

Church History - the Early Church Part 1 (100-312)

by David Guzik

David Guzik explores the structure, worship, and challenges of the early church from 100 to 313 AD.

Duration: 45:28

Scripture: Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 16:20

Topics: "Early Church", "Communion Practice"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker describes the early Christian practice of communion. He explains that after prayers and greetings, the president of the brethren brings bread and a cup of wine mixed with water. The speaker emphasizes the significance of the bread and wine, highlighting that they represent the body and blood of Jesus. The sermon also mentions the early Christians' commitment to meeting at daybreak for worship and their belief in Jesus as God.

Transcript

We're talking about a period from approximately 100 AD to, let's say, 311 is I think a common date. Actually, 313. You get different things.

But 100 AD to 313, and basically what we're talking about is the time span between the passing of the apostles. Now, we throw that date out as being 100 AD. We don't know the exact date that the apostle John died.

But a lot of these early dates, we don't have any idea for sure. We're just taking a good guess. But then 313 AD, a very important thing happened.

That's when Constantine became the emperor of the Roman Empire. Now, when that happened, that changed everything in Christianity, though not immediately. And we'll talk about that when we get to that period of church history.

But we'll spend probably a couple weeks taking a look at this period of church history, 100 AD to 313 AD. Now, what's important to understand about this period of church history is this is a period of church history that most people are very excited about. They want to know what was the early church like.

And most of the time, they're not talking about the apostolic church. That's what we talked about last week, the church of the apostles. A lot of times, they want to know, what did the earliest Christians after the apostles think and believe and do? Well, first thing we might ask ourselves is, if you could get into a time machine and go back to that time, what would it be like going to church? Well, you would not meet in a building like this.

There's just no way. It was virtually impossible for Christians to gather together in a room this large in this period of history. In this period of history, for a room to be this big, and, you know, this isn't a huge room, but a room to be this big in this period of history, you would have to be a, number one, it would have to be a public building, right? That's one option.

It could be a public building, or it would have to be the home of virtually a mansion. I mean, it was almost unheard of for a home to have a room this big. So you're talking about something that would be pretty rare.

Well, for reasons we'll talk about later on, Christianity was closed to the public buildings, right? That was not an option. And mansions, it just, you know, there's not that many of them out there, and the people that live in them a lot of times aren't Christians. And so, most of the times, Christians would meet in homes, but it would mostly be organized in a series of home churches.

And occasionally, maybe all the churches would get together and do something outdoors somewhere, but commonly, the Christian life would be lived in small gatherings, probably no bigger than the amount of people that we have here, that would meet together in homes, and why would they meet together in homes? Not because they thought it was more spiritual, not because they thought it was better, but because that was the only place they could. Now, today, there's a movement in the church known as the home church movement, or the cell group movement, and stuff like that, and really says, this is the way the church ought to be, this is God's biblical pattern, this is the way the church ought to be. Well, you know, look, I don't agree with the idea that this is how the church ought to be, in just cell groups.

I think it's fine, I don't think there's any problem with it, and I think when necessity demands, the church should be able to do that. But the early church did it, not because they thought it was theologically correct or biblical, they did it because that's the only thing they could do. They simply did not have access to doing anything else.

So, it was just a matter of necessity. And as soon as the necessity changed, it changed in the church. As soon as the church was able to have its own buildings for larger meetings, it snapped it up.

So, I don't think the issue is what's more spiritual, home meetings or larger church meetings. To me, there's advantages and disadvantages of either side. It's just, you know, it's just different.

It's not more that one's better than the other, they're just different. But this is how the church was organized. Now, so what you would have is a group like this, and there would be individual elders slash pastors over each individual home congregation.

When Paul instructs Timothy in 1 Timothy to appoint elders and such like this, he's almost certainly talking about appointing people to lead these individual groups. He's not talking about so much of a board of a large church, the way we would conceive it today. That wasn't the structure.

But probably leaders of these individual groups, and Paul says these are the kind of men you should look for. Now, there would be somebody who was a general leader of the work in that city. Take, for example, in 1 Timothy, the case was Timothy, right? Timothy was the guy who had oversight over all of those.

Now, as the church developed, and in this period, this came to pass, this 100 to 313 AD period, this fellow began to be known as the bishop. Now, that's not strictly a biblical idea, because biblically, the term bishop is applied to each one of these people. Somebody know what the term bishop means in the original Greek? Overseer.

Matter of fact, it's almost a perfect translation to call it overseer. Because the Greek word there is episkopos. Epi means over, and skopos means to see or to observe.

So it means to oversee. It's almost a perfect translation. So there's an overseer in the sense of these individual congregations, but then there's someone who has oversight of the work of God in the whole city, and that person became known as the bishop.

So this is how the church was organized. You would have a bishop in a city, and he was the guy that we might call today the pastor. He had oversight over the congregation at large.

And then you would have individual home group leaders that led the churches in the homes on a smaller individual level. So that's pretty much how it would be structured. Now, how many of you ever heard of the churches meeting in the catacombs and things like that? Yes and no.

They did not really have regular meetings in the catacombs. They didn't. Now, does anybody know what a catacomb is? What is a catacomb? What kind of cave? Underground cave, that's right.

But what is a catacomb used for? It's an underground cave used for burial. That's right. Now, the Romans had catacombs.

They buried their dead in these underground caves. There's nothing unusual about that. But as Christians began to come up and do this, very interesting.

I've got a great book in my library on the catacombs. It shows wonderful pictures of the Roman catacombs, and the artistic motifs of those pictures really help you to understand what was in the thinking of these early Christians. Now, early Christians did used to meet in the catacombs, but not every week.

They would meet in the catacombs as sort of like a memorial to the person who died. Let's say Carl here died a martyr. Tomorrow, they put him up down in the city hall, and they burn him to the stake on a platform.

And we are just totally blown away by Carl's... I mean, we go, man, this man was a hero for the faith. And all the Christians are really struck by this. Now, would it be unusual if a year from the date Carl was martyred, we got together at the place where he was martyred, or the place he was buried, either one, and had kind of like a memorial service? That wouldn't be unusual at all, would it? That's what the meetings in the catacombs were.

They would get together on the anniversary of the day that that saint either died or was martyred, and they would have a service to remember the testimony of that saint. So that's the kind of occasional way that they would meet in the catacombs. The catacombs wasn't like a regular place for church, but it would be

like meeting at a burial place, having a service at a cemetery to remember somebody.

So the catacombs were not primarily for hiding out or for that. It was a burial place. We'll talk about that in a minute, why Christians were persecuted.

And one of the big reasons why Christians were persecuted was because they were perceived as being anti-social. In other words, you guys just don't want to go along with society. You're not part of us.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that amazing that the world would look at Christians and say, you're not part of us, you're not our team. I wonder, you know, today is a day when so many Christians are so desperately trying to be like the world. I mean, we are trying so much to be as much like the world as possible so that the world will not look at us and say, hey, you guys are different.

But that's what brought a lot of persecution on the early Christians. People looked at them and said, you guys are different. That was one of the big reasons.

And then the other reason, anti-social, the other reason related to it, but it's still different, was a political reason. This was the real reason why Christians were persecuted, was the political reason. But we'll get into that for a minute.

We're still talking about how early Christians met and worshipped. Now, if I would have had my act together, I would have had a handout for you here this morning that would have this quote so that you could follow along, but I'll just read it to you. Now, I'm going to tell you about a guy named Pliny the Younger.

Pliny is spelled P-L-I-N-Y. He was known as Pliny the Younger. He was a Roman governor over a region known as Bithynia in Asia Minor.

Bithynia is a place where Paul started some churches, and so there was a church there, there was a Christian presence in Bithynia. And Pliny the Younger writes the emperor Trajan. Roman emperor, his name was Trajan.

Pliny writes Trajan, the Roman emperor, and he says, okay, Trajan, you've told us to persecute the Christians. Am I doing it right? That's essentially Pliny's question. It's a fascinating letter.

It says, am I doing it right? And in it, he tells Pliny, or excuse me, Pliny tells Trajan, let me tell you what these Christians are doing. Okay, so this is a description of an early church service, written by a pagan, by an outsider. Listen to what he says.

He says, on an appointed day, the Christians are accustomed to meet at daybreak and recite or sing a hymn to Christ as to a god. Okay, just stop right there. Notice what he says.

On an appointed day. What day would that be? Do you know why they met on Sunday? For a few reasons. Yeah, it was the day of the resurrection.

That was the day of the resurrection. And I think also they did it after a while to sort of distinguish themselves from the Jews. But just by the fact that we know that they met in the early morning shows that they didn't meet after the custom of the synagogue.

The custom of the synagogue was to meet in the afternoon or the evening. The custom of the early church was to meet in the early morning, Sunday morning. Now, is it commanded by the Bible to go to church on Sunday morning? No, no.

The Bible says one day is as good as another. I mean, all days belong to the Lord. What's important is to be committed to consistent fellowship.

Biblically speaking, it doesn't really matter if it's Sunday or Saturday or whatever. I mean, that's up to the individual conscience. But what is important is to be consistent with it and to be locked in.

But anyway, on an appointed day, the Christians are accustomed to meet at daybreak, at sunrise service every week. How would you like that? That's what the early Christians did. Let's get back to the early church.

Any takers here? They're accustomed to meet at daybreak and recite or sing a hymn to Christ as to a god. Isn't that interesting? This guy's a pagan. He's a Roman governor, and he's just submitting a report to the emperor, but even he knows that the Christians regarded Jesus as a god.

That's fascinating. As accustomed to meet at daybreak and recite or sing a hymn to Christ as to a god and bind themselves by an oath, and the word for oath there is sacramentum, bind themselves by an oath to abstain from theft and robbery and adultery and breach of faith. In other words, they'd have a time of worship, and then they'd have a time probably of exhortation and common affirmation and say, let's live like Christians out there, folks.

We're not going to steal. And everybody in the group would say, yeah, that's right. We're not going to do that.

Yes, yes. This is what it means to be a Christian. Then what would they do next in the service? He says, after this, they depart and meet again to take food.

What do you think that is? Communion. Probably connected with a church dinner. They'd probably have a potluck supper, and then in connection with that, they would have communion.

So I'm very interested in this guy's description. And then he goes on and he says, to find out the truth concerning them, I applied torture to two maidservants who were called deaconesses, but I found nothing but a, this is what Pliny calls it, but a depraved and extravagant superstition. That's what Pliny calls Christianity.

Depraved. Now, he doesn't mean immoral. He just means, like, low.

Like, scummy. You know, base. That's a great word for it.

Depraved and extravagant. Why would he call it extravagant? Probably because of the depth of doctrine. You know what I mean? I mean, they start talking about who Jesus is and the glory of the Messiah and this and that, and he goes, man, this is way out there.

So Pliny called Christianity a depraved and extravagant, what? Superstition. Not like those good Roman gods, right? You know, that's the real stuff. But it's just fascinating to see what this guy's talking about.

And you know what? Honestly speaking, there's not a whole lot of difference between this. You could see they had a time of worship, they had a time of teaching or exhortation, and then they had communion. I mean, in some ways, you might think that a lot has changed from the early church service.

But believe me, if someone could take that time travel and go from the early church to our days, I think that they would know that they were in church. There'd be a lot different, to be sure, but they would say, you know what? We know we're in church. Now, if you want another idea here, Justin Martyr, writing in the year 150.

This is his description of an early church service. I love this. He says, At the end of the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss.

Then the president of the brethren has brought bread and a cup of wine mixed with water. And he takes them and offers up praise and glory to the Father of the universe, to the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and give thanks at considerable length for being counted worthy to receive these things at his hands. When he has concluded the prayers and the thanksgivings, all the people present express their joyful assent by saying, Amen.

And then he points out, Amen means so be it in Hebrew. Then those whom we call deacons give to each one of those present the bread and the wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced and carry away a portion of those who are absent. Okay, obviously he's describing communion.

You know what's interesting in there? Did you notice what he said? He said, The bread and the wine mixed with water. Do you know why he said that? Because early Christians were accused of their church service were big drunken parties. And he wants everybody to know, No, we do not get drunk at church.

He says the wine is mixed with water. So he's just letting everybody know that. Then he goes on to say, We call this food Eucharist, which no one is allowed to share unless he or she believes that the things which we teach are true and has been washed with the washing that is for remission of sins and unto a second birth and is living as Christ commanded.

For we do not receive them as common bread and common drink, but as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation. Similarly, we have thought that the food which is blessed by the word of prayer transmitted from him and by which our blood and flesh are changed and nourishes is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. Then he goes on to talk a little bit more about this.

So you get the idea. This is just an early church service. They would get together and have communion.

Now, you notice here, Justin Martyr was very focused on communion in his thing. And I think this points to two things. First of all, he focused on communion because this was greatly misunderstood among the pagans.

Justin Martyr was writing to pagans trying to explain Christian customs. And how would communion be misunderstood in the early church by people who weren't Christians? One of the things they said, they said it's cannibalism. You're getting together and you're eating a person's flesh.

Ah! These Christians! You know, away with them! So, he's trying to clear that up. The second thing is the charge of it just being a big drunken party. Now, there's another thing you notice in there.

He talks about the idea too of the table being closed and why it's closed. Only to people who believe. That was the other thing that offended the Romans.

Was that when Christians got together for worship and stuff, you had to be one of them to join in. I think maybe this was a place where the early church started getting off in air. And started becoming too exclusivistic.

This is one of the big battles. Oh my heavens! There were two trends in the early church that probably, I'd say, one of them definitely is not good. But they were reactions to the worldliness around them.

They lived in the midst of a really pagan... Do you think that our culture is depraved and just going to hell? We have a tendency to think sometimes that this is the only time... Believe me, the world of first century Rome was just like our modern day. If not, maybe even a little bit worse. If you think there's a struggle in society today to accept and approve of homosexuality, in the Roman world of the first century it was a non-issue.

It was totally accepted. Completely. It was just a matter of custom.

It was just a totally depraved world. Now, it's tough to be a Christian in that kind of environment, isn't it? It's very difficult. And what's difficult about it... This is what's hard.

It's hard to keep pure in that environment, right? But it's also hard to keep in grace. And what the early church did pretty soon... And I would say that this period, 100 to 313, was a time when legalism started coming on pretty strong in the church. And it was also a time when... How would I say it? Probably a exclusivism.

You know what it is to be exclusive? Well, Christians had such a heightened sense of the need to protect themselves. And at times of persecution it's like this too. I tell you, whenever you find the church in a time when it's persecuted in the midst of an immoral society, you'll find these two things present.

Those are just two temptations for the churches. Very understandable. I mean, we can sympathize with it.

We can understand why they gravitated towards these things. But you know what? It wasn't good. It wasn't good.

It's kind of like your concern for purity can go too far into an exclusivism. Your concern for purity can also go too far into a legalism. And you can leave aside these things.

Another big aspect to what was going on was not just how Christians worshipped, but the spread of the gospel. During this period of time, from again 100 to 313, the gospel went as far east as India. That's pretty impressive.

It went as far northward and westward to the north of England. That's impressive. And to the south, the gospel went all the way down into Ethiopia.

So Europe, Spain, Gaul, which we would call France today. This whole area of North Africa, that was Roman colonies and Roman provinces. And some of the strongest, most vital Christian regions were in

that area, North Africa.

You go there now and it's all Muslim. I mean, you're hard pressed to find Christians in those areas. But these areas have an incredible Christian heritage.

Incredible. North Africa. And so you have this whole dynamic here of the spread of the gospel all over the Roman Empire.

And in some cases, even beyond in the case of going into India and things like that. It's just amazing the spread of the gospel during this period. And so, you know, these are two dynamics.

How the early Christians met and worshipped and the spread of the gospel. But we cannot neglect one of the third major aspects of what went on during this period. Persecution.

And this maybe is a defining... It's a whole dynamic of persecution. I don't think that many Christians in the West understand... Not that we don't understand it having personally experienced it. That's true in and of itself.

But I don't even think we understand the dynamic of what persecution is. Persecution during this period of the church was never universal. It was never constant.

In other words, the last thing in the world you want to do is give the impression that during these 213 years that every day, the life of every Christian in the Roman Empire was on the line. That's not how it worked. How it would work is in a very almost bureaucratic way.

Remember the letters I was talking to you about from Pliny to Trajan? An edict would go out from Rome. Persecute those Christians. Then it would be up to the governors in the individual provinces to carry it out.

Some would carry it out more energetically than others. A lot of it was up to the discretion of the local individual. So, first of all, persecution in a larger sense was regional.

I mean, in some places Christians would be persecuted, in other places they weren't. And then it was also having to do with times. Sometimes Christians would be persecuted, and then the next year they wouldn't.

It would have to do just with time and place and circumstance and all sorts of things. Sometimes it was political, sometimes it was economic, sometimes it was social. But whatever, the persecution of Christians was never universal, and it was never constant.

It came in waves, and it came in where local leaders had the authority to determine how energetically they would persecute the Christians in their area. Now, I would say that there were four, you could break this down a lot more, four major periods of persecution in the early church. One of them is before our period, we talked about it last time, 64 A.D. This was the persecution of? The persecution of Nero.

He started the whole ballroom. By the way, you know what I think is very interesting about the persecutions of Nero? We know that Paul preached the gospel to Nero. And I believe that Nero did not embark on his persecutions until after he rejected the gospel from the Apostle Paul.

I mean, the timeline historically seems to work out exactly that way. But Nero was a depraved man. But it's interesting to think that this man heard the gospel from the Apostle Paul and later turned out and persecuted Christians.

Now, Nero's persecution was not particularly widespread. It was really pretty much focused in Rome. Right? If you were a Christian living in Ephesus, if you were a Christian living in Corinth, no big deal.

But in Rome. Now, what made the persecution of Nero notable was first of all how sadistic it was. Nero was a cruel, cruel tyrant.

And again, as we talked about last week, he would devise tortures for Christians like taking a Christian, sealing them up in a leather bag, and then throwing them out in the arena so that the lions and such could pounce on them and eat them alive. Make Christians do gladiatorial combat. He would coat Christians in asphalt or pitch and light them on fire to illuminate his garden.

Just horrible, kind of sadistic persecutions, Nero. Now, the other reason, the two reasons that Nero's persecutions are notable, first of all for the cruelty, but secondly for their notable victims. Peter and Paul both died in Nero's persecutions.

Secondly, the second major persecution. Now again, there was lots of persecution before this. I'm just talking about some significant major ones was the period between 249 and 251 with the emperor Decius.

Now, Decius came to power campaigning on traditional Roman values. And that meant getting back to the pagan gods. You see, by the year 250, by this period, Christianity is strong in the Roman Empire.

They're persecuted, they're unpopular, but there's a lot of Christians. And Decius says, the problem with the Roman Empire is that there's too many Christians around here. Let's get rid of these guys.

And so what he did was, this was pretty much the first empire-wide persecution. And he was the first one to do this on a universal level, bring in the political aspect to it. Why would they persecute Christians politically? Were the Christians starting a political party to try to overthrow the emperor of Rome? No? Were the Christians getting an army up to try to overthrow the Roman emperor and have their own name? That it? What would there be politically controversial about being a Christian? Roman emperors, living Roman emperors, were regarded as gods.

Now, interesting train of thought. It didn't start out that way. The Romans, from their pagan roots, were into ancestor worship.

Now, if you know anything about ancient societies, pagan societies, a lot of them are into ancestor worship, right? You worship the spirit of your ancestors. Now, especially if there is a really notable ancestor, then they're lifted up on another level, right? So, a deceased Roman emperor, yeah, you could really worship him, right? A deceased Roman emperor, right? If old Uncle Charlie is worthy of burning a little bit of incense, too, on the family altar, then how about Augustus, right? I mean, wow, let's, you know that. Now, once you start worshiping the dead Roman emperors, is it a very far jump to start worshiping the living Roman emperors.

And that's what they did. They regarded them as gods. Which is no problem, because in the Roman way of thinking, you got a lot of gods, right? What's one or two more? No big deal.

So, here you go. The worship of the emperor. Now, what you would have to do in this worship of the emperor is you would have to go and burn a pinch of incense before a little statue of Caesar.

Okay? You'd go in there. There would be a Roman official. There would be a guy at a table, you know, writing out the little document.

And you'd go and, you know, you'd be given your little pinch of incense. And they'd say, okay, you know, okay, you're a Flavius Maximus. You know, go over and here's your incense.

Go over and do your thing. And Flavius would have to take the pinch of incense, go over for the statue of Caesar and say, Caesar est curios. I don't know.

Caesar is Lord, is what he would say. Burn it. Okay? That's what he'd say.

Caesar is Lord. Burn it. Go.

Fine. The Romans regarded this as no big deal. For the Romans, this was like taking the Pledge of Allegiance every year.

That's how they saw it. You were just saying, we're behind you, Caesar. We're behind you.

We're behind the Roman Empire. We're loyal citizens. Yes, we're patriotic.

That's how the Romans saw it. But how did the Christians see it? When they were required to burn a pinch of incense, which is kind of a sacrificial thing to do, right? That's a religious thing to do. To burn a pinch of incense before a statue of Caesar and say, Caesar is... The Christians said, no way.

We're not doing that. And so, to the Romans, it was a political thing. What? You don't recognize Caesar? You're not loyal to the state? You're not this? And the Christians would say... And the Christians tried to bend over backwards and say, we are the best citizens the Empire ever had.

We're trustworthy. We're kind. We're loyal.

We pay our taxes. We're hardworking. We don't trouble the state at all.

We keep peace. We are the best citizens the Empire ever had. But we cannot say that Caesar is Lord.

We cannot burn a pinch of incense before a statue of Caesar. We can't do that. And so, what the Emperor said, beginning in earnest, they were doing this before this time, but beginning in earnest with Decius, they said, then you're going to die.

Everybody has to do this or you die. And how do they know whether or not you've done this? They give you a certificate. Literally.

You know, you go in, you do the ceremony, and some of the guy at the table says, okay, you know, Leanne did this. She feels that's it. There's your certificate.

And then if anybody asks, you say, well, here's my certificate. I did it. Here's the deal.

I'm the Roman official. You give me a hundred bucks. I'll give you the certificate.

If you're a Christian, do you do that? Isn't that hard, though? Don't you see how Christians would excuse that? They'd say, look, I didn't do it. I didn't say Caesar is Lord. I didn't burn a pinch of incense.

But I didn't have to lay down my life, either. These issues get really, really complicated. And so, wow.

You know, you had all this thing. And you know what? I wish I could tell you that all the Christians stood strong in the midst of this. But they didn't.

It basically had three categories here. You had the martyrs. The martyrs were the people who died for this.

And you know what? It's just remarkable. It's just remarkable how many Christians were killed. Men, women, children.

A lot of times, just like they would do today. They'd go after leaders in the church. They'd go after pastors or bishops or whatever.

They'd search for scrolls or copies of the scriptures and they'd burn them. They'd attack. They'd put in informants among Christians and then rat them out.

This was another reason for the exclusive character of it, right? I mean, who can you trust? This is what we don't understand so often about times of persecution. Years ago, one of the first foreign missions trips that I took, I went to Bulgaria. And I got to spend time with Christians who were just three or four or five years out of significant persecution.

These Christians knew very intimately what it was like to live under the fear of persecution. Now, you wouldn't find that many people who had actually been persecuted. You know what I mean? You wouldn't find that many Christians who had actually been thrown into jail.

But everybody knew about them. And that was enough to put fear into the heart. And I just can't tell you what a climate of fear and suspicion and stress persecution puts on the church.

Even if, like in this meeting right here, even if nobody had ever been martyred or nobody had been persecuted, or maybe if nobody we knew directly had been, but somebody we knew about second or third hand had been martyred. That would make us afraid. We wouldn't have the courage to do that stuff.

This is the kind of thing that I don't think we understand about persecution. The climate of not just fear, but stress that it puts on people. And to live with that day after day and week after week, man, it takes a toll.

It really does. So it is not easy at all to live as a Christian under a time of persecution, even if you never ever get arrested. Maybe if nobody even directly in your church ever gets arrested.

Just to know that it's out there and at the most unexpected moment, it could come. Man, it introduces a whole new element of fear and stress into your life that's really profound. So there were the martyrs.

Now, in a time like this, the martyrs, you know who they are? They're the heroes. Oh man, the church loved their martyrs. They honored their martyrs.

They commemorated the day of their martyrdoms. They kept records of it. And again, men, women, children were all killed.

And again, I don't know proportionally. Maybe you could say 10% of all Christians, 5%. It certainly would never have been more than 10% of Christians who were martyred.

But even that's a staggering number. One in ten. The fear and the stress throughout the whole church.

Everybody knew it. So they looked up to the martyrs. Then you had another group.

The confessors. The confessors were people who were not martyred, but were punished in some way. Maybe they were imprisoned.

Maybe they were tortured. In other words, they suffered for Christ, but weren't killed. Now, these people, man, they weren't martyrs, but in a way they were better.

You know why? Because they were alive. Right? And can you imagine what it would be like if Carl was taken away to jail for being a Christian, was whipped, was beaten, was tortured, and then he came back to church? Man, we would give that guy a standing ovation. We would applaud him.

We'd say, Carl, you know, man, you are a treasure because you have suffered for Christ. And the confessors had a very high place in the church. Well, of course, you had your martyrs, you had your confessors.

Then you got a big blank spot, right? Then you got a bunch of people who were never arrested, never tortured, never martyred, but they never denied Christ either, right? I mean, they just, they lived in the fear and the stress of persecution, but it never touched them directly. Then you've got the third area, the lapse. What do you do with these people? Let's say Carl's story wasn't such a happy story.

Let's say they arrested him and took him away to jail and they started torturing him. And under torture, he denied Jesus Christ. Under torture, he told them where the pastor was hiding.

And the pastor was taken away and killed. Under pressure, he told them where they kept the scriptures. You know what? I mean, can we understand that? Can we sympathize? I mean, torture is torture.

I mean, it's... And we wish we could say that every Christian, you know, was of an iron will and withstood it. But it didn't always happen. Now, Carl comes... Now, Carl's set free and, you know, what do you do with Carl? Wow, that's a tough question.

I said, what'd you say? Well, you know what? You know what? This was a huge issue in the church. And there was a whole spectrum. You know, you had people on one side that just said, forget about it.

Come on back, Carl. It doesn't matter. Bygones are bygones.

Then you had another group way over here that said, you are never coming back. You have denied Jesus Christ. Jesus said, if you deny me before men, I will deny you before my Father in heaven.

You're lost, buddy. That's it. Forget it.

I don't care how much you repent. You are going to hell, and that's it. What do you do? You know what the church settled on? And I think this was the wise course.

They settled on a middle course. And you know what they said to a guy like Carl? They'd say, Carl, you can come back, but you know what? You're coming back as a brand new believer. That's how we're regarding you.

I mean, not necessarily saying you lost your salvation, but that's how we're going to regard you. We're not going to put you back into office right away. As far as we're concerned, you're a brand new believer, and we're going to welcome you back as that, as long as you've repented over what you've done.

But man, this was a debate in the church. You know, the people over here, the easygoing ones, they looked at these people and said, oh, you're so harsh and unloving. These people looked at these people and said, you don't have any standards.

You don't have any integrity for the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so man, this was a significant issue in the church. Can you imagine what it would be like? Okay, here we are.

We're all under persecution, right? And nobody in our group has been touched by it, but we know it's out there. And then what do you do when someone brand new walks into the church and sits down? There are amazing, accurate stories of Roman soldiers taking Christians into the arena, seeing how those Christians died, and then the soldiers laying aside their arms, trusting in Jesus Christ, and then stepping out in the arena to die at the same time. Just saying, you know what? This is it.

This is how we have to live. I mean, it was really true that the church grew because, you see, times of persecution are intensely, intensely difficult for the church. But they do accomplish two things.

Number one, it weeds out the nominal believer, right? Listen, you're not going to have Charlie Churchgoer when your life's on the line. So the church is purified by persecution, number one. But number two, it gives opportunities for Christian heroism like you've never seen before.

And you know what? That brings Jesus to people. When committed Christians are given the opportunity to be heroic, glorious things happen. And so believe me, Satan knows what he's doing in not having persecution all the time.

Let me read you something else from Pliny the Younger. This is what he says about his own investigations of Christians. He says, This is the course that I have adopted.

I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it, right? I mean, it's like, are you a Christian? Yes, I admit it. I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment.

You know, you've got to get the idea. You know, most of these Roman rulers, the Romans were an incredible... You know, Romans were a lot like Americans. Incredibly practical people.

You know what? I mean, you could just see a guy like Pliny saying, I don't care what you believe. But if you don't say the Pledge of Allegiance to Caesar, you're a problem for me. And I can't have problems.

Why don't you just change and save us a lot of trouble? You know, I've got nothing against you. But he says, This is the course I have adopted. I ask them if they are Christians.

If they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, threatening capital punishment. If they persist, I sentence them to death, for their inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished. Christians who are Roman citizens, I reserve to be sent to Rome.

Right? You've got special privilege if you're a Roman citizen. I discharge those who are willing to curse Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be persuaded to do. In other words, you could see how the interview would go.

Are you a Christian? Alright, then curse Jesus Christ. And even Pliny says, you know what? If he's a real Christian, you can't get him. And there was oftentimes an economic motive, not only in the business end of it, but sometimes there was a motive to persecute Christians just to get their stuff.

You know, you got a house? Well, we'll send you away and persecute you, and then I get your house. You know, and so this was a motivation too. And there's a lot to it.

One last thing, and we'll end with this, because we're at 11 o'clock. I told you that Pliny wrote these letters to Trajan, the emperor, right? You know, what do I do? This is what I do. And I'm doing this.

Is this okay? You want to know what Trajan said back? This is what Trajan replied. He said, listen, Pliny, don't seek out Christians to persecute. Don't go on a big hunt for them.

But if they're informed against, or once they're exposed, then deal with them harshly. But don't waste your time going out trying to hunt out Christians. But when it's brought before you, then deal with it strictly.

And you know, that's sometimes how persecution was. It wasn't that they were out to get you, but you could be exposed, you could be, you know. How many times do you think this worked? You're competing with another guy at the job for that promotion.

And you get it. And he's really mad. So what does he do? He goes and he exposes you as a Christian.

I mean, it gets down to real life in a lot of these things. That's the kind of lives these Christians are living. Real life lives.

But the next time we get together, we're going to continue on, because I want to introduce you to, I'll just give you a little preview of some of the important topics we're going to be talking about next time. We're going to be talking about some of the important developments of this period, like how the New Testament came together. And then we're also going to be talking about some of the important people of this area, some of the important Christian writers.

And I'll give you good excerpts of those Christian writers of the period. And we'll also talk about some of the big threats to Christianity during that time. Not only persecution, but some of the heresies that were spreading around.

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