

A JUDE 3 PROJECT CURRICULUM

THROUGH EYES OF COLOR

A CONTEXTUALIZED GUIDE TO HELP YOU KNOW
WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND WHY.



JUDE 3 PROJECT

Chapter Three

EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

I. The Ethiopian Eunuch Revisited

In the previous chapter, we took a brief look at the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. This story is significant because it helps overturn the lie that Christianity is a white man's religion, but also because it marks the initial fulfillment of Jesus's promise in Acts 1:8. Let's take a closer look.

Just before Jesus ascended into the heavens, He promised His disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

If you were to do a quick survey of the first eight chapters of the Book of Acts, you would find the story of how the gospel quickly moved from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth. In Acts 2, after the Spirit came down and filled the disciples who were gathered in the city of Jerusalem, 3,000 people were saved (Acts 2:41)! Later in Acts 4:4, we are told that their numbers in Jerusalem grew from 3,000 to 5,000. In Acts 8, due to persecution, Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). But that didn't keep them from talking about Jesus. Instead, "the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they

went" (Acts 8:4). The gospel was on the move, and as more people were filled with the Holy Spirit, new witnesses were born.

Then we come to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip, a deacon of the church in Jerusalem, was instructed by an angel of the Lord to leave Samaria and travel south to a desert road that went from Jerusalem to Gaza. *What kind of evangelistic work could possibly be found on this desert road?* Hardly anyone traveled on it. There were no villages or towns surrounding it.

Upon his arrival, Philip found a single chariot traveling along the road. He ran over to catch up with it at the Spirit's prompting. As he got close to the chariot, he heard a man reading from the scroll of Isaiah. Philip realized he was Ethiopian, not Jewish, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Though the Ethiopian eunuch had likely traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship God at a Jewish festival, he had no idea what or who Isaiah was talking about. All he knew was that God was real and deserving of his devotion. He believed this so much that he traveled five-and-a-half months to worship God at a temple he wouldn't even be able to set foot in. By Jewish law, the Ethiopian eunuch was prevented from entering the temple because he was a foreigner. And not only that, but his status as a eunuch also prevented him from worshipping in the temple because he was considered unclean by Jewish law (Exodus 12:34; Deuteronomy 23:1; Ezekiel 44:6-9). All he could do was stand outside the temple and listen as people raised their voices to God.

So, out of an eagerness to know the God he had just traveled to worship, he gladly welcomes Philip aboard his chariot to explain. Philip picks up from where the Ethiopian eunuch was reading in Isaiah 53:7-8 and begins to share the gospel. Imagine how the Ethiopian eunuch's heart fluttered when they got to Isaiah 56:3-8:

For this is what the Lord says:
I will bless those eunuchs
who keep my Sabbath days holy
and who choose to do what pleases me
and commit their lives to me.

I will give them -- within the walls of my house --
a memorial and a name
far greater than sons and daughters could give.
For the name I give them is an everlasting one.

It will never disappear!

I will also bless the foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord,
who serve him and love his name,
who worship him and do not desecrate the Sabbath day of rest,
and who hold fast to my covenant.

I will bring them to my holy mountain of Jerusalem
and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer.
I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices,
because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

How do you think these words landed on the heart of the Ethiopian eunuch? How might these words have changed his understanding of God and himself?

With this renewed perspective of God and himself, along with an understanding of Christ's role in his salvation, the Ethiopian eunuch realizes every barrier to God had been torn down. In Christ, he is no longer a foreigner, but a son. In Christ, he is no longer unclean, but clean. This is why, when the Ethiopian eunuch saw a pool of water, he asked Philip if there was anything preventing him from being baptized (Acts 8:36). Seeing that there was nothing standing in the man's way, Philip baptized him.

What a gift! For the first time the Ethiopian eunuch was able to participate in worship and obedience to the Lord just like everyone other Christian!

Given this review of Acts 1-8, consider the question below, which was posed in the last chapter. "Is Christianity a white man's religion?" What might you add to your response?

Why would God call Philip away from a successful ministry to go to a desert road to meet the Ethiopian eunuch?

The Holy Spirit didn't just send Philip to that deserted road to reveal God's desire for "burnt-faced" people to know Him. The Holy Spirit sent Philip to that deserted road to fulfill Jesus's promise to empower His people to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

In his commentary on the book of Acts, biblical scholar F.F. Bruce writes, "The Ethiopians were regarded by the Greeks and their neighbors . . . as living on the edge of the world."¹⁶ If this is true, it means that Luke is intentionally sharing the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch to show that his conversion is the initial fulfillment of Jesus's promise in Acts 1:8 to reach the world.

The conversion of Ethiopian eunuch—a "burnt-faced" black man—is the first fruits of Jesus's promise for His disciples to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. This is incredible!

If God intentionally inspired the writers of Scripture to record particular stories, then who they were, in regard to their ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, mattered. Why is it significant that the first non-Jew to receive Christ was a black man? What significance does this have for the church? What significance does this have for you, personally?

The end of the Ethiopian eunuch's story says, "he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). Though Luke doesn't tell us what happens when he gets back home to Ethiopia, it's not totally a mystery. The man's heart was bursting with joy!

16. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 178-9.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Paul writes, "For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: If one died for all, then all died. And he died so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised" (CSB). The word "compel" can be likened to being forced into a corner. When you are forced into a corner, you feel suffocated, stuck; like your only option is to surrender to your opponent. Sounds awful, right? Why would Paul use such an awful analogy to describe Christ's love? Paul is taking this concept and spinning it on its head to explain the inescapable, irresistible, all-consuming love of God. Because Paul experienced God's love in his life, he couldn't help but surrender it and share it with others. The same was true for the Ethiopian eunuch.

II. Going Deeper

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. Use the five-step process for Bible study presented in chapter one to unwrap the meaning of this passage and its implications for those in Christ, then answer the following questions.

- Share with one another how God saved and captured you with His love.
- How does Christ's love compel you to die to yourself and live for Him?
- What does it mean to be a "new creation" according to this text?
- According to this text, what does it mean to be an "ambassador of Christ"?
- If gaining the identity of an ambassador for Christ is a natural consequence for all who place their faith in Jesus, what do you think the Ethiopian eunuch did when he got home? How might he have leveraged his position as an officer to the Queen for God's glory?

Dr. David Daniels, who has done extensive research in the area of Church History, shares the following about the church in Ethiopia:¹⁷

- The church of Ethiopia was firmly established during the first century. This is within the first 100 years of Christ's ascension.
- Ethiopia was the first kingdom to accept Christianity as its state religion.
- During the sixteenth century, Ethiopia was commended by Martin Luther,

17. David Daniels, "The African Roots of the Reformation" [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/african-roots-reformation-special-guest-dr-david-daniels/id978012810?i=1000394480912>. The Jude 3 Project (November 2017).

the father of the Reformation, for not wavering from the faith. Unlike the church at Rome, they had not added unbiblical rules that prevented people from experiencing the grace of the gospel. (If you don't know much about Martin Luther and the Reformation, a church being commended by Luther is like a basketball player being commended by Michael Jordan; they both have high standards and are not quick to hand out compliments.)

By God's grace the whole kingdom of Ethiopia was reached with the gospel. And not only Ethiopia, but by God's grace other countries in Africa were reached. Within the first 100 years of Christianity, churches were established in Egypt.¹⁸ By the fifth century, churches began to pop up in Nubia, which led to its Christianization in the year 543.¹⁹

In the opening pages of *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, our white chocolate brother, Dr. Thomas C. Oden writes,

“Africa played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture. Decisive intellectual achievements of Christianity were explored and understood first in Africa before they were recognized in Europe, and a millennium before they found their way to North America.”²⁰

Africa set the standard for academia, hermeneutics, the formulation of Church doctrine, and so much more. You can't go to a seminary, preach a sermon, or talk about the nature of Christ without bumping up against the influence of the Early African church.

AFRICAN CHURCH LEADERS AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CHURCH

Clement of Alexandria (c. 169–215)

Location: Alexandria

Role: Presbyter (Elder)

18. Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), 8.

19. *Ibid.*, 30.

20. Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 9.

Contribution: Clement was an apologist. He was always looking for ways to integrate his faith with the world around him. He had a gift for utilizing philosophy to explain the truths and implication of God's word with those who were far from God. One of his greatest works is a book called *The Instructor*, which was the first literary work on Christian ethics. It presented Jesus as the divine Logos (Word) that instructs the Christian on how to live in society.²¹ Pastors, theologians, and apologists still use Clement's methods as a way to build a bridge from doubt to faith.

Tertullian (c. 160–220)

Location: Carthage

Role: Christian Writer

Contribution: Tertullian was a complicated brother. If you take a listen to our Jude 3 podcast “Tertullian: The Good, Bad, & Ugly,” you'll learn why. However, the Church is forever indebted to Tertullian for his work on the three-person nature of God. Tertullian coined the term “Trinity,” along with many others like “original sin” and “sacrament,” to help the early Church make sense of their faith.²²

Saint Perpetua (c. 182–203)

Location: Carthage

Role: Martyr

Contribution: Perpetua was a 22-year-old mother who refused to obey the Roman emperor and renounce her faith in Jesus Christ. Though her father urged her to be sensible, she endured imprisonment, torture, and death for the sake of the gospel. In the days leading up to her death, she not only nourished the church with her bravery and commitment to endure against persecution, but she also nourished her infant by nursing him while in prison. Perpetua contended for the faith until death.

Saint Felicitas (c. ?–203)

Location: Carthage

Role: Martyr

Contribution: Felicitas was a bad mamma jamma! Even though she was pregnant, she refused to obey the emperor and renounce her faith in Jesus Christ. Along with Perpetua's, her commitment to Christ in the midst of motherhood spoke volumes to the persecuted church at Carthage. Felicitas gave birth to her baby girl just days before her execution. As she cried out in pain during childbirth, someone asked her, “How are you ever going to endure the suffering of martyrdom?” Felicitas replied,

21. Ferguson, 129.

22. *Ibid.*, 126.

“Now it is I who suffer what I am suffering; then, there will be Another in me Who will suffer for me, because I will be suffering for Him.”²³

Origen (c. 185–251)

Location: Alexandria

Role: Christian Writer

Contributions: Though Origen is often criticized for being on the edge of orthodoxy, he gave the Church a blueprint for how to properly study God’s Word (hermeneutics). He, along with Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian, was the first to use the term “New Testament” or “New Covenant” as a way to establish which books should be recognized as authoritative Scripture.²⁴

Augustine of Hippo (c. 354–430)

Location: North Africa

Role: Presbyter (Elder)

Contributions: Augustine is the G.O.A.T when it comes to theologians. He has shaped much of the way we think about Church and its function in the world, along with the way the we understand the roles of grace and free will in one’s salvation. His most famous quote—“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”—is still used by many pastors, writers, and singers as a way to encourage the Church to turn from its idols.

Given what you have learned about the Ethiopian church and these African Church Fathers, make a list of the ways in which their contributions are currently influencing the church.

III. Athanasius: The Jude 3 Prototype

Another prominent African Church Father is Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373). Though much has not been written about the early years of his life, Dr. John Tyson recounts an endearing story of how Athanasius was caught by the Bishop of

23. <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/saints/saints-stories-for-all-ages/saint-perpetua-and-saint-felicity>

24. Ferguson, 115.

Alexandria playing church with his friends.²⁵ He preached a full sermon and even performed a few baptisms. (Yep, black folks been “playing church” since the third century.)

However, when the Bishop of Alexandria questioned Athanasius’s actions, he realized Athanasius wasn’t playing church at all. The Bishop was so convinced by this that he confirmed the baptisms Athanasius had administered and took him under his wing to train him for ministry.

Though Athanasius was often overlooked because of his youth and small stature, he became a strong yet humble force in the church at Alexandria. During the first few centuries of Christianity, there were some in the church that found it difficult to understand that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. They struggled with this idea for two reasons:

1. Monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, is a central belief of the Jewish faith. Some believed that if they accepted Jesus as God, they were deviating from monotheism and taking up polytheism. Polytheism, the belief in multiple gods, was a pagan belief that no Christian or Jew wanted to be associated with.
2. Many found it difficult to conceptualize how Jesus could be fully God and fully human. How was it possible for His divinity to co-exist within His humanity?

Deep questions, right? Fair questions, too. However, some allowed their questions to lead them to unfortunate heresies. One of these heresies was Arianism. Arian, a presbyter and popular preacher in the church at Alexandria, got around the complexities concerning the nature of Jesus by suggesting “there was (once) a time when Jesus was not.”²⁶ By this he meant that Jesus was the created son of God who was God’s instrument in the creation of the world.²⁷ This interpretation allowed Arius to hold onto his monotheistic beliefs while affirming Jesus’s divinity. That would mean Jesus was not co-eternal or co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and would make Jesus subordinate to God, the Father.

25. John Tyson, “The Life and Work of Athanasius” [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-life-and-work-of-athanasius-special-guest-dr-john-tyson/id978012810?i=1000390911456>. The Jude 3 Project (August 2017)

26. Ferguson, 192.

27. Ibid., 192.

On the surface, this may seem like a minor or even insignificant deviation, but in Athanasius's mind, to strip Jesus of even once ounce of His divinity was to strip Him of His ability to save the world. In his book *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius passionately argues,

For the Word (Jesus), realizing that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except, simply, by dying, yet being immortal and the Son of the Father the Word was not able to die, for this reason he takes to Himself a body capable of death, in order that it, participating in the Word who is above all, might be sufficient for death on behalf of all, and through the indwelling Word would remain incorruptible, and so corruption might henceforth cease from all by the grace of the resurrection. Whence, by offering to death the body he had taken to Himself, as an offering holy and free of all spot, he immediately abolished death from all like Him. . . . For being above all, the Word of God consequently, by offering His own temple and His bodily instrument as a substitute for all, fulfilled in death that which was required. . . . And now the very corruption of death no longer holds ground against human beings because of the (the Word that became flesh).²⁸

If that was easy for you to read, God bless you! If not, that's understandable—this is a fourth century writing that was originally written in Latin and was translated to English in 1944. There are a lot of layers that prevent us from being able to catch the meaning of Athanasius's words in just one reading.

Take a moment to read this excerpt again. Once you get a sense of what Athanasius is saying, try to create a summary for yourself in the space provided below.

IV. Summary

For Athanasius, contending against the heresy of Arianism was not a matter of being right; it was a matter of preserving the beauty and glory of the God who came down

28. Athanasius & C. S. Lewis, *On the incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2003), 58.

and put on flesh to provide salvation for all who put their trust in Him. If Christ were not fully human and fully divine, there would be no hope for us to be fully saved and renewed. The Incarnation—Jesus's coming in the flesh—was necessary. Athanasius is known for summarizing it this way: "He became what we are so that we might become who is."

During his lifetime, Athanasius would experience many highs and lows as he contended for the Incarnation of Christ. One of those highs would be at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Due to the growing tensions in the Church concerning the nature of Christ, the Roman emperor Constantine called for church leaders throughout the empire to gather in Nicaea to reach an agreement on the matter.

At the gathering, Athanasius and others called for the council to "do away with the irreligious phrases of the Arians" that taught Christ did not always exist and was born before the creation of the world.²⁹ Because of their due diligence, Arianism was denied and a creed (statement of faith) was drafted to protect the Church from further heresies. Many have said that if it were not for Athanasius "the church would have probably fallen into the hands of the Arians."³⁰

Though this is high praise for Athanasius, his commitment to contend against heresy did not come without a cost. After Constantine's death, questions concerning the nature of Christ resurfaced. This would result in Athanasius being exiled a total of five times because of his unwillingness to waver in the matter.

At the Jude 3 Project, our objectives are two-fold: (1) To help the Christian community know what they believe and why they believe it; (2) to equip believers to contend for the faith for the glory of God.

*In what ways do you see Athanasius live out these objectives in his own life?
How does Athanasius's life encourage you?*

29. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 4, Athanasius: Select Works and Letters (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson, 1995), 126.

30. Ibid, 306.

ONE MORE THING . . .

Remember our white chocolate brother, Thomas Oden, who was mentioned earlier in this chapter? He writes, “Ordinary African Christian believers deserve to have a much more accessible way understanding early African Christianity: its faith, courage, tenacity and remarkable intellectual strength . . . this story must be told.”

He’s right. The story of the Early African Church must be told. But whose responsibility is it to tell?

Dr. Vince Bantu explains that many people have come to reject Christianity not because they have issues with Jesus, but because they primarily associate Christianity with colonialism and slavery. But this is simply because they haven’t gone back far enough into history to learn the whole story.

“We . . . have to go back and reeducate our people and our community . . . and also to help people understand the last five centuries that we have experienced are not the beginning of the story. . . if someone was only to look at the last five centuries, then it (Christianity) would seem like it’s the white man’s religion and it’s a mechanism of oppression. But, when you go back 500 years or a 1,000 more years and you go back to the early church then you find out that Christianity was growing in Africa before it was ever growing in Europe. When Europeans were still worshipping Oden and Thor, African Christians in Egypt, North Africa, Ethiopia, and Nubia were worshipping Jesus as Lord and Savior before Islam even existed.”³¹

Now, this is not an attempt to throw shade at our European brothers and sisters. The same blood that was shed for us was shed for them. We don’t possess a higher place in the kingdom over them. But the little bit of evidence presented in this chapter undermines the idea that Christianity is a white man’s religion, or that if it weren’t for slavery, black people wouldn’t have ever heard the gospel. These statements are ignorant, uneducated, and simply untrue.

Brothers and sisters, in order for us to competently contend for the faith against these lies, we must know our history. Our Early African Church History. What are you going to do?

31. Vince Bantu, “Is Christianity a White Man’s Religion?”, [Audio podcast] Retrieved from <http://www.jude3project.com/podcast/whitemansreligion?rq=vince%20bantu>. The Jude 3 Project (June 2016)

What are one to two ways you have been impacted by what you’ve learned in this chapter?

Identify one person or topic from this chapter you would like to study further. Who can you invite to study it with you?

V. Tools for Going Deeper

- Athanasius & C. S. Lewis, *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2003).
- Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013).
- Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).
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