

CHAPTER 2

Attentive faces turned toward Mr. Dell. *He's pretty cool*, the students admitted to themselves. *For an old guy he's pretty savvy on the computer*. Yesterday, everyone had enjoyed the pictures of ancient Rome and they wondered what they would be learning today.

Passing out a new map, Mr. Dell asked the students to identify Antioch. “There are two Antiochs – Antioch in Pisidia (which is modern-day Turkey) and Antioch Syria that we will be talking about today,” explained their teacher. “As you look at your map, you can see that Antioch (notice that the modern city is spelled 'Antakya') was quite far north of Jerusalem. That meant that the early Christians who lived there were safe from much of the unrest taking place in Israel and they were able to build a new life for themselves and their children. Located on the border between Rome and Persia, they had access to news, decrees and culture which steadily streamed along Rome’s well-kept roads into this capital city.



“Antioch was well known for its large Christian population,” commented Mr. Dell. “That is why Antioch eventually replaced Jerusalem as the headquarters for the early Christian Church. Please take out your Bibles and turn to Acts 11:26. Carrie, would you read that for us?”

“Sure. 'The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.'”

“Thank you, Carrie. Most of the Jewish Christians did not want to live right in the city of Antioch with all its vice and temptations, so they built villages and cities in the surrounding area.”

Dimming the lights and turning on his projector, Mr. Dell continued. “Today, if we were fortunate enough to visit this area of Syria, we would find six or seven hundred cities - many with almost perfectly preserved ancient buildings - in what are known as 'the dead cities of Syria'. Ancient names such as Jerada, Ruweiha, Al-Bara and Serjila are steeped in early Christian history. Here is a panoramic view of Serjila – one of the best-preserved 'dead cities of Syria':



[flickr.com/photos/10088916@N02/3815534394](https://www.flickr.com/photos/10088916@N02/3815534394)

“As you can see, these were not primitive cities by any standard. Notice the beautiful architecture of these ruins. Can't you just imagine the majestic buildings gracing these long-ago Christian cities?”



http://quezi.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/3139529470_e4dc025ba3.jpg

A new picture flashed on the screen. “If we wandered through the 'suburbs' we would see beautiful two-story houses that once had wide balconies and beautiful gardens. Even after all these years you will notice that they are in amazing shape because they used no mortar to hold the stone buildings together. If we were to explore the homes we would see that the early Christians had many 'modern' conveniences. They had basins for washing, oil and wine presses, large stone storage containers, water cisterns and such. Viewing these ruins we catch a glimpse into how well organized those hard-working early Christians were. They were not only talented, but they lived full and comfortable lives in well maintained towns and cities.



<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/88/Sejilla-ruins.jpg/800px-Sejilla-ruins.jpg>



http://www.globespots.com/pictures/asia/syria/deadcities_1161.jpg

“If we could read the inscriptions found on family tombs or some of the carved stone door posts we would find chiseled messages showing these families were followers of God. On one large house it says, 'Lord, protect this house and all those living in it, Amen.' And on a public building it reads, 'To Christ the Victory. Away Satan!' Another prominent building has inscriptions which read, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, the Word of God, dwells here; let no evil enter;' 'The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in;' and 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' This picture show a house from the city of Al-Bara. It is in impressive shape for a house nearly 2000 years old, don't you think?” Mr. Dell asked as the students nodded in agreement.



<http://www.travelpod.com/travel-blogentries/dinoshona/1/1247856938/tpod.html#pbrowser/dinoshona/1/1247856938/filename=the-old-house-in-al-bara.jpg>

“...And this is the entrance to a church in Reweiha. Notice the symbols above the doorway. As we can see, the early Christians were certainly skilled in building and carving.”



http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1086/559376959_1ac6de779c.jpg

Turning on the classroom lights, Mr. Dell picked up the Bible book. “These pictures will help you visualize the type of community where one of God's early Christian heroes grew up. Listen carefully as we read about:

LUCIAN (AD 250 – 312)

With the the cruel stoning of Stephen in AD 34, Christians began to flee the mounting persecution within Palestine. With all the fighting and chaos in Jerusalem, more and more Christians chose to move where they could raise their families in peace and safety. Many moved northward to Antioch in Syria. Since most of the Jewish Christians did not want to dwell in such a large, pagan city they began to build villages and cities in the surrounding area. Here, numerous Christians constructed beautiful homes and built up prosperous businesses. In fact, there were so many believers in that region that in Acts 11:26 we are told, “The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” It was into this thriving Christian community that a Gentile boy, Lucian, was born.

As a child, Lucian was taught to love and obey God’s Word. As he grew to manhood he became aware of disturbing news filtering in from the Roman churches in the West. A certain church leader, Tertullian (AD 150 – 235), had started to make changes to the church worship service. He taught oblations (special ceremonies) for the dead, he made the sign of the cross on the forehead of worshipers, and dipped people in the water three times to baptize them. Tertullian admitted that he had adopted these changes from pagan teachings and could not

support them from Scripture, yet he thought that if Christians adopted some heathen rituals the pagans would find it easier to join Christianity.

Lucian discerned that the church must choose between strict obedience to the Bible or allowing man-made traditions to creep into its worship. Already two movements were forming within the early Christian Church. The churches in Rome were looking to the famous college at Alexandria Egypt for spiritual guidance, while the Syrian Christians trusted their leaders in Antioch to guide them in the ways of God.

To understand Lucian's concerns about Alexandria, you need to know some of the history of that celebrated college in the north of Africa. Two hundred years before Jesus came to earth the Jews began sending their best scholars to Alexandria where they were introduced to many pagan ideas and teaching. Hebrew students were taught to accept man-made tradition along with the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather than accept the plain teachings of the Word of God, they learned to look for mystical meanings in Holy Scripture. Lucian knew that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus as their Messiah because of their faulty training in Alexandria.

It seemed that Satan, using his success in changing the Jewish church, now plotted how to use the school at Alexandria to destroy the fledgling Christian church. Two well-known teachers at Alexandria, Clement (CAD194), and his famous pupil, Origen, taught students how to allegorize the Bible. Origen and Clement made people, cities or stories in the Bible represent something else. An example of this type of teaching comes from Rabbi Zakkai where he taught that unclean animals listed in the Old Testament, such as the hare and the pig, referred to Greece and Rome rather than to the actual animals.

Lucian saw that accepting Clement's and Origen's way of interpreting Scripture would allow people to change the plain meanings of the Bible. For instance, if the hare and pig stood for Greece and Rome, it would be impossible to show the differences between clean and unclean animals as taught in Leviticus 11. This type of "educated" reasoning would force the people to rely on their rabbis, priests and other spiritual leaders to help them understand the Bible. Such methods would give church leaders spiritual power over those who did not have the training of Alexandria's "higher education."

Origen showed his contempt for the plain Word of God when he wrote almost two thousand years ago, "Could any man of sound judgment suppose that the first, second, and third days (of creation) had an evening and a morning, when there were as yet no sun or moon or stars? Could anyone be so unintelligent as to think that God made a paradise somewhere in the east and planted it with trees, like a farmer, or that in that paradise he put a tree of life, a tree you could see and know with your senses, a tree you could derive life from by eating its fruit with the teeth in your head? When the Bible says that God used to walk in paradise in the evening or that Adam hid behind a tree, no one, I think, will question that these are only fictions, stories of things that never actually happened, and that figuratively they refer to certain mysteries."

"That reminds me of a talk show I heard on the radio the other day," Mr. Dell stopped reading. "Some callers said that they couldn't accept the Bible stories as genuine events. One man said he couldn't imagine how all the animals in the world today could have fit in the ark so he wasn't going to believe that Bible story. Another caller questioned whether the seven days of creation were perhaps figurative. She said her husband insisted that science had proven that Moses' account in Genesis could not be taken literally."

"How are we supposed to know which parts are true and which parts are wrong?" questioned

Hannah.

“Exactly,” her teacher responded. “Satan knows that if we don’t trust the entire Bible it will be easier for us to believe his deceptions. That is why it is so important we accept all of Scripture as truth. John 17:17 tells us, 'Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.' Satan would like us to get confused on what God's Word says.

“But let's continue with our story about Lucian.

Lucian could see that accepting the teachings coming from Alexandria would result in the truths of the Bible being changed by human reasoning and tradition. Already the church at Rome was replacing God’s Word with tradition and philosophy. In AD 190 Victor I, the bishop (or head pastor) of Rome, made an agreement with Clement of Alexandria to make Sunday the main day of worship for Roman Christians. They did this by making sure Easter would always be celebrated on a Sunday. They called Easter Sunday “Big Sunday” and every weekly Sunday they called “Little Sunday.” All this emphasis on “Sun-day” began to give importance to the worship of the sun. To give themselves more power, the Roman church leaders threatened to excommunicate all those who did not go along with their changes.

“What is excommunication?” Ashley questioned as she raised her hand.

“Excommunication is when your church membership is taken away,” Mr. Dell explained.

“Why is that such a big deal?”

“Well, excommunication used to be a lot more scary than it is today. Thousands of years ago, if a Jew was forced out of the synagogue he became a social outcast. You were not allowed to talk to him, sit next to him, or invite him into your home. No one would have the courage to hire him or to buy something from him for fear they also would be excommunicated. Heretics were forbidden to wash or take baths and no barber was allowed to cut his hair or beard. They became ‘untouchables’. If an excommunicated person were to die, no one (not even his friends or relatives) was allowed to mourn for him or give him a funeral.”

“Wow! And the Roman leaders threatened to do that if people didn’t keep their Sunday holy!” exclaimed Jay.

“It got worse than that, Jay. In later years the Roman church took excommunication one step further. They taught that if a person was excommunicated, they were shut out of heaven and tortured in hell fire for all eternity. Because of that teaching the people were scared to disobey their church leaders and risk losing church fellowship. Let’s see how Lucian dealt with such heresies,” commented Mr. Dell, as he turned the page.

Lucian would not compromise with the man-made changes Alexandria and Rome were bringing into Christianity. Knowing that Christians must have nothing to do with these pagan practices, Lucian began a college in Antioch which would give young people a true Biblical foundation. Suddenly, early Christianity had two rival cities – Alexandria, a powerful center for Satan’s errors and Antioch, the protector of true Christianity.

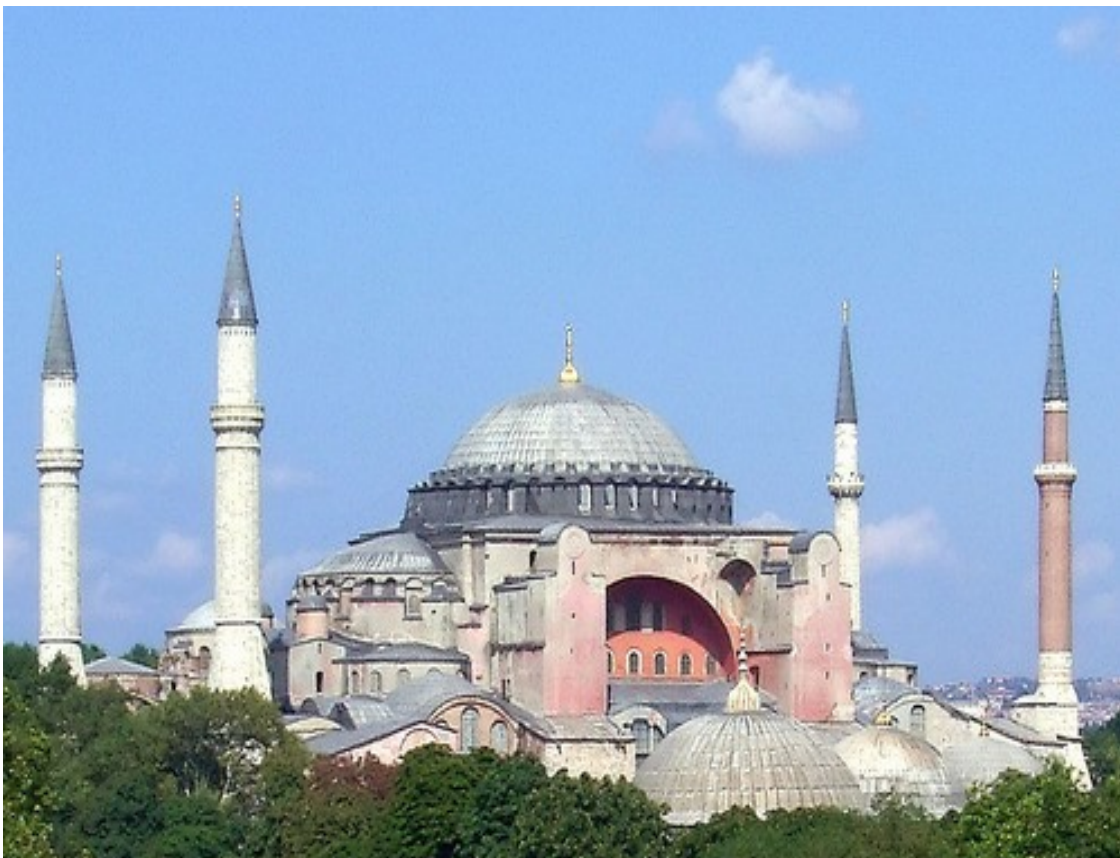
The graduates from Lucian's thriving school were solid Bible students. They not only had an intelligent knowledge of God’s Word, but they permitted that truth to convert and transform them into skilled witnesses of the gospel. Their great goal was to share with others the peace and joy they had received from accepting Jesus into their heart. Pagan superstitions were

swept away as faith in God produced transformed followers of Christ. The gospel spread quickly through the world.

In addition to their study of scripture, students at Lucian's college also received training in useful trades and occupations including foreign languages, the sciences and medicine. Antioch became world famous for its medical school and students left Lucian's college skilled in all branches of natural healing. Because of their excellent education, Christian students were hired for important jobs with government officials and even royalty. In addition to their scholastic learning, God blessed them with remarkable occupational success. First they would gain their employers' confidence by their consistent and trustworthy work, then they faithfully taught them the truths found in God's Word.

“Aaron,” Mr. Dell broke into the reading, “if you will dim the lights for us I’ll show you a building in Turkey constructed from blueprints made by two early Syrian Christians. As you will see, Lucian's school had some very famous graduates.”

The class settled back in their seats as Mr. Dell flashed a picture of a huge domed building on the screen. “I want you to see the famous Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. Perhaps you remember that Istanbul was anciently called both Byzantium and Constantinople. When Emperor Justinian undertook the immense task of erecting a building of this size he chose two Christian men, Anthemius (who was a mathematician) and Isidore (an architect and city planner), to work together on the plans for this massive church. For 1000 years Hagia Sophia was the largest church in the world and many say that its amazing dome 'changed the history of architecture.' This remarkable building shows just how brilliant, creative and advanced the Syrian Christian students were.”



“Just look at this magnificent dome!” exclaimed Mr. Dell as he pointed to the imposing canopy. “This picture doesn't do it justice, but it is huge – 62m (203 feet) high with a diameter of 33m (108 feet). That would make it around 20 stories high and the longest blue whale ever measured would stretch across the entire width of the dome! The proud citizens of the East considered it to be the eighth wonder of the world. Even today, Turkish people proudly say, ‘Nothing like it was ever built before or after.’



<http://artfiles.art.com/5/p/LRG/21/2177/2IUCD00Z/adam-woolfitt-interior-of-santa-sofia-hagia-sophia-aya-sofya-unesco-world-heritage-site-istanbul-turkey.jpg>

“I would like you to see a close-up of the dome and its surrounding windows. Do you see the richly decorated and intricate mosaics? It is said that they are made of tiny pieces of glass-covered colors which do not fade. We have no idea what the original mosaic looked like but if you visit Hagia Sophia today you will see the central mosaic now features a quote from the Qur'an called the 'Light Verse'. When the Ottomans took control of this area of Turkey in 1453 they converted the church into a mosque. However, the Greek Orthodox believe that buried under the plaster applied by the Turkish Muslims there is a central medallion of Cristo Pantocrator (Christ Almighty) in the dome area.

“For over sixteen years now there have been efforts to restore the mosaics found in the dome. Finally, in 2010 the scaffolding (and the workmen with their tools) were finally removed so visitors could have an unobstructed view of the impressive dome.”

“What does 'Hagia Sophia' mean?” asked Jeremy.



<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/turkey/hagia-sophia-photos/dome-c-helen-betts.JPG.html>

“Hagia Sophia means 'Divine Wisdom,’” answered Mr. Dell “This church has quite a unique history. Until the 1400s it was a Christian house of worship, but when Constantinople was taken over by the Ottoman Empire this magnificent structure became a mosque. In 1935 it was turned into a museum and now welcomes thousands of visitors every year who come to admire the amazing construction skills of two early Christians.

“That’s awesome!” exclaimed Carrie. “Should we mark Istanbul on our map, Mr. Dell? I love how we are learning about history and geography from this Bible book!”

Just then the bell rang and the students quickly put their maps and notes away. “I’m afraid we’ll have to finish the chapter tomorrow. Have a good math class and I’ll see you at lunch time.”

B.G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant: The Church in the Wilderness* (Teach Services, Brushton, New York, 1994) Chapter 5

F.C. Gilbert, *Practical Lessons for the Church of Today*
(<http://www.writtentreasures.org/html/plchap2.html>) Chapter 2
www.CopticChurch.net