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CHURCH HISTORY MONTHLY

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Timeline of Topics

Early Church History

-230s: First evidence of a church building.

Medieval

-1205: New Testament chapters added.

Reformation

-1551: New Testament verses added.

American Church History

-1620-present: Congregationalism.

-1948: Christian Spiritual Classic quote.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos_church#/media/File:Dura_Europos_Baptistry_Good_Shepherd.jpg

The first house church in Dura-Europos had several frescos. This one is of Jesus as a shepherd carrying a sheep. (Look just to the left of the center.)

The earliest known church building

Today church buildings come in all shapes and sizes, yet the first Christians gathered in people's homes, known as house churches.

As Christianity grew larger, the Roman Empire began arresting and persecuting Christians. Building a church building would be like putting on a big target and saying "Here we are." Instead, Christians gathered secretly in people's homes. The number of house churches in a city varied. Rome or Corinth or Ephesus could have had up to 100 or more, we just don't know.

The first actual church building that has been discovered dates from the 230s and is in Dura-Europos in southeastern Syria. It was originally a house (and shared walls with surrounding houses) and was later made into a church. The church had a number of frescos on the wall. (See the image on the left.) A long table was at one end of the house, probably used for communion, and a pool was in the center, possibly for baptisms by the Christians. The whole city is amazingly preserved for a simple fact: it was a Roman fortress-city built in the desert, and, after it was conquered by the Persians in 256, it was abandoned. Over time it was covered with sand, and the city was not discovered until the 1920s.

And, in a bizarre twist of history, in the 1930s Yale University archaeologists dismantled part of the church and reconstructed it in the Yale University Art Gallery, where it resides today.



*Egyptian desert father, c. 350:
Abba (Father) Poemen used to
say, "Teach your heart to keep
that which your tongue teaches."*

Yes, the Apostle Thomas went to India

The Bible is silent on what happened to most of the original Apostles of Jesus later in their lives; the New Testament only gives details about Peter, Paul, James, and Judas. But some evidence suggests that the Apostle Thomas traveled to, evangelized, started churches in, and died in India.

First, let's examine the early history of Christianity in India. We know that Christianity existed in India before the Middle Ages. In the 300s, Theophilus the Indian recorded the presence of Christians in India. Cosmas the Indian Voyager wrote a book in the mid-500s called "Christian Topography" and stated, "In the country called Male, where the pepper grows, there is also a church, and at another place called Calliana, there is moreover a bishop, who is appointed from Persia." Both "Male" and "Calliana" are on the western coast of India. Now we turn to some references to Thomas' life and death. Gregory of Tours (540-594) was a bishop in Gaul, or present-day France. He reported that a traveler named Theodore claimed that the bones of Thomas had been in a monastery and church in India and then moved to Edessa (in Greece or Turkey). A Syrian calendar of unknown early date reads thus on July 3: "St. Thomas was pierced with a lance in India [and died]." Ephraem (306-373), a bible scholar who lived in Edessa wrote this: "It was his mission to expose India to the One-Begotten." And none other than Marco Polo himself visited the tomb of Thomas in India, stating that "Christians . . . greatly frequented it in pilgrimage."

Therefore, we know that Christianity was not only present in India early on but was probably introduced by Thomas. Today the descendants of this early Indian Christianity have the tradition that Thomas came to India in AD 52 and established seven Christian communities: the beginnings of Christianity in India.

What is the origin of the idea of "separation of church and state"?

First of all, why a separation of Church and State? No doubt the Founding Fathers did not want to reproduce the European situation where different nations had different national religions, which led to wars. Plus, think of this, if the Founding Fathers did choose a national faith, which one would it be? So they chose none.

This did not come out forcefully enough in the Constitution in 1789, so two years later the First Amendment made it clearer: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." (Ratified Dec 15, 1791)

However, Baptists in the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut felt they continued to experience religious harassment. They wrote a letter in October of 1801 to inform the then-President Thomas Jefferson.

The President responded in 1802, and I quote a part of his letter:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and state.

But what does this "wall of separation between church and state" mean and look like? He did not fully explain and so the debate goes on.

Questions, comments, or suggestions
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Upcoming free online class:
-8-week "New Testament Overview"
starts on February 22.