

THE POST-APOSTOLIC AGE (CIRCA AD 100-400)

Objective

The children learn about how the Christian church developed after the death of the first Apostles.

Contents

- Bishops become the highest spiritual authority.
- The establishment of statements concerning matters of faith.
- The persecution of the Christians.
- The battle of faith and conviction of faith.



Introductory
Remarks**1 The development of the Christian church after the death of the first Apostles**

The Apostles of the early church were probably active until the end of the first century after Christ. After that a time began in which the Apostle ministry as such existed, but it was not occupied. Even during this period, however, the church felt that it was bound to the doctrine of the Apostles.

The bishops, who led the congregations and kept them together, became the supreme spiritual authority. In order to achieve unity in the leadership of the Christian church, bishops gathered from time to time to discuss church matters and make decisions. The bishops endeavoured especially to ensure doctrinal unity. Their meetings, which constituted supreme authority in matters of faith, were referred to as councils (from the Latin word *concilium*) or synods (from the Greek word *synodos*).

2 Sacraments

Augustine (354–430), a bishop and doctor of the church (a teacher), established the basis for what is considered to be a sacrament.

Different ideas regarding the number of sacraments and their content started to develop. That is why the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have seven sacraments, Protestant Churches two, and the New Apostolic Church three.

3 Persecutions of the Christians

The Roman emperors placed special significance on the practice of religion for the continued existence and strengthening of the empire, because the continuous success of Roman politics was attributed directly to the consistent worship of various gods. In many places there were idols. Because of the conviction of their faith (namely that the living God is the only one!) Christians could not acknowledge pagan gods.

Christians in the Roman Empire were confronted with a multitude of gods day in and day out. For example, if they came into a Roman home, there were household gods (penates) to whom they had to pay respect in passing—an impossibility for a devout Christian!

The problems which Christians of that time had to reckon with in their everyday lives are impressed upon the children in this lesson with the help of pertinent text.

Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome in AD 64 to justify ordering their systematic persecution.

Under Emperor Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 95, the state's interest in the Christians was aroused anew. Domitian was extremely vain and mistrustful, and suspected opposition on all sides. He introduced paying homage to the emperor as a sign of unconditional loyalty. Unable to worship the emperor on account of their faith, Christians were accused of atheism (that is, denying God's existence) and persecuted. Many were killed during these persecutions. The worst persecutions of Christians took place in the eastern part of the empire because emperor worship was most pronounced there.

According to Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon who died around 202, the Revelation of Jesus Christ was written at the time Emperor Domitian pressed ahead with this wave of persecution.

At this time persecution of the Christians in the empire was sporadic and local. However, when they were persecuted it was not always for political reasons. Christians were still regarded as eccentrics, whose teachings and goal were not understood. Again and again Christians fell victim to the unjust reports of their neighbours. Whenever there were epidemics, famine or crop failures, suspicion that the Christians were responsible for the disaster was sufficient to effect their punishment.

4 The last great persecutions

Under Emperor Decius, who reigned from 249 to 251, Christians were put into extreme jeopardy. In 249 he issued an edict against bishops and other clergy. They were summoned to appear in court and executed for refusing to worship the emperor. In 250 this edict was extended to include all citizens of the empire. Now persecutions were no longer directed solely at Christians. Decius wanted to secure the unity of the state. He ordered that all citizens had to provide written confirmation to certify they had paid homage to the emperor. If a citizen did not, it was regarded as *lèse-majesté*. Now everyone had to publicly declare his or her position. And as earlier on already, there now were also many Christians who staunchly professed their faith.

Under Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 305, extremely violent persecutions commenced, which developed into a veritable annihilation campaign especially in the east. Christian churches were destroyed and the people's books burned. They themselves were arrested and executed by the thousands. Nevertheless, he did not succeed in blotting out Christianity.

In 311 and 313 Diocletian's successors, one of whom was Emperor Constantine I, issued edicts calling for tolerance, which secured equal status for Christianity and pagan religions, and (for the time being) put an end to the persecution of the Christians.

Nonetheless, following a peaceful interval, the Christians were again persecuted during the reign of Roman Emperor Julian (361–363).

In the year 380, however, Theodosius, who reigned from 378 to 395, elevated Christianity to state religion status in the Roman Empire. In addition he enacted a law banning all forms of pagan worship 12 years later. The terrible persecutions of Christians by Roman emperors were finally a thing of the past, and Christianity had attained undreamt-of significance within the state.

5 Christianity among the Gentiles

At the time of the early church, the gospel was initially spread only among the Jews. But shortly after God had revealed to Apostle Peter that the gospel was also to be preached to the Gentiles, the spreading of Christianity among the Gentiles began. At the beginning of the fourth century AD, Christianity's area of influence extended from Spain in the west to Persia and India in the east, from North Africa in the south up to the British Isles in the north.

Already at the time the Christians were being persecuted, many Christian principles aroused the interest of the Gentiles. For many of them it was an amazing and, at the same time, attractive accomplishment that Christians treated one another the same, regardless of social status. Whether enslaved or free, rich or poor, everyone in the congregation was equal. Slaves, who were regarded as mere objects and treated so too in everyday life, could even assume ministries within the congregation. This attracted many ordinary people.

Lesson Plan

Lead-In

Workbook

Teacher's Presentation

Christians were prepared to die for their faith. This had an exemplary effect. Their fearless profession of faith caused many non-Christians to become pensive and ask themselves what power and hope inspired these people.

Women were also permitted to attend Christian divine services, although in the ancient world they were often regarded as being inferior.

The children look at the picture on the title page.

For the Jewish Christians of the early church, the menorah (the seven-armed candelabrum used in the ancient temple), rather than the cross, was the symbol of their faith, whereas non-Jewish Christians from Antioch, Rome, and Greece had made a fish the sign by which to identify fellow Christians. The Greek word for fish is *ichthys*. The letters of this word are the first letters of the confession, *Iesous Christos Theou Yios* (or *Huios*) *Soter*, which means Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.

Question Prompt

What does this statement mean?

Discussion

With His sacrificial death, the Son of God established the basis for the salvation of all people.

Implementation

Question Prompt

How did the gospel, the message of salvation, reach the people?

- Jesus Himself was only active for about three years within a limited geographic area (namely Galilee, Samaria, and Judea) and therefore reached only few people with His doctrine.
- He commissioned the Apostles as His ambassadors: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28: 19).
- The early Christian Apostles fulfilled this commission as far as possible. But under the circumstances at the time, they were unable to familiarize all people with the glad tidings of the gospel.

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| Question Prompt | <p>What happened after the last Apostle of the early church had died?</p> <p>If necessary, supplement the children's answers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Bishops were now the supreme ministerial authority. They assumed responsibility for the congregations, cared for them, and continued to spread the gospel of Jesus. |
| Teacher's Presentation | <p>The epoch from the death of the last Apostle (approximately AD 100) until the year 400 is called the post-apostolic early Christian age. With the spread of Christianity and the corresponding increase in the number of congregations, the bishops saw the necessity for establishing uniformity of church leadership. To this end meetings of bishops (constituting supreme authority) were convened, at which church matters were discussed and decisions made. These meetings were called councils or synods. At these gatherings the bishops endeavoured especially to ensure doctrinal unity.</p> <p>The bishops of the post-apostolic age established basic principles, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, which are essential for the Christian faith.</p> |
| Workbook, Exercise 1 | <p>The children work on the exercise together with the teacher.</p> |
| Discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople documents the Christian belief in God the Father, His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Catechism-QA 35). ■ The canon of the New Testament established at the councils of Hippo and Carthage is binding for all Christian churches. |
| Statement Prompt | <p>All Christian churches and communities believe in the triune God.</p> <p>They believe in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ God, the Father. ■ God, the Son. ■ God, the Holy Spirit. ■ one holy universal [catholic] and apostolic church. |

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| Statement Prompt | The Christians' convictions of faith differed distinctly from those of the Gentiles, which resulted in many difficulties for the Christians. |
| Workbook, Exercise 2 | The children work on the exercise individually or with a partner. |
| Discussion | Idol worship contravened the first commandment. Accordingly it was incompatible with a Christian's conviction of faith, and that of a Jew's. If he refrained from the demanded form of worship, however, he provoked mistrust and disapproval in his surroundings, and even had to reckon with court action. |
| Workbook, Exercise 3 | The children read the text with the parts given out and answer the questions. |
| Result | The Christian was put to death by the sword because he would not worship the emperor. |
| Teacher's Presentation | <p>Christians also had to reckon with similar measures if they were reported for not worshipping the pagan gods.</p> <p>Persecutions of the Christians ensued. A good many Christians were cruelly put to death (by crucifixion, as live feed for the animals in the arenas, or burnt as live torches). Not all Christians had to die on account of their faith. But at all times they had to reckon with the derision and scorn of their fellow-men.</p> |
| Workbook, Exercise 4 | The children look at the satirical drawing and discuss it. |
| Question Prompt | Have you ever been mocked because of your faith? |
| Discussion | <p>The children report about their own experiences.</p> <p>In many parts of the world there are situations that, although they are not comparable to those encountered at the time of the persecution of the first Christians, require us to make it clear where we stand and profess our faith. But even today there are countries in which Christians are persecuted and killed.</p> <p>Also make it clear that professing one's faith can lead to lasting conflicts. Possibly peer pressure is experienced (from fellow-students or teachers).</p> |

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| Question Prompt | <p>How do we react to this?</p> <p>In spite of it, we always want to readily profess our faith. As children of God we can be sure that our heavenly Father will stand by us. That is why we do not have to be afraid of anyone.</p> <p>A child reads aloud from the Bible.</p> |
| Bible | <p>Matthew 5: 11: <i>"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake."</i></p> |
| Discussion | <p>The important part of this statement of the Lord is the requirement "falsely". It implies that the Lord's beatitude refers to being unjustifiably reviled and to unjustifiable evil words.</p> |
| Conclusion | <p>A child reads aloud what Jesus Himself promised.</p> |
| Bible | <p>Matthew 10: 32: <i>"Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven."</i></p> |
| Workbook, Exercise 5 | <p>The children write this text into their workbook.</p> |
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