

Church History Series - Part 3

by Mike Attwood

This sermon explores the historical challenges faced by the early church, including persecution, heresies, and the formation of the New Testament canon during the reign of Constantine.

Duration: 34:49

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-12, Acts 20:29-30, Galatians 1:6-9, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:7, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 5:8, 1 John 4:1, Revelation 2:10

Topics: "Church History", "Doctrinal Purity", "Persecution"

Description

Mike Attwood discusses the early church in Smyrna and the significant persecutions faced during 100-300 AD, focusing on the martyrdom of Polycarp, who steadfastly refused to deny Christ even in the face of death. He highlights the dual challenges of external persecution and internal doctrinal errors, mentioning groups like the Ebionites and Marcion, who distorted Christian teachings. The sermon also covers the rise of Gnosticism and the need for a defined canon of scripture amidst these challenges, culminating in the Council of Nicaea and the influence of figures like Constantine and Augustine on the church's trajectory. Attwood emphasizes the importance of doctrinal purity and the historical context of the church's struggles against both persecution and heresy.

Transcript

This morning we were looking at the church in Smyrna and the persecutions that were taking place during this period of church history that we've been referring to, 100-300 AD and all the things that were connected with that. And just to kind of finish up quite on that one, there's a few things I wanted to just say more, but I thought it was just interesting that there was a man from Smyrna who you would have perhaps heard of, his name was Polycarp. He was born in 55, sorry, in 69 AD and he was martyred in 155 AD.

And it's interesting that his testimony, he was in his 90s when he was arrested and he was asked to curse Christ and the guy who, the official who went to meet him, because an old man, he put him up in his chariot and he said, look, at your age, it won't matter, just curse Christ and he refused. So the guy pushed him out of the chariot and dragged him along behind and then they tied him to the stake, but it's interesting what he said, he said, Polycarp said this, 86 years I have served him, he did me no wrong, how can I blaspheme or deny him? And so they tied him to the stake and they lit the fire, but the wind blew the flames away from Polycarp. So then they got a spear and they plunged it into his heart and when the blood came out, they put the fire out.

But eventually they got their man and they killed him. But this is the kind of stuff that people endured during this reign of official government persecution really coming from the Roman government. But we said this morning, we didn't really get into it too much, but the church was fighting, in a sense, a war on two fronts.

There's persecution from outside and then there's error from within. And so there was a lot of battles going on in terms of doctrinal purity of the church. And there were different groups at this time.

The Judaizers, who we read about in the Book of Acts and Galatians, didn't go away. And there's a group called the Ebionites. And they, again, would emphasize the need for people from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds to be under law and to keep the Sabbath and to keep the dietary rules and all the rest of it.

And what we said is no new thing under the sun. These are the Seventh-day Adventists before the Seventh-day Adventists. All of these things that we see today, if you know anything about church history, you realize they've already been trying this before.

And so these Ebionites. And one of the things that they disliked was Paul's writings for obvious reasons. It's hard to get around Galatians and some of these things.

So they questioned the authenticity of Paul's writings. And so, again, as a reaction to that, another fellow called Marcion the Heretic said, no, only Paul's epistles are legitimate. Because he was reacting to the Judaizers.

The pendulum swung so far the other extreme. He was the first ultra-dispensationalist. We only use Paul's epistles, nothing else.

So you see how this one reacts against another. And this is certainly happening in these times. Gnosticism was beginning to take root.

And, again, kind of almost like a New Age philosophy before the New Age movement. That was there. And Montanism, we already mentioned that, like the modern-day charismatic movement.

They were very active. And so many other things that were going on at this time. And one of the things that this caused was a need to determine what were the scriptures.

Again, because, first of all, especially during the reign of Diocletian, remember we said if you had a copy, you just signed your death warrant. And they were trying to not only wipe out Christianity, but wipe out what they saw as the source of Christianity, and that was the New Testament. And so a lot of the early copies were destroyed during this time.

And so there was a need for that reason and for other reasons. The Montanists saying that Revelation is continuing. Martian, the heretic who formulated his canon.

It was the first one to actually formulate a canon. I'll talk about what we mean by canon in a minute. It was a heretic called Martian.

And basically it was just Paul's epistles and parts of Luke's gospel. And that was, in his mind, the only inspired scripture of the New Testament. And so it caused an issue about what do we do with this? How do we do this? So the word canon, it's simply a word that means measuring wrong.

And the idea is this, does it measure up? Does it really measure up correctly? And so there are several tests to determine canonicity, whether something was able to measure up and was considered to be inspired scripture. I'm just going to mention a few of them because this is all very interesting, this whole process of how do we get our Bible. But it's all in this time frame that a lot of this stuff is being discussed.

And so one of the things, one of the tests was, was it written by an apostle or a definite link to the apostles? So for instance, Luke wasn't an apostle, but he traveled with Paul, right? There's a clear link there between Luke. Mark, again, clear link within Peter. So was it by apostle or somebody who is closely linked to the apostles? Then there's an internal appeal.

Was it harmonious with a previous revelation? Does it fit in with the whole counsel of God that's already extant? Is it harmonious? And then is it authoritative? Does it have the thus saith the Lord about it? If you've ever read the Apocrypher, one thing about the Apocrypher is it doesn't claim to be authoritative. It doesn't have that thus saith the Lord about it. It doesn't have that claim to it.

But much of the New Testament does have thus saith the Lord about it. Is it dynamic? Has it been demonstrated to have a life-changing effect on people? And you know that in inspired scripture you can read your Bible a hundred times and all of a sudden a verse will jump out like you never saw it before, right? There's that dynamic effect to the Word of God. Does it have that dynamic effect? And so that was another issue.

And then was it received, accepted, and used by believers? Was it already received, accepted, used by believers? Now, the canon that we have, the 27 books of the New Testament, in 175 our friend Irenaeus, remember we talked about him, already had in his writings that the scriptures included this list. So back at 175. At 397 there was a council in Carthage that agreed to these 27 books, and it was ratified at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

But I want to just say this, that the Church did not give us the scriptures. Catholic Church might like to claim that, right? All they did was recognize what was already believed and practiced amongst the saints. That's the important thing, right? It already was the ones that people were using and being copied.

And again, going back to the whole manuscript thing, and I don't want to go down this road too far, but a lot of the early manuscripts were destroyed, including the original manuscripts, but they managed to copy and copy with more copies of the New Testament, but a lot of them later, because the early ones were destroyed. But again, there's so much manuscript evidence of any other piece of literature in the ancient world supposing the scriptures. And I'm not going to get into the majority text versus the older spurious manuscripts view, but that just already told you what I think.

Anyway, basically, I just wanted to mention that about canonization and this war on two fronts that's going on. Now, let's move to the next church. Having just looked at Smyrna briefly, I'd like us to look at Revelation 2, verses 12 through 17 now.

And we want to look at Pergamos 2.12. And I'm looking at 2 Timothy. I'm still with Harold. 2 Timothy here, Revelation 2.12. So he says, And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write these things, sayeth he which has the sharp sword with two edges, I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is, and thou holdest fast my name and hast not denied my faith, even in those days where an antipas was my faithful martyr, he was slain among you where Satan dwelleth.

Now, I just want to make a comment about Satan's seat or Satan's throne. It is interesting that sometimes inadvertently Christians can almost give to the devil almost kind of the characteristics of deity. And one thing we need to recognize is the devil is not everywhere present.

He can only be in one place at one time. He's not God. He's a created being.

He owes his existence. He's dependent on God for his very existence. And so what we learn is that at this point in history, his throne was in Pergamos.

That was where he was. Now, I know he's got his agents everywhere, but I doubt right now in history that Satan is in Kelowna. I don't know that it's kind of big enough on the radar right now.

But his agents may well be. But at this point, this is where Satan's throne was, the center of his operation. And the Lord says, I know where you live.

Isn't that good to know that he knows where we live? And he knows what you're going through. And he's just ensuring them that he knows the difficulties. And he's appreciative that, as we were hearing this afternoon, they hold fast his name.

That meant a lot to the Lord. They're holding fast his name. And we're going to see, even in this period of church history, we're going to go from 312 to 500 this session, that there was tremendous battles that went on at this time concerning the person of Christ.

Who actually is he, this person called the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he this deity and his humanity? And how do these work together? So a lot of issues are being discussed and thrashed out. And again, a lot of it in connection with people who are teaching error. And so it was a time where great battles were fought concerning the person of Christ.

And then you've not denied my faith. Again, battles concerning the truth of Christianity are taking place. But here's the salient feature I want us to notice.

Verse 14, I have a few things against thee because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balaam to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols and to commit fornication. So the real salient feature is this doctrine of Balaam. Now, Balaam, as we know from the book of Numbers, was a very interesting character in that he was hired, the Highly Prophet, and he was hired specifically to curse the people whom God had blessed.

And he couldn't do it. By the time he got up, God had kind of rewired and reprogrammed him and he pronounced a blessing instead of a curse. And so what we find is that Balaam could not get God to be unfaithful to his people.

Isn't that encouraging to know? He couldn't get God to be unfaithful to his people. So what did he do? He came up with a scheme to get God's people to be unfaithful to their God. Right? And so he basically brought in this time of compromise.

And when we think of it in terms of the church, Satan failed to destroy Christianity through persecution. In fact, it had the very opposite effect. Right? We said the testimony of men like Polycarp, people who witnessed this heard him speak so reverently of the Lord and they were converted.

And so actually Christianity expanded as a result of persecution. And persecution never works. It always backfires.

On the enemy. And so what does he do? Well, if we can't get the church that way, we have to come up with another methodology. And what he does is he will somehow persuade the church to exchange the rags of persecution to the riches of acceptance and marriage with the state.

Okay? This person must have been thoroughly married. Right? And there's going to be a terrible marriage going to take place here. A terrible compromise where the church is going to be married to the state.

And it all is connected with a guy called Constantine. Now tonight we're going to do two Eames. Two guys whose names end with I-N-E.

Constantine, Augustine. Both in this time frame. Both of them, in my opinion, unmitigated disasters.

Right? The church has hardly recovered from the impact of Constantine and Augustine. In fact, Sir Robert Anderson, who is an interesting writer, and we're jumping ahead, but he says that every major error in Christianity can be traced back to Augustine. Interesting.

Quite a statement. So we're going to think about these individuals and how they affect church today. Because again, all of these things, although they're happening a long time ago, have a current impact on Christianity right to this very day.

So Constantine and the unholy alliance with the world. Now Constantine's mother was Helena, who was a professing believer. And after the death of Diocletian, who, remember, had persecuted severely the church, sought to wipe out Christianity, sought to destroy the scriptures, all the rest of it.

After he died, there was a kind of vacuum in the Roman Empire, and there was a battle for control who was going to be the next emperor. And so there were two individuals who were involved in this conflict. One is Constantine, and the other is a man called Maxentius.

And they actually are fighting each other, almost like a civil war going on, to see who is going to be the next Roman emperor. And they finally come in 312 A.D. to a battle at a place called Milvian Bridge, just outside of Rome. And it's going to be a very decisive battle.

And the night before the battle, Constantine saw a vision in the sky of an illuminated cross. And then these words, by this name, conquered. And so he decided, he made a kind of deal that night, that if I win the battle, I will become a Christian.

And as we know, even though he was outnumbered actually by Maxentius, he won the battle of Milvian Bridge. And he then immediately, in A.D. 313, after this conquering, he actually made the Edict of Milan, which was a charter of Christian liberties. So Christianity no longer became the persecuted, despised, hated kind of negative influence in the empire.

Now there's absolute liberty to practice Christianity. And we say, well, that's a wonderful thing. But soon, very soon, Christianity became the religion of the empire.

In fact, when Constantine was crowned emperor, 400 bishops met a victorious Constantine and carried him on a golden throne. So all of a sudden the churches all in with Constantine. And they like this.

They're maybe weary from persecution, I don't know, but they like this. They like the softer garments of a marriage with the state. And some have asked the question, was Constantine really a Christian or just a consummate politician? And I think he was a politician, to be honest.

I mean, I guess that's not me to judge, but I'll give you some examples. For instance, the Roman emperor not only was the Caesar, the emperor, but he also had the title Pontifex Maximus. The high priest of pagan religions.

And Constantine, although supposedly embracing Christianity, never relinquished the title Pontifex Maximus. He was still the high priest of the pagan religions. As well as now supposedly being a Christian.

And he died as, ironically, head of the church in the eyes of this new compromised church. Remember we've already decided who that is, haven't we, who the head of the church is? And now Constantine died as the head of the church and the high priest of the heathen. Combining both in one.

Now let me just say something. I was raised Catholic, you already know that. Catholicism is an interesting thing.

It is an unholy mixture of Judaism, paganism, with a thin veneer of Christianity over the top. And I emphasize thin. That's what Catholicism is.

It's a wicked system. Now be careful what I'm saying here. I despise Catholicism.

I love Catholic people. Many of them are sincerely lost. And they desperately need a savior.

But the actual system is wicked. And this is really where it begins to originate. This is really the beginning of it.

The kind of emerging, really, of the emperor with Christianity becoming the religion of the state. And it's a mess. It really is.

And the papal system, including the present pope, still retains the title Pontifex Maximus. High priest of pagan religion. Because it is a pagan religion.

With all the superstition next to it. And so one of the things Constantine did, being the consummate politician he was, he actually gave the bishops land to which to build their churches on. He gave them tax exemption.

Now it's getting close to home, isn't it? The church today wedded with the state. Began to build basilicas. At the church councils, he was given a chair.

So as well as the bishops, Constantine sat there with this Pontifex Maximus guy. High priest of pagan religion sat down with the bishops to discuss theology and issues facing the church. And so his wife, his mother Helena, she again, supposedly a Christian, but very fascinated about the land of Israel.

She wants relics brought back from the land of Israel. She apparently had enough pieces of the cross to rebuild Noah's ark in her collection. She had two eggs of the dove that descended on Jesus at his baptism.

Now think about that for a minute. You see a problem with that? I see a huge problem with that, right? But this is just the nonsense. And again, she had nails of the cross and all the rest of it.

And so all of these things, him sitting on the golden throne amongst the bishops, used before going into battle, got the bishops to pray for them to conquer in the name of Christ. So now we've got military connected with them. Again, this is not so foreign to our nations, right? We just do the same stuff.

But it all goes back to this. But not everybody was happy with this. There was a group in North Africa called the Donatists.

They were kind of the first dissenters, if you like. And the Donatists, they opposed the ordination of ungodly men by the Catholic Church. They refused to align themselves with them.

And they believed in the autonomy of the Church. They believed in baptism by immersion. They believed in the new birth, the need of being born again.

I like the sound of these guys. But you see, what happened is the Donatists, because Constantine felt that the Church would unite the Empire, he wanted one holy Catholic Church without any dissent. So he decided to persecute the Donatists.

And now, for the first time up to now, you've had pagans persecuting supposed Christians. Now you have Christians with state backing persecuting Christians. And the Donatists, an instrument of a lot of the things about many of these groups I'm going to mention.

The ones who wrote the history were the persecutors. So in order to do that, what they like to do is blacken the character of some of these groups. Say that they were heretics and then try and attach something to them.

Just remember Ahab and Jezebel and Naboth's vineyard. And remember, what did they do? They put words into Naboth's mouth that never were in his mouth. Remember that? And that's exactly what the Catholic Church has done to anybody who dared to dissent against them.

And so the Donatists, what we know of their writings that remain, we would be very happy with their convictions about these things. But they were persecuted. And then during this time, some other things are going on.

This rise of Arianism. A man called Arius from Alexandria in Egypt. And he was a very eloquent man.

And he taught, basically, a kind of prototype of the Jehovah's False Witnesses. A presbyter in the Church of Alexandria, he said, the Son of God was a created being, the first and greatest, but not equal with the Father. And so, here we've got the prototype of Jehovah's Witnesses.

And the problem was that he was so eloquent, so that the bishops were becoming persuaded by this man. And there's a really important lesson here for all of us, brethren, and that is this. That eloquence is no guarantee that person is speaking the truth.

In other words, everything must be tested by the Word of God. And there's a coming man of sin who's going to be golden-tongued. He is going to be very eloquent and very persuaded.

And so, we just can't just buy into this. We've got to, again, be like the Bereans and search the Scriptures, see whether these things are so. So, there's another man that was raised up by God called Athanasius.

And Athanasius contested the teachings of Arius. And they actually came together, all the bishops, all the rest of it, at the Council of Nicaea. Because, once again, Constantine doesn't want a divided empire.

Now, see, the Church is becoming divided doctrinally. Not only you've got these Donatists that we're trying to deal with, now you've got a division amongst the bishops. And so, he calls this Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, where the Churches were discussing this issue.

Called by Constantine, 300 bishops and presbyters, all expenses paid by Constantine. Now, can you see why these bishops like this stuff? They've gone from persecution to now an all-expenses-paid trip. You know, checked into Hologene, all the rest of it.

And there they are, you know, wined and dined by the emperor. Wow, this is really appealing, isn't it? And so, here they are, at this Council of Nicaea. And, as the debate goes on, it seems as if the eloquence of Arius is about to win the day.

And even though Athanasius has got truth on his side, he's losing, because he's not eloquent. And in the midst of all this, an African bishop jumped into the midst. And he was wearing a leopard skin.

This is why Church history is so fun, I mean, just think about it. And he removed the leopard skin, turned around and showed the back. He'd been thrown to the lions during the days of persecution, and survived.

But his back was covered in the scars from these animals. And he said, if Jesus wasn't God, all this was in vain. And then, the tide turned.

And Athanasius and the Athanasian Creed, which again testifies to the deity of the Lord Jesus, came out at this time, Council of Nicaea 325. And then there's another guy called Pelagius. He was an Englishman.

Not a very good one. He's the prototype of Arminianism, in a big sense. A British monk, reacting against the laxity and self-indulgence of many professing Christians.

He said that Adam's sin only affected Adam. Each person is born without original sin, and can live a life of sinless perfection. Okay? Because it takes away our dependence on Christ for salvation, points man to look within himself for his own goodness.

So, there's Pelagius. And that's where our friend Augustine... Friend? I don't know if I would use that term. But anyway, he comes in.

Augustine of Hippo, 354-430. Interesting story behind his conversion. He was living a very wicked life.

Had a mistress, had children out of wedlock. Just a real kind of playboy character. But he overheard children.

And they basically were saying, Pick up and read. Pick up and read. And so he picked up and read the New Testament.

Romans 13 and verse 14 was the scripture that was used in his conversion. And he confessed Christ and began to live a life, a different life, a changed life. And again, because he had such an issue with sexual

sin in the past, he was a guy that came out with the idea that sex is only for procreation and you're not supposed to enjoy it.

Right? Because he had a problem with that area himself. Again, notice how much in church history is Pendulum's way, going from 1 to 18. You've got to watch that in our own hearts, the Pendulum's way.

You've got to be careful. But certainly he, that's what he did. And so he made that, and of course to this day within Catholicism, that's the official line that sex is never for enjoyment within the marriage.

It's just purely for procreation. Grin and bear it, you'll get children. Right? Completely different to what the book of Hebrews says, right? That the bed is undefiled and all the rest of it.

But anyway, this is this man. And as Mr. Anderson said, that every error seems to come from this gentleman. And combination of the tryptophan in the turkey and the clock on steroids, our time is gone, believe it or not.

And we haven't even dealt with Augustine of Hippo yet. But I'll just say one thing, that one of the things that he's going to do, is in his reaction to Pelagius, he is going to say that man is so utterly depraved, that he can't even believe the gospel. So he's going to be the brainchild behind what we know today as five-point elements.

In fact, John Calvin studied at an Augustinian university. One of his heroes, in fact, in his institutes, Calvin's institutes, he quotes 800 times from Augustine. So basically, you see Calvin, you see Augustine.

So that's why Robert Anderson says, it all really comes from these two guys. Constantine, Augustine, lots of stuff we're dealing with today. This is the sauce.

We're dealing with it one time down the pipe, but we're still dealing with it. In our assemblies today, we're dealing with some of these issues. So we'll talk about it more tomorrow, but our time is gone.

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