

(Christian History) 2. the Spread of the Gospel & the Apologists

by David Guzik

The early church period saw the spread of the gospel beyond the Roman Empire and the emergence of the office of bishop as a key leadership role in the church.

Scripture: Acts 12:1-2, Ephesians 2:20

Topics: "Biblical Interpretation", "Early Christianity"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of understanding the different levels of meaning in Scripture. He explains that Scripture has a primary sense, which is the literal meaning, but also deeper spiritual meanings. The speaker emphasizes the need to look beyond the surface level and seek the spiritual truths in the Bible. He also mentions that during the early spread of the gospel, much of the missionary effort was not deliberate, but rather through the personal lives of Christians.

Transcript

In our second lecture now on this Christian history series, we want to take a look for a second part at this period known as the early church. We've already discussed how we've divided in these first period two different divisions, the Apostolic Church, A.D. 33, now that's just, you know, I would say from the Ascension of Jesus, right, from Acts chapter 1 to the death of the Apostle John. We don't have exact precise dates for those events, but we just say approximately A.D. 33 to A.D. 100.

And then we come in this period that we call the early church, which covers the period from A.D. 100 until the period of 312, which we would consider to be the conversion of Constantine and how things radically changed for Christians in the Roman Empire and therefore for Christianity at the conversion of Constantine, which we'll discuss in some length. So in this period of the early church, we discussed how Christians met and worshipped in the period of the early church. Then we discussed persecution against Christians in the period of the early church.

And then now thirdly, we want to talk about another important theme or characteristic through this period, and that would be the spread of the gospel. The spread of the gospel, as remarkable as it was during the period of the apostolic church, we would say that it was even more remarkable during this period of the early church. We sort of took a look at a map before of first century churches and how it covered a lot of the Roman Empire, but not the western part of the Roman Empire into what's known as the Iberian

Peninsula, that would be Spain and Portugal into Gaul, which today we would call France, up into Britain, and up over into the western part of North Africa.

Those periods were largely untouched by the gospel during the time of the apostolic church, but the gospel spread into those regions in a radical way during the period of the early church. So the apostolic church had its parameters, and then the early church had a much greater parameter, with churches extending all the way up north into Cologne. Now the city where I live in right now is Siegen, Germany.

It's about on the same latitude as Cologne. Let me tell you, that's a good eight hour drive, that's 800 kilometers from here. It's a long way north.

There were churches in Cologne this far up in the Roman Empire. And so you see how the church spread all up north, all over west, into North Africa, into the area of Spain, and then eastward also was a greater expansion. Since Christianity began in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, it generally spread westward, up to the boundaries of the empire.

For 350 years, the Rhine and the Danube were the borders of the Roman Empire. The Romans kept about 200,000 troops on this frontier of the Danube and the Rhine, and those two rivers formed a wonderful natural border that basically encompassed the boundaries of the Roman Empire. In the ancient world, the people who lived east of the Rhine and north of the Danube were generally known as barbarians.

That's because the Greeks called all foreigners barbari, meaning people who were strange, foreign, or crude, especially in the way that they spoke. The term implied inferiority to Greco-Roman culture. And so that's what they thought of all these people who lived in this area east of the Rhine and north of the Danube.

They considered them inferior barbarians, but yet these people did have civilized and developed cultures. The German tribes in particular had high standards of morality and duty that Romans, such as Tacitus, admired. Yet these barbarians saw the high cultural, economic, and agricultural development of the Roman Empire, and they wanted it for themselves.

I mean, these weren't stupid people who lived outside of the Roman Empire, and when they learned of the great accomplishments of the Roman Empire, they wanted it for themselves as well. So it wasn't until late in the early church period that the gospel spread beyond the Roman Empire into the west and the north. Between 250 and 300, Christianity began to spread among a Germanic tribe known as the Visigoths.

The Visigoths raided cities in Asia Minor, down here in the area that we would call modern-day Turkey. They raided cities in Asia Minor, and some of these prisoners that they took were Christians. The witnesses of these unwilling missionaries introduced the gospel to the Visigoths and to German peoples.

Now towards the north and the west, the gospel made its way all the way to northern England. We don't know much about how the gospel first came to England, but at the Council of Arles in 314, there were British bishops present at that council, which shows that not only was Christianity present in Great Britain at that time, but that it was also organized. From the Roman perspective, what an anonymous Christian wrote in the letter to Diagonist was true, and we already took one look at a section from that letter of Diagonist before.

Here's another section. He says, to put it simply, the soul is to the body what Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body, and Christians through all cities of the world.

So basically, Christianity filled up the Roman Empire, which it had not done in the apostolic period, but that it definitely did do during the early church period, and it even extended beyond the Roman Empire, spreading the gospel as far as India. India in the east will have reasonably reliable traditions that say that the Apostle Thomas came to Cranganore in AD 52 and founded seven churches there. They say that he then went to the eastern coast of India and beyond, and was martyred at Mylapore, which is the modern city of Madras in the year 72.

And so the gospel expanded eastward all the way to India and beyond. It also expanded down into Ethiopia to the south. And so you just see the spreading phenomenon of the gospel during this period.

Now again, I would say that during this period, most of the missionary effort was not deliberate. Most of the spread of the gospel was spontaneous. Do you remember what I told you about how the gospel came to the Visigoths? How did it come to the Visigoths? The Visigoths were down in Asia Minor, raping and pillaging towns, and they carried off a couple Christian servant girls, and the Christian servant girls went back and testified and, you know, brought people among the Visigoths to Christ, and that's how the gospel came to the Germanic peoples.

So I mean, much of the missionary endeavor during this period was not deliberate. It was just done through the personal lives of Christians. Which, by the way, can sometimes be an enormously effective missionary strategy, right? Just go move to an area and be a Christian.

You don't necessarily have to be a full-time Christian servant. You don't necessarily have to quit your job or all this. Sometimes it can be an extremely effective missionary strategy to have no missionary strategy, but just go and live in a different place, but say, I'm going to live my daily life here as a genuine Christian.

And God can use that in a mighty way. Obviously, he has in times past. So the other thing I want you to understand is the role of what we would call geography during this period of the early church.

Geography actually had a very important influence, especially when we consider the patriarchal cities and the rise of the Roman bishop. Now, in the days of the apostles, churches were governed by the influence of the apostle. Sometimes this was direct, as in the case of Paul, right? When Paul was at Ephesus, at the church there, who ran the church at Ephesus? Paul, right? There was never any doubt about that.

But sometimes the apostolic influence was indirect. When Paul left Ephesus, he left Timothy in charge of it, right? And so Timothy wasn't one of the apostles, but he was certainly under the influence, under the direction of the apostles. But what's very interesting to see is that in the early church period, the office of apostle was not recognized as it was in the apostolic church.

In other words, we don't see people coming on the scene in the early church period who claim to be apostles. If you were to ask a Christian or church leader in the early church period, where are the apostles? They would answer, back in the first days of the church. Early church leaders did not see themselves as apostles.

They saw themselves as heirs to the apostles, right? And there's a big difference between the two, isn't it? And might I say that there was a definite scriptural precedent for this. First of all, the New Testament presents the work of the apostles and prophets in what we might call foundational sense. Do you

remember that passage from Ephesians 2.20? He talks about the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and the foundation needs to be laid once, right? We do not need continuing authoritative revelation from the apostles and prophets because we have it as it's recorded in the New Testament, and that's our foundation.

But secondly, James, one of the apostles, Peter, James, and John, James was martyred in Acts chapter 12. Now, when Judas committed suicide, what was the reaction of the 11 remaining disciples? They said, we got to replace him, right? And so they made a 12th apostle, Matthias, right? Now, when James was martyred, there was no attempt to replace him. You see the difference? They felt Judas has to be replaced because of the shame and the disgrace in which he ended his office.

But James does not have to be replaced. When they did not choose another apostle to replace James, it was their way of saying, our work of apostles is foundational, and it won't be repeated. By the way, another way to stress this idea from Scripture is to go to the book of Revelation, where it talks about the foundation of the New Jerusalem, and it says on there, on each of the 12 foundations of the New Jerusalem is written the names of one of the 12 apostles of the Lamb, right? Very much so, the foundation of the apostles, which doesn't need to be continually replaced.

By the way, if you want to get into a good debate with somebody about those foundations of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation, who's the 12th apostle in the book of Revelation? You get a very warm debate whether it was Matthias, the guy that replaced him in the book of Acts, but the sentimental favorite, of course, is Paul, right? Instead of Matthias, and so you can argue about that to your heart's content. But anyway, what we find here is a scriptural precedent for this idea that the apostles were one thing, and now in the early church, they were the heirs of the apostles. So in the New Testament, excuse me, in the early church time, the emphasis was not on apostles, the emphasis is on what we might call the office of bishop.

Now bishop, of course, is a New Testament office. It comes from the ancient Greek word episkopos, which just basically means overseer, and it describes an office of some kind in the church. But the office of bishop began to be emphasized more and more in this period of the early church.

Generally, the bishop was the leader of the Christians in a particular city in its immediate region. He had oversight over the many congregations of Christians in that area. Okay, so you just take a town, right? Take the town of Spital, right? And you would have the bishop of Spital.

Now there would be several Christian congregations, not of different denominations, but just there was no one big meeting place. They would all meet in the home fellowships all over the period, right? So in Spital itself, you might have a dozen Christian congregations in different home churches, right? And then you would have one in Sebolden, and then you would have one in Milstadt, and you would have one in different geographical regions, and there would be one bishop, so to speak, the bishop of Spital, who would have sort of the authority and the governance over all these different areas. Okay, that's sort of how it grew in its area.

This increase of authority in the bishop developed quite naturally, right? I mean, think about the difference at the very beginning of Spital, right, when there would be one small Christian congregation there, and then after two generations, when there's maybe 20 congregations meeting in homes all over the Spital area, right? Think of the difference, right, between one and 20. Well, as the church grows, there's more people, and there's more resources, right? Secondly, as the church grows, there's more needs to meet.

Thirdly, the problem of persecution makes leadership all the more important.

And then fourth, the problem of heresy makes leadership all the more important. So because of all these reasons, you might say that the bishops became more and more powerful, right? If the bishop of Spital is overseeing 20 congregations, he has more power, so to speak, than if he's overseeing one congregation. He has more money, has more resources, persecution, heresy, all these things sort of very naturally serve to increase the authority that the bishop has.

Now this trend was recognized and encouraged by the apostolic fathers, including Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius of Antioch, who did his ministry between 110 and 117 approximately, his whole emphasis was to strengthen the office of bishop in the early church. These are some of the things he said.

He said, pay attention to the bishop and to the board of elders and the deacons. And then he said, do nothing without the bishop. And then he said, you must follow the bishop as Jesus Christ followed the father.

And then he said, let no one do any of the things that have to do with the church without the bishop. Now, so you can see how on a very spontaneous way, very natural way, the office of bishop would become more important and more powerful. But then think of the map of Christian congregations spread all over the ancient world.

When you think about that, there's this whole idea of all these congregations. Well, let's face it. Some of these cities where there are Christians are more important than others, right? I mean, look, I don't want to say Spital is unimportant, but if you compare Spital to Vienna, which one is more important, right? Which is more prestigious to be the bishop of Vienna or the bishop of Spital, right? It's very obvious, isn't it? So four cities rose to prominence in this period of the early church, and they're known as the patriarchal cities.

The four cities were Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Alexandria. The bishops of these cities sort of rose to a special prominence and a special stature. Now listen, you got to pay attention to what I'm saying here.

Not that I don't think you're paying attention, but I'm just calling attention to this. Listen, you know why this is important? You don't understand it yet. I'm explaining to you how there became a pope, okay? This is all in the development of the papal office.

You know, all back to the illustration I gave of the bishop of Spital, all of those same trends and ideas will result in the formation of the papal office, okay? What I want you to notice is how natural it all was. I'm not saying it was good. I'm just saying it was natural.

Nobody sat down with a piece of paper and made a diagram that said, we're going to go from this in the days of the apostles to this in the popes. Nobody sat down and did that, but it happened in a very natural way. I'm not saying necessarily good.

Some very natural things need to be resisted, don't they? But it happened in a very natural progression. So first, the importance of the bishop in all these different cities rose in prominence. Second, a few particular cities among them all became even more prominent.

Notably, Jerusalem. Why would Jerusalem be a prominent patriarchal city? Why? Well, because of the birth of Jesus and the ministry of Jesus and the birth of the church, right? Wouldn't you rather be the bishop of Jerusalem than the bishop of, you know, Murrieta or Spital or something like that, right? I mean,

it just, it sounds cool, right? I'm the bishop of Jerusalem. Why would Antioch be a powerhouse center? Antioch, if you notice in the book of Acts, the center of Christian dynamic ministry moves from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Antioch was the church of the apostle Paul. This was Paul's home church. He visited Jerusalem, but this was Paul's home church.

Okay, so Antioch was important. Why would Rome be important? Rome was important because Rome was Rome. Rome was the leading city of the world.

Rome was New York, London, and Paris all rolled into one. Rome was Rome. To be the bishop of Rome was a big deal.

And then finally, Alexandria. What was important about Alexandria? Well, first of all, it was one of the great cities of the intellect and learning. This was the Oxford or the Cambridge, right, of the ancient world.

And so these four cities, these bishops of those cities, became more prominent than other ones and sort of began to exercise an authority over the bishops of the smaller cities in their area. So after some time, there naturally arose the idea of regional church government with the bishop who led the Christians in a particular city having oversight and authority over a broader region. As churches grew in cities, so did the idea of the metropolitan bishop.

A metropolitan bishop, that's what they would call the bishop of Spital, okay? But then the patriarchal bishop, those would be the ones of these major patriarchal cities, Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. Now, what happens when you generally have four patriarchal cities like this and four prominent bishops among them? Naturally, they will tend to compete. Now listen, not all of them at all times, right? I mean, conceivably, at any one time, you could have four humble, godly men who were heading up these churches.

But at other times, for whatever reasons, you would have other times where one of these would be trying to exercise authority over the other four, right? One of them trying to say, I'm more important than the other four. And let me give you an example of how Rome tried to exert authority over the other three and over all other Christians. And it's something called the Quartodesmian Controversy, which I know all you guys could tell me all about.

But just to save you the embarrassment of having to speak in front of the class, let me just explain to you what the Quartodesmian Controversy was. It was all about when to celebrate Easter. In Latin, the word Quartodesmus means 14th.

Now, the church in Rome and in Europe had always celebrated Easter on Sunday, the first Sunday after the 14th of Nisan on the Jewish calendar. Okay, so they find the Jewish calendar, the 14th of Nisan, and they take the first Sunday that happens after that. So in Rome and in Europe, they always celebrated Easter on a Sunday.

But the Quartodesmians, Christians from Ephesus and most of the churches of Asia Minor, they always celebrated Easter on the 14th of Nisan, no matter what day of the week that it fell on, right? There's two different ways you can celebrate a You can celebrate Thanksgiving always on a Thursday, right? Or you can celebrate the 4th of July always on the 4th of July, right? And so the Christians in this region of Asia Minor and Ephesus, in this general area, they were the Quartodesmians. They said the 14th of Nisan,

that's the day that Jesus rose from the dead. That's the day we're going to recognize it, or whatever.

That was the day that they selected for their thing. Over here in Rome and in this area and in Europe, the Christians said, no, Easter happened on a Sunday. We should always have it on a Sunday.

And so that was the difference between the two camps. Well, that meant that in some years, Christians were remembering the death of Jesus on the same day that other Christians were remembering his resurrection. And it wouldn't make it a big deal if it just happened in Asia Minor and in Rome.

You say, well, who cares, right? These Christians don't even know when these ones are celebrating Easter. But no, I'll tell you where it made a difference was in a city like Rome. Because in a big city like Rome, you would have a lot of Christians who lived from these areas and who had moved to Rome for any number of reasons.

And in their neighborhoods and in their cultures and their churches, they would be celebrating Easter on their day, while the rest of Rome would be celebrating Easter on their day. You see how complicated this would become? Well, here's the bottom line. The bottom line is that the Bishop of Rome at first sort of agreed to disagree with this.

The Bishop of Rome around the year 150, when he was visited by Polycarp of Smyrna, Polycarp tried to persuade the Bishop of Rome, hey, you should celebrate it the way we do. The Bishop of Rome said, no, but let's just each one of us do how we like to do it. We'll just agree to disagree.

But 40 years later, Victor, the Bishop of Rome, he tried to command a resolution. He tried to make the Eastern Christians follow the Western custom. Now he was met with very stiff opposition by Polycratus, the Bishop of Ephesus.

Victor tried to excommunicate this Bishop of Ephesus and the churches of Asia Minor over the matter. And many people objected to the arrogance of Bishop Victor. And matter of fact, the church in Asia Minor used to celebrate Easter on that 14th of Nisan, no matter what day of the week it fell on up until the 5th century.

Now, what I'm trying to show you is that Victor, the Bishop of Rome, did not succeed in making the Ephesian Christians, the Christians of Asia Minor, do what he thought they should do. But this shows us two things. First of all, that the Roman bishop thought he had the right to do it, right? I mean, wouldn't we almost say, who are you to tell them? But you see, he thought he had the right to do it.

But number two, it wasn't agreed upon. It shows that the Christians did not feel obligated to obey the Bishop of Rome, right? That these Christians in Ephesus could just say, forget you, Victor. We don't have to celebrate Easter on the day you tell us to.

We're going to do it on the day that our conscience tells us to do it. And so this is what I want you to see. Do you see here the Bishop of Rome trying to take authority over these different areas, but at the same time being resisted in his efforts to take authority? Okay, that has to do with geography and sort of church government.

But there's another aspect of geography that we need to consider, and it's geography and theology. The wide geography of the early church also meant that there were Christians from many different intellectual and philosophical traditions. Over time, three main centers of Christian thought emerged, okay? Just as much as there were four patriarchal centers, there were patriarchal cities, there were also three major

intellectual centers of the church.

In Alexandria, in Antioch, and in Carthage were these three major intellectual centers. The Alexandrian center, which was represented by men like Clement and Origen, their tendency was to emphasize Greek philosophy. The Antiochian center in Asia Minor, represented by Irenaeus, his tendency was to order things after the bishop.

And then the North African center, represented by Tertullian and Cyprian, their tendency was very practical and very rigid. Now these three centers of Christian thought became more and more important in their influence upon what Christians believed and taught. What I'm trying to say is that this is in some ways the fragmentation of Christianity, right? The diversity.

Because different regions would begin to emphasize different aspects of Christian theology. So in Alexandria, they would try to understand Christianity in light of Greek philosophers. And they would say, listen, if we could just really explain Christianity in terms of Greek philosophy, then people would really understand it.

So that was the Alexandrian center. Then there was the Antiochian center, again represented by Irenaeus. His tendency was to really order things after the bishop.

He was into structure. He was into order. He was into this idea of ordering things after the bishop.

And then you have the North Africa center. I have to tell you, you and I think of North Africa today, and we think only of Islam. We think of a place that's dangerous for Christians.

You should know that for many centuries, North Africa was an area of tremendous Christian presence and influence. And some of the most wonderful and brilliant Christian leaders that the church has ever seen have come to us from North Africa. And again, Carthage, represented here by Tertullian and Cyprian.

These guys tended to be practical and rigid with a real emphasis on holiness. They would look at the Alexandrian guys and say, you're so speculative. You're just a bunch of philosophers.

We're down to the practical things of where Christians really live and breathe. And so let me give you one example of this having to do with the development of Alexandrian philosophy. One of the notable features of the Alexandrian church is what we would call today a Bible college.

A man named Pantanaeus started a school of Christian instruction in Alexandria, and they hoped to both strengthen the church and to reach educated Greeks with the gospel. Pantanaeus was succeeded by Clement, and Clement wanted to unite Christianity and Greek philosophy. He thought that the Greek philosophers spoke the truth and that their knowledge should be used by Christians to deepen their faith and come to a true knowledge of God.

And so Clement really had this idea. Again, it flows very much out of this idea of Alexandrian philosophy and the interest of Greek philosophy. So that has to do with Clement.

With origin, we'll speak more about him a little bit later. Now let's go on to the next idea of what early Christians believed. What were sort of their doctrinal ideas and emphasis? Well, if I could say anything, early Christians believed what the church fathers taught them.

I mean, among the early church fathers, there were many influential teachers. You have Clement of Rome. Again, that's not the Clement that I just mentioned.

That was Clement of Alexandria. Clement of Rome was a different guy. You have Ignatius of Antioch, Hermas of Rome, Barnabas of Alexandria, Papias of Hierapolis, and Polycarp of Smyrna.

These are just some of the important and influential apostolic fathers. One of the major themes in the writings of the apostolic fathers was keeping unity and love among Christians and respecting the leader of the church. And so you would have Clement of Rome.

Clement wrote, again, he wrote a letter to a rebellious Corinthian congregation. He emphasized the apostolic origin of bishops and deacons. He was supposedly exiled and martyred by drowning.

Clement of Rome, an important apostolic father. Then you have Ignatius of Antioch. He was a teaching bishop.

He wrote letters to the Romans, the Magnesians, the Ephesians, the Trallians, the Philadelphians, Smyrnians, and Polycarp. He emphasized the orders of deacons, presbyters, and bishops. Again, he emphasized the monarchical episcopate, one bishop per diocese.

He was the first one to use the phrase Catholic Church. Now do you understand what we mean when we say the phrase Catholic Church? The word Catholic means universal. Actually, we'll get into it later.

The term Roman Catholic Church is almost an oxymoron. It's saying specific, universal church. Roman, which ties it to one place, right? Catholic means universal.

Well, but that's a whole other subject. Then you have Polycarp of Smyrna. Polycarp was especially famous as a great martyr of the church.

Now, we need to sort of analyze a little bit what was good about the apostolic fathers. When you read the writings of the apostolic fathers, it is evident that these men had indeed a deep love for Jesus. I mean, it's just absolutely evident.

You can also see that they had a high regard for the unity of the church and for love among Christians. It's very evident. They also had a strong sense of self-discipline and holiness.

I mean, there's passages in the writings of these apostolic fathers where they talk about themselves being God's athletes. They're the ones who are just out there really going for it before the Lord. When you read and understand the writings, you understand why.

These were men of incredibly high commitment, a deep love for Jesus, a deep concern for the unity of the church. However, and you can tell from the tone of my voice that that's a big however, I think that there's too many people who tend to uncritically receive the apostolic fathers. How many times have you heard, well, let's see what the early church said.

Let's see what the apostolic fathers say. Listen, you can make a big mistake by putting too much trust in the apostolic fathers. Because even though these were godly men, even though they had a deep love for Jesus, they loved the unity of the church, and they were men of strong self-discipline and holiness, all was not right and good with the apostolic fathers.

We must admit that among the apostolic fathers, they had an unhealthy desire for martyrdom. As a matter of fact, many of them even sought martyrdom. Now, this grew very naturally out of just the admiration of the martyrs, right? You can imagine how martyrs would be admired in the early church, and well, they should be admired.

But there's a big difference between admiring the martyrs and actively seeking martyrdom. And Jesus never instructed that, to seek martyrdom. Secondly, the idea that significant sin after baptism could damn a Christian.

This is how they literally believed it taught. Many of the apostolic fathers believed this. They believed, okay, you're a Christian, you're baptized, right? And then if you were to commit adultery after you were baptized, that's it.

You're going to hell. So, well, no, no, no, I'm sorry, I want to repent. They would take you to passages like in Hebrews, that say, there's no chance of repentance for you.

They actually believe this and taught this. We must also say that in the apostolic church, among, excuse me, in the early church, among these apostolic fathers, now, again, don't we use these contradictory phrases? I'm sorry for using these phrases, but they're just the phrases that are handed down to us. When we say apostolic fathers, we don't mean the apostles.

We mean the people of the early church period. Is that confusing enough for you? Well, just learn how to live with it. You have the apostles, but then you have the apostolic fathers who were the leaders of the early church, not the apostolic church period.

But the apostolic fathers had a general emphasis upon works as opposed to grace. I'm sorry, but you just read it and you see it all over the place. You cannot deny, as you read the writings of these men, that they had a general works orientation.

And to be honest, it's kind of frightening. It is. You wonder where the emphasis on the grace of God is going.

And then fourthly, one of the bad things about the apostolic fathers was that they had an emphasis on the allegorical interpretation of scripture. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, the allegorical interpretation of scripture is actually very difficult here. We can talk about a little bit more later.

I think when we talk about origins specifically, we'll speak over this. But I'll give you an example from the letter of Barnabas of Alexandria. He deals with understanding the Old Testament, interpreting it in a highly allegorical sense.

For example, he taught about the Old Testament distinction between clean and unclean animals. Now, in the Old Testament, it says that if an animal chews its cud and divides its hoof, right, has a divided hoof, then you can eat it. But if it chews its cud but does not have a divided hoof, you can't eat it.

It has to have both things, chew its cud and have a divided hoof. Well, Barnabas said, why? Well, Barnabas said, well, it's because the clean animals are like those who continually think about the word of God. That is, they chew the cud.

And then also, they're like those people who are divided in their hoof. They live in this world, but they look forward to the next world. Now, you have to admit, that's a highly allegorical interpretation.

But this kind of way of interpreting the Bible became very popular among the apostolic fathers in this early church period. So again, we honor the apostolic fathers, we respect them, but at the same time, we recognize that they were not perfect and that there were things that were bad about them. Now, we would say that the early Christians not only believed what the apostolic fathers taught them, they also believed what we would call the Apostles' Creed.

We don't know exactly when this creed was formulated, but we do know that Hippolytus, in 215 AD, used it in Rome as a way to prepare and to confirm those who were saved and eligible for baptism. The creed was used to teach new converts, and it was also used in question form. They would say, do you believe in this? Do you believe in that? Used in that way to confirm people before baptism.

As time went on in the early church, the creed was a handy way for people to remember the most important doctrines of the early church when it was difficult for everyone to have a Bible to read for their own. And so, the Apostles' Creed. Very simple statement of Christian faith.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he arose from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Now again, we look at this and we say, well, this is fine, isn't it? Although you must admit as you look at it, it leaves out a lot, doesn't it? There's a lot that the creed doesn't say, but I wouldn't judge it because of that. I mean, it's impossible for a creed in any brief form to cover everything. So they believed what the apostolic fathers taught them, the early church fathers.

They believed the Apostle Creed, but they also believed the New Testament as the books of the New Testament began to be agreed upon in the process that we know as the formation of the canon. This is another thing that we have to take a look at during this early church period. It was the time when the Bible, excuse me, when the books of the New Testament were being gathered and collected and understood together as being what we know today as the New Testament.

Before the year 140, we do not have a formal list of what the books of the New Testament are, but you can see the gospels and the letters of the apostles are respected and authoritative because they're quoted as such in early Christian writings. Now, from the year 140 to the year 220, formal lists of what books belong in the New Testament and what books do not belong begin to take shape. Now, why did they start doing it then? Why did they start doing it after 140 when they didn't do it before 140? Well, I'll tell you why.

It's because of the Gnostics. The Gnostics were a cult, sort of a Christian-oriented cult, because they brought in a lot of Christian elements in the midst of their cultish beliefs. The Gnostics started saying, this book doesn't belong in the New Testament, this book doesn't belong in the New Testament.

You see, before the year 140, it was just sort of generally agreed among Christians, these are the books of the New Testament. Nobody sat down and made a list, it was just sort of under general agreement. But when you had some heretics who started saying, no, no, no, not that book, no, no, no, not that book, then the Christians started putting their foot down and saying, we've got to do something in response to this, we've got to declare what books genuinely belong in the New Testament and what books do not.

This brings up a trend that you should be aware of in New Testament, or in, it's not New Testament, excuse me, let me take that back. This brings up a trend that you should be aware of in the development of Christian history, that oftentimes issues are only addressed when there's a threat, right? We're going to see this time and time again. The church only deals with an issue when there's a problem with it, right? It's just human nature to do this.

We don't really examine things carefully and take a close look at them until there's a problem with them. And that's exactly how it was in these days of the early church. So in this period, there was a list known as the Muratorian Canon, written about 200 AD.

This was a document from Rome with a list of the books that were accepted by the Roman church of that period, books that were authorized to be read publicly in church services as scripture. It's called the Muratorian Canon because a man named Muratori discovered it in 1740. It's written in Latin, but it was probably translated from Greek.

The books accepted in the Muratorian Canon in 200 AD are the same as our present New Testament, with one addition, a book known as the Wisdom of Solomon. The books rejected included the Shepherd of Hermas and the Apocalypse of Peter, which were approved to be read in personal devotions, but not as scripture in public services. So from the year 220 to 400, there arose a general agreement on what we have today as the New Testament, based on these general criteria.

Number one, apostolic authorship or direct influence. They took a look at the book and said, did an apostle write it or somebody under the direct influence of an apostle? Now, for example, you could say Luke wrote Luke and Acts, right? Was he an apostle? No, but he was under the direct influence of the apostle Paul. And so this apostolic authorship or direct influence.

Number two, what we might call inherent character and worthiness. In other words, you just look at the book and you say, man, that's good. That has character.

It has worthiness. And then third, general agreement among Christians. Christians should be able to understand and discern these things together.

And so between 367 and 397, three authoritative declarations settled the issue completely. The first was the declaration of Athanasius. The second was the Council of Rome.

And the third was the Council of Carthage. It established the New Testament canon. Now, this is what early Christians believed, but they were also characterized by defending their beliefs.

And that brings us to the whole issue of the apologists of the early church. There were some very early apologists in the early church. Aristides from Athens in the early second century, Justin Martyr from Judea in Rome, and then Tatian from Syria in Rome.

These were all early apologists. And what they tried to do was they tried to convince a hostile and educated world that Christianity was legitimate and what we might call a safe religion, right? They wanted to convince the Romans, you don't have anything to fear from us, which indeed was true, right? And so they were simply trying to convince the Romans, you don't have anything to fear from us. Our religion is legitimate.

It's safe. And then on top of all of that, they tried to convince them that Christianity was true. And so the apologists were a very important group in the early church.

They wrote to emperors and to pagans and to Jews that Christianity was number one a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. You find this to be a familiar theme within the apologists, quoting about how Christianity is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Secondly, they tried to demonstrate that Christianity was rational and based on empirical evidence.

In other words, it's logical. It's based on facts such as the historical events of the life and the crucifixion of Jesus. And third, they tried to convince them that Christianity was something that contributed to the good of society.

Again, as I said before, the theme was kind of, you don't have to fear us, Romans. We're okay. We love you.

We pray for the emperor. Now, this was a good work. This was very important for the Christians to defend Christianity.

This falls very much under what Peter said, in that Christians should be able to give to every man an answer for the hope that lies within you, right? Isn't this exactly what they were doing? And this was a good thing that the apologists were doing. However, let me say this. There's a danger in the work of the apologist.

And let me explain to you what that danger is. In trying to show that Christianity was not something new, they Christianized many previous pagan philosophers, like Plato. Oftentimes, what the apologists try to do is they try to say, look, our ideas aren't dangerous.

Plato said much the same thing. Or this other Greek philosopher did this. And once you start trying to explain Christianity with the vocabulary of Greek philosophy, then the influence of Greek philosophy is going to become more and more strong within Christianity.

The unintended result of this, and might I say it was an unintended result, but it was a result nonetheless, the unintended result of this was that pagan thought gained a much stronger influence within the church. So the apologists, good, but I would say that they also had a smaller, unintended negative effect as well. Next, if we're talking about what early Christians believed, how early Christians defended their beliefs, next we want to talk about threats to what Christians believed in the days of the early church.

Well, the two main threats I would describe would be the threat of Gnosticism and the threat of Montanism. Or, excuse me, the problem of Montanism. We'll talk more about that later.

Gnosticism was what we might call a new age movement of the ancient world. It was heavily influenced by Oriental mysticism. It had its appeal in secret knowledge that was obtainable only by those who were initiated into the movement.

Gnosticism denied the humanity of Jesus Christ, saying that he was God, but that he was only one of many gods. And also, different Gnostics believed that the body of Jesus was only an illusion. They made this radical separation between the material and the spiritual, and they believed that God was entirely spirit, and anything that was material was inherently corrupting.

Therefore, Jesus could not have a corrupt human body, so they would say that Jesus only seemed to be a human, or seemed to have a body. They taught that the material substance is inherently evil, and so they either thought that material things and the material body was either irrelevant, or they were severely excited. Not very interesting.

This exaltation of the spiritual over the material made them think this. Well, the material doesn't matter. My spirit is what matters to God, so it doesn't matter what I do with my body.

Therefore, some Gnostic sects were very sexually immoral, right? Because, well, it doesn't matter what I do with my body, it's my spirit that God cares about. Other ones felt, ooh, the body's evil, right? So what I have to do is, I have to beat and restrain and virtually whip my body into submission. So there was this great contradiction between different strains of Gnostic thought.

Gnostics were very heavy on allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and they did not hesitate to disregard or reinterpret passages that contradicted their teachings. The Church took the threat of the Gnostics to do some very good things. They very plainly spelled out their doctrine of God and Jesus Christ, and they settled on a list of books for the New Testament.

Then secondly here, I list the problem, not the threat, but the problem of Montanism. Hold on that idea, we're going to discuss it completely in our next lecture. The next lecture we're going to discuss Montanism.

So let's skip now to our last section here in this lecture, considering some examples of important peoples and writings in the early Church. What do we have here for important people and writings? Well, I'd list to you these several ones. First of all, Clement of Rome.

Secondly, Hermas. Thirdly, Polycarp. Fourth, Justin Martyr.

And then fifth, Origen. And then of course, these are some of their major works. So let's take a look at them kind of one by one.

First of all, Clement of Rome. Clement of Rome wrote the letter to the Corinthians, among other things. He is considered by the Roman Catholic Church to be the fourth Pope.

I think when you get to heaven and find Clement of Rome, ask him if he was indeed the fourth Pope, I think he'll give you a different opinion. But that's what the Roman Catholic Church considers him. His letter, First Clement, stresses the idea of apostolic succession.

Let me show you what I mean here from this quote of Clement. By the way, if you'll notice on this picture that I have up on the PowerPoint of Clement, you'll notice what he has in his hands. He has in his hands keys.

Now why would the artist depict Clement with keys in his hand? What biblical figure do you always see with keys in his hand in artistic representation? Peter. Why does Peter always have keys in his hand?

Because it's their way of emphasizing from a Roman Catholic perspective that Peter was given the keys to the church, right? The keys to the kingdom, so to speak. And so the keys are the measure of Peter's authority.

Whenever you take a look at the artistic depiction of Peter, he'll have keys. Do you know what Paul will have oftentimes? Not all the time. Often a sword.

I don't know exactly why the motif of Paul has a sword. But anyway, Peter has keys. So what does it say that Clement, supposedly the fourth Pope, the fourth in line after Peter, has the keys? It means artistically he has Peter's authority.

That's what that painting is trying to show. He has the authority of Peter. He has the keys.

So notice here what Clement wrote in his letter to the Corinthians. He says, quote, the apostles were taught the gospel for our sakes at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was sent out from God.

Christ is then from God and the apostles from Christ, both therefore issued from the will of God with due order. No less did our apostles know through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the dignity of the overseer's office. For this very reason, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid overseers and deacons and ordained that at their death, their ministry should pass into the hands of other tried men.

I hope that didn't confuse you. The critical phrase here is at the very end, at their death, their ministry should pass into the hands of other tried men. This is the idea of apostolic succession.

That Peter, before he died, laid his hands on a man. And that man took the authority of Peter. And that man laid his hands on a man.

And that man laid his hands on a man. And that hand laid his hands on a man, all the way down to the modern day Pope. That's the idea of apostolic succession.

That the hands laid on somebody can be traced back all the way back authoritatively to the apostles themselves. I like what Charles Spurgeon said about apostolic succession. He said, the idea of apostolic succession is empty hands laid on empty heads.

Because if there's any true apostolic succession, it's not because one man laid hands on another man. It's because people are faithful to the Word of God. They're faithful to the testimony of the apostles and prophets.

But anyway, Clement of Rome advanced this idea very much so of apostolic succession. Next we have Hermas. Hermas wrote the very influential work, The Shepherd.

You know, some people thought that Hermas's Shepherd should be included in the New Testament. That's what a powerful book it was in the early church period. It was very widely respected and honored.

But of course when you read it, I think you can pretty well see it doesn't really belong in the New Testament. But yet it has a lot in it that Christians found very helpful. But I have to say that I find the Shepherd that Hermas wrote to be very legalistic and works oriented.

Take this quote. Quoting, The Lord therefore being full of compassion and had compassion upon his handiwork and appointed this repentance to me and was given the power over this repentance. But I say to you, said he, that after that great and solemn calling, should any man being sorely tempted of the devil's sin, he has one repentance.

But if he sin often and repent, it is no advantage for him, for hardly shall he live. And I said, Sir, I feel that life has come back to me in listening to these commandments. For I know that I shall be saved if in the future I sin no more.

And he said, You will be saved, you and all you who keep these commandments. Do you see the works orientation that I'm talking about? First of all, what's the theology here? Okay, after you're a believer, after that great and solemn calling, if you're sorely tempted of the devil's sin, you have one repentance. So again, if I could translate just throwing out a modern day sin, you can commit adultery once after you're a believer.

Okay, great, we'll let you repent of that once. But if you do it again, sorry, you're going to hell. That's all.

It is no advantage to him if he should repent again, for hardly shall he live. And then notice this. I know that I shall be saved if in the future I sin no more.

Well, do you want that to be the grounds of your assurance of salvation? And then secondly, he said, You will be saved all you who do what who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who keep these commandments. Do you see what I'm saying? That's why sometimes I feel that people over romanticize the early church and the apostolic fathers. Next, Polycarp.

Polycarp was a glorious martyr of the early church. The story of his martyrdom is something I would share with you if we had more time, but we just don't have more time. And so let's just look at something from his writings here, his letter to the Philippians.

He says not brethren in concession to my own inclination, but because you challenged me, I am writing to you concerning righteousness. For neither have I nor has any other like me the ability to follow hard on the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who, when he had come among you in the presence of them at that time, taught accurately and constantly the word of truth, and when absent wrote to you letters into which if you examine carefully, you will be enabled to be built up into the faith given to you, which is the mother of us all. Well, this is a great quotation, isn't it? Basically, what Polycarp is saying is, hey, man, go on believers, just encourage you.

I want to encourage you to continue on in the apostolic truth, in the apostolic doctrine. Next, we have Justin Martyr. Now you can assume from his name how he died.

He died, of course, as a martyr. He was one of the early church apologists writing dialogue with Trifo the Jew and against heresies. You could say that Justin out-thought his opponents because he was a brilliant man, but he also out-died them.

He just died a glorious death as a martyr, really confirming his beliefs. He was educated in the classics of philosophy and ministered as an itinerant lay teacher. He personally opposed heretics like Marcion and argued for the validity of Christianity on the basis of fulfilled prophecy, miracles, and ethics.

He was beheaded in Rome. Here's a brief section from Justin's apology. He says, What then? On us who profess to do no evil and not to hold the above godless doctrines, you make no judicial inquiry, but impelled by unreasonable passion and through the instigation of evil demons, you punish us without judgment and reflection.

You see what he's saying? You're persecuting us without thinking about it. This is just part of his apologia, just a brief little glimpse of how he defended the faith. And then finally, our last example here is Origen.

Origen wrote the important works of *Against Celsus* and the *Principles*. He studied under Clement of Alexandria and he advocated the allegorical interpretation of scripture. Clement was extremely ascetic and was exiled for controversial doctrines and he was martyred by the Romans.

To say that Origen was extremely ascetic was, well, it's putting it lightly. Because Origen was so ascetic, well, he took that passage where Jesus said that if your right hand offends you, cut it off, and if your eye offends you, pluck it out, he used that as justification for castrating himself so that he would no longer be tempted by certain things of the flesh. Extremely ascetic, of course.

But notice here, Origen speaking about how to interpret the scriptures. This will illustrate the point I wanted to make about the allegorical interpretation of scripture. He says, The right way, then, to read the scriptures and extract their meaning so far as we've been able to discover from examining the oracles themselves appears to be as follows.

Solomon in the Proverbs gives a rule respecting the divine doctrines of scripture to this effect. Do thou thrice record them with counsel and knowledge that you may answer with words of truth to those who try you hard questions. A man ought then in three ways to record to his own soul the purposes of the holy scriptures, that the simple may be edified, as it were, by the flesh of the scripture, for thus we designate the primary sense, the more advanced by its soul, and the perfect by its spiritual law, which has a shadow of the good things to come.

As man consists of body, soul, and spirit, so too does scripture, which has been granted by God for the salvation of man. Now wouldn't you notice this? What he's saying is that the simple may be edified by the flesh of scripture, the primary sense. In other words, what it clearly says.

Origen is telling you, when you read the Bible, don't look for what it clearly says. Look for spiritual meanings beyond it. A very dangerous idea, right? Because what it does, now I'm not saying that God can't show you spiritual meanings in the scriptures, that's fine, but you should always put them below the primary meaning, right? It's the primary, plain meaning of scripture that's the most important.

To act as if these other kind of allegorical meanings are higher and better is very dangerous. But again, it's a difficult thing to talk about these great men, great women of church history, and to sound critical of them, right? Because these were great men. These were giants who walked the earth, every one of them.

And even though they had their failings in certain areas and great strengths in other areas, we just need to be real as we look at them from a historical perspective and say they did a tremendous amount of good, but sometimes, completely understandably and without intending to, they brought in dangerous influences and dangerous trends that really need to be addressed. And I think Origen was one of those. A remarkable man who did some great things, but he did not help the church with his emphasis on the allegorical interpretation of scripture.

The same thing with Hermas and his shepherd. A great man who did some great things, but in the end, he did not help the church with his legalistic attitude. And so we're just trying to help ourselves to look at church history, not at all, not at all with an entirely critical mindset.

No, it's not like we look at all the past and say it's all terrible, but we don't want to over-romanticize these early church fathers.

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