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Persecution and Ecclesiastical Development



Church History - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the development of the Christian Church and the reasons for the persecution faced by early Christians. He notes that the origins of some ideas associated with Roman Catholicism did not originate until after the death of the apostles, when the church became more organized. Christians were persecuted under the Roman Empire for various reasons, including being used as scapegoats, but this ultimately strengthened the faith of believers. The role of bishops and elders in the early church is also explored, with the emergence of a monarchical bishop representing a shift towards a more organized and hierarchical structure.

Transcript

The fourth session studying the history of the Christian Church. And we want to move beyond now the time of the apostles. We've taken this long just to talk about the early, very early state of the church and some of the events of the early church.

And now we want to move along and see what happened after that. And for some Christians, although to tell you the truth, the Bible itself, the biblical history, should be more exciting. It's, for one thing, purer than any other history.

It's more authoritative. But it's also very, very well known to many of us, whereas the things that happened after the Apostolic Age is not as familiar to us. And therefore, in some cases, may be a little more exciting or interesting simply because it's new.

As a matter of fact, the period after the death of the apostles, until the early part of the 4th century, I know, early part of the 2nd century and 3rd century, that's a period of time that we don't have very much information about. We have some writings that have survived from that period, and I'll be introducing you to those, telling you something about those tonight. But there were changes that occurred during that period of time, and we don't have complete documentation of all the stages that the church went through in order to change in the way that it did.

We know, as we read the book of Acts, that the Christian community was a very free, spiritual assembly of people who were disciples of Jesus. They were saved by their

simple response to the gospel, their faith in the gospel. They acknowledged the authority of the apostles, but they were not followers of men so much as they were followers of Christ and led by the Holy Spirit.

There was not much in the way of ritual that they acknowledged to be mandatory, and they certainly didn't attach any ritual as a necessity of salvation. Now, at the end of the 3rd century, end of the 4th century probably more properly, in the 300s, no, end of the 3rd century is the problem. I don't know if you're like me, I always get confused which century is which 100s.

I shouldn't have any trouble, I just remember this is the 20th century for a little while more, and yet it's the 1900s. So the 1st century is before it was 100. The 2nd century is the 100s, and the 3rd century is the 200s, and so forth.

I'll try not to get confused, and if you're not confused, I'll try not to confuse you, and we'll try to get this right. Until about the year 300, in other words, or the early part of the 4th century, there's not a whole lot of documentation. There are some writings, we'll talk about them and what they contain and what we can learn from them.

But when you see the church as it emerges from a time of great persecution, in the time of Constantine, in the first quarter of the 4th century, you see a church that's really gone through quite a few changes from what it was in the apostolic days, and without very many transitional forms to document the evolution of the church. You find, for example, that in the time of Constantine, the church had come to think very much of Rome as sort of the capital of the church in the whole world. It's sort of like the church had a federal government, and the capital was in Rome.

You find that instead of each church being governed by a group of elders, who as far as we know from the New Testament did not have anything like what we would call political authority, you have each church governed by an individual bishop. And this bishop was what we call a monarchical bishop. He had authority like a monarch, like a ruler, like a king in the church.

And you can see then that the church had become very much institutionalized, that the kind of simple relationships in the spirit that were characteristic of the church in the earliest days had given place to an organization that had people in power. And there was one church that had some disproportionate influence over the other churches. That was the church in Rome.

And the doctrines were kind of, I think, strange compared to some of those of the early church. For example, baptism was now being applied to infants in the beginning of the fourth century. We have no record of that or anything like that happening in the first century.

Baptism also was very much considered to be attached to the forgiveness of sins by the time the 300s opened up. And so the church typically thought of forgiveness of sins happening at the point of baptism. Whereas, of course, in the New Testament you have a thief on the cross being forgiven of his sins, not being baptized.

We have Jesus telling the story of a publican and a Pharisee, and the publican simply beat his breast and said, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner, and went home justified, according to Jesus, and was not baptized, at least not at that point, but his sins were forgiven. There was a man lowered through the roof at Jesus' feet who was paralyzed, and Jesus simply said, Son, your sins are forgiven. The man was not baptized.

And yet somehow the church had corrupted the doctrine of salvation to the point where it was water baptism somehow. That was the event at which a person's sins were forgiven. In fact, a dispute arose in the early church as to what to do with people who sinned after they had been baptized, because it was thought that once you're baptized, that covers all your past sins, and you better not sin anymore, because you've now repented of sinning, and you're supposed to live a holy life.

But if people sinned grievously after they had been baptized, the question was, what do we do with them now? You don't baptize them again. And there were actually people who apostatized, or at least denied the faith, under persecution. And after the persecution would end, these people would wish to be readmitted to the church.

And these people had been baptized believers at one time, and then had renounced Christ under pressure. When people did that, they were called lapses. The act of denying Christ under torture was called lapsing, and those who did it were called lapses.

Those who did not deny Christ under torture and ended up dying for their faith were called martyrs. And those who did not renounce Christ under torture and did not die, they were tortured but were not martyred, they were called confessors by the early church. So we have, in times of persecution, three categories of people who endured torture of some kind.

Those who were tortured to death faithfully were martyrs. Those who were tortured but did not die and remained faithful were called confessors. And those who were tortured and renounced Christ were called lapses.

And that becomes important in some of the later writings of the church, because eventually when Constantine came to power, there were no more persecutions of the churches. And when everything got easier, those who had lapsed under persecution wanted to come back and have all the benefits of the church, membership and salvation and so forth. And there was a great dispute among some of those fathers at that time as to whether they should be let back in, and if so, on what basis, and what they would have to do.

But one of the earliest documents that's come to us from the late 1st century or early 2nd century of the church is mainly taken up with the question, what do you do about people who sinned after they were baptized? How did they get forgiven again? Because they thought of baptism as the point at which sin is forgiven. This is a concept that arose fairly early in the 2nd century or maybe late in the 1st century. It was after the apostles' time it would appear.

But you can see that by the beginning of the 4th century, a lot has elapsed. And we don't know all that has elapsed during that period, because that's not a very thoroughly documented period of time. But they're looking at baptism as saving.

They also believed that virginity and martyrdom were things that would also forgive sins. There was a developing early on in the early 2nd century, apparently, a doctrine of penance, which of course was full-blown in the Catholic Church later on, that if you committed sin and repented, you'd have to do something hard to earn, I wouldn't say to earn forgiveness, I'm not sure that that's what the doctrine of penance said, but essentially that you needed to do some penance in order to really get clear on the matter with God. So some of these doctrines that we might associate with Roman Catholic doctrines were already well established by the time the persecutions ended with the time of Constantine.

Now, what we call the papacy or the Roman Catholic hierarchy structure was not fully developed with all its present implications at that time. But you can see that it didn't take very long for certain ideas that are now associated with Roman Catholicism to originate after the death of the apostles within a few centuries. And we don't know how quickly they all originated.

We have those few documents that we have, we don't know if they are characteristic of the whole church or if the writers of those documents were unusual in their own time and kind of on the vanguard or on the fringe of what the church typically thought in their day. However, interestingly enough, the writings that have survived from that period did tend to embrace ideas that became normative in the church later on. This process is what I referred to already earlier in this series as the institutionalizing of the church.

I think that a church needs a degree of organization. I think organization is necessary whenever more than two people are wanting to do something at the same time. There's got to be some degree of organization.

But the problem is that the organization begins to define the movement eventually. And what was once just a spiritual fellowship becomes defined in different terms as the organization becomes what matters. And then when the organization is what matters, who's leading it becomes what matters.

And then who's leading it becomes a political question. And then people vie for

leadership and the whole carnal issues of power and control become issues in the movement. And before long you've got something that doesn't look very much like the original at all.

And as I said to you before, throughout the history of the church as we study it, we'll find that there is this emerging and very early on it's fully emerged institutional thing called the church. But there's also the true church all the time. There's always true believers, true members of Christ's body, sometimes in and sometimes not in the institutional church, who really love the Lord and who are probably the remnant that really can be identified with the early movement that Jesus started.

Now, the handout I've given you only features some of the things that could be said about the period. But I think the things that we can't say everything in the time we have, and I think some of the major considerations are here. I want to talk tonight about the political developments in the empire from the time that the apostles died until about the beginning of the fourth century.

And I also want to talk about ecclesiastical developments. Now, ecclesiastical means church developments. The word church in the Greek is ecclesia.

And so when you hear the word ecclesiastical, it comes from the Greek word ecclesia, which means the church. We'll talk about political developments in the Roman Empire. We'll also talk about ecclesiastical or church developments in the same period.

And then before we close, I want to acquaint you just briefly with some of the writings of that period. They are, by the way, still available and can be purchased and read. And they are very interesting.

I was reading some of them last night again. Let's talk, first of all, about how the political situation changed from the time of the death of the apostles to the time of Constantine. Well, most of that period of time was characterized by persecution of the church.

Usually officially, the emperors, 10 different emperors officially persecuted Christianity. Now, there were more emperors than that. Not all of them did.

Some of the emperors ignored Christians and let them do their thing or even were reasonably favorable in their own attitudes toward Christianity. But there were 10 emperors that did persecute Christians during that time. And therefore, we think of that time largely as a time characterized by imperial persecutions.

But the first persecutions the church endured were not imperial. They were not from the Roman Empire. They were from other sources.

And they often would be persecuted just by neighbors who didn't like them for one reason or another. There were various reasons Christians were persecuted. I want to just

explore, first of all, the question of why it is that the church was persecuted.

It might also help to answer the question of why it is that the church in this country isn't persecuted. Once we see why the church was persecuted back then, we'll see that it did not look very much like the church in this country in this century. And maybe that's why they were persecuted and we weren't.

Now, of course, the real reason the church was persecuted is told us in Revelation chapter 12 in a symbolic vision, which depicts a warfare that took place in the heavenlies between Satan and the angelic powers represented by Michael and his angels. And the casting out of Satan, out of heaven. And his anger at that event so that he now turns his wrath against other characters who are in the vision.

In verse 17 it says, The dragon, who represents Satan, was enraged with the woman, who I believe and most believe represents the remnant of Israel. And he went to make war with the rest of her offspring who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Now, the woman, I believe, is the remnant of Israel, but she has other offspring.

Now, it says the rest of her offspring. What offspring were prior to this mentioned that these are the rest? Well, she had a male child earlier in the vision. That was her first offspring and that was, I believe, representative of Jesus.

But once he was caught up into heaven and the dragon found himself incapable of inflicting harm on Jesus, he turned his wrath against the mother, as it were, the remnant of Israel that brought forth the Messiah. And the rest of her children, which would be, well, we don't have to guess who they were. It says those who have the testimony of Jesus and keep the commandments of God.

That would be the church. So, this is a persecution against the church as described here. And we read of the wrath of the dragon.

Apparently frustrated that he was unable to thwart the founding of the kingdom in its initial stage when Jesus was here. And so he turns against it with all his wrath. That is perhaps the real reason that lies behind the persecution of Christianity in all times in history.

But the persons who persecuted Christianity didn't always think of themselves as agents of the devil. In fact, sometimes they felt like they had a righteous cause to do it. Jesus said to his disciples, the time will come when men shall kill you and think they're doing God a service.

Of course, that was fulfilled mostly in the persecutions instituted by the Jews. The Jews of the Sanhedrin persecuted the apostles and believed they were like the solitarsis. Thought he was doing God a service until he was turned around himself.

But the Romans and the pagans had their own reasons for persecuting Christians. One of them, we will find, was social isolation. The early Christians did not attend many of the public entertainment that everybody else did in those days.

Principally sports events and theater. And one of the reasons, of course, historians say, is because at those events there were invocations and prayers offered and even incense burned to pagan deities. At the beginnings of the races and even in the theater performances.

And therefore the Christians, having a scruple against idols, did not want to attend these events. Now this is what church historians tell us. They tell us that the Christians didn't attend these events because of the idolatry there.

And they imply, therefore, that of course if there was not such invocations to idols, the Christians would have gone to the sporting events and the theater. I have my doubts. If you have any awareness of how the Greeks ran their races or conducted their theater, I have serious doubts that the Christians of that day would have approved of going to those events, even if there had been no invocations to idols there.

The Greeks ran their races in the nude. And pious people generally thought that was immodest. And theater was of the coarsest and most debauched and most immoral sort among the Greeks.

And for that reason, Christian writers of the period were totally against Christians going to sports events or theaters for the simple reason that they were corrupt. And they reflected a corrupt culture. And the Christians stood largely aloof from that.

So much so that there was one letter written from one church leader to another of another church saying that they had a bit of a dilemma. There was a man in their congregation who had become converted and he was an actor in the theater. And they were not sure what he should do.

But one thing was sure, he shouldn't be an actor anymore. He should get out of the theater. And they actually decided that the church to whom the letter was written would be willing to help support the man while he looked for another vocation.

Because it was given. He wouldn't be in the theater anymore after he became a Christian. Now this is how the early Christians thought about sports and theater.

And yet these were the normal recreational fun things that the average citizen of Rome participated in. But the Christians didn't go there. They made the Christians seem snobbish.

They made the Christians seem aloof. Made them seem holier than thou. And, you know, I don't think the church in America will ever be persecuted for those reasons.

It seems to me like the church is as interested in sport and theater in this country as the world is. Now someone says, well, you know, it's a different deal. Back then they burned incense to idols.

I dare say that if there are idols in our society, they are best found at the sporting events and in the theater. And Christians have their idols too. If a Christian is dejected when a certain team loses a game and their mood is changed, it seems to communicate to me that they have more commitment to that team than is healthy for a Christian to do.

I've never understood why anyone has, Christian or non-Christian, has any commitment to any team or why it would matter who won a game. But when Christians are all wrapped up, I was listening to, I just tuned my radio into a talk station as I was driving home today. And there's usually some intelligent talk on this particular station, but it gets preempted once in a while for some kind of sports event.

And I was just amazed because, I mean, I thought, here they preempted this intelligent show. And they just had two guys on there talking about how the Blazers flew in and they got in at 2 o'clock in the morning and someone else came in at 3 o'clock in the morning. And so I thought, who cares what time in the morning these people, I don't even care that they came.

I mean, hearing these people just gibberish about nothing that matters. But I realize that they preempt intelligent talk shows for this kind of thing because America likes it. America is pleased to sit and listen and vegetate while they listen to all these inconsequential things that have no interest whatsoever except that they have something to do with a sports team that people idolize, I guess.

Frankly, I don't think we're any different than the Romans. We just don't burn incense there. America's idols are sports figures and actors.

And I believe that sporting events and theater in our society are probably as much likely to be the places where idolatry is practiced in American culture as it was in Roman culture. The only difference is Christians don't remain aloof from it here. Christians participate wholeheartedly.

So we don't get persecuted. We don't look holier than thou because we aren't. God forbid that we would look holier than thou when we're not any holier than the world is.

Now, there was more to that, too. It was not just that they seemed antisocial because they didn't frequent the theaters and the sporting events. It was also that there were rumors that they were actually doing gross and criminal things.

One of the things that some of the early Christian writers had to defend Christianity against were the charges, false charges, that Christians practiced incense and ritual cannibalism and that they were atheists. Now, you might think it's strange that

Christians would be accused of being atheists, but you see, the Romans and the Greeks, the only kind of gods they knew about were made of stone and wood and metal. And therefore, they could see their gods.

Their gods couldn't see them, but they could see them. And therefore, it seemed that their gods were more real. The Christians professed to believe in a god that no one had ever seen.

And therefore, it seemed like they didn't believe in any god at all. They certainly didn't believe in the gods you could see. And for that reason, they were actually accused of being atheists.

Polycarpinus martyrdom was told that he would be released and not burned at the stake if he would simply say, away with the atheists. That's all they asked him to say. Just say, away with the atheists.

But he wouldn't say it because, well, he did say it, but he applied it differently. They intended for him to be a renouncing Christian, renouncing Christianity, because atheist was a term that was used of Christians among the Romans. And he did.

Polycarpinus waved his hand at the crowd and said, away with the atheists. And that didn't placate his persecutors, so they burned him. But Christians were thought to be atheists, which was criminal, by the way.

There was no separation of church and states, as it were, in pagan Rome. You had to be a pagan to be a good Roman. And if you weren't a pagan, if you didn't have gods that could be seen, you were seen to be an atheist, and that's criminal.

Now you might say, why in the world would Christians be accused of being incestuous or cannibalistic? Well, in our days, Christians might be accused of immorality because too many people who profess to be Christians actually do commit immorality. But that wasn't practiced in the early church. In those days, if a person after they were baptized committed sexual immorality, they were considered to never be able to be forgiven again.

Now, I don't agree with that attitude, by the way. I certainly don't. Jesus didn't either.

He didn't treat the woman taking an adultery that well, or she hadn't been baptized yet. But I mean, the point is that Jesus never laid out some sin like immorality as the one thing that if you do that again once you're saved, you just can never be saved anymore. I have met a few people today who still believe that, and that was believed in the early church.

I don't believe it's biblical. But because of that belief, you didn't find very widespread immorality among the Christians because it wasn't something where you could just go

out on a weekend and play around with the opposite sex and then come back to church and go to the altar in tears and everyone comforts you and says, well, welcome back. Glad to have you.

The church wouldn't have you back. And it was more of a standard of holiness there. So it's ironic, really, that the pagans would accuse them of incest, of immorality.

The reason for this apparently was that the Christians all called each other brother and sister. And they only married among themselves. And therefore, the pagans, not really understanding what was going on, thought that brothers were marrying their sisters.

And they didn't realize that brother and sister was just a way in which Christians spoke of each other. I mean, it's a true reality. We are brother and sister, but not in any sense that makes marriage among us incestuous.

And therefore, it was a misunderstanding. And Christians were accused of being incestuous in this way and also cannibalistic because you can probably guess why they were accused of being cannibals. Because their typical ritual on a Sunday morning was to participate in the eating of the body and the blood of the Lord.

And while I don't believe the early Christians considered the elements to turn into the actual body and blood of Jesus, I don't know exactly what they thought because we don't have complete records of what they thought, yet that's what they were thought to think. That's what actually the Romans thought, that they were actually eating a man at their ceremony. So, the Romans kind of despised the Christians.

Tacitus said that when Nero persecuted the Christians, he selected them because they were despised for their vices. And of course, it's not so much that the Christians really had abundant vices, it's that they were accused of these kinds of things. There was misunderstanding of what they did and why they did it.

But there were some things that were really true. They did stand aloof and they didn't run with their old evil companions. And that does make evil companions angry.

And Peter brings that up over in 1 Peter chapter 4. And this is a very good biblical example of this phenomenon that became a source of persecution later in church history as well. In 1 Peter 4, Peter says in verses 1 through 4, Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind. For he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in licentiousness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them to the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. Now what he's saying is because you

don't run with your old friends in the same activities that they're still running in, because you've repented and you've ceased from sin, you suffer in the flesh.

The person who suffers in the flesh in this instance has done so because he has ceased from sin, that he no longer is pleasing the Gentiles. He's now living to please God. Therefore, they don't understand it.

They think it's strange and they speak evil of you, and in some cases do more than speak evil of you. There were times when persecution erupted into mortal hatred and violence, and so that Christians were often not only killed by official decree of the emperor, sometimes they were killed simply by mob violence in the streets of the cities, where the people just get angry at the Christians, and there'd just be a spontaneous riot. We read of such a riot in Acts chapter 19 in Ephesus, and there was such a violence there that although Paul wanted to step out and speak to the crowd, his friends wouldn't let him go out there because they thought he'd be killed.

And this happened in the Roman world quite a bit. So, one of the reasons Christians were persecuted is for this reason, their social isolation and the suspicion that they were probably in some sense corrupt people because of the claims that they were involved in cannibalism and incest and that they were atheists and so forth. Now, there were other reasons that Christians were persecuted.

There were economic reasons. The whole world, except for Israel, was sold under idolatry, and idolatry makes money. Idolatry means there's got to be idols.

Somebody's got to make these idols. They're not going to do it for free. They set up an industry making idols.

And then there were, of course, those who raised the cattle and the sheep to be sacrificed to idols. A man named Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor writing to Emperor Trajan, in the early part of the second century, was asking the emperor how to deal with the Christians in his area. He was already persecuting them.

He was wondering whether he was doing the right thing and whether he should modify his practice. But he said one of the problems was Christians were everywhere and the people who were raising animals to sacrifice to the idols, they're going out of business. They're losing a lot of money because idolatry is not in vogue once Christianity kind of takes hold in the society.

And so those who made money on the established idolatry were not very pleased with the Christians because Christians were interfering with their trade. And so there was economic motivation for persecuting them. We read of such a thing in Acts 19, I already mentioned.

We have Demetrius and Alexander. Actually, Demetrius was a silversmith, an idol maker.

And he stirred up all the other smiths against Paul and his teaching because no one was worshipping Diane anymore.

No one was buying their idols anymore. And he said, we've got to put an end to this or else we're going to go out of business. And he started a big riot in the city.

And this was not the only case. It was not an isolated case. Now, Christians sometimes, even in this society, are persecuted for economic reasons.

Why do you suppose that pro-lifers are persecuted for their views about abortion? Why would anyone care? Why would anyone object? If I happen to believe that an unborn baby is a baby still, and a human, and has the right to at least live so long as God lets it, and we don't have the right to take that life away, why should that belief of mine bother anybody else? And even if I try to tell them that, even if I try to say, well, listen, I want everyone to think this way about that, why should that bother anybody? Why should anyone have a vested interest in believing that an unborn baby is not a human being? Well, it's almost entirely money. I mean, there's a tremendous industry in this business of harvesting little organs and things like that out of these unborn babies. The doctors, you know, they don't do this for free.

And the women who wanted abortion in the first place, why is it? Well, it's not always for the same reason. Of course, there's lots of reasons, but one of them that's very prevalent, I'm sure, is that it will hurt their career to go ahead and carry this baby. They want to have a career.

They don't want this baby interfering. Or a young girl, too young. I can't afford to raise a baby.

You know, I haven't even finished school yet. How am I going to make a living? You know, I mean, let's face it. The positions Christians take are expensive compared to the positions non-Christians take about some issues where they've got a financial stake.

And Christians are sometimes persecuted for taking positions. That will cost somebody some money. Those who take a stand against drugs are taking a stand against a lucrative industry.

And very cruel and violent, nasty people who would like to hurt people who interfere. Those who stand against pornography. Similarly, there's a lot of money in that, too.

In fact, the Bible says the love of money is what? It's the root of all kinds of evil. You won't find very many kinds of evil practiced in the world that someone isn't making money off of. In fact, the whole pornography thing, we might think that that's, you know, that's fueled and fired by human lust.

Well, maybe on the buying end, but the persons who are supplying it, they're not in it for

the lust, they're in it for the money. If there was no money to be made in it, there'd be no pornography anymore. And, you know, money, the love of money, stands behind almost every kind of evil in society.

And Christians who are standing for God uncompromisingly are going to be challenging somebody's financial stake in evil. Now, it's not so much that we direct our attacks toward that. Paul didn't direct his attacks toward the bottom line in Demetrius' silver business.

He didn't care about Demetrius' silver business. He just cared about the truth, but it just so happened the truth tended to undermine and curtail the sales of those who are making their living off of evil. And there was economic motivation, therefore, to pursue Christians.

There still would be if Christians would take similar stands today more often, I think. Then, of course, there was the ordinary religio-political noncompliance of the Christians in a world where everybody's supposed to worship the emperor because he's one of the gods. And sometimes it was even mandatory to burn incense to the emperor.

And Christians would never do such a thing as that. This means two things. One, they're bucking the religious system.

And two, they're not loyal to the state. They're traitors. They're not patriotic.

They won't burn incense. They won't comply with the ungodly demands of the government or the state religion. And, you know, Christians have been persecuted in modern times for similar sentiments.

The Mennonites are a very good example in the Hutterites. Because many of them, especially during World War I, before it was legal to be a conscientious objector, I think by World War II it became legal. I'm not sure.

I know a man who was in jail both wars for his conscientious objector stance. And he wasn't even a Mennonite. He was a Baptist.

But the Mennonites and the Anabaptists in general, many of them, have gone to prison. During World War I, they were treated in American prisons in Alcatraz and Fort Leavenworth and places like that. The same way we read about Richard Wormbrant being treated in the communist prisons in Romania.

Same thing. You read the stories of some of those Anabaptists who, the reason they were put in prison, and some of them died there, was simply because they would not put the state and its interests above the interests of the Kingdom of God, which they had loyalty to. They had another king, one Jesus, and some of them died for him as recently as World War I in this country in our prisons.

And if you read the stories about them, and they do exist in print, some of these men were treated in ways that you'd think you're reading about Corrie ten Boom in a Nazi torture camp, or about Richard Wormbrant in Romanian communist prisons. It wasn't any better in some cases. So what I'm saying is, we sometimes say, well, we live in a time where there's no persecution.

Well, there's always the option of being persecuted. Paul said, all who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. If you don't suffer any persecution, that might tell you something about yourself, not so much about our times.

The Christians in the early days were persecuted for these reasons that I've identified. But, if we were like them, we might be persecuted for the same reasons. It's not so much that the times have changed, it's that the church has changed.

Well, these are the reasons that persecution happens. Now, you can get a nice book like Fox's Book of Martyrs and get a good catalog of some of the things, people who died for their faith and the ways they died, and in some cases what they said at their trials. It's really, really inspiring stuff.

Someone gave me a copy years ago, probably 25, almost 30 years ago, someone gave me my first copy of Fox's Book of Martyrs. I still have it, the binding's falling apart and everything. But, I didn't read it for a long time.

I didn't think I would like it. I was a teenager and I have a weak stomach and I don't even like to see a possum squeezed on the road, much less hear about people with their bowels poured out or whatever, or put on a spit and roasted over a fire, things like that, and their skin peeled off. That just isn't my cup of tea.

But, when I finally broke down and started reading it, I realized that this is a very different kind of book than I thought. I thought the economy was very different than what I thought. I thought it was going to be grossed out.

Instead, I was inspired. Tremendous. It's the history of the victory of Jesus Christ over all opposition and the tremendous victory that he gave his people when they had to seal their testimony with their blood.

And, this was the period. Now, Fox's Book of Martyrs goes beyond this early period and goes on through up to the time of the Reformation practically. But, we can see that many of the stories of the martyrs have been preserved for us.

The earliest that was preserved by an early church was the Martyrdom of Polycarp, which was written sometime within a year of his death by his church. He was a bishop of the church of Smyrna, and he was burned at the stake, and the people of his church wrote the account of his martyrdom. It's available.

You can read it. It's very inspiring. Anyway, having looked at the reasons why Christians were persecuted, let me talk about some of the specifics of Christian persecution.

Some of this, of course, goes back to the days of the apostles. But, for the most part, as I said earlier, most official persecution of the Christians in the days of the apostles was by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the only body, power body, that really wanted to stamp out Christianity in the days of the apostles.

At a later date, the Roman government wanted to do so. But, early on, there were some times when Christians came to be hurt a little bit by the Romans. One of the earliest cases we know of is in 50 A.D., where the Caesar Claudius banished all the Jews from Rome, many of whom were Christians, and they had to find some other place to live.

They had to leave the country, leave the city. And a couple of people who did that we know of were Priscilla and Aquila. They were Christian Jews in Rome.

And, because all the Jews had been banished from Rome, they had to relocate. They relocated to Corinth. Now, it's interesting, because they probably considered that a great inconvenience.

I mean, having to leave their home, and make a trip, and set up a business in another town, in another country, and so forth. I mean, that was not exactly convenient. But, it was certainly providential for them, because had they not been in Corinth at that time, they would never have met the Apostle Paul, who became probably the most significant person they ever had contact with, and they become companions of his and fellow workers.

But, they were banished from Rome when Claudius Caesar in 50 A.D. told all the Jews to get out of Rome. We read of this, actually, in Acts, Chapter 18, in Verse 2, but we also have secular history recording it. I believe it's Suetonius, the Roman historian, tells about this, that Claudius banished the Jews from Rome, because, he said, of continual disputes that arose over Crestus.

The Roman historian says, over Crestus, C-H-R-E-S-T-U-S. Well, no one knows who Crestus is, however, it is the case that the Latin version of the name Christ is Christus, just one letter different. And, most scholars feel that Suetonius simply got the spelling wrong, that it was disputes over Christ in Rome that caused Claudius to banish the Jews from there.

Now, why would he banish the Jews from there, if the disputes were over Christ? Well, that was at a period of time where the Romans weren't persecuting Christians, but the Jews were. And, there were Jews in Rome who believed in Jesus, who were Christians, and there were Jews in Rome who didn't. And, apparently, there was continual strife there, just like you read of in the cities that Paul visited in the Book of Acts.

And, I guess, the strife that the Jews stirred up against the Christians over Christ became so, you know, destabilizing to the peace of the city that the emperor just said, get all the Jews out, just all of them, leave, all Jews leave Rome. And, that included Christian Jews. So, that was not really a Roman turning against Christianity.

It was, however, because of Christ that these Christian Jews, Priscilla and Aquila and many others, had to leave Rome. But, it was really because Claudius was upset with the Jews. And, they happened to be Jews as well as Christians, so they had to leave too.

The first real persecution that a Roman authority launched against Christians was that of Nero. And, actually, Nero didn't persecute the Christians because of their religion, per se. I mean, he was far from being a Christian himself.

But, it wasn't because of their religious beliefs that they were persecuted. You know the story, I'm sure everyone knows the story about how Rome caught fire. And, ten of the fourteen districts in Rome were gutted by the fire and destroyed.

There were a million people living in Rome and countless thousands suffered because of this destruction of the city. It was a very unpopular event among the Roman populace. And, rumors began to circulate that Nero himself had started the fire.

Which made Nero begin to seem a very unpopular ruler in the eyes of the people. Nero got wind of this rumor. We don't know if the rumor is true or not, but it was certainly prevalent.

Both Suetonius and Tacitus, the Roman historians, mention it. And, in order to take the heat off of himself, whether he was guilty or not, we do not know. But, because he was perceived to be guilty of burning Rome, he needed to find somebody else to accuse.

And, he chose the Christians as his scapegoat. The reason he did was not because he knew anything about their religion or objected to anything in particular in it. But, because they were already unpopular.

They were probably already unpopular for the reasons I mentioned in my first reason for persecution. They were social outcasts. No one really felt a kinship to them.

They didn't really do the same kinds of things for fun. Everyone else did. And, because they were unpopular, Nero took them as a convenient scapegoat.

To say, they're the bad guys. And, of course, he began to do some excruciating things. Tacitus, I think it was, said that he afflicted them with the utmost refinements of cruelty.

And, to be precise, he would douse their bodies in tar and tie them up or nail them up on posts in his garden. And, light them on fire. And, they were called Nero's torches.

And, he would ride through the garden in his chariot with his guests watching the

Christians burn. And, these Christians had done nothing. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time and unpopular.

And, so he picked them as the ones to hurt. He hurt them in other ways, too. He would sew them up in the skins of animals and then throw them to packs of wild dogs and lions and so forth to be torn up.

In fact, Paul stood before Nero during that same persecution. And, at first, apparently before that persecution broke out, Paul had his first trial before Nero. But, he was released because the persecution of Christians had not begun.

And, Paul says in 2 Timothy chapter 4, he was delivered from the mouth of the lion on that occasion. But, later Paul was arrested again and he did not escape. Nero beheaded Paul.

And, he crucified Peter upside down. So, it was Nero's persecution. It was from 64 A.D. to Nero's death in 68.

And, the Christians suffered like this. And, in the late 60's, both Peter and Paul succumbed to that particular persecution and were martyred. There's a story.

I don't know if it's true or not. It may be a legend. It comes from that early time.

And, it's said that Peter and Paul were in Rome at some event, some public event. And, there was a performance being done by Simon, the sorcerer. The same Simon who is in Acts chapter 8, who seemed to be converted under Philip's preaching, but then apparently wasn't.

And, Simon went on to Rome, according to the writings of the Church Fathers, and became a popular magician there. Had a cult named after him. There was actually a monument and a statue of him made in Rome.

And, the Church Fathers mentioned it. It's there to this day, they said. The statue of Simon Magus, the magician.

Well, he was apparently quite powerful. So much so, that even the Bible itself says that the people of Samaria referred to him as the great power of God. Although, he was acting through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Yet, Simon in his own right, through his own demonic powers, was able to impress a lot of people. And, according to the legend, he was putting on a performance for Nero in Rome. And, he was actually levitating, flying through the air.

And, the performance disgusted Peter and Paul. Peter had reviewed Simon before, in Samaria, according to Acts chapter 8. And, Peter and Paul prayed against him. And, his power left him.

And, he fell down and I think broke his legs or something like that. This made Nero angry. And, Peter and Paul both were martyred as a result of that.

That may or may not be the true story of the cause of their martyrdom. But, it is a story that exists from ancient literature. Another story that has come down from the early fathers is that Peter, at the time of that persecution, was fleeing from Rome.

And, he met Jesus on the road. And, Jesus was on his way back into Rome. And, Peter said, where are you going? And, Jesus said, I'm going back to Rome to be crucified again.

So, Peter turned around and went with him too. Peter was arrested, was condemned to be crucified, did not feel worthy to die the same way Jesus did. So, he requested that he be crucified upside down and was obliged.

Now, you might say, why was Peter crucified and Paul beheaded? The reason is because Paul was a Roman citizen. And, one of the privileges of Roman citizenship is if you happen to make the emperor mad enough to kill you, he can't crucify you. He has to behead you.

It's faster and more humane. Peter didn't have the advantage of being a Roman citizen. Therefore, he got to spend about three days on a cross before he died, according to the Fox's Book of Martyrs.

Now, an event that really changed the situation for the persecution of Christians by Rome was the destruction of Jerusalem that took place in 70 A.D. And, I've told you this before, but before Jerusalem fell, most people, including a lot of Jewish Christians, had the impression that Christianity was just another sect of Judaism. There were several religious sects within Judaism. There was the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Pharisees, there were the Zealots, and there were others.

Even among the Pharisees, there were different sects. There were those who followed Hillel, and there were those who followed others, Shammai, and so forth. And, so the Jews had all these different sort of denominations, as it were.

And, Christianity was perceived by the Romans, and by, as I say, some of the Jews, as a sect of Judaism. Because the Jews and the Christians were the only ones in the empire who thought there was only one God, and he was invisible. And, after all, Christianity was about a Jewish guy, Jesus, and it was spread by Jewish preachers.

So, I mean, the Romans just couldn't tell that this wasn't a Jewish religion. It was something different. And, Josephus tells us that when the Roman general, Titus, destroyed Rome, he actually thought that by doing, excuse me, destroyed Jerusalem, he actually thought by doing so, he was going to bring an end both to Judaism and Christianity.

But, he was only half right. He brought an end to Judaism. The Jewish kingdom was abolished at that point in time, and the Jewish temple was destroyed.

Judaism has never been practiced since. Christianity, however, went on business as usual. Because the temple and the center of worship in Jerusalem are not part of the essence of what Christianity is.

Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, the day is coming, and now is, when those who worship God will not worship in Jerusalem or in this mountain, but those who worship God will worship in spirit and in truth. And, he was predicting 70 A.D. when both the mountain in Samaria, the citadel, or the temple there that Samaria was built, was destroyed by the Romans at the same time. And, Jerusalem was destroyed.

So, people don't worship there or in Jerusalem. But, they have to worship, as Jesus said, in spirit and truth. That was no problem to his disciples.

They were spiritual people. Therefore, Christianity survived just fine after the destruction of Jerusalem. And, that gave it a visibility as a religion in its own right, separate from Judaism.

And, of course, I told you before, Rome had a policy. Any religion that was already being practiced in a region before Rome took over was allowed to continue to practice. It was legal.

Judaism was practiced in Palestine before the Romans took over. So, Judaism was a legal religion in the empire. But, no new religion was to be tolerated.

No new religion was to be permitted to arise within a Roman territory after the Romans had taken possession of it. And, now, it became clear that Christianity was just such a religion. It was new.

It had arisen in Palestine after the Romans were already in occupation. And, therefore, it was not a legal religion. And, various emperors pressed harder than others in trying to stamp it out.

And, it was made illegal. And, although Nero's persecution of Christians had not been really for religious reasons. He didn't persecute them for religious reasons, but because he was looking for a scapegoat for his own crime, if that's what it was.

But, Nero's persecution of Christians had at least set a precedent so that later emperors felt comfortable and felt like they'd have public support if they persecuted Christians, too. And, so, after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the main persecution came not from Jews, but from Romans. I don't mean to imply that Jews didn't have any more hostility to vent against Christianity.

We read in the martyrdom of Polycarp that in Smyrna, the city where Polycarp was a bishop and where he was martyred, the Jews of the city were very glad to help the Romans gather the wood for the fire. And, they played a very active role in helping with the death of Polycarp, although it was done by Roman authorities. The Jews were very happy to participate.

You might remember Jesus sent a letter to that same church before Polycarp was there, the church of Smyrna. Smyrna had more Jews in it than any of the other seven towns that those letters of the seven churches went to. And, Jesus refers to those in Smyrna who say they are Jews, but are not, but are the synagogue of Satan and do lie.

And, he basically indicates that there were Jewish people in Smyrna who Jesus regarded to be a synagogue of Satan rather than worthy of the title Jew. And, these were among those who continued to persecute Christians even after Jerusalem fell. But, most of the persecution was done by the Romans because the Romans had the power to do it.

The Jews certainly didn't have power anymore after their commonwealth was destroyed in 7 AD. There were, as I say, ten emperors besides Nero who persecuted Christians after the fall of Jerusalem. And, I have their names here.

There's really three waves of persecution under these ten emperors that we can differentiate between. The first four of them may have been relatively mild or moderate in their persecution and rather incidental in the sense that it was not systematic. It was not that they were hunting down the Christians to kill them.

It was that Christianity was illegal and if somebody was found to be a Christian, they would be prosecuted for it and sometimes martyred. The first emperor to do that was Domitian. The persecution under Domitian began in 95 AD.

And, the second to do that was Trajan, the emperor Trajan from 111 AD to 115 AD. There is an interesting letter, actually correspondence between Trajan and one of his governors of Bithynia, a guy named Pliny the Younger. I mentioned him a moment ago.

This correspondence has survived. Pliny had been arresting Christians and killing them if they would not renounce Christ. But, he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing because I think his conscience was bothering him because he couldn't find anything really criminal about these people.

And, he was giving them the utmost punishment of the law, but he couldn't figure out why. And, he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing, so he wrote a letter to emperor Trajan, which letter has survived and is available to be read today. And, he basically said, you know, I've been doing this with these Christians, but I'm not sure this is really what you would suggest that I do.

And, since you're the emperor, I'm going to let you decide what should I do with these

Christians. And, he explained to Trajan exactly what he had been doing. He was interrogating the Christians to find out what it was their activities were.

And, he said, I can't quote him exactly. I could have brought a quote with me, but I didn't. But, he says something like, well, here's what they were accustomed to do.

They'd rise before dawn and meet at a certain place and they'd sing hymns to somebody named Christ as if he were a god. And, then they would participate in a harmless meal. And, then they would make vows never to lie or perjure themselves or commit adultery or to steal or to kill.

And, then they would disband. And, he said, I can't really understand what's wrong with these people. You know, I mean, it doesn't really sound like they're doing anything that we should call criminal.

And, Trajan actually wrote back to him, and his letter is also on record. Trajan said, well, since Christianity is illegal, we can't stop persecuting them, but we can stop hunting them down. And, Trajan decreed that Christians should never be arrested on an anonymous tip.

Isn't that interesting that ancient Rome was more just than modern America in that respect. Because, a person can have their children taken from them by children's services, a government agency, on the basis of an anonymous tip. Somebody who doesn't even have to say who they are can claim they suspect there's child abuse, and that can result in all their children being taken from the parents.

And, the parents, I know of families who have lost their homes and their jobs in fighting in court to get their kids back. Sometimes they get them back after a year or so. Sometimes they don't.

But, Trajan, a pagan, had a higher standard of justice in persecuting Christians than even this country does. Because, he said, no one should be arrested or prosecuted on the basis of an anonymous tip, an anonymous accusation. The accuser has to face the accused.

He said, also, you don't have to go around asking people if they're Christians or trying to find Christian meetings. But, if somebody is brought to your attention that they are a Christian, then they should be interrogated and made to renounce their faith. And, if they don't, then they have to be killed.

Now, this is moderate persecution under Trajan. And, the same kind of persecution continued under Hadrian in 117 to 138 A.D. And, Antoninus Pius, the first of the Antonine emperors of Rome, from 139-161. It was under Antoninus Pius that Polycarp was martyred.

And, then, after those four emperors, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius, there were three emperors who kind of turned up the heat a little more. Their persecution was somewhat more severe and definitely more deliberate. Whereas, those earlier emperors, it was sort of a don't ask, don't tell policy.

You know, if you're a Christian, if you don't say anything, I won't say anything. We won't chase you if you don't get in our face. But, these other emperors, these next three, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, and Maximinus, they actually did, systematically actually, persecute Christians, and deliberately so.

Although, sometimes it was not empire-wide. They sometimes just persecuted Christians in selected areas. Marcus Aurelius, from 161 to 180, persecuted Christians.

Justin Martyr died under Marcus Aurelius' persecution. We'll say something about Justin in a few moments, some more about him. You'll know who he is if you don't already.

Severus, the emperor from 193 to 211, he persecuted Christians too, but he restricted it to Egypt and North Africa. He didn't persecute Christians throughout the whole Roman Empire. And, likewise, Maximinus, from 235 to 238 A.D., he attacked Christian leaders principally, and only in certain areas in the Roman Empire.

He didn't launch an empire-wide persecution. Now, the last three emperors who persecuted the Church did conduct empire-wide persecutions. You can see that the persecutions began to increase in intensity as the centuries rolled on.

And, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian all persecuted Christians throughout the empire. Decius had a very severe persecution. There were many Christians who renounced Christ during the reign of Decius.

This is probably because, as some have suggested, that in the years prior to that, there had not been very hard persecution, and Christians had gotten kind of soft, and Christianity people began to join the Church who were not really that committed, because it didn't cost them that much. And so, when Decius really launched a severe persecution in 249, many in the Church were not extremely committed Christians, and many did renounce their faith. It was under Decius' persecution, and the lapses that occurred at that time, I think it was at that time there was tremendous debate among the fathers of the Church as to how these lapses could be restored to the Church if they repented later on.

There were also many who did not lapse, and under Decius' reign, there were many martyrs, many Christians died, faithful. Valerian, who reigned from 253 to 260 AD, early in his administration, he actually kind of had a friendly attitude toward Christianity. But, see, what happened is that there was a superstitious notion among the pagans that whenever a volcano would destroy a city, or a flood would come, or there would be a

crop failure, or a hurricane, or whenever there would be some kind of a natural disaster, an earthquake that destroys a neighborhood, that this is because the gods were angry.

And why would the gods be angry, but that the Christians were there not worshipping them? And so the pagans actually believed, or if they didn't believe it, they at least pretended to believe, that every natural disaster was really the fault of the Christians, because the Christians were making the gods angry but not worshipping them. And Valerian, as I say, was friendly toward Christianity at first, but because of some serious natural disasters that happened during his reign, and the strong public opinion that the Christians were responsible for this, he turned on the Christians, and he martyred quite a few of the leaders of the churches. And then Diocletian may have... Odysseus and Diocletian, I think, are among those who are considered to be the most severe persecutors of the church during the Roman Empire.

And Diocletian's persecution began in 303, but he abdicated the throne and went into private life a couple of years later, fortunately, and so it only lasted a couple of years. But during the time that Diocletian was persecuting the church until 305, he imprisoned the church leaders, and he destroyed the places of worship. Now it's interesting that there were places of worship by this time, because for the first two centuries the church didn't have churches.

The Christians didn't build churches. However, you can see by the dates that there was a period of peace over 40 years, there was a whole generation between Valerian and Diocletian during which there was no persecution. And the Christians had a whole generation of Christians who grew up not knowing any persecution.

And things were peaceful, and they actually built churches and things. So when Diocletian came along, there were churches to burn, and there were books to burn. They had Bibles, and he ordered the destruction of all Bibles.

It is considered one of the wonderful providential turnarounds of history that this Diocletian actually signed an edict in 303 to burn all Bibles and to destroy all copies of the scriptures in the entire Roman Empire, which would be wherever the scriptures were, actually. But within 25 years after that, Constantine, the new emperor sitting on the same throne, actually commissioned Eusebius to make 50 copies of the Bible by hand, which was an expensive project, and distribute them to all the churches. So the same government that had caused all Bibles to be burned that they could find in 303, 25 years later was publishing Bibles at government expense and distributing them to the churches.

So this is how God has vindicated His church and prevented it from going under. The gates of hell have never really been able to prevail, as Jesus said, against the church, although sometimes they've tried very hard. So this is what we know about the persecution of the period.

It was kind of nasty. But that's not all that was happening. That sort of describes the political setting in which the church grew during these centuries.

But there were things happening in the church as well, changes in the church itself. And these changes, I think, began with the death of the apostles, although they may have begun even while some of the apostles were still alive. In fact, I'm fairly sure John was still alive when some of these happened.

And some of the problems seem to be emerging even in the latter times of the apostles' living. One of the things that was a cause of change in the church was that divisions arose. Without enough apostles to go around to all the churches, there were elders and leaders that were appointed by the apostles in many cases.

Sometimes there weren't even appointees of the apostles. They were just people who were leaders by virtue of being older men. And there would be no political authority in the church, because the church was not a political institution.

Jesus told the disciples not to have political authority. He said, the rulers of the Gentiles do that, but it shall not be so among you. So the earliest Christians didn't exercise any power trips in the church.

And because of this, partially, there were people who disputed with the leaders and who disagreed with them. And in particular, in the church of Corinth, where Paul had written a letter to the church of Corinth and they had problems with divisions in Paul's day, well, a generation or so later, in the days of Clement of Rome, the church of Corinth was at it again. And there were a bunch of young men in the church of Corinth that were ousting the older men who were the elders of the previous generation because they disagreed with their doctrines.

And Clement, who was the bishop of Rome apparently at the time, according to Eusebius, he was the third bishop of Rome, Clement wrote a letter to Corinth. And we have it. It's the oldest surviving non-biblical, non-scriptural document of the early church.

Apart from the writings of the New Testament, there is no surviving document of the early church older than what is called Clement, the Epistle of Clement of Rome. Actually, Clement's name does not appear in the letter. It's actually sent from the church of Rome.

But there's very, very early, strong attestation from the early church that it was written by a man named Clement, who may have been the same Clement that Paul mentions. I believe in Philippians or somewhere, a Christian in Rome, he mentions the name Clement. This man may have known Paul.

Whether he did or not, and whether he was the same Clement, he was a well-respected Christian. And he wrote a letter to the Corinthians because of divisions in the church. And he tried to get them to stop being so divisive.

Now, unfortunately, I don't know if it's unfortunate. I think this part is not so unfortunate, but it got unfortunate. What Clement suggested as the solution to division was that everyone should submit to the elders and the deacons.

Now, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think the New Testament says to do that. It says in Hebrews chapter 13, and I'd like you to look there if you would.

In Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 7, it says, Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Now, the word rule there should be understood to mean lead. They weren't rulers in the pagan sense of ruling, but they were leaders, the leaders in the church.

Remember those who are your leaders, who have spoken the word of God to you. Follow their example. Follow their faith.

Now, you can see the nature of church leadership at that time. The nature of church leadership was somebody is speaking the word of God to the people. He's probably an older Christian.

Hopefully there's a group of them in every church, a group of older men, who are speaking the word of God to the younger believers and being good examples, good role models, mentors for the younger Christians so that the younger could follow their faith. And that's what leadership was. Leadership was just being useful, being an older, stronger, knowledgeable Christian who could help others.

There's no reason to believe that they were appointed by some kind of political official office. Now, later in the same chapter, Hebrews 13, 17, it says, Obey those who rule over you, the same term, those who lead you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy, not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Now, notice, you're supposed to remember those who lead you and also obey them, he said. And be submissive. Now, this does not mean that the writer of Hebrews is establishing the rulers of the church as some kind of political authorities.

This would be in violation of what Jesus himself said. Now, we know from the book of Acts that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church in the regions of Galatia that they evangelized in their first missionary journey. We read in Acts 14 that they appointed elders in every church.

We read in both 1 Timothy and in Titus that Paul had some of his associates ordain elders in some of the churches, in Ephesus and in Crete, respectively, there. And so we know that sometimes the apostles appointed elders. But what was an appointed elder? When an elder was appointed, does that mean he now has a position, a prestige, a position of power in the church? Or does it mean that since the church needs role

models, the church needs to know which men know the truth and should be listened to? That Paul and his companions said, these are the guys that you should look to as your elders.

It doesn't mean, I mean, they may have, but there's no reason to believe that he gave them some kind of office with something like political authority. Consider, for example, what Paul said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16 about one of the ones that they're to submit to in the church. In 1 Corinthians 16, in verse 15, Paul said, I urge you, brethren, you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia.

That means they were among the first Christians converted in that part of the world, in southern Greece, Achaia. They were the oldest Christians in the church. And it says, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints.

Ministry means service. They're servants, they're slaves. Jesus said, he that would be chief among you must be the servant of our slave of all.

These people qualify. They have come to this town. They have devoted themselves to service to the saints.

He says that you also submit to such and to everyone who works and labors with us. In other words, you are to submit to who? The elders who have a political office in the church? No, those who show themselves to be true elders by their maturity, by their longstanding walk with God, and by their slavish service to the saints. Now, it's obvious that submit to them doesn't mean submit to them as people who domineer over you, because these people aren't domineering people.

They're servants, they're slaves. They're addicted to service. They're not addicted to ruling.

And, you know, these people clearly are the ones that Paul is saying, these are your elders. Submit to people such as them. It's interesting, he doesn't say Stephanas is the bishop of this church.

Obey him. He says, you know Stephanas, you've seen how he is. Submit to such people as this.

It's not as if there were political offices in the church and you submit to people because they're in that office, but there were individuals such as this. People like this. Submit to people like that.

It doesn't sound at all like those to whom they submitted, the leaders of the church were power or political type leaders in the church. Look over at 1 Thessalonians 5. Church of Thessalonica likewise had leaders, but we don't know if they held any political office in the church, so to speak. But in 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 12, Paul says, We urge you,

brethren, recognize those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.

Not because they hold an office, but because of the work they do. Be at peace among yourselves. Be attorney to those very leaders that the others were told to submit to.

Warn those who are unruly. Comfort the faint-hearted. Uphold the weak.

Be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue that which is good both for yourselves and for all. And it goes on.

Notice he gives instructions to those who are the sheep, as it were, in verses 12 and 13. We urge you, brethren. And then verse 14, he appears to talk to those who are under them, as it were, are told to recognize them, esteem them highly, and love them because of the work they're doing.

Who are these leaders? Are they some kind of power-trippers in the church? No, they are those who are laboring among you. They're servants. They may be laboring in the Word.

They may be laboring in some other capacity, but they are servants. They're not addicted to power. They're addicted to service.

Warn the unruly. Comfort the faint-hearted. Uphold the weak.

Be patient with all. In other words, perform the service of spiritual leadership for the people who have needs in that area. Now, what I understand is that there were, of course, elders in the early church, but these men were not necessarily appointed into an office that had something like political characteristics, but they were simply recognized.

Sometimes Paul would come in and tell people who to recognize, but they were recognized, and these people were recognized by the fact that they weren't into being in charge. They were into serving. They weren't into bossing.

They were into teaching what the Word said, and this is what the writer of Hebrews says. Remember those who lead you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God and follow their faith. There's nothing of a monarchical kind of a bishop in these letters.

There's nothing of a bishop in the biblical writings are identical. That is interchangeable. A person who is a bishop was also an elder.

A person who is an elder is also a bishop, and every church had several, at least more than one. You read continuously, whenever you read of bishops or elders in the Bible, you read of the elders, plural, of the church, singular. Each church had elders, and the elders were exhorted by Paul in Acts chapter 20 and by Peter in 1 Peter chapter 5 to feed the flock, and they did.

The early church did not have individual pastors over individual churches. The early church had elders who were the pastors, but there were elders in each church. We're not told that there was one who was above the rest, but all of these things began to change.

We don't know how they all began to change, but we know that in the settling of a dispute in Corinth, Clement from Rome writing told the people, the way to come back to unity is to submit to the elders and to the deacons. Now, there's nothing wrong with saying that. The writer of Hebrews said that too.

Obey them, be submissive. Paul told the Christians, be submissive to such people as these. The problem is, of course, once you've got a letter saying submit to these people, you can institutionalize that.

You don't have to, but you can. Someone rises to power, he's on an authority trip now. Suddenly, someone has come to power who isn't a humble servant.

And he's got a letter from Clement that says everyone needs to submit to me because I'm an elder here. And eventually, because of the command to submit, which is not a bad thing to command, it's just something that can be abused, and it was. Eventually, because people were commanded to submit to the elders, it was possible for elders who were on a power trip to demand it on the basis of these precedents.

Okay, I'm an elder. You're supposed to submit to the elders. You submit to me.

And suddenly the whole thing is institutionalized as a power trip. And it's not spiritual anymore. People are not recognized as leaders by their spiritual qualifications anymore.

But now they hold something like an office that has something like teeth and political clout in the church. And this developed more and more until before long. Actually, you find even by the end of the first century, the very early part of the second century, already you have developing what was called the monoepiscopate, which means one bishop per church.

Now, the word bishop is in the Greek episkopos. It comes from two Greek words or two Greek particles. Epi means over.

And skopos means to see, like telescope or microscope. Skopos means to see. Episkopos means overseer, a person who sees over the church, just watches over the church.

That's what the word bishop in the Bible is. Episkopos, an overseer. The word elder in the Bible is the word presbyteros, which just means an old man.

And it's the same word in the Greek, whether you're just talking about a man who's old or a person who's an elder in the church. And what you will find repeatedly in the scripture is that elders and bishops are the same people. In Acts chapter 20, Paul called

for the elders of the church in Ephesus to him in Miletus.

And among the things he said to them in verse 28 was, take heed to the church of God over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, episkopos, bishops. These were said to be the elders of the church. He said, the Holy Spirit has made you overseers of them.

Why? Because elders are the same people as the overseers. They're the bishops. Interestingly, Paul said, the Holy Spirit has made you the overseers.

See, in the early church, people didn't run for office in the church. People were not appointed by the power brokers of the previous generation to replace them. In the early church, the Holy Spirit made people overseers.

Now, you can institutionalize that and it can still be the same person that the Holy Spirit made an overseer. But the problem is that once you've institutionalized it, the next generation, you've got a machine that produces the successor. The institution produces successors.

It doesn't need the Holy Spirit to do that anymore. And eventually you may well, and you eventually did in the early church, you did have successors to the Holy Spirit ordained bishops. You have successors who were not Holy Spirit ordained.

They were just cranked out of the machine. Things like that. Some of them very corrupt.

So because of the disunity in the church, the letter of Clement urges people to submit to the bishops and the deacons. Likewise, some of the other early writings urge that upon the early church. There was, somehow through all of this, there was the rise of the mono episcopate, the single bishop, the individual bishop in one city, so that we now have like a one guy ruling over each city.

But at that time, there still was not one church over the other churches. Now see what eventually developed into the Roman Catholic system was where the Roman bishop had authority over all the other bishops of the other churches. That's where the papacy came from.

That's what the papacy is. He's the bishop of Rome, and the Catholic Church believes he's got authority over all the bishops and he's the head of the whole church. That was not an early development.

That was not in the first or early second century. Rome did not become predominant, but the idea of a mono episcopate, of a single bishop ruling a church did become, did rise fairly early on. We find it in the days of Ignatius, in the year 110.

Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch, and he was martyred. He was arrested and he was taken to Rome to be martyred, where I believe he was thrown to wild beasts. And on the

way to Rome, he wrote seven letters to various churches.

Again, the main concern was unity. And in these letters he urged them to submit to the bishop. And he actually strengthened the position of the monarchical mono bishop more than anyone prior to that.

Because actually Ignatius in his letters said that everyone had to be in subjection to the monarchical bishop. And he held that the church was not capable of baptizing or celebrating the Eucharist or performing marriage without the bishop present. So the bishop was now instead of Jesus, you know.

Whereas before that time, you know, Philip could baptize a eunuch out in the wilderness without a bishop present, or anyone could baptize anyone they led to the Lord without a bishop present. But in the days of Ignatius, which is only 110 A.D., he's now urging the churches not to do any of those things without a bishop present. Now, that was for expediency's sake.

You know, when you've got divisions in the church, some of those parties dividing off are maybe heretics. And there may be some people who really don't stand in the true faith. And maybe they're going to be drawing some sheep after themselves.

And maybe they'll be baptizing people. Maybe they'll be conducting rituals and marriages and stuff. And they really are heretics.

And the church doesn't want to want to distinguish them. So to make sure that doesn't happen, the bishop has to be there. You know, it's got to be overseen by the bishop.

Make sure it's with his approval. Now, again, when things are institutionalized, it's not usually done out of some diabolical desire to corrupt the thing. It's done because of expediency.

A problem arises. And we say, well, it looks like the best way to solve that is have everyone submit to this guy. OK.

Maybe some people were baptizing in a wrong formula into a cult. And so Ignatius had to say, well, listen, don't anyone baptize anyone unless the bishop's there. You know, then we'll make sure that no one baptizes the wrong way or into the wrong faith.

I mean, that would be perhaps very well-intentioned. The problem is that these letters set precedence that later generations, they just say, look, see right there, you're supposed to submit to the bishop. You cannot take the Lord's Supper without the bishop present.

You can't baptize him. You can't marry a friend. Suddenly the bishop has this institutionalized job of being the boss of the church.

And that is not really the character of the ministry in the days of the apostles. And that is what began to develop about this time. So the divisions in the churches caused there to be an advocacy of strengthening the role of the bishops to keep unity.

At that time we have the rise of the mono-Episcopate somehow. And we have the monarchical nature of the bishop strengthened, especially by Ignatius and his letter to the churches that he wrote on his way to be martyred. Now, it was at a later date, not in the early second century, but at a later time, that there was a rising respect for the church in Rome as the church where Peter and Paul had died.

Eventually, the church developed the tradition that Peter had founded the church in Rome, which is almost certainly not true, judging from what we know in the book of Acts about the church in Rome existing before Peter as far as we know ever went there. But the church began to develop this idea that Rome and the bishopric of Rome was the seat of Peter. And that whoever succeeded Peter to that bishopric had the same authority Peter had, not only over the church in Rome, but over all the churches in the world.

And this notion that the Roman church had priority over all the churches and authority over them developed at that time. Now let me very quickly wind this down by acquainting you with some of the writings. Now there are several typos.

I typed this up very rapidly this afternoon, and I'm not a very good typist. I've noticed in proofreading there's at least four or five places where there's a letter or two missing. Just forgive me on that.

Don't be too critical of this. There are groups, like even the word categories there is missing a letter. Actually the E on my computer is sticky.

I often miss E's. I hit them and they don't register on the screen. It didn't there apparently.

But there are four different categories of who we call the church fathers. And they're called by different titles based on their time that they lived. Those that lived in the early second century and the late first and early second century, people like Clement and Ignatius were called and Polycarp.

These guys, their lifetimes actually overlap the lifetimes of the apostles themselves. Papias was another of these. We call those apostolic fathers simply because in many cases they knew the apostles or at least they were so near in their careers to the time of the apostles that it is assumed that the church had not been very much corrupted and that they preserved a great deal of the apostolic teaching.

The fathers of the late second century and third century, that would be of course the 100s and 200s A.D., are usually called antinocene fathers. Ante means before. And nicene refers to the council of Nicaea that took place in 325 A.D. where the Trinity

doctrine was hammered out and became official in the church.

But those fathers of the second and third centuries before Nicaea are called the antinicensian fathers. Those that are in the fourth century, which is the time when the council of Nicaea took place in the years that followed, are called the nicene fathers. And then in the fifth and sixth centuries, which would be the 400s and the 500s A.D., you call those the post-nicene fathers.

You can buy, there's 30-some-odd volumes, large volumes in a set you can buy for about \$300 as all these writings of these guys. There's a lot of them in there. You can also get them all in one CD-ROM disc from a place in Albany.

Really wonderful, wonderful service. Very inexpensive compared to buying them all in paper. Anyway, this is what we mean when we talk about the apostolic fathers or the antinicensian fathers or the nicene fathers or the post-nicene fathers.

These are talking about different time periods in the first six centuries of the church. Now let me just acquaint you with a few of these and then we're going to have to wind this down. I'm going to read this because I don't have this all memorized.

Clement, I've already told you about Clement. In about 95 or 96 A.D., he wrote the letter to the patriarch of the Corinthian church about keeping the unity and he advised that the people should obey the elders. I always thought the word elder didn't need an E in it.

The letter L suffices. Elders and deacons. The earliest non-canonical Christian work is this book.

That is of the books that are not in the New Testament but are produced by the early church. This is the earliest that has survived. In fact, it was so respected that near the end of the second century, most of the church wanted to canonize it.

Most of them treated it as it was part of Scripture. It eventually didn't make the final cuts but it was highly regarded for about a century after it was written as almost of scriptural status. Then there's Barnabas.

The Epistle of Barnabas was written somewhere between 70 A.D. and 130 A.D. We're not sure exactly when. It's fairly certain that this Barnabas was not the Barnabas known to us in the Book of Acts. Although the author might have been claiming to be.

It's hard to say. But it's not that same Barnabas, probably. I don't have much to say about it.

It was written in Alexandria, Egypt. The argument of this book is against imposing Jewish law on the believer in Christ. Actually, the Epistle of Barnabas is very anti-Jewish and very much against legalism in Jewish law and so forth.

Almost to the point of denying any continuity between Judaism in the Old Testament and Christianity in the New. And of course, you can't make too big a distinction because Christianity did grow out of Jewish roots. But Barnabas almost errs on the side of denying any connection between Judaism and Christianity.

The Shepherd of Hermas also was very highly respected in the second century. Many people wanted it to be in the canon of Scripture. It didn't make the final cut either.

But Hermas was a slave. May have been Jewish, but he was a slave in Rome of a woman named Rhoda. He was set free by her and later had a family of his own.

He married. He actually made some money. Was fairly affluent.

But at a time of persecution, he lost all his property and even his children renounced him. Later, however, he and his children both went through penance and were reunited. The Shepherd of Hermas, the book, consists of five visions, twelve mandates, and ten similitudes, all of which claim to be inspired, which led many of the early people in the early church to think of it as Scripture.

The book mainly deals with the question of repentance from sins committed after baptism. And it also gives evidence of an emerging penitential system. The idea of penance, which the Catholic Church later developed more fully, seems to have its roots right here.

We'll talk about the Didache and Ignatius and some of these others next time. We've run out of time for this lecture. So we'll have to continue it next time, which we will.