn on the same horizontal line that started in the days of the apostles, keeping the same faith, dogma, and worship of the Church started by Christ and His apostles.

Fifth: Now we know that the early church still exists, we need to ask: what kind of impact can this church have on an individual's spiritual life?

Although the Reformation movement would have liked to restore the grace of God back to its dynamic position in the church, it eliminated a great deal of the work of the grace when it refused the priesthood, mysteries (sacraments), and the spiritual treasures that were handed down over the centuries. Christ Himself established these mysteries to work as channels of grace in the life of the faithful. Without them, the individual suffers spiritually and the church loses its way to the heavenly spiritual treasures. Thanks to God that a church like the Coptic Orthodox Church still has it all. We can summarize what this church has in one phrase: **'the fullness of Christ.'**

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Now, one great icon of the church that was established by Christ and His apostles still exists, and probably in your town. Search the Internet for the Coptic Orthodox Church or visit www.mycopticchurch.com to find the closest church to you. Joining this church, you will experience the church as it was in the days of St. Paul, St. Peter, and the other apostles. You will enjoy the rich heavenly worship, as you never experienced before. You will witness the church that was meant when Christ established it. You will find a church that is not basing her faith on one person who has no connection to what was delivered from the saints, but the fullness of Christ that has been passed down, as it was 2000 years ago. What you will find there is different from what you are used to, and it might take you a while until you understand it and open its spiritual treasure, but it is worse every effort to understand.

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² Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987, p. 348

^[1] (Matt 28:20, 2 John 1:10, 2 Timothy 1:13, 1 Timothy 6:3-4, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Philippians 4:9, Galatians 1:8)