



When the year 100 A.D. turned, it was not as huge a deal as some may think. For starters, the world, including the Body of Christ, was not yet basing its calendar on the birthdate of Jesus. In effect for the known world at that time was the Julian calendar which began in 45 B.C. It was a revision of the Roman calendar under Julius Caesar, converting from a lunar to a solar calendric system. The old Roman calendar had undergone a number of revisions from the time of the founding of Rome to Julius Caesar. It would be over one-and-one-half millennia before the Julian calendar would be replaced by the Gregorian calendar which is used virtually worldwide today.

The difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars is not so significant that it would throw off the dating of historical events by too large a margin. The purpose of the change under Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 was to correct the inaccuracy of the Julian calendar that gained one day every 134 years. By 1582 it was 10 days out of sync with the solar cycles, throwing off the Roman Catholic celebration of Easter as it related to the spring equinox.

Yet over 1,000 years prior to Gregory XIII a Roman Catholic monk by the name of Dionysius Exiguus (“Dennis the Small, meaning “humble”), residing in Rome, developed the Anno Domini year numbering while calculating the date for Easter. He was no obscure figure, but was a well-educated member of the Roman Curia, the administrative arm of the papacy. Dionysius translated hundreds of ecclesiastical canons, including the decrees of the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon and Sardis. His writings still guide Roman Catholic administrations.

We may visit this issue again when we deal with the 6th and 16th centuries A.D. I mention this now merely to illustrate that to the Roman world the year that we know as A.D. 100 was just another year—ca. 853 A.U.C. (*Ab Urbe Condita*, “from the foundation of the city” [Rome]), used mostly by modern historians to relate events from 753 B.C., the traditional dating of the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus. The ancient Romans dated their years according to the times of emperors and/or the two consuls who reigned at a given time.

So the year A.D. 100 held no particular importance to the people living at the time. It is only since the A.D. dating system that centuries and millennia have held much importance. For some reason mankind attaches mystical properties to the turning of centuries and millennia, even though dating has largely been arbitrary according to specific civilizations. (The Hebrew calendar is probably the only exception, likely used from before the time of Moses and based on the assumed time of the creation of Adam.) History records expectations of cataclysmic occurrences—the end of the world, doomsday, natural disasters, societal breakdown, and other apocalyptic scenarios. Much of this is based on superstition surrounding astrological calculations. The fact that man’s calendars have always been based not only on astronomical observations but also on astrological assumptions most likely plays a part in these unfounded fears. That alone is sufficient evidence of anti-Christ’s imposition of pagan influences in the world’s functioning. What is of concern is that Christianity—particularly influenced by Roman Catholicism and its inheritance of the Roman pagan religio-political system—also functions largely on superstition.

By the time one hundred years had passed from the estimated date of the Lord’s birth, superstition had increased within the assemblies that had been birthed through the work of the apostles and their successors. The simplicity of faith in Christ had already begun to give way to the religious spirit that suggested the only way to express that faith was through ritual and submission to hierarchical authority.

The deception started slowly, of course. But its growth would be exponential, increasing rapidly over time until it came to dominate the vast majority of those who claimed to believe in Jesus. Before we examine how the faith fared during this time we will turn our attention to the world at large.

The early part of the second century saw Rome at its peak under Emperor Trajan who extended the empire further to the Middle East. Roman trading posts reached from the southwest coast of India to the southern edge of the Sahara. Human industriousness took strides that saw inventiveness begin to increase. In A.D. 100, Italy became the first country to use

under-the-floor heating, and Hero of Alexandria developed a machine that demonstrated the power of steam; In 105 the Chinese first used paper made of vegetable fibers; around 120 the Chinese scientist, Chang Heng, invented the seismograph to record the strength of earthquakes; In 122 the Roman emperor Hadrian built Hadrian's Wall to stop the Picts of Scotland from invading Britain.

PERSECUTION OF BELIEVERS

In spite of the Gospel's reach into virtually the entire known world, anti-Christ still held sway over the vast majority of mankind which he used to oppose the Gospel wherever it went. Persecution of Christians continued under the Roman Empire, but it was an on-again-off-again affair depending upon who was emperor at the time. Vespasian, late in the first century, was not inclined to persecute the Jews and Christians for failing to worship the Roman gods, but his son Trajan, who reigned from 98 to 117, did so. Although regarded by Medieval Christian theologians as a virtuous pagan, and counted by historian Edward Gibbon as the second among Rome's "Five Good Emperors," Trajan declared Christianity illegal and consented to persecution of Christians. His edict stated that Christians were not to be sought out, but punished if the charge against them of being Christians was proven. Following is Trajan's reply to Pliny the Younger's letter (10.96) in which Pliny as governor of Bithynia et Pontus province in 110 described his execution and other forms of persecution of Christians:

"You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it, that is, by worshiping our gods...shall obtain pardon through repentance." (Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.97)

The Roman emperors were charged with protecting the culture of Rome, which included their pantheon of gods. Anti-Christ used this in an attempt to stamp out faith in Jesus. But it wasn't only the emperors who were moved to destroy faith in Jesus. Eusebius records in his *Ecclesiastical History* (5.1.7) that during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) civilian mobs, often mobilized by religious sects, assaulted, robbed and stoned Christians. During Marcus Aurelius' tenure there occurred the Persecution in Lyon, Gaul (ancient France), where Christians were forbidden from public areas including the marketplaces. Mobs attacked the Christians, and the authorities imprisoned them, eventually killing all but those who recanted.

Not all executions were instigated by Roman authorities or mobs. Many early Christians, thinking they would obtain a better resurrection, actually sought to be put to death for their faith, prompting Roman authorities to try hard to avoid Christians. In 185 the proconsul of Asia, Arrius Antoninus, was approached by a group of Christians who demanded to be executed. The proconsul obliged some of them and sent the rest away, saying

that if they wanted to kill themselves there was plenty of rope available or cliffs from which they could jump off. ⁱ

Nor was it solely through the Roman imperial system that anti-Christ persecuted Christians unto death. Pagan and Jewish religious leaders of all stripes were jealous of their positions of authority and control over the masses. They were not inclined to surrender themselves or their constituents to what they considered a new religion invading their territory. Persecution continued increasing the more the Gospel went forth. By the turn of the century all the original twelve apostles, with the possible exception of John, had fallen asleep in the Lord, most of them martyred for the faith. It was left to those whom they entrusted with the souls of the saints to be faithful to the call. Some discharged their duties admirably; others failed, succumbing to the seduction of anti-Christ who often came as an angel of light, his ministers appearing as ministers of righteousness.

We should pause for a moment to remind our readers that the history of anti-Christ is a record of conflict between Satan and his minions against the creator God, YHWH, and His saints and angels. Every nation and territory has over it spiritual entities that work on behalf of either side. We read in Daniel 10 of how there are superior principalities who rule over the major kingdoms of the world. Daniel records a vision in which he saw a heavenly visitor who had come in response to Daniel's desire to understand the things of God. This visitor spoke of two spiritual principalities—the prince of Persia who was to give way to the prince of Greece. Some believe this visitor was the angel Gabriel; others say He was the pre-incarnate Son of God, Jesus (cp. Rev. 1:12-16). In any case, this visitor revealed that there are indeed principalities that rule in the heavens, and that there is warfare among them for dominion over the earthly kingdoms.

We are reminded of Paul's words to the Ephesians that we do not struggle against men, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual evil in high places (Eph. 6:12).

The objective of Anti-Christ is to unite all mankind in rebellion against the creator God, YHWH. That has been the purpose in the anti-Christ spirit inspiring man to attempt to conquer the world. Those men did it for their own glory, unaware of the spiritual forces directing them. But each has succeeded in turn because God's time for the end of this age has not yet come. When it does come the final kingdom of the Anti-Christ—the revived final kingdom of Daniel's vision—will succeed in uniting mankind to oppose the Lord when He returns.

In contrast, the Lord has deigned that His people should be united in their affection for Him and for one another. It is only within the Kingdom of Heaven that men can truly be united regardless of race or national origin. Even the United States of America, the greatest attempt of man to achieve unity, has failed to bring true unity. This is because true unity can come only through the spirit; the flesh cannot achieve it. This is why the final empire will also fail; it will be a mixture of iron and clay (Dan. 2:33-45) which cannot adhere. It will be destroyed by the Kingdom of Heaven with the coming of the Lord (Rev. 11:15).

For believers on earth our goal in fellowship must be unity in the bonds of love. That is the Lord's command, and for good reason. It is the only way we can stand in the face of the evil that threatens to destroy us as representatives of our Lord's Kingdom.

What has escaped so many believers in Jesus is that our time on this earth is a time of warfare against these spiritual forces of anti-Christ. Unless we comprehend that truth we will be ineffective for the Kingdom of God, and many will live lives of spiritual defeat and shipwrecked faith. The enemy targets us in our assemblies, attempting to create division in order to render us powerless against his wiles. Without the love that the Lord commands, we will succumb to faithlessness.

This is the primary message behind the letters from the apostles to the assemblies: love one another; stand firm for the Kingdom of Heaven; do not give in to factions; let no one have preeminence except to esteem others better than ourselves.

And this is how faithless Christians, either oblivious of this truth or unwilling to face it, from the very beginning began to surrender spiritual ground to the anti-Christ. The further time passed from the apostles' direct influence, the further away from the truth of God's Word and from the purity of the faith the assemblies began to stray.

Yet in the midst of persecution, the influences of Gnostic and Ebionite heresies and other attempts by anti-Christ to destroy faith in the Messiah, there remained faithful brethren, many of whom gave their lives for the faith.

Here, some two millennia from the time of Jesus, we tend to look upon the early assemblies as models of spiritual perfection, loving brotherhood and pure faith. Yet if the apostles had to constantly guard the assemblies and issue letters of conviction and correction, would we expect the assemblies to be more perfect upon the apostles' deaths? Not if the anti-Christ spirit that had begun to invade the assemblies at their inception could help it.

So we see in the second century an increase in the spiritual warfare that was now waged, not merely for the kingdoms of the world, but for the Kingdom of Heaven—the souls of the saints who were charged with manifesting the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Yet God has never been without knowledge and understanding of that struggle and how even regenerate men must continually wage warfare against their own flesh which would hamper them, let alone against the world and the devil.

Man's flesh tempts him to sin by inordinate desire for the things that satisfy the flesh—everything from illicit sex, alcohol, drugs, even good things like food that may be used to feed the sin of gluttony, or comforts that may cause him to become lazy, even slothful.

The world tempts man with promises of riches, power and esteem in the sight of others.

The devil tempts man through vain philosophies and deceit, even within the framework of the true faith.

All these must be overcome if we are to remain faithful to the Lord and productive in serving Him. Unfortunately, the history of Christianity is more a history of failure in all these areas than it is a history of triumph. But for our Father's help

through His Holy Spirit guiding us by His written Word we would have no chance of succeeding.

So we see in the second century a continuation of the onslaught by anti-Christ to destroy the Gospel. And men both inside and outside the Body of Christ would be complicit in that plot.

On the one hand the Jews considered the followers of Jesus, both Jew and Gentile, as aliens to their religion that had devolved into rabbinical Judaism. And rightly so they considered them thus. After all, Jesus' greatest conflicts in His earthly ministry came at the hand of the religious leaders of the Jews. By the time He appeared, the faith of Abraham and the Law of Moses had been so convoluted by the traditions of the Jews that it was hardly recognizable to them. When Jesus brought clarity to them, only a minority from among the Jews believed in Him, and many of them eventually fell away when His sayings became too hard for them. The hatred that followed Jesus and His apostles did not abate during the second century.

Yet even as late as the Bar Kokhba Revolt (A.D. 132-136), Messianic Jews were still considered a minor sect of Judaism because of their roots in the Old Covenant. Most historians attribute the schism between the rabbinic Jews and Messianic Jews to Simon bar Kokhba being acclaimed as the Messiah who would restore Israel's glory. The Messianic Jews knew that Jesus is the Messiah, and had to make a clean break from the rest of Jewry rather than follow the masses that championed bar Kokhba.

Although bar Kokhba succeeded in establishing independent Jewish rule over parts of Judea for over two years, the Roman army eventually crushed the rebellion and barred Jews from Jerusalem, allowing them access only to celebrate Tisha B'Av—the ninth day of the month Av commemorating the destruction of both the first and second temples.

Now that the Jews again possess Jerusalem even in their current state of unbelief, the stage is set for the Lord's return. The only thing that remains is for the man of sin, the son of perdition, also called the Anti-Christ, to be revealed (2 Thess. 2:1-3).

The Jewish revolts of the second century brought much suffering upon the Jews. The minor victories they attained and the constant rebellion against Roman rule caused the emperor Hadrian to wage a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Jews. He prohibited the Hebrew calendar to be used, and did not allow the Jews to function under the Law of Moses. Many Judaic scholars were executed, and the sacred scroll, the Torah, was burned. He erected two statues where the temple sanctuary had formerly stood—one of Jupiter, and another of himself. To complete the cleansing he replaced the names of Judaea and Israel with Syria Palaestina after the Philistines.

From the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 until the Six-Day War in 1967 when Israel annexed East Jerusalem, Jerusalem has been in the hands of anti-Christ pagan rulers with the exception of bar Kokhba's brief victory (and even bar Kokhba could be named among the anti-Christ). And no wonder. Anti-Christ knows that the prophecies pertaining to the Lord's Second Coming clearly reveal that the Jews would possess Jerusalem at the time. The prophecy recorded in Luke 21:12-24

relates to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 until the coming of the Lord. It states that Jerusalem would be trodden underfoot by the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles has been completed. For some two millennia anti-Christ has managed to prevent the Jews from being placed in that position, rightly supposing that as long as the Jews did not possess Jerusalem Christ cannot return without failing His own prophecies.

Anti-Christ could be seen on both sides of the Jewish revolt against the Romans. He stirred up the unbelieving Jews to create the conditions that would bring down the wrath of the Roman Empire upon them, resulting in the Gentiles occupying Jerusalem for some 2,000 years. He stirred up the Roman emperors to try to wipe out the Jewish nation, which would effectively prevent the redemption of Israel and the return of the true Messiah. All the while Christians were being persecuted from both sides in anti-Christ's campaign against the Gospel.

The pagan world was no less culpable than the Jews in attempting to destroy the Gospel. It, too, sought to destroy faith in Christ, and it was through the introduction of significant heresies that the assemblies faced the most insidious threat to their faith.

HERESIES OF THE SECOND CENTURY

The second century saw the faith become decentralized from Jerusalem where the apostles first guided the fledgling community of believers in Jesus. It was the era of what modern theologians call the "Apostolic Fathers," who are said to have been students of the original twelve apostles. Prominent among these was Ignatius of Antioch, also known as Theophorus ("God-bearer") (ca. 35 B.C. - A.D. 108). Ignatius is considered the progenitor of sacramentalism and hierarchical ecclesiology, applying the word "bishop" to the Greek term *episkopou* (1Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7). Whereas the simple application of the word was one of "overseer," and the practice of overseeing was administered by a plurality of elders, Ignatius' concept of bishop was that of one possessing hierarchical, even monarchical authority. This would devolve into the clergy-laity model that has permeated Christianity from that time until today. It would be two more centuries before formal institutionalism via Roman Catholicism would enshrine the title "bishop" as representative of a ruling class within Christianity. In A.D. 115, while being taken to Rome for his execution, Ignatius wrote letters to various assemblies stressing the importance of the bishop as indispensable, and whose authority was absolute.

In spite of this shortcoming on the part of Ignatius, he went to his death for his faith, and never denied Christ. It may be said that his purpose largely rested on a desire to combat other serious heresies that were threatening the faith.

A contemporary of Ignatius, Polycarp, who was named bishop of Smyrna, assumed the authoritarian role that Ignatius promoted. In A.D. 156 Polycarp, like Ignatius, was also martyred for his faith.

Lest we judge these men too harshly we must also consider their zeal in combating other serious heresies that began springing up during their time. Among those promoting what would come to be called heretical teachings were Marcion of Sinope,

Valentinus, Montanus, Basilides, Carpocrates, Tatian, and others lesser-known.

Marcion of Sinope (ca. 85-160) was said by Hippolytus to be the son of the bishop of Sinope in Pontus. Around the middle of the second century he developed his particular theology which became known as Marcionism. Marcion found himself in conflict with the "bishops" of Rome who were even then beginning to assume authority over the assemblies at large, and was eventually excommunicated by them.

Central to Marcionism was a dualist system of belief based on the teaching that the God of the Torah was not the same God Jesus proclaimed as His Father. In his *Antitheses*, he contrasted what he called the "Demiurge" of the Old Testament with the heavenly Father of the New Testament. Marcion believed that Jesus' teachings of love and mercy were incompatible with the actions of the God of the Torah who Marcion believed was a jealous tribal deity of the Jews, and whose Law was based on reciprocal justice. Marcion failed to see the love and mercy of YHWH within the teachings of the prophets.

Additionally, Marcion taught that Jesus was the son of the heavenly Father, but he held a docetic understanding of the Lord's incarnation. That is, he believed Jesus' body to be merely an imitation of a material body—an illusion—a belief held by Gnostics. Yet he also believed that Jesus paid the price for mankind's sins through His crucifixion and death.

Valentinus (ca. 100-ca. 160) founded a school in Rome that taught a form of Christian Gnosticism. He was said to be a candidate for bishop in Rome but started his own sect when another was selected.

Valentinus developed a theology that espoused three distinct groups of people—spiritual, psychical, and material. Only his followers were considered of a spiritual nature, able to receive the knowledge (gnosis) that would allow them to return to the divine Pleroma—the totality of the divine nature. (This is similar to the Mormon doctrine of attainable godhood.) The psychical people (unenlightened Christians) would attain a lesser form of salvation; those of a material nature (pagans and Jews) were doomed to perish.

The extent of these fates is not fully understood due to the scant physical remains of Valentinus' writings. Most of what is known of his teachings is found in the writings of his disciples and his opponents.

The teachings of Marcion and Valentinus fell within the scope of Gnosticism.

Montanus developed a theology called by his disciples "New Prophecy." He held to the basic tenets of Christianity, but because of his emphasis on ongoing revelation and prophecy outside the parameters of the Scriptures he was regarded as a heretic. He and his two female colleagues, Prisca and Maximilla, claimed to receive direct revelations from the Holy Spirit, and spoke in ecstatic trances. Montanus would often speak as an oracle of God, sometimes in the first person as God. This led some to misunderstand him as claiming to be God. (This would be akin to several of today's word-faith and new wave doctrines.)

Montanus' New Prophecy enjoyed the endorsement of Tertullian, famous for his defense of the Trinitarian doctrine in his *Against Praxeas*. Tertullian is known as "the father of Latin Christianity" and "the founder of Western theology" which developed into the Latin Rite of Roman Catholicism.

In all these teachings, and others, we see many attempts by anti-Christ to subvert the purity of faith in Jesus. It was because of such diabolical attempts to subvert the faith that well-meaning men were impelled toward developing a systematized set of beliefs that became the foundation for "orthodox Christianity." This eventually developed into the establishment of church law and the structuring of Roman Catholicism which, because of its imperial power and military might, went virtually unchallenged by any large segment of Christianity until the Protestant Reformation.

So we see how anti-Christ first introduces spiritual error, laying the groundwork for correction—which correction itself becomes spiritual error through its overreaction to the original spiritual error.

It was a desire to correct such serious errors that the earliest so-called "Church Fathers" came to replace the apostles as the source for spiritual truth. These included Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp. To establish the authority of the Roman Church a lineage of bishops who operated in Rome was developed into what the Roman Catholic Church offers as a historical link to Peter as the first pope.

There is no scriptural or historical evidence that Peter was ever in Rome, and the earliest records trace back to a list of Roman bishops that existed in the time of Pope Eleutherus (ca. 174-189). Yet the Roman Catholic Church developed its papal lineage beginning with Peter and continuing through the first and second centuries by the following:

Linus (67-76); Anacletus (76-88); Clement I (88-97); Evaristus (97-105); Alexander I (105-115); Sixtus (115-125); Telesphorus (125-136); Hyginus (136-140); Pius I (140-155); Anicetus (155-166); Soter (166-175); Eleutherius (175-189); Victor I (189-199).

No one should doubt that these were pious men who believed they had the responsibility to preserve the faith against heresies. But what was developing was a different heresy—a hierarchical system of fallible men who took it upon themselves to be the spiritual authority over the Lord's people. This was also a time of persecution and turmoil that threatened the stability of the assemblies and the lives of the saints. Men of learning within the assemblies were expected to give guidance and to help ensure that no one would be found guilty of denying Christ or introducing teachings counter to the accepted orthodoxy. But one evil was being replaced by another, far more insidious, evil that would keep much of Christianity in the dark and subject to the authoritarian imperial rule of the popes up to this present time. Thus the role of Shepherd of the *ecclesia* would eventually be passed from Jesus to the pope of Rome as the "Vicar of Christ" on earth. But that is for another installment of this series.

The mistake made by Roman Catholicism and passed to the churches today through its daughters, the Protestant churches and their offspring, is assuming the succession of authority

passed from the apostles to those immediately after them simply because they were contemporaries. If one had become a disciple of Jesus through the apostle Paul, for example, it was assumed that one had the mantle of apostolic authority passed to him, particularly if that one were educated and able to write his theological musings to garner a following.

As a result, the Scriptures have largely been regarded as merely a starting point for God's revelation; now we have the authoritarian pronouncements of bishops, priests, pastors, and other clergy to tell us what is truth.

These are also from the spirit of anti-Christ.

ⁱ Droge, A.J. and Tabor, J.D. (1992:136) *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (Harper, San Francisco.)