

### C. The Purpose of the New Testament

- 1) Identifying the *purpose* of the NT (*why* it was written) is challenging as the NT is made up of 27 books. Each book has its own unique set of characteristics, including a definite reason or purpose **why** it was written. Thus, setting forth the purpose of the NT must take into account each NT book's purpose.
- 2) The purpose of the NT is to give the **church** God's written revelation concerning **Christian** doctrine and practice

### D. The Divisions of the New Testament

- 1) The Basis for and Growth of Christianity—the **Gospels** and **Acts**
  - a. The Gospels provide the basis of Christianity—the person and work of Jesus Christ and Israel's rejection of Him as their Messiah
  - b. Acts provides the birth and growth of Christianity
- 2) The Doctrine and Practice of Christianity—the **Epistles** (Romans through Revelation)

Doctrine and practice—what you believe and how you live—are never separate issues. The latter is based entirely on the former. In the NT, issues of lifestyle, church life, and even petty problems are dealt with in light of God's principles.

“Christianity is a religion of a Book. That is sometimes regarded as a reproach. The reproach would be justified if the Bible were an ordinary book. But the Bible is not an ordinary book. It is a message from God” (Machen, *The New Testament*, p. 19).

## 2. The Roman Background of Christianity

These essential documents of Christianity must be understood in light of the times and circumstances in which they were written—the times in which the first Christians lived. Christianity had its beginnings under the Roman Empire, and so we need to give some time to understanding Roman rule.

### A. Advantages of the Imperial Government

Throughout the Roman Empire most provinces appreciated the Roman government and its leader, Augustus

#### 1) Peace

The Roman Empire brought about peace (*Pax Romana*) after a long civil war. This peace was essential not only for every-day life but also for good business.

#### 2) Administration of Government

- a. Local governments were enabled to function with greater protection of citizens
- b. Before Rome took over the governors used their office to get more money
- c. Roman rule established a central authority that local governments became responsible to
- d. What was once a chaotic situation became more orderly
- e. While there was oppression and injustice among Roman rulers, by ancient standards Roman law did do much good for the people
- f. One of the good things that resulted from Roman law was a strong economy, and during NT times it was at its peak
- g. In ancient times communication and **travel** was extremely dangerous and difficult. Under Roman rule an extensive system of paved roads (250,000 miles!) made land travel much easier and more common. This does not mean, however, that there were no dangers (cf. 2 Cor 11:26—"perils of robbers"). However, roads made the work of Christian missionaries much easier than it would have been otherwise.

## B. Roman Administration under the Empire

### 1) Provinces (for examples see Acts 23:34; 25:1)

A Roman province was territory under Roman rule. There were two types of provinces:

- a. Imperial
  - Under the emperor's immediate control
  - Governed by "legates" who served as long as the emperor chose to keep them
  - Often these areas were places of unrest and so soldiers occupied them
  - The emperor thus had direct control over the army
  - Syria (capital: Antioch) was an imperial province, and Palestine was basically supervised by the Syrian official
  - Sometimes areas were under the emperor's control but were governed by "procurators." Judea is an example of this during most of the NT times.
- b. Senatorial
  - Governed by "proconsuls" chosen by the Senate
  - Proconsuls served for only one year
  - Senatorial provinces were found closer to Rome and were more settled
  - Achaia (capital: Corinth) and Cyprus (capital: Paphos) are examples

### 2) Local Government

- a. Cities had a certain amount of independence (this was in place before Roman rule, when Greece was in power)
- b. Throughout the empire Roman colonies were established, often composed of veterans of Roman armies. One example is Philippi (Acts 16:12)

### 3) Roman Citizenship

- a. Italian citizens automatically had citizenship, so outside of Italy it was extremely valuable.
- b. If one was a Roman citizen he could not be **punished** in shameful ways, such as scourging with rods or whips, and especially crucifixion (see Acts 22:25-29)
- c. Roman citizens could also appeal to the **emperor** if charged with a capital offense (see Acts 25:11-12)

### C. The Empire and Christianity

#### 1) How this Affected Christianity

- a. Barriers of race and nationality were removed
- b. **Travel** was easier than it had ever been
- c. There was **peace** throughout the then known world
- d. The mission of Christianity was to the **world**, and the effects of Roman rule opened the world to Christianity

#### 2) Rome's "Protection" of Christianity

- a. With the exception of the Jews, those under Rome's jurisdiction were polytheistic—they worshiped many **gods** and were very tolerant of “your god”
- b. Despite the general loathing others had toward Jews they were tolerated as Rome sought to avoid dealing with differences of religion, especially with people as stubborn as the Jews were
- c. At its beginning Christianity was viewed as a division or sect of Judaism and so it had all the privileges of Judaism. Early on when the Jews attacked Christianity Roman authorities viewed this as only a fight among themselves (cf. Acts 18:12-17), so that Rome actually *protected* Christianity!

“These things did not happen by chance. It was not by chance that Jesus was born in the golden age of the Roman Empire...God is the ruler of **history**. His times are well chosen. The Roman Empire was an instrument in his hand. And so are the nations of the modern world” (Machen, *The New Testament*, p. 25).

## 3. The Greek Background of Christianity

### A. Greek Language

- 1) Greek culture and language was spread throughout the area of NT times as a result of Alexander the Great's conquests in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This is known as Hellenization, which comes from what Greeks called themselves (*Héllēn*, Ἕλληνας).

- 2) Koine Greek (“common Greek”) became the common **language** among the Mediterranean and Ancient Near East countries. Each country would have their own particular language (for Judea it was Aramaic) but Greek was the language that almost everyone knew (called the *lingua franca*). This enabled communication with those from different regions and backgrounds.

Example: English is the “mother tongue” in the US but not in the Philippines where Filipino is their “mother tongue” but they also learn English to be able to communicate with non-Filipinos.

- 3) When the Roman Empire replaced the Greek Empire they did not try to change the shared, common language. Combined with the Romans’ improved travel and communication, Greek became the universal language. Other languages were used, such as Lycaonian (Acts 14:11) and Aramaic (Acts 21:40; 22:2), but Greek was the language understood by almost everyone.
- 4) This was a great help to the **spread** of Christianity. Christians were able to communicate the gospel to most people because they spoke Greek. This enabled the gospel to spread rapidly, much faster than having to learn a new language when entering a new area with a different language.

#### B. Greek Culture and Christianity

- 1) Remember, Christianity is a religion of a Book, the Bible. When it began it had a Bible, but it was *not* Greek but **Hebrew!** This could have been a huge problem, but in the providence of God it had been overcome.
- 2) While the OT was a Hebrew book, before the Christian era it had been translated into Greek, so that from its beginning Christians had a Bible they could read. Translation is difficult and time-consuming, but again God had met this need.
- 3) This Greek translation of the OT is called the Septuagint (abbreviated as LXX). Note the following:
  - a. Early Christians had no interest in the Hebrew OT as they were content with their Greek Bible.
  - b. The LXX was the Bible first century missionaries like Paul used as the basis for their teaching and work
  - c. This was the Bible that NT authors—under the protection and guidance of the Holy Spirit—quoted from

## 4. The Jewish Background of Christianity

#### A. Government

- 1) Judea was governed by Roman procurators, but Jews were able to exercise a large amount of power (see for example Acts 5:17-18, 40)

- 2) A council called the Sanhedrin (“Council of the elders,” Luke 22:66; Acts 6:12; 22:5) administered this ruling power and also served as a court. The high priest was its president.
- 3) The Sanhedrin was made up of **Pharisees** and **Sadducees**. The Sadducees had higher authority but the Pharisees had more real power as they had the people on their side.

## B. Parties

### 1) Pharisees

- a. Strict interpretation of the Mosaic law
- b. They hated foreign influence
- c. Most of the scribes (professional interpreters of the law) were Pharisees
- d. From a desire to make sure the Law was kept the Pharisees enforced observance of minute and endless traditions (called “oral law”)

### 2) Sadducees

- a. These men were from the wealthy upper class
- b. They held positions of worldly authority, and as a result didn’t mind either Roman government or Greek culture
- c. Accepted Mosaic Law but rejected the traditions of the scribes
- d. Rejected belief in the **resurrection** (Matt 22:23) and angels or spirits (Acts 23:8)

## C. Religious Life

### 1) The Temple

- a. The temple had been rebuilt in 20-19 BC by Herod the Great (he killed boys under the age of two in Bethlehem and its vicinity, Matt 2:16)
- b. The OT regulations concerning its worship were carried out by the priests, most of which were worldly
- c. There were some godly priests and Israelites who worshipped there and looked for the consolation of Israel (see Luke 1:6-9; 2:25-38)

### 2) Synagogues

- a. Though we don’t know when synagogues began, they were everywhere Jews were (ten Jewish males were required to found one)
- b. Services in the synagogue were a lot like our church services today. There was prayer, Scripture reading, and a message. The two basic purposes of the synagogue service were to **praise** the Lord and **educate** the people.
- c. Any Jewish male could lead in prayer or give the sermon (for example see Matt 4:23; Acts 13:15)
- d. No **sacrifices** were made in synagogues—that only happened at the Temple in Jerusalem

- e. Synagogues were open and used every **day** of the week, not just on the Sabbath

#### D. The Dispersion

“When a foreign missionary enters a new city, the first difficulty which confronts him is the difficulty of getting an audience. In the Gentile mission of the early Church this particular difficulty had been overcome. In practically every city of the Greco-Roman world, the Christian missionaries found an audience ready for them. The audience was provided by the synagogue of the Jews” (Machen, *The New Testament*, p. 39).

##### 1) Causes and Extent of the Dispersion

- a. By the first century AD Jews were scattered all over the civilized world
- b. Jews were taken away from Israel by force
- c. Jews moved from place to place because of famine or better business opportunities

##### 2) Proselytes

- a. Both **Jews** and **Gentiles** attended synagogue services. This is extremely important for understanding the spread of the gospel
- b. Today only Jews attend synagogue, but in NT times Jews actively sought to convert Gentiles. **Converts** to Judaism were called proselytes (see Matt 23:15; Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43)
- c. There were two classes of Gentiles who attended synagogue services:
  - Full converts were Gentiles who became fully identified with the people of Israel
  - Gentiles who attended synagogue—these were Gentiles who were interested in Judaism and believed some of its teachings but did not become full Jews (usually because of **circumcision**)
- d. When the Christian missionaries spoke in the synagogues they spoke to both Jews and Gentiles

##### 3) How the Dispersion Helped Christianity

There are four ways:

- a. Many of the first Christian missionaries were Jews of the dispersion and so their background included a knowledge of the OT *and* speaking Greek. This equipped them to fulfill the Great Commission to most anyone they met
- b. As Christianity was viewed as a branch of Judaism, Christianity at first had legal protection
- c. Synagogues provided an audience for Christian missionaries to begin their work from (see for example Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14-15; 18:4; 19:8)
- d. In the Septuagint Christians had a translation of the OT Bible in Greek