Church Structures: Historical Influences

Teacher Background

Pentecost
Pentecost is celebrated by Christians because of their association with the events recorded in Acts 2:1-45 which speaks of the descent of the Holy Spirit on those gathered and the beginning of the apostolic dimension of the Church. In the Church’s calendar year the feast of Pentecost marks the end of fifty days of rejoicing of Easter. This season is to be celebrated as a joy-filled time marked by the absence of fasting and kneeling in prayer. Pentecost Sunday became a baptismal day in some places, as was the Easter Vigil.

Early Church
The first Christian communities were small and relatively unstructured. Relatively quickly, a common pattern of authority and liturgy emerged as identifiably early Christian. At first the Churches looked to their founding apostle as leader. But Paul began the practice of appointing a resident community leader. Already in the New Testament we see the threefold Order of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons in existence. The Council of Jerusalem set the pattern for dealing with questions of faith and order in the universal Church. Church leaders would gather in prayerful assembly to deal with such matters under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, Peter and his successors in Rome were looked to as the centre of unity, preserving communion between the local Churches. At first this was limited to leadership in faith, but gradually Roman authority became institutionalised, paralleling that of the empire.

Some of the early churches were households, others larger communities meeting together in towns and cities. As the gospel spread to the Gentile world, this pattern was repeated. Acts describes these early communities: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.’ Structures were simple. The focus was on people sharing faith and caring for each other.

St Peter and St Paul are honoured in the liturgy as the principal founding apostles of the Church. From the beginning Peter had a special role of leadership. James the brother of Jesus, Barnabas and other apostles, close disciples and early post resurrection converts were also involved in the formation of the early Church. Upon consideration of this, it could be said that the Church, in historical fact, was founded on the first generation of Christians and the diverse members of the early Jesus movement. This was recognised by Paul in his conflict concerning demands being made of pagan converts. He confronted Peter and demanded an end to discrimination. Peter spent time with the Church of Antioch before travelling to Rome, where he was martyred. Paul was a Pharisee, well educated and zealous in stamping out Christianity. He underwent an extraordinary conversion and, after a long period of prayerful preparation, took up his calling to be the Apostle of the Gentiles. He was a strenuous missioner, organised many of the first Churches, and gave us the earliest writings of the New Testament. The Church is said to be built on the rock of Peter’s faith and the sword of Paul’s teaching.

Paul was the first great Christian missionary. He preached to both Jews and Gentiles, travelling extensively throughout the Roman Empire, establishing Christian communities in areas of modern day Turkey, Syria, Greece and Cyprus. Paul maintained contact with these communities by writing letters to communities he had already established in such places as Rome, Corinth, Thessalonika, Philippi and Galatia. Paul is the major figure in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul's letters express his theological thinking about the message and significance of Jesus Christ for the early Christian
communities. These letters were written in relation to the particular pastoral needs of individual communities. Paul helped the early Christian communities recognise that they were more than a sect of Judaism. His influence at the Council of Jerusalem in 49 CE was crucial in the decision of the Christian communities to move beyond purely Jewish traditions (Acts 15:1-17; 19-31).

**Historical overview of the Church**

A study of the Church in history is not concerned with an accumulation of dates and data. It is rather an examination of the impact that history has had upon the Church, and of the Church upon history. There is a mountain of Church historical material available. The following overview depicts some of the more significant events in Church history.

**Early Church History**

- New Testament period – mission and beginnings of structure
- Doctrinal controversies – heresy and the early Councils; clarification of belief
- The Church is dominant in the West
- Holy Roman Empire – alliance of Church and State
- Monasticism – centre of scholarship
- Gregorian reform – institutionalisation of Church and papal power
- East-West schism – rise of Orthodoxy in the East
- Disintegration of Christian unity
- Church-State conflicts
- The Reformation
- The Counter-Reform
- The Enlightenment – worldwide missionary activity
- The Industrial and Technological ages
- The French Revolution – the end of feudalism
- Modernism – a transition period to a new age of secularism
- Social Questions – the development of social teaching and action
- Renewal – Vatican II and beyond

Throughout the history of the last two millennia, the Church has helped shape and has itself been significantly shaped by history and culture. Today's Church cannot be properly understood except in the context of its historical development. Similarly, many aspects of especially Western culture cannot be appreciated without reference to strong Christian influences. The interaction of history, culture and Church makes a fascinating study.

**Creeds and Councils**

As Christianity emerged from its Jewish roots, questions arose about how best to express the faith. In some places attempts to accommodate local religion and philosophy led to controversy. Usually the local bishop dealt with this, but sometimes the problem could not be contained and regional or even universal councils were called to settle the matter. Many of the early heresies were about a proper understanding of Christ’s humanity and divinity. Some councils, such as Ephesus and Nicea issued carefully worded professions of faith (or creeds). These were incorporated into the liturgy.