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A SHORT HISTORY OF

CHRISTIANITY

Written In Collaboration By
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INTRODUCTION

These are days in which the minds of Christian people are turning more and more to the church as the hope of the world. If this confidence is to be intelligent, it must be based upon a knowledge of what the church has accomplished through the centuries and what it has failed to accomplish.

With this history the rank and file of church members are none too familiar. They know something of New Testament times, something of present-day church activities, possibly something of Luther, Calvin, or John Knox. They talk familiarly of the Church Universal, of the Body of Christ, and of similar mystical concepts. But of the church as a historical religious movement, wrestling with the issues of each succeeding century, struggling with the state and the world, giving shape to its doctrinal orthodoxy and institutional form as best it can, time and again breaking out spontaneously beyond the bounds of ecclesiastical conformity, now hibernating through a long winter of worldly coldness and then awakening afresh in a great spiritual revival, it may be of St. Francis, of Wesley, of Moody—of this *continuing church* few Christians have any adequate idea.

This can be easily accounted for. Most church histories are too long for the ordinary reader. The majority of Protestants have looked upon one thousand

years of this history as the "great apostasy" which must be repudiated. People find little of interest in doctrinal disputes, political intrigues, and the almost endless mass of dates and details which on the surface seem to have little connection with the vital issues of our modern world. But suddenly this story of Christianity has assumed an importance which can no longer be neglected.

To meet this new interest and in response to the accelerated tempo of the age, the authors have prepared a digest of church history. The book is planned for the use of the serious reader who has only a limited time at his disposal. It is also designed as a textbook for study classes. The material has been cast into the structural form of thirty-two sections, which may be arranged in a series of lessons according to the convenience of the study group.

While there has been consultation between the various authors in order to give structural unity to the story of the church, each writer is responsible only for his own contribution.

The understanding of history calls for factual knowledge and intelligent interpretation. For fuller equipment diligent students will find it advisable to consult at least some of the books listed in the Bibliography.

THE EDITOR

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CHAPTER I

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

1. CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

The Roman Empire.—Jesus Christ was born “when the fulness of time was come.” This confident assertion made by the apostle Paul is amply confirmed by history. Like a fertile field to the newly planted seed, the environment in which the Christian movement had its beginnings was extraordinarily favorable to its development and spread. Less than a generation before the birth of Jesus the Roman Empire was established by Caesar Augustus. Thus was brought to completion a process of political unification, begun by the conquests of Alexander the Great, of the lands and ancient cultures already bound together geographically by the Mediterranean Sea. On the north the Empire was bounded by the Rhine and the Danube, on the east by the fertile Tigris-Euphrates Valley, on the south by the great African desert, and on the west by the Atlantic Ocean.

Rome governed this vast and varied dominion as a military despotism; yet its power was exercised chiefly in the maintenance of public peace and the collection of taxes and tribute. Administration of justice was remarkably fair and efficient. Business and trade flourished as tariff barriers were eliminated and easy lines of communication made possible by the govern-

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ment's extensive road construction (chiefly for military purposes) and riddance of piracy on the water routes. Common use of the Greek language fostered the intercourse of people, ideas, and commercial traffic. Toward business enterprises and cultural pursuits Rome maintained a strict policy of laissez faire. Cities of cosmopolitan population grew to unprecedented size, magnificently adorned with artistic monuments and buildings and endowed with excellent schools of rhetoric and philosophy. Large numbers of people, however, remained poor and depressed, caught in the maelstrom of unrestricted competition and dependent upon the largess of the emperor or wealthy patrons for their very food, as well as amusement. Programs of social betterment organized on any scale comparable to the public need were virtually nonexistent.

Few periods of human history have exhibited more varied and widespread religious interests. Both the imperial and the local governments supported as public services official cults of the time-honored gods of storied myth for their sanction and benefaction to the commonweal. After the death of Augustus the custom of ruler worship, long known to the peoples of the eastern provinces, was increasingly applied to the Roman emperors both living and dead. In the case of wise and beneficent rulers such devotion was as genuinely religious as it was patriotic and prudent.

Educated and cultured people found personal religious satisfaction in the study and practice of philosophy, which concerned itself not only with deep specu-

lations about the causes, nature, and meanings of things but also with the problems and duties of everyday living. A religion of this sort was highly individualistic, for the philosophers were not organized, for the most part, in associations of clearly defined membership. Though there was no lack of definite systems of philosophy, such as the Stoic, Epicurean, or Platonic, most devotees preferred to be eclectic and choose from the various schools of thought such ideals and practices as appealed to them.

For great numbers of people the most satisfying religious experiences were to be found in the cults known as mystery religions. These were secret societies, mostly of oriental origin, whose "mysteries" were imparted only to those who underwent a dramatic and emotionally exciting rite of initiation. By virtue of this rite an initiate was "reborn" and obtained an earnest of an eternal life of bliss after death. The guarantor of immortality was none other than the god of the cult himself, who in ages long past had suffered a violent death but had been restored to life. Since the mystery religions were open to all persons regardless of race or class, many folk dispirited by their ill lot in this world found in them a source of hope and comfort. Active propaganda and extensive interchange of ideas gave to the mystery religions a preponderant influence upon the religious climate of the Roman Empire.

Judaism.—In all important centers of population in the Empire Jewish people were to be found in great numbers. In Alexandria, Egypt, for example, they occupied a sizable quarter of the city and enjoyed com-

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munal self-government. Though their religious and social exclusiveness won them the scornful contempt of the masses, many thoughtful persons were attracted by the nobility of their worship of one God and their ethical standards. To such inquirers the Jews were not slow to improve their relations and to recommend their religious principles in terms approximating the best philosophical thought of the times. The writings of several of their apologists have come down to us, notably the works of Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, and one of the most respected thinkers of his day.

Worship and instruction in the synagogues were open to all comers and were carried on, outside of Palestine, in the Greek language. Indeed before the Christian Era the Old Testament had been translated into Greek—a version of the Scriptures known as the Septuagint. Early Christian missionaries found in the synagogues of the Jewish dispersion a fertile field to begin their work of evangelization, not only among the Jews but also among numbers of gentile “God-fearers.”

In Palestine Jewish hostility to all things gentile was far more sharp. Remembrance of the glories of David and Solomon’s kingdom, combined with the fresh experience of complete independence for about one hundred years before the coming of the Romans under Pompey in 63 B.C., made the Palestinian Jews exceedingly restive. Periodic outbreaks of revolt forced upon them a heavier hand of Roman military power than was the case in many other provinces of the Empire.

Those who realized the futility of armed resistance took comfort in the lively hopes, entertained in almost all circles with varying degrees of vividness, that God himself would shortly intervene to smite the foreign oppressor and establish a new age in which his people would enjoy the full fruition of his promises made to them of old by the prophets. Imagination was often pressed to extravagant limits to describe the incidents attendant upon the imminent day of judgment when God or his "Anointed One," the Messiah, would intervene to order a new heaven and a new earth.

The center of Jewish religious life was the temple in Jerusalem, with its daily round of sacrificial offerings of praise, penitence, and supplication. On great festival occasions, such as Passover or Pentecost, pilgrims assembled here from all parts of the Empire. At the head of the priestly caste, who performed the temple rites, was a small party of wealthy, aristocratic families, known as Sadducees, from whose number the government appointed the high priest, the chief civil and religious officer of the Jewish people. The Sadducees were arch-conservatives, distrustful of all innovations in religious belief and practice, but not unwilling to accommodate themselves to many gentile habits of living.

Their more successful rivals for popular religious leadership were the Pharisees, who dominated the teaching and worship of the synagogues. They were zealous advocates of uncompromising obedience to the law of God as laid down in the Scriptures. But in their effort to make this law apply to every possible circum-

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stance and situation which might arise in daily life, they developed a cumbrous load of traditions, known only to the learned, and more burdensome than the mass of folk were able or willing to bear. Thus formalism and pride were their besetting sins. Yet it is only fair to say that their emphasis upon repentance for sin and the necessity of righteousness in all endeavors served as a real leaven for good in Jewish religion.

Jesus.—In a devout home of humble though sturdy village folk Jesus was born and reared. His call to his life's work was evoked by the preaching of one John, an ascetic prophet living near the Jordan River, who had attracted great crowds by his forewarning of the imminent coming of God's new age and the need of repentance to prepare for it. With many others Jesus accepted baptism from John's hands. Returning to his native district of Galilee, he at once began to preach as opportunity afforded, both in the synagogues and out, the "good news" of God's promised redemption.

The utter sincerity and strength of Jesus' character and the commanding conviction of his message won an enthusiastic reception; and we are told that "the common people heard him gladly." Wonders of healing which he performed attracted the needy, the curious, and the skeptical. To Jesus they were evident signs that God was already at work in the world to bring faithful men under his rule. He became conscious during his short-lived ministry that he himself was God's chosen Messiah to usher in the new day of righteousness—a view shared by his intimate disciples

who knew him best, so much so that one was ready to take up arms to bring in the kingdom by violence. Nothing could have been more alien to the spirit of Jesus' teaching. Entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven could be given only to those who with hearty repentance, full faith, and unbounded charity to their fellow-men yielded their lives in perfect submission to the will of God.

Opposition to Jesus on the part of the religious leaders quickly crystallized. They rejected his claim to messiahship—for was he not simply the carpenter's son from Nazareth? Jesus' sensitive insight into the inner spirit of true religion had pricked the shell of formalism with which they incrusting their piety and had exposed their hypocrisy and spiritual obtuseness. Seeing the increasing influence which he exercised among the people brought sharply to focus on the occasion of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival, they accused him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, as a fomenter of sedition. His end was thereby sealed. The Roman government had been troubled by so many "messianic" disturbances in Palestine that justice to Jesus yielded to fear of public disorder. Jesus was crucified between two thieves.

Christian beginnings.—The intimate disciples of Jesus, fearful of their own lives and disillusioned by their master's ignominious death, hastened home to Galilee. But Jesus appeared to them alive again! In joyous assurance of his resurrection and exaltation at God's right hand in heaven to appear again in glory to establish the longed-for kingdom, the disciples hurried back

to Jerusalem. At the festival of Pentecost an extraordinary outburst of the prophetic spirit encouraged them to preach boldly the marvelous news about Jesus and to call men to repentance and baptism in his name. Their enthusiasm was contagious. Many accepted baptism and joined the new fellowship where God's Spirit appeared so active and real. Daily propaganda was conducted from Solomon's portico in the temple with surprising success. Efforts of the religious authorities to silence the leaders of the new movement were futile. Indeed, some influential Pharisees were little inclined to repressive measures, if not openly favorable toward the movement.

The believers in Jesus remained loyal to all the customs of Jewish worship and ways of living. In fact, they considered themselves to be "the true Israel" and inheritors of all of God's promises to the chosen people. They assembled frequently in their homes for prayer and mutual edification and continued the practice, observed by Jesus and his intimate disciples, of common meals. In the "breaking of bread" they seemed vividly aware of the living presence of Jesus with them and sensed some joyful foretaste of banqueting with him in the age to come. Most of them were exceedingly poor, and distribution of goods to their several needs was provided out of a common chest, to which many contributed all that they possessed.

Many Greek-speaking Jews of the dispersion, who had returned to Jerusalem to live, were attracted to the movement. When some of their widows complained of being slighted in the daily dispensing of food, seven

men were appointed to look after their needs. The leader of this group, Stephen, proved himself a no less able preacher. Some of his views, notably those about the temple and its services, were alarmingly unorthodox. He was arraigned before the religious authorities and condemned to be stoned. A vigorous persecution of his sympathizers followed, led by Saul of Tarsus, a relentless Pharisee. The result of this conflict was to scatter many of the believers outside the confines of Jerusalem and thus unexpectedly to start the Christian movement upon its world-wide mission.

2. FORMATION OF THE CHURCH

The gentile mission.—Those who left Jerusalem to escape the fate of Stephen carried the story of Jesus to all who would give them audience. Soon the community of believers in Jerusalem was apprised of similar bands of disciples in Samaria, Joppa, Caesarea, Damascus, and even in distant Antioch. More incredible still was the news that Saul the persecutor (later known as Paul) had experienced a vision of the risen Jesus and had received baptism in Damascus, where he had gone with the intent of molesting the believers.

The home community in Jerusalem endeavored to maintain a general oversight of the new "churches." Visits were paid them by Peter and John, and other less eminent leaders, to see that the new communities were in full possession of God's Spirit, and to encourage them in prayers and exhortation. Contributions to the poor fund of the Jerusalem church, collected

from time to time, helped to maintain a bond of sympathy with the mother-community. At the head of the church in Jerusalem was James, a brother of Jesus, who was highly respected by the Jews for his piety and sanctity. With him were associated a council of elders, including the twelve companions of Jesus (such as Peter and John) known as "apostles." The decisions and counsels of these men carried great weight in all the churches.

At Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians, the good news about Jesus was presented not only to Jews but also to Gentiles. Thus a new field of work was opened which proved so promising that the Antioch Christians felt moved by the Spirit to send out two missionaries to extend the area of Christian propaganda. Barnabas and Paul were selected for the task. Their first journey took them to the island of Cyprus and the cities of the provinces on the southern coast of Asia Minor. The results of this mission showed that Gentiles were as willing, if not more so, as Jews, to accept the Christian message. Missionary ventures were accordingly launched on a wider scale and within a generation had established Christian churches in cities all over the Empire as far as Rome.

The nucleus of membership of the new societies was gathered from the synagogues, where both Jews and Gentiles would already be familiar with the promise of God's Messiah and kingdom. Naturally most of the Jews were unconvinced that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ (i.e., the Messiah). Accordingly, Christian believers were invariably expelled from the synagogues