

THE SECOND HUNDRED YEARS

A History of the Primitive and Apostolic Churches for the Radically Committed Christian

by Paul Pavao

Currently, as of September, 2008, this manuscript is only complete through chapter five, though outlines and references are given for chapters six through ten.

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PART ONE

Life in the 2nd Century Churches

Chapter One: A Debate

The year was A.D. 200, and Octavius was enjoying the soft sand beneath his bare feet. It was long since he had been in the pleasant Italian weather and long since he had been with his dear friend, Minucius Felix. They had spent the day following the Tiber river to the seacoast. Now the glittering, azure waves of the Mediterranean seemed purposely to smooth a path before them.

Cecilius, who was Minucius' business partner, walked with them. He had not wanted to miss the healing, salty air of the Mediterranean, and he listened with Minucius as Octavius regaled them with stories of his homeland. At this point, however, Cecilius happened upon an image of the pagan god Serapis carved into a stone. He raised it to his mouth and pressed a kiss on it with his lips.

Octavius wrestled with what to do. He, like his dear friend Minucius, was a Christian, which was not a popular thing to be in Rome of the late second century. The autumn day was beautiful and the atmosphere pleasant, perhaps even nostalgic. They had come here to Ostia just so that Minucius could refresh himself from long labors. Finally, though, this shameful display was simply more than Octavius could bear.

“My brother Minucius, Cecilius lives by your side, both at home and abroad. Can you really leave him in his blindness and vulgar ignorance? No matter how it is carved into an image, crowned, and anointed, this is nothing but a stone, and you have allowed him to give himself up to it in broad daylight! This disgrace is as much to your discredit as his. A good man shouldn't do this!”

The effect was as awkward as Octavius had feared. They walked along in silence for some time, watching boys skipping shells across the waves. Eventually, Octavius attempted to return to his stories. Cecilius, however, would have none of it.

“Octavius' comment disturbs me,” Cecilius complained. “He reproached you, Minucius, for negligence, but under the cover of that reproach, he really wants to condemn me for ignorance. The issue here is really between Octavius and I, and not between you and him. If he is willing to discuss this with me, I think he will find that it is easier to announce his opinion to a friend than to debate it as the philosophers do.”

Octavius thought quietly a moment. Cecilius was persistent. “I suggest we sit on the barrier over there, so that we can rest from our walking and devote some attention to our discussion.”

He gestured with his hand toward a rock wall, flat and wide and thus comfortable for sitting, used to protect the Roman baths from the tides. Octavius followed his gesture, walking over to it and climbing up onto it. Minucius and Cecilius followed suit, with Minucius taking his place in the middle as judge. As soon as they were seated, Cecilius spoke.

“My brother Minucius, we need you as a judge, and you are going to have to make an effort to be honest and fair. I know that you are well-informed in both his way of life and mine, and you have already made a choice for his. However, you need to make a decision based upon our arguments and not upon your own perceptions. If you sit in judgment as a person who is new to these things and ignorant of either side, I will have no difficulty in making my case.”

Minucius readily assented, and a debate began that would be remembered to the present day, each man climbing down from the wall to make his case before the others as the sun sought to disappear in the mists of the sea behind him.

All Things Are Uncertain

Cecilius: Octavius, if you are going to sit in judgment against me as ignorant, I say that it is plain that all things in human affairs are doubtful, uncertain, and unsettled, so that most things are more probable than true. It is not commendable to simply give in to one opinion, because you're tired of thoroughly investigating what is true. Instead, it is better to continue exploring with persistent diligence. It should be no surprise that everyone is indignant, everyone feels pain, when those unskilled in learning, ignorant of literature, and without knowledge of the arts—like you Christians, for example—should dare to claim to know with any certainty the general nature of things or to understand divinity, which so many religious groups in so many ages still wonder about, and which even philosophy itself still debates.

Octavius: Since my brother used such expressions as that he was pained and indignant that illiterate, poor, and unskilled people should dispute about heavenly things, let him know that all men are born alike, with a capacity and ability of reasoning and feeling, without bias to age, gender, or dignity. Nor do they obtain their wisdom by riches, but it is implanted by nature. Moreover, even the philosophers themselves, and others like them, before they made a name for themselves, were considered vulgar and untaught.

We all know that rich people are more accustomed to gaze upon their gold than upon heaven, while our sort of people, though poor, have both discovered wisdom and taught others. So it appears that intelligence is not given to the wealthy nor obtained by study, but is begotten with the very formation of the mind.

Receive the Religion Handed Down to You

Cecilius: If you are going to look into such things, how much better and more respectful it is to simply receive the teaching of your ancestors? It is wiser to cultivate the religions handed down to you and to adore the gods that you were trained by your parents to fear than to assert your own opinion about the deities. Rome itself acknowledges the sacred institutions of all nations, and thus they deservedly rule the world. It is custom to assign a greater sanctity to the more ancient ceremonies and temples, for these have stood the test of time.

Octavius: If the world is directed by the will of one God, then it shouldn't matter how old the opinions of unskilled people are. They should not be enough to make us agree with the gods of our forefathers.

Let's consider those gods. You will find mournful deaths, misfortunes, funerals, and griefs and wailings of the miserable gods. What are the sacred rites of Jupiter? His nurse is a she-goat, and as an infant he was taken away from his father so he wouldn't be eaten! And why should I have to mention the adultery of Mars and Venus? All these stories have been told with one aim: to justify the vices of men. By these fictions and others like

them the minds of boys are corrupted. They grow up with these fables clinging to them and, poor wretches, they grow old in the same beliefs, even though the truth is plain if they will only seek after it.

Even dumb animals judge concerning your gods. Mice and swallows know that they have no feeling. They gnaw them, trample them, and sit on them. Unless you drive them off, they build their nests in the very mouths of your gods. You wipe, cleanse, scrape, and you protect and fear that which you make, while not one of you thinks that he ought to know God before you worship him.

The Secrecy of the Christians

Cecilius: What of all the accusations? Christians have gathered from the lowest dregs of society the more unskilled men and gullible women to establish an unholy conspiracy held together by nightly meetings, solemn fasts, and inhuman foods. Rumors of debauchery and even the worship of the head of a donkey abound. Reports so great and various would not spread unless truth were at the bottom of it. Besides which, even the obscurity of your religion proves that at least the greater part of the accusations must be true. Why do you never speak openly or congregate freely, unless what you adore and worship is worthy of punishment or something of which to be ashamed?

Octavius: We do not hide in corners. We all judge one thing to be good, and we assemble with the same quietness with which we live our lives. The problem is that you either blush or are afraid to listen to us in public.

On the matter of rumors, it is not just to form a judgment based on things unknown and unexamined. We were once just like you. We thought Christians worshipped monsters, devoured infants, and engaged in incestuous banquets. We didn't recognize that fables like these are always being set afloat by talebearers, and that none of those things were ever looked into or proven. We never noticed that in so long a time no one has come forth to betray their activities, trying to obtain pardon for their own crime or credit for exposing the Christians. We didn't take into account that Christians, when accused, were not embarrassed or afraid, but they were only repentant that they hadn't become one sooner!

An Impious and Inexplicable Love

Cecilius: It's a fact that the more wicked things are the more they grow. The abominable shrines of this impious assembly are growing throughout the whole world. This confederacy ought to be rooted out and destroyed! They know one another by secret marks and signs, and they love one another almost before they know one another.

Octavius: The fact that we are increasing day by day is not a proof of error; it is something to be praised. We live an honorable way of life. Our current numbers don't decrease, and it is strangers joining us that increases it.

Nor are we distinguished by some small bodily mark, as you suppose, but we are distinguished easily enough by the marks of innocence and modesty. Thus we love one

another with a mutual love, to your regret, because we do not know how to hate. “Behold, how they love one another,” you say, because Romans are moved by mutual hatred; You say, “See how they are ready even to die for one another,” for you would rather put to death. And you are angry with us, too, because we call each other brothers. There’s no other reason, I think, than because among yourselves such titles are given in mere pretence of affection.

On this very account, perhaps, we are regarded as having less claim to be held true brothers, that tragedies do not cause problems in our brotherhood and the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us but our wives.¹

Christians Think They Are Better Than Others

Cecilius: Yes, that’s another thing. Christians think of themselves as good, and they promise to themselves a blessed and perpetual life after death, but to others, since they are unrighteous, eternal punishment.

Can you at least learn from your current experience, how the fruitless expectations of your vain promise deceive you? Consider, wretched creatures, from your experience while you are alive, what is threatening you after death. As you yourself admit, most of you are needy, cold, and work in heavy labor even while you are hungry. And God allows it! He is either unable or unwilling to help his people, and thus he is either weak or unjust.

Octavius: Only a profane man would hesitate to believe that those who do not know God are tormented deservedly, because it is no less wicked to be ignorant of the Parent of all than to offend him.

If you wish to compare Christians with yourselves, then even if in some things our discipline is inferior, yet we shall be found much better than you. You forbid, yet commit, adulteries. We are born men only for our own wives. You punish crimes when committed. With us, even to think of crimes is to sin. You are afraid of those who are aware of what you do. We are afraid even of our own consciences, without which we cannot exist. Finally, from your numbers the prisons boil over, but there is no Christian there unless he is accused on account of his religion or has deserted it.

Yes, many of us are called poor. This is not our disgrace, but our glory. The mind is lulled to sleep by luxury, but it is strengthened by frugality. Besides, who can be poor if he does not want? Is a person poor if he doesn’t want the possessions of others? Can he be poor if he is rich towards God? No, the person who is poor is the one who desires more even though he has much.

And consider this. Who can be as poor as the day he is born? Birds live without any income. Every day the cattle are fed. Just as the person who travels on a road is happier the

¹ From “Behold, how they love one another,” to the end of Octavius’ reply is borrowed from Tertullian’s *Apology*, ch. 39. Octavius’ reply continues in the same vein as the words borrowed from Tertullian, but Tertullian’s is much more eloquent and comes from the same time period.

lighter he walks, so is he happier who carries himself along in poverty in this life and does not breathe heavily under the burden of riches.

Let me be clear, though, that if we thought wealth was useful for us, we would ask God for it. We are confident that God would answer us in some measure, because he possesses everything. But we would rather despise riches than possess them. What we want is innocence, and what we pray for is patience. We prefer being good to being lavish.

God Doesn't Help Christians When Persecuted

Cecilius: Let's forget what's common to everyone. For you specifically there are threats, punishments, tortures, and crosses. And those crosses aren't objects of adoration, but tortures to be endured. Where is that God who is able to help you when you come to life again, when he can't even help you in this life?

Octavius: It's a beautiful thing to God when a Christian does battle with pain. When he faces threats, punishments and tortures by mocking death and treading underfoot the horror of the executioner; when he raises up his freedom in Christ as a standard before kings and princes; when he yields to God alone and, triumphant and victorious, he tramples upon the very man who has pronounced the sentence upon him; God finds all these things beautiful.

Even you Romans praise unfortunate men to the heavens. You praise Mucius Scaevola, for example, who sacrificed his right hand to save himself from the enemy. Yet how many of our people have borne it when not only their right hand, but their whole body is burned. They were burned up without any cries of pain, yet they had it in their power to be spared! Am I comparing men with your Mucius and others? No, our boys and young women treat the crosses and tortures with contempt and endure wild beasts and every other punishment with the inspired patience of suffering. Can't all you wretched Romans see that no one would endure these things without good reason? Don't you realize that they couldn't bear tortures without the power of God?

The Romans Rule the World Without God's Help

Cecilius: Don't the Romans, with no help from your God, govern, reign, enjoy the whole world, and even rule over you?

Octavius: Perhaps it has escaped you that those who abound in riches, honor and power, but don't know God are miserable. They're fattened like cattle for slaughter. They are lifted up even to empires and dominions, but their unrestrained exercise of power makes a market of their soul, and they live like ruined souls. If you don't know God, what enduring happiness can there be, since no matter how good things seem, death must come?

My friend Cecilius, let Socrates, the Athenian buffoon, confess that he knew nothing at all. Let all the philosophers go on deliberating. Let the great philosopher Simonides go on forever putting off a decision about what he believes. We despise the bent brows of the philosophers, because we know them to be corrupters, adulterers, and tyrants. They have great eloquence, but they're speaking against vices that they themselves live in.

We, on the other hand, who do not carry our wisdom in our clothes, but in our minds, don't speak great things; we live them. We boast that we have found what they have sought for with the utmost eagerness but have not been able to find. Why should we be ungrateful? Why should we resent the fact that the truth of divinity has ripened in our time? Let us enjoy our benefits! Let's correct our opinions with the standard of truth; let superstition be restrained; let ungodliness be done away with; let true religion be preserved.

Cecilius Concedes the Debate

Cecilius: Well. I congratulate Octavius as well as myself for the great peace in which we live. I will not wait for your decision, Minucius. We have both conquered. Octavius has conquered me, but I am triumphant over error. I both confess that providence exists, and I yield to God. I agree with you, Octavius, about the sincerity of the life which is now mine. I have more questions, but they're not to resist you further. They're necessary to complete my training. Tomorrow, since I see the sun is setting now, I will ask you at length about the things that are necessary. For right now, though, I rejoice on behalf of us all. Octavius will get a reward from God, because he argued by God's inspiration and gained the victory by God's aid.²

² This entire chapter is pulled from an early 3rd century document called *The Octavius*, written by Minucius Felix. *The Octavius* is a much longer debate in which Cecilius gives all his arguments in one oration, followed by Octavius' answer. I have greatly shortened the debate, divided it into sections by argument, and made the wording more modern.

Chapter Two: 2nd Century Christianity Is Not Just Fallen 1st Century Christianity

The Octavius is a fabulous introduction to early Christianity. Unlike the soft apologies we are obliged to whisper in the 21st century, in the 2nd century Christians boldly and unashamedly proclaimed that not only did the Gospel have the power to transform men, women, and children, but the lives of Christians across the board were proof of it. Octavius' confidence in the power of Christ and in the testimony of the lives of his fellow disciples is typical of all the Christian writings of his day. It is inspiring, powerful, and intellectually satisfying. Just as Cecilius was converted by Octavius' dramatic description of Christian living, so Octavius creates a longing in all of us to experience such power from heaven. Octavius' Christianity is a Christianity all of us who name the name of Christ long to be a part of.

Yet as a young Christian, I was told that the 2nd century church fell away immediately after the time of the apostles. I understood the early churches were cold and legalistic. Pastors and history books taught me this based on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, John's letters, and Jesus' letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation, chapters two and three. The Corinthians had not only started dividing in Paul's time, they said, but were also full of disorder and getting drunk during love feasts. Some members of Paul's churches were even teaching that there is no resurrection of the dead or that it had already past.³

John dealt with even bigger problems. Gnosticism⁴ had crept into his churches, and men were teaching that Jesus Christ hadn't come in the flesh, were eating things sacrificed to idols, and were practicing immorality.⁵ Things were growing so bad, in fact, that Jesus threatened to remove the candlestick of the church in Ephesus (i.e., they would no longer be a church) and to vomit the church in Laodicea from his mouth.⁶

However, the fact that the 1st century church has problems does not mean that these problems increased in the 2nd century. Problems can get worse, but they can also be resolved. It is necessary to look at history to find out what happened. Tertullian, a Christian lawyer from Carthage in North Africa around the turn of the 3rd century, addresses this very issue, because gnostic heretics were using the same arguments to suggest that the catholic⁷ churches had fallen away from truth.

All these suggestions of distrust you will find put forth by the heretics. They bear in mind how the churches were rebuked by the apostle: "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?" . . . They likewise [remember] what was written to the Corinthians, that they "were

³ 1 Cor. 11:21; 15:12; 2 Tim. 2:18

⁴ Gnosticism is explained in chapter eight.

⁵ 1 Jn. 4:3; Rev. 2:14, 15: Although there is a popular modern teaching that the deeds of the Nicolaitans had to do with distinguishing between clergy and laity (because "Nicolaitans" in Greek comes from *niko* and *laos*, suggesting "victory" over "the people" or "the laity"), the early church says they were simply immoral people who taught that it was okay to fulfill the pleasures of the flesh. Their name came from the deacon Nicolas, mentioned in Acts 6:5, though it's not agreed whether he was at fault for beginning the movement (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I:26:3; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, III:4; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, I:29). These two verses in Revelation seem to back up the early Christian view.

⁶ Rev. 2:5; 3:16

⁷ The word "catholic" simply means "universal." Long before a pope existed and any churches were "Roman Catholic," the early churches referred to the churches originating from the apostles—and formed later from the ministry of those apostolic churches—as the "catholic" churches.

yet carnal,” and were “required to be fed with milk,” . . . When they raise the objection that the churches were rebuked, let them suppose that they were also corrected. Let them also remember those [churches], concerning whose faith, knowledge, and behavior the apostle “rejoices and gives thanks to God,” which nevertheless even at this day unite with those which were rebuked.⁸

So Tertullian, who was there, believed that the problems did not get worse during the 2nd century. On the contrary, they improved. On most of these issues we know when the problems were resolved and what steps were taken to resolve them.

For example, the issues brought up in the first Corinthian letter were resolved even before the 2nd century, and they were resolved by the very letter that described the problems. Paul did not only write one letter to the Corinthians. He wrote at least a second one, which tells us:

[Titus] reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me...For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it...I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful according to God...For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourself to be innocent in the matter.⁹

We know even more than this about the Corinthians. About 40 years after Paul wrote his letters to the church in Corinth, the church at Rome sent them one. They, too, describe the state of the Corinthians after Paul’s first letter:

Who has ever lived among you, even for a short time, and not found your faith to be as fruitful of virtue as it was firmly established? Who did not admire the sobriety and moderation of your godliness in Christ? Who did not proclaim the magnificence of your habitual hospitality? And who did not rejoice over your perfect and well-grounded knowledge? For you did all things without favoritism and walked in the commandments of God, obeying those who led you and giving fitting honor to your elders . . . Content with the provision God had made for you and paying careful attention to his words, you took his teachings deep inside and his sufferings were always before your eyes. Because of all this a profound and abundant peace was given to all of you, you had an insatiable desire to do good, and a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit was upon you.¹⁰

It’s only fair to point out here that the reason the church in Rome was sending the letter is because controversy and division had arisen a second time in Corinth. Again, though, we find it dealt with. Tertullian’s comment above was written over a century after the church in Rome sent its letter to Corinth, and he argues that the Corinthians were corrected and were in fellowship with other, commended churches.

⁸ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 36

⁹ 2 Cor. 7:8-11

¹⁰ Church in Rome, *First Clement* 1-2. This early letter is credited both by early Christians and modern historians to Clement, one of Rome’s bishops at the time; however, the letter itself cites the church in Rome as the author, not any individual.

The church in Ephesus is another that is specifically rebuked in the Scriptures. Fortunately enough, we also have an early letter to them. Just fifteen years after the church in Rome wrote to the Corinthians, Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to Rome as a prisoner to be martyred, sent a letter to the Ephesians. It begins:

“Ignatius, who is called Theophorus, to the church which is at Ephesus, deservedly most happy, being blessed in the greatness and fullness of God the Father...being united and elected through the true suffering by the will of the Father and Jesus Christ, our God. I have become acquainted with your name, much beloved in God, which you have acquired by the habit of righteousness, according to the faith and love in Jesus Christ our Savior. Being the followers of God, and stirring yourselves up by the blood of God, you have perfectly accomplished the work which was befitting to you.”¹¹

Ephesus was rebuked in Revelation two for losing their first love. Clearly, they had found it again. So the Ephesians, too, took heed to the admonitions they received. Their repentance was complete enough that Tertullian cited both Ephesus and Corinth by name as examples of apostolic purity.

Come now, you who would indulge a better curiosity. If you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over to the apostolic churches, in which the very chairs of the apostles are still preeminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them individually. Achaia is very near you; you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; you [also] have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus.¹²

Irenaeus, too, one of the most respected bishops of his day and whose life extends through almost the entire 2nd century, cites the Ephesians as an example of the apostolic faith.

“The Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.”¹³

Perhaps of all the churches admonished in the Bible, we are most curious about Laodicea. To this day, they are regularly cited as examples of a lukewarm faith. Many Bible expositors note the nominalism of churches today and say we are in a Laodicean age. If Laodicea, the epitome of humdrum Christianity, can repent, then perhaps there is hope for us as well.

We are not so fortunate as to have a later letter to Laodicea, as we do to Ephesus or Corinth; however, the repentance of the church in Laodicea is implied in later writings. Eusebius, who wrote a history of the church in A.D. 323, mentions several bishops of Laodicea, but his quote of one particular letter, written around A.D. 260 after the division created by Novatian,¹⁴ is worth mentioning.

¹¹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, introduction & ch. 1

¹² Tertullian, *ibid.* ch. 36

¹³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III:3:4

¹⁴ The Novatian division was the first major schism in the church. It arose over the question of what to do with Christians who lapsed during persecution but wanted to return to the church when persecution ended. The catholic churches chose a course of mercy, but Novatus determined that they should not be admitted, and he obtained many followers. In the fourth century, the Novatians returned to the catholic churches, and their bishops and elders were allowed to maintain their titles.

But know now, my brothers, that all the churches throughout the East and beyond, which formerly were divided, have become united. All the bishops everywhere are of one mind and rejoice greatly in the peace which has come beyond expectation. Thus Demetrianus of Antioch, Theoctistus in Caesarea,...Heliodorus in Laodicea,...and all the churches of Cilicia, Firmilianus, and all Cappodocia. I have named only the more illustrious bishops, that I may not make my epistle too long and my words too burdensome.¹⁵

Since it would be hard to imagine an “illustrious” bishop of a lukewarm church, it seems safe to assume that Laodicea, too, had heeded the Lord’s warnings in the Book of Revelation, especially since Tertullian’s quote, above specifically mentions Laodicea as well. Eusebius simply includes them in his history as he does all other churches, with no indication that they were lesser or weak.

The Gnostics

But the greatest problem in the apostles churches were the Gnostics. What of the gnostics and their inroads into John’s churches? It seems from 3 John 9 that they had gained so much influence that one leader was able to prevent John’s letters from reaching the church in his town! What did the 2nd century church do with them?

Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch in the late 1st and early 2nd century. The testimony of history is that he was appointed to that position by the apostle John himself. He inherited a lot of John’s problems. In A.D. 110 he was sent to Rome to be killed by wild beasts in the coliseum. On the way he wrote seven letters, six to churches and one to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna.

It is clear from Ignatius’ letters that the Gnostic problem was alive and well. His letters are full of exhortations to the churches to stick fast to their bishops and elders and to do nothing without them. Christians who read his letters today often misinterpret this as a strong emphasis on authority. On the contrary, he was merely battling the Gnostic problem in the only way he knew how.

It’s easy to read our practice and culture back into the early Christian writings. We have to remember that there were large differences of culture and Christian practice. There were not many denominations in each city in A.D. 110. There was only one. As the church grew, it became harder and harder to keep track of everything the members were doing, nor even everything they were teaching. This is obvious even in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, where he had Corinthian Christians teaching that there is no resurrection,¹⁶ and from the letters to Timothy and Titus, where all sorts of heretical doctrines were being taught.¹⁷

It’s not surprising that this could happen. There were no public schools in 1st century Rome. Instead, self-styled philosophers taught the arts, science, and math in private schools. Without licensing, anyone who considered themselves knowledgeable or inspired could open a school. Thus, Ignatius faced the problem of Gnostic Christians, teaching the very things that Paul and John had tried to root out in their letters, opening up schools to spread their Gnostic heresies. The simplest answer, in Ignatius’ eyes, was for Christians to do no baptizing or teaching without the knowledge and approval of the bishop.

¹⁵ Eusebius, *Church History* VII:5:1, quoting Dionysius of Alexandria from a letter that is no longer extant

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:12

¹⁷ 1 Timothy 1:3-4,7, etc.

Ignatius, however, seems to be the last to mention Gnosticism within the church. Writings like *The Letter of Barnabas*, written in the early to mid 2nd century, regularly address issues of Judaism but make no mention of Gnostic-type beliefs. Justin Martyr has a very long writing called *A Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. In the process of debating most of the Old Testament with Trypho, he mentions some various views held within the church, but he never mentions one that sounds Gnostic. His disciple, Tatian, is known to have departed the faith for Gnostic beliefs, but he had to leave the church to do so. All of this indicates that sometime in the early 2nd century the church had successfully driven Gnosticism out of the church.

Late 2nd century apologists like Irenaeus and Tertullian wrote treatises directly against particular Gnostic beliefs, especially those of Valentinus and Marcion. Though Irenaeus is very concerned about their influence on Christians, and even on Christian leaders,¹⁸ it is clear from his *Against Heresies* that these heretics are outside the church. He speaks for example of Gnostic by the name of Marcus in these words: “Drawing away a great number of men, and not a few women, he has induced them to join themselves to him.”¹⁹

Thus we see that the wayward churches of the 1st century not only corrected their errors as they entered the 2nd century, but they relieved themselves of the Gnostics as well. The gnostics did not survive well on their own, and we do not hear much about them after the 3rd century.

Here, as in the other cases, we find that admonitions and efforts of the apostles availed. The churches received their correction and changed. As a result, far from continuing the struggles and failures of 1st century Christianity, the church of the 2nd century, if possible, bore an even greater testimony to the power of Christ and influenced the world to a greater degree than even the apostles. You can judge this for yourself as we look at the life and testimony of the 2nd century church in the next chapter.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V:20:1 (A.D. 323)

¹⁹ *Against Heresies* I:13:1

Chapter Three: The Testimony of the Second Century Church

The Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe, . . . but, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities . . . and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. . . . They marry, as do all; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. . . . When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life.

-Anonymous, c. A.D. 100²⁰

There are three early Christian writers thought to have been appointed to positions of leadership by the apostles. These were Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Two of these met their end by martyrdom. Like most 2nd century Christians, they were thrilled about this. Ignatius wrote:

I write to all the churches and impress upon them all that I shall willingly die for God unless you hinder me. I beg of you not to show an unseasonable goodwill to me. Allow me to become food for the wild beasts . . . I am the wheat of God. Let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. In fact, entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body, so that when I have fallen asleep [i.e., in death] I may be no trouble to anyone.²¹

Polycarp, who was an old man by the time he was martyred in A.D. 155, at first refused to run when he was told that the Romans were after him. When the church in Smyrna persuaded him to leave, he found refuge in a country house not far from the city. There he spent night and day in prayer for all men and for the Church throughout the world. As he prayed one night, he had a vision that the pillow under his head was on fire. This he took as a sign that he would be burned alive.

The Romans eventually found Polycarp by torturing a boy of his household. Though Polycarp saw the soldiers coming to arrest him, he chose not to flee in order to avoid any further trouble to his fellow Christians. Instead, he came down to meet his pursuers, invited them in, and set out a meal for them. Stunned, the soldiers remarked, “Was so much effort made to capture such a respectable man?” They were so taken with Polycarp that they gave him two hours to pray before taking him away. Moved by his prayers, they were full of regret that they were arresting such a man.

After they took him into the city, the “irenarch”—ironically named Herod—took him to the stadium in a chariot. Along the way he and his father, Nicetes, tried to persuade him to recant. “What harm is there in calling Caesar Lord and offering a sacrifice along with everyone else? This will ensure your safety.” Polycarp’s reply was straightforward. “I will not do as you advise.” Angered with his obstinacy, they threw him out of the chariot when they reached the stadium, spraining his ankle.

²⁰ Letter to Diognetus 5

²¹ Ignatius, Letter to the Romans 4

Polycarp, however, anxious to give glory to God, hurried into the stadium as though nothing had happened.

A crowd had gathered to see this famed atheist, as the Romans called Christians who did not believe in the pagan gods, meet his fate. The tumult was so great that nothing at all could be heard, with one exception. The Christians testified that a voice from heaven said, “Be strong and show yourself a man, O Polycarp!”

The proconsul silenced the crowd, but he was quite unprepared for what he would meet from this old man. Expecting timidity from the 86-year-old Polycarp, he gently suggested that he have respect to his old age. “Simply swear by the fortune of Caesar and say, ‘Away with the atheists,’ and I will let you go.” Polycarp let his eyes wander across the stadium, looking sternly at the fierce crowd. He waved his hand across them and cried out, “Away with the atheists!”

The proconsul became agitated. “Just swear! Reproach Christ, and I will let you go!”

Polycarp would have nothing of it. “Eighty-six years have I served him,” he replied, “and he never did me any injury. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?”

The proconsul would not give up. As he urged him further to swear to Caesar, Polycarp looked him in the eyes and spoke plainly to him. “Sir, since you are so vainly urgent that, as you say, I should swear to the fortune of Caesar, and since you pretend not to know who and what I am, listen to me proclaim with boldness, ‘I am a Christian!’ If you want to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a time, and you shall hear them.”

Taken aback, the proconsul looked at the brave old man. “Persuade the people,” he remarked, waving to the crowd.

Polycarp was unmoved. “I think it’s right to offer an account of my faith to you, for we are taught to give all due honor to the powers and authorities ordained by God. As for these people, I do not deem them worthy of receiving any defense from me.”

The proconsul was failing, and he knew it. It was time to resort to threats. “I have wild beasts here. I will throw you to them if you don’t repent.”

But threats gained the proconsul no more advantage than his pleadings. “You had better call them then,” Polycarp said. “We are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt what is evil.”

“Since you despise the wild beasts, I will have you consumed by the fire, unless you repent!”

Now it was Polycarp who was losing patience. Far from being frightened, this was his glorious hour, and he would not be denied. “You are threatening me with a fire that burns for an hour, but you don’t know about the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. What are you waiting for? Bring out whatever you wish!”

Once it was announced to the crowd that Polycarp had confessed himself to be a Christian, they raced from the stadium to gather wood for the pyre from their shops and homes. A stake was set up,

but when they began to nail him to the stake, he told them not to bother. “The One who gives me strength to endure the fire will also enable me to stand still in it for you.”

Polycarp offered one last prayer in a loud voice, and the fire was lit. There was so much wood that it quickly roared into a large blaze. Then, to everyone’s amazement, it formed itself into an arch around Polycarp, so that Polycarp appeared to be baking rather than burning. Beyond this, rather the horrible, acrid smell of burning flesh, a sweet odor like frankincense filled the stadium.

When Polycarp wouldn’t die, the fire arching over him rather than burning him, an executioner stepped forward and stabbed him with a dagger, killing him instantly. The Christians were thankful that they would be able to bury him, but the proconsul would not allow it. A centurion took his body, threw it on the wood, and had it burned.

So ended the story of Polycarp, one of the most notable figures of the 2nd century. His end was a testimony to his life, but the boldness he showed was not unique to such a legendary figure. Octavius was able to boast that Polycarp’s bravery was simply typical of Christians of the 2nd century.

Do I compare men with Mucius, Aquilius, or Regulus (Roman heroes)? Boys and young women among us treat with contempt crosses and tortures, wild beasts, and all the bugbears of punishments with the inspired patience of suffering. Do you not perceive, O wretched men, that there is nobody who either is willing without reason to undergo punishment or is able without God to bear tortures?²²

The apostolic churches of the 2nd century bore a glorious testimony to Christ’s power, and they were not afraid to speak of it. Whereas the 3rd century church would later split over what to do with Christians who lapsed during persecution, the 2nd century churches experienced no such problems. Though persecutions happened often enough to prompt numerous apologies (defenses of the faith), lapses were rare enough not even to be mentioned. Instead, the faithfulness and bravery of the saints during times of persecution was a subject of boasting for 2nd century Christians.

It was not only in times of persecution that the lives of the 2nd century Christians glowed. Even in peacetime, their lives were marked by love. This was so much the case that the love of Christians was a matter of scorn among the Romans. Cecilius, Octavius’ opponent in the Minucius Felix debate, complained, “They love one another almost before they know one another.”²³ Tertullian, a Christian lawyer in Carthage at the end of the 2nd century, wrote an apology addressing such a Roman complaint.

“See,” they say, “how they love one another,” for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. “How they are ready to die for one another!” for they themselves will sooner put to death.²⁴

²² Minucius Felix, *The Octavius* 37; I’ve seen it suggested that this writing is from as early as A.D. 130, but its introduction in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (available at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers>) suggests A.D. 166 as an earliest date and holds an early 3rd century date as more likely.

²³ *The Octavius* 9

²⁴ *Apology* 39

Tertullian goes on to describe the extent of this love. Unlike most modern Christians, the 2nd century Christians were brothers in more than name only. Their brotherhood not only matched the intimacy and sharing common among those related biologically, but exceeded it:

“[The Romans] are angry with us, too, because we call each other brothers. . . . On this very account, perhaps, we are regarded as having less claim to be held true brothers in that no tragedy makes a noise in our brotherhood or in that the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us but our wives.”²⁵

This brings up a very interesting point. Every Christian that diligently reads the Scriptures has wondered about Acts chapters two and four. There we are told that the first church in Jerusalem “had all things in common,” and “not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.”²⁶ Did this continue, or was this something unique to the church in Jerusalem? As late as A.D. 200, some 170 years after the events of Acts 2 and 4, Tertullian tells us such sharing was still the norm among Christians. He’s joined by the testimony of Justin Martyr a half a century earlier.

We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and share with everyone in need. We who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them.²⁷

Justin’s testimony is significant. He lived in Rome, but he was well-traveled. His *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew* takes place in Corinth, and Trypho is a Jew who was also traveling. Both Justin and Trypho have exactly the same description of Christian practice in the mid-2nd century. His *First Apology*, from which the above quote is taken, is not a theological teaching designed to persuade Christians to live a certain way. Instead, Justin is describing to the emperor the practice of Christians as he knows it. As far as he is concerned, Christians across the Roman empire shared their possessions with their needy brothers and often lived together. And this is over a century after the description of the church in Jerusalem found in Acts.

This does not mean that the early Christians had no personal possessions. Both Justin and Tertullian say that this sharing was accomplished by a collection on a weekly (Justin) or monthly (Tertullian) basis. This would appear to match apostolic practice. Paul said that it is appropriate that Christians with more goods or money share with those who had less in time of need so that there was an equality. Later, First Timothy gives instruction to “those who are rich” to “do good” and “be generous and ready to share.” The 2nd century church seems to understand this, promoting the need to be “ready to share,” not to strip all Christians of their possessions.²⁸

Was this unique to Carthage, where Tertullian lived, or Rome, where Justin resided? It seems very unlikely. Not only was Justin well-traveled, but both claimed to be speaking for all Christians and there is ample testimony that the 2nd century church was united in its practice across the world. For

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Acts 2:44; 4:32

²⁷ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 14

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67; Tertullian, *Apology* 39; 2 Cor. 8:13-15; 1 Tim. 6:17,18

example, Irenaeus, a widely respected bishop from what is now northern France who wrote between the times of Justin and Tertullian, testifies:

The church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She believes these points just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart. She proclaims them, teaches them, and hands them down with perfect harmony, as if she possessed but one mouth. . . . As the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth.²⁹

This unity and love that the 2nd century church displayed to the world was of prime importance. We read in the Gospel of John that this is the primary testimony that Jesus wanted to offer to the world. Jesus prayed, “I do not ask on behalf of these alone [i.e., the apostles], but for those also who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you...so that the world may believe that you sent me.” To this he adds, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Clearly, then, Jesus himself considered the unity of his disciples and their open love for one another to be of prime importance.³⁰

However, though unity and love were the primary testimonies, they were not the only one. Jesus also said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”³¹ The power of God in the 2nd century Christians did not extend only to bravery in persecution, a remarkable unity, and a notable love. In the area of good works, they received strong scores as well. This chapter starts with one of the earliest descriptions of Christian life found in the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*. There are many more. Justin, whom we’ve already met, described more than the sharing and community life of Christians of the mid 2nd century.

We who formerly delighted in fornication . . . now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock, and share with everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, pray for our enemies, and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ.³²

Justin was not the only one noticing. The good works of the 2nd century church really were a light to the world, and the Romans noticed. Justin took the time to quote Matthew 5:16, and then he wrote:

Nor has [Christ] wanted us to be imitators of wicked men, but he has exhorted us to lead all men by patience and gentleness from shame and the love of evil. Indeed, this is proven in the case of many who were once of your [i.e., the emperor and the Romans] way of thinking, but have changed their violent and tyrannical disposition, being overcome either by the constancy which they have witnessed in their neighbors’ lives, by the extraordinary

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I:10:2

³⁰ John 17:20-21; 13:35

³¹ Matt. 5:16

³² Justin, *First Apology* 14

forbearance they have observed in their fellow travelers when defrauded, or by the honesty of those with whom they have transacted business.³³

The lives of the early Christians converted “many.” It was not public preaching or personal testimony to which Justin points, but the godly example of the Christians, something the early Christians were not afraid to boast of. Athenagoras was another apologist writing some 20 years after Justin in A.D. 177:

But among us you will find uneducated persons, artisans, and old women, who, if they are unable in words to prove the benefit of our doctrine, yet by their deeds exhibit the benefit arising from their persuasion of its truth. They do not rehearse speeches, but exhibit good works; when struck, they do not strike again; when robbed, they do not go to law; they give to those that ask of them, and love their neighbors as themselves.³⁴

This boasting continued into the 3rd century. In the debate of the first chapter, we saw how Octavius was able to use the holy lives of Christians as a powerful argument against his opponent. Origen, one of the most educated and respected of Pre-Nicene³⁵ Christians, used similar arguments, not in a debate, but in an answer to an attack on Christians written by a Roman skeptic named Celsus.

For the *ekklesia* [*ekklesia* is the Greek word translated as “church” in the New Testament] of God which is at Athens is a meek and stable body, as being one which desires to please God . . . whereas the *ekklesia* [i.e., the assembly of townspeople/citizens] of the Athenians is given to sedition and is not at all to be compared with the *ekklesia* of God in that city. You may say the same thing of the *ekklesia* of God at Corinth and the *ekklesia* of the Corinthian people . . . In like manner, in comparing the council of the *ekklesia* of God with the council in any city, you would find that certain councilors of the *ekklesia* are worthy to rule in the city of God, if there be any such city in the whole world, whereas the councilors in all other places exhibit in their characters no quality worthy of the usual superiority they enjoy over their fellow citizens. . . . Even among those councilors and rulers of the *ekklesia* of God who come very far short of their duty and who lead more indolent lives than those who are more energetic, it is nevertheless possible to discover a general superiority in what relates to the progress of virtue over the characters of the councilors and rulers in the various cities.³⁶

Many more quotes could be adduced to show the holiness of the 2nd century church. The ones we have seen should be sufficient, but the question may be asked, are there also complaints about the behavior of 2nd century Christians? In Scripture we read about immorality between a man and his father’s wife and about “Nicolaitans” teaching the church to eat food offered to idols and to practice sexual immorality.³⁷ Do we read such things in the writings of the 2nd century church as well?

The answer is, surprisingly little. There are numerous exhortations to holiness, but not much complaint about the lack of it. Is this because they turned a blind eye to it? This seems doubtful because 3rd century Christians were quick to complain where there was a lack of holiness. In fact, very early in the 2nd century, Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch appointed by the apostle John, wrote:

³³ *First Apology* 16

³⁴ *A Plea for the Christians* 11

³⁵ Pre-Nicene is a reference to the time period before the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

³⁶ *Against Celsus* III:30

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:1; Revelation 2:14-15

Keep yourselves from those evil plants which Jesus Christ does not tend because they are not the planting of the Father. Not that I have found any divisions among you, but exceeding purity.³⁸

Here, despite the exhortation to avoid unholy people, Ignatius tells the church in Philadelphia that he has found only purity among them. This kind of testimony among the early churches surely had much to do with the purging that resulted from Jesus' own scathing rebukes in the Book of Revelation. The churches took Jesus' admonitions seriously and drove these people out of the churches. Many of the greater problems in the 1st century churches came from gnostic influence. In the 2nd century, once they were gone, the churches enjoyed a peace they had not been able to have before.

³⁸ *Letter to the Philadelphians* 3

Chapter Four: The Unity of the Second Century Church

In the last chapter we touched on the unity of the 2nd century churches. This is an important point, though, that we should explore further. Jesus hung his reputation on the unity of his disciples. The world would recognize Christ's disciples by their love, and they would recognize Jesus himself as the Christ by the disciples' unity.³⁹

In our world of multiple denominations, some 36,000⁴⁰ strong in the United States, we are desensitized to the dangers of division. We have become comfortable with it. "Go to the church of your choice" and "find a good Bible-believing church" are considered good advice in the modern era rather than a sign that Christianity, being divided, has fallen. The Bible's warnings are strict. Paul writes:

"...disputes, dissensions, factions...I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."⁴¹

The word that is translated "factions" here, the Greek word *haireisis*, is used five times in Acts to refer to the various sects of Judaism, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Christians themselves.⁴² Thus, it can clearly be rendered "sect," as most translations render it throughout Acts, or even "denomination." Is there really any difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees as sects of Judaism and the Baptists and Pentecostals as denominations of Christianity?

The early churches understood this. Ignatius of Antioch wrote:

"If any man follows him that makes a schism in the church, he shall not inherit the kingdom of God."⁴³

The Shepherd of Hermas, considered Scripture by some churches of the late 2nd and 3rd centuries, states:

"You are hardened and do not wish to cleanse your hearts, to add unity of aim to purity of heart, that you may have mercy from the great King. Take heed, therefore, children, that these dissensions of yours do not deprive you of your life."⁴⁴

The church at Rome, admonishing the Corinthians at the end of the first century for returning to the division it experienced in Paul's day, states it longer and more forcefully:

"Why are there strifes, tumults, divisions, schisms, and wars among you? Have we not one God and Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out on us? And have we not one calling in Christ? Why do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ, raise up strife against our own body, and reach such a height of madness that we forget that 'we are

³⁹ John 13:34,35; 17:20-23

⁴⁰ qqq ref needed

⁴¹ Galatians 5:20-21

⁴² Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5; 26:5; 28:22

⁴³ Letter to the Philadelphians 3

⁴⁴ Hermas, *Shepherd of Hermas* I:3:9

members of one another’? Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, ‘Woe to that man! It would be better for him never to have been born than that he should cast a stumbling block before one of my elect. Yea, it would be better for him that a millstone should be hung around him and he should be sunk in the depths of the sea than that he should cast a stumbling block before one of my little ones.’ Your schism has subverted many, has discouraged many, has given rise to doubt in many, and has caused grief to us all.”⁴⁵

A bit later they added more, driving home the importance of the unity of the saints:

“Love admits of no schisms; love gives rise to no seditions; love does all things in harmony. By love have all the elect of God been made perfect; without love nothing is well-pleasing to God.”⁴⁶

How important is the need for unity? The early churches considered it so important that it would be better to leave the church than to split it:

“Who then among you is noble-minded? Who compassionate? Who full of love? Let him declare, ‘If on my account sedition, disagreement, and schisms have arisen, I will depart. I will go away to wherever you desire, and I will do what the multitude commands. Only let the flock of God live on terms of peace with the elders set over it.’ He that acts in this way will procure for himself great glory in the Lord.”⁴⁷

Knowing these things put a mandate on the early church that we do not possess today. Dividing was simply not an option, and so they did not divide. As late as A.D. 200, Tertullian describes the unity of the churches of his day:

“The churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, [founded] by the apostles, from which they all [spring]. In this way all are primitive, all are apostolic, while they are all proven to be one, in unity, by their peaceful communion, title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality.”⁴⁸

We saw in the last chapter Irenaeus’ glowing testimony to the unity of the church about two decades before Tertullian.

“The church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She believes these points just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart. She proclaims them, teaches them, and hands them down with perfect harmony, as if she possessed but one mouth.”⁴⁹

The combined testimony of Tertullian and Irenaeus is powerful. Tertullian was an educated citizen of Carthage in North Africa, a lawyer who received his education in Rome. Irenaeus lived in Asia

⁴⁵ *First Clement* 46

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, ch. 49

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, ch. 54

⁴⁸ *Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 20

⁴⁹ *Against Heresies* I:10:2

Minor as a young man, learning the Gospel in Smyrna under the great overseer⁵⁰ Polycarp, who had been appointed by the apostle John. He had traveled more than once to Rome to resolved disputes between the Roman bishop and Eastern church leaders. *Against Heresies*, his opus magnum, was penned as overseer of the church in Lyons, Gaul, which in modern times is France. Tertullian and Irenaeus did not merely speak of unity among the churches and around the world, they had experienced it.

The Family of Christ

It is not enough for us to know that they did not divide. We must understand what unity meant to them. Today we proclaim our unity if we simply conduct a festival together or hold a once-a-year picnic or combined holiday church service. We count it a great standard of unity if we do something together weekly, such as an inter-denominational Bible study or a men's breakfast. All the while we continue to separate over doctrines or modes of worship.

This was not the unity of the early church. This was mentioned in Chapter Three, but it bears repeating. Family was not a mere word to primitive Christians. They were closer than brothers, and they enjoyed all the benefits of their family relationship. They knew that to be a part of God's family should bring a much stronger love than blood relationship ever could. They knew it should, and they got to experience it.

“[The Romans] are angry with us, too, because we call each other brothers...On this very account, perhaps, we are regarded as having less claim to be held true brothers in that no tragedy makes a noise in our brotherhood or in that the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us but our wives.”⁵¹

Minucius Felix says it similarly, declaring in his *The Octavius*:

“We love one another, to your regret, with a mutual love, because we do not know how to hate. We call one another, to your envy, brothers, as being men born of one God and Parent, companions in faith, and fellow-heirs in hope.”⁵²

Thus, the unity of the primitive churches went far beyond a mere agreement in doctrine. In fact, it had very little to do with doctrine at all. The early churches focused first and foremost on a holy life of love together. They developed a whole new society and a whole new way of living. Dr. Alexander Coke, American editor of the *Ante-Nicene Father* series, describes it in these words:

⁵⁰ Overseer is a more literal translation of the Greek word *episkopos*, usually rendered bishop. It is the equivalent of the English word “supervisor.” The New Testament refers to two appointed “offices” in the church, overseer and servant. Servant is the correct translation of *diakonos*, which is left untranslated as “deacon” in 1 Timothy 3:10 and 13. Overseer and elder are used interchangeably by Paul and Peter in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 20:17,28; Tit. 1:5,7; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), but history indicates that John's churches had one overseer as a “head elder” among the elders. By the mid to late 2nd century, this leadership structure was universal in the church.

⁵¹ Tertullian, *Apology* 39

⁵² ch. 31

“They reared the sacred home; they created the Christian family; they gave new and holy meanings to the names of wife and mother; they imparted ideas unknown before of the dignity of man as man; they infused an atmosphere of benevolence and love; they bestowed the elements of liberty chastened by law; they sanctified human society by proclaiming the universal brotherhood of redeemed man.”⁵³

A very early anonymous Christian author described Christian society in much more poetic terms. It is clear from his words that it is a common love and life that united the early Christians. He has little to say about doctrine, but much to say about the way Christians lived.

“Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor by language, nor the customs which they observe ... nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities ... and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. ... They marry, as do all; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. ... They love all men and are persecuted by all; ... They are poor, yet make many rich; ... they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers.”⁵⁴

While this book is a description of 2nd century Christianity and not an exhortation to live like them, it seems important to me to point out that if we wish to imitate the unity of the early church we will need to imitate the source of their unity. The unity of the primitive churches was a unity of life. As common servants of Jesus Christ, they were bound together in love, in a common family, and in a common way of life. Just as the Scriptures promise, this led to a unity of doctrine because they first formed a unity of Spirit.⁵⁵

“The churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, [founded] by the apostles, from which they all [spring]. In this way all are primitive, all are apostolic, while they are all proven to be one, in unity, by their peaceful communion, title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality.”⁵⁶

⁵³ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, “Introductory Notice,” p. 3; electronic edition obtained from <http://www.ccel.org/fathers>.

⁵⁴ *Letter to Diognetus* 5

⁵⁵ Eph. 4:3,13

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 20

PART TWO

The Doctrines of the 2nd Century Church

Chapter Five: The 2nd Century Church Was Not Roman Catholic

It's not uncommon for modern Christians to assume that shortly after the apostolic era the church became Roman Catholic, ruled and united by an ecclesiastical system headed up by the Pope. I hope we have already seen that the 2nd century church was united not by an ecclesiastical system but by a common life.

However, what sort of leadership did the 2nd century church have in place? Let's begin right at the top, with the bishop of Rome himself.

Simply put, there is no indication that the bishop of Rome was considered "the Pope" until long after the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when there was an official pope, though Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome in A.D. 600, is often listed by Protestant scholars as the first.

At Nicea, three "patriarchs" were established.⁵⁷ At that time, each city had its own bishop⁵⁸, but Canon VI of the Council of Nicea assigns authority over larger areas to the bishops of Alexandria (in Egypt) and Antioch (in modern Syria) and acknowledges extralocal⁵⁹ authority to the Roman bishop in Italy, which was apparently already established. The question is, how long ago was this extralocal authority established, and how widespread was his authority?

That question is not difficult to answer. According to Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, around A.D. 250, Stephen, the bishop of Rome, attempted to call himself "bishop of bishops" and was condemned by a council of 87 bishops convened by Cyprian. Cyprian was a bishop of great importance and to this day is held in much higher regard than Stephen even by the Roman Catholics.

"When Stephen, bishop of Rome, had by his letters condemned the decree of the African council on the baptism of heretics, Cyprian lost no time in holding another council at Carthage with a greater number of bishops....Cyprian said, 'Neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience, since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another.'"⁶⁰

This decision of the Council of Carthage, occurring 75 years before Nicea, shows that there was an attempt by the bishop of Rome to exert his authority in north Africa, but it was soundly and unanimously rejected. This council is significant specifically because it was led by Cyprian, who is the source of the majority of the quotes used by Roman Catholics to argue for a Pre-Nicene papacy. Clearly, no matter how many quotes are produced to argue that Cyprian considered the Roman

⁵⁷ Canon VI, Council of Nicea (re: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, Vol. 14). Some have said that Canon VII assigned patriarchal status to the bishop of Jerusalem as well, but both later history and the wording of the Canon make this very unlikely.

⁵⁸ Note again that "bishop" originally came from the Greek *episkopos*, which means overseer or supervisor. Beginning about the mid-2nd century, each city had just one bishop. See the discussion on bishops later in this chapter.

⁵⁹ Extralocal, in this context, means authority outside his own city.

⁶⁰ *The Seventh Council of Carthage Under Cyprian*, from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5

bishop to be “the Pope,” the Seventh Council of Carthage proves unquestionably that Cyprian rejected the authority of Stephen, the bishop of Rome in his time.

The numerous quotes pulled from Cyprian’s writings in defense of a 3rd century papacy can all be answered with one argument. Cyprian was the first to argue that “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” given to Peter in Matthew 16:19 were passed on to the church. However, Cyprian believed that they were passed on to *all* the bishops, who represented the unity of the church. Cyprian nowhere specifies that the keys to the kingdom of heaven were given to the Roman bishop. Instead he describes the all the bishops of the churches as one.

"And this unity we ought firmly to hold and assert, especially those of us that are bishops who preside in the Church, that we may also prove the episcopate itself to be one and undivided....The episcopate⁶¹ is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole."⁶²

Cyprian also rejects the claim of Stephen to hold a succession from Peter. In fact, he refers to himself as “justly indignant” about it. He writes:

"In this respect I am justly indignant at this so open and manifest folly of Stephen, that he who so boasts of the place of his episcopate, and contends that he holds the succession from Peter, on whom the foundations of the Church were laid, should introduce many other rocks and establish new buildings of many churches; maintaining that there is baptism in them by his authority."⁶³

Cyprian was not alone in his opinion. The Seventh Council of Carthage was attended by 87 north African bishops, all of whom ratified the decision of that council. Seventy-five years later, at the Council of Nicea, Constantine’s attempt to gather all the bishops of the Roman empire drew 304 bishops. The 87 bishops at the Council of Carthage must have represented at least 25% of the bishops under the emperor of Rome’s dominion.

The role of the Roman bishop is even easier to determine before Cyprian’s time. To do so, however, we need to begin in the New Testament itself.

Bishops, Elders, and Deacons

The key New Testament passages on the subject of bishops are Acts 20:17-18, 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2. They read as follows:

From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church And when they had come to him, he said to them, “. . . Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers⁶⁴, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

⁶¹ “Episcopate” means the office of bishop.

⁶² *Treatises of Cyprian* I:5

⁶³ *Epistles of Cyprian* 73:17; Stephen wanted to accept the baptism of Novationist separatists, who had left the church of Rome because Rome had accepted lapsed Christians back after persecution had ended. Cyprian violently disagreed with Stephen on this matter, specifically with his attempts to force his opinion on other bishops.

⁶⁴ Greek *episkopos*, the word translated by “bishop”

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight⁶⁵ not under compulsion, but voluntarily.

The first passage has the elders of the church being told that they are bishops (“overseers” and “bishops” are the same in the original Greek) and that they are the ones who shepherd the church of God. In the second passage, Peter tells the elders that they are to “oversee” (Greek *episkopeo*) and shepherd the flock of God. So twice in the New Testament we are told that the churches of God are led by elders who are made bishops (or, more literally, “overseers”) and who are to shepherd the church of God.

There is no separate office of pastor in the New Testament or in the early church. The elders are the shepherds or pastors. In the New Testament, they are also the bishops, and there are a group of them in every church. Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders ... in every church.”⁶⁶

We find similar terminology in what is probably the earliest Christian writing outside the New Testament. Interestingly enough, it is in a letter from the church at Rome to the church in Corinth. It is called *First Clement*, because it was purported to have been written by Clement of Rome, supposedly the third Pope after Peter and Linus. However, Clement could not have been even the sole bishop of Rome, much less an actual Pope. *First Clement*, like Acts and 1 Peter, knows only of a group of elders, all of whom are bishops, and deacons (more literally, “servants”).

“[The apostles] appointed the first-fruits, having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who would afterward believe.”⁶⁷

There, assuming that Clement is really the author, he mentions only bishops and deacons, just as we find in the New Testament. Two chapters later, he ties elders and the office of bishop together, also just as we find in the New Testament.

“Our apostles also knew ... there would be strife on account of the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, ... they appointed those already mentioned and afterwards gave instructions that when these should fall asleep [in the Lord], other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by [the apostles], or afterwards by other eminent men with the consent of the whole church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of Christ ... cannot be justly dismissed from their ministry. For our sin will not be small if we eject from the office of bishop those who have fulfilled its duties blamelessly and in holiness. Blessed are those elders who, having finished their course before now, have obtained a fruitful and perfect departure, for they have no fear that anyone will deprive them of the place now appointed them.”⁶⁸

Like Paul and Peter, Clement of Rome recognized a group of elders filling the office of bishop and shepherding the flock of God. This being true, it is impossible that Clement was “the Pope” in Rome, as the Pope is nothing more than the bishop of Rome ruling over all the other bishops of the world. In Clement’s time, however, around A.D. 95, Rome had no individual bishop to fill that role.

⁶⁵ Greek *episkopeo*, the verb form of *episkopos*, which is the Greek word translated by “bishop”

⁶⁶ Acts 14:23

⁶⁷ ch. 42

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, ch. 44

While the role of elders and bishops in Paul's churches, Peter's churches, and in Rome specifically is quite clear, the whole picture is a bit more complicated. Only about 15 years after *First Clement* was written, Ignatius of Antioch wrote seven letters on his way to being martyred in Rome. In those letters he identifies himself as "the bishop" of Antioch, and sends greetings to "the bishop" of several churches. In fact, one of the most outstanding marks of Ignatius's letters is his strong exhortations to unite around "the bishop."⁶⁹

Was there a change between A.D. 95 and A.D. 110? That's unlikely. What seems much more likely is that the leadership structure established by the apostle John was different than that established by Peter and Paul. John appointed elders like Peter and Paul, but only one of those elders was "the bishop."

There are faint indications of this in the New Testament. 3 John 9 and 12 may indicate that the church to which John is writing was used to having just one main leader. There are also some who see indications of an individual bishop in the mention of an "angel" of each of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3.⁷⁰

Whether the New Testament backs this up or not, it is a clear pattern in the post-apostolic writings. Several of the churches that Ignatius writes to are John's churches. Even Ephesus, formed by Paul, is known to have had John living there, perhaps for decades. Tradition has it that Ignatius was appointed to the episcopate by John himself, as was Polycarp of Smyrna, to whom Ignatius also wrote. In each of those letters, there is great emphasis placed on the bishop. The one exception to this in Ignatius's letters is the letter to Rome, which is said by numerous writers to have been established and built up by Peter and Paul. In that one letter to Rome, Ignatius makes no mention of a bishop, a notable omission considering the emphasis placed on the bishop in all his other letters.

Polycarp, too, addressed as "the bishop" of Smyrna in Ignatius's letter, fails to mention an individual bishop when he writes to the church in Philippi, another one of Paul's churches. Nor does he identify himself as bishop of Smyrna, though he does introduce himself with the words "Polycarp, and the elders with him ..."⁷¹ In chapters five and six of that letter, he describes the duties of elders and deacons, never mentioning a bishop, nor bothering to describe the elders as bishops.

Polycarp's letter is believed to have been written around A.D. 155. All the Christian writings after Polycarp's not only refer to an individual bishop, but several backtrack to claim that Rome had one bishop all the way back to the time of Peter. It seems clear, however, that until sometime in the early to mid 2nd century, Paul and Peter's churches, including Rome, had a group of bishops, while John's churches had just one that presided over a group of elders. By somewhere around the mid 2nd

⁶⁹ "Bishop of Antioch": *Epistle to Polycarp*, introduction; "the bishop" of various churches: *Letter to the Ephesians* 1, *Letter to the Magnesians* 2, 4; references to uniting around "the bishop": *Letter to the Magnesians* 6, *Letter to the Trallians* 2. These are just examples; there are several other references.

⁷⁰ Since "angel" can also be translated "messenger," I am much more inclined to believe that the angels of each church were the messengers put in charge of sending and receiving letters. The ability to write was less common in the 1st century, as was the wealth to afford materials to write with and on. Also, the "angels" of each of the seven churches were already represented by the symbol of seven stars in Jesus' hand (Rev. 1:20). It seems unlikely that the "angels" or "messengers" themselves were a second symbol representing the bishops of the churches. There's no precedent in Scripture for a symbol representing another symbol.

⁷¹ *Letter to the Philippians* introduction

century even Paul and Peter's churches had adopted the Johannine leadership structure, and by the late 2nd century it was assumed that this had always been the case.

Apostolic Succession and the Apologists

The Roman Catholic argument—mentioned earlier in this chapter—that Peter received the keys of the kingdom of heaven and then handed those down to each successive bishop of Rome is called the doctrine of “apostolic succession.” In a more general sense, “apostolic succession” also refers to the handing down of certain sacerdotal rights from bishop to bishop in all the churches.

Because Roman Catholics define apostolic succession in this way today, one early reference to apostolic succession is often misinterpreted as an argument for a Roman Pope in the 2nd century. However, apostolic succession in the Pre-Nicene church was simply the argument, common among the apologists, that the apostles taught a body of tradition (known as “the rule of faith”) to the elders they had appointed to lead the churches. If a succession of elders could be traced back to the apostles in any church, that was at least some indication that that church was still in possession of legitimate apostolic teaching.

The “apologists” are Christian writers of the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries who wrote defenses of the faith both against heresies and to the emperor refuting charges against Christians. Irenaeus and Tertullian especially (both introduced earlier) were fond of this argument. Though it would not carry much weight today, after 2,000 years—especially knowing the history of those 2,000 years—it was very effective just a century or two after the apostles. Here's an example from Tertullian's *Prescription Against Heretics*, written around A.D. 200:

“But if there are any [heresies] which are bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age [i.e., to claim that they were founded by apostles], that they may thereby seem to have been handed down by the apostles ... we can say, let them produce the original records of their churches. Let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that the first bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men, a man, moreover, who continued steadfast with the apostles. For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers. For example, the church of Smyrna records that Polycarp was placed in office by John. The church of Rome also makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter. In exactly the same way the other churches likewise exhibit those, whom, as having been appointed to their episcopal places by apostles, they regard as transmitters of the apostolic seed. Let the heretics contrive something of the same kind. ... But should they even effect the contrivance, they will not advance a step, for their very doctrine, after comparison with that of the apostles, will declare, by its own diversity and contrariety, that it had for its author neither an apostle nor an apostolic man.... To this test, therefore, they will be submitted for proof by those churches, who, although they do not derive their founder from apostles or apostolic men—as being of much later date, for they are in fact being founded daily—yet, since they agree in the same faith, they are accounted as not less apostolic because they are akin in doctrine. Then let all heresies, when challenged to these two tests by our apostolic church, offer their proof of how they deem themselves to be apostolic.”⁷²

⁷² ch. 32

Tertullian argues in this passage not only that the orthodox churches have passed truth down through the succession of bishops, but he buttresses his argument by pointing out the unified truth that has been handed down. His argument, that “they agree in the same faith,” is explained in a different place in the same work:

“Is it likely that so many churches, and they so great, should have gone astray into one and the same faith? No casualty distributed among many men issues in one and the same result. Error in doctrine in the churches must necessarily have produced various issues. When, however, that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the same, it is not the result of error but tradition.”⁷³

It is clear in Tertullian’s work that the issue is the transmission of truth and that he is simply trying to prove that the orthodox churches possess the same doctrine the apostles taught. His reference to the apostolic succession argument is rarely quoted by the Roman Catholics because Rome is not singled out, nor is it even mentioned first. Irenaeus, on the other hand, speaks glowingly of the church in Rome, which enjoyed great status in his eyes due to Rome’s relationship to both Peter and Paul.

Irenaeus’s respect for the argument of apostolic succession is evident in his reference to Rome. Like Cyprian’s later attempt to correct Stephen on the subject of the baptism of heretics, Irenaeus had also corrected a Roman bishop, Eleutherus, just a few years earlier. He had also told a story about Polycarp, one of Irenaeus’s teachers, having to prevent Anicetus, an earlier bishop, from splitting the orthodox churches over the issue of when to celebrate Passover in the church.⁷⁴

Unlike Tertullian, Irenaeus does single out the church at Rome. Here is the passage at question:

“It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world. We are in a position to reckon up those who were instituted bishops in the churches by the apostles and the succession of these men to our own times ... If the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to ‘the perfect’ apart and privately from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the churches themselves. ... Since, however, it would be very tedious...to reckon up the successions of all the churches, we ... indicate that tradition derived from the apostles of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, as also the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by the succession of bishops. For to this church, on account of more potent principality, it is necessary that every church—that is, those who are on every side faithful—resort; in which church ever, by those who are on every side, has been preserved that tradition which is from the apostles⁷⁵ ... [Irenaeus lists a succession of 12 bishops since the apostles with some commentary here.] ... In this order and

⁷³ *ibid.*, ch. 28

⁷⁴ “Introductory note to Irenaeus *Against Heresies*,” from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I

⁷⁵ The original Edinburgh, Scotland translators of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* comment that the Latin is difficult and that “it is impossible to say with certainty” what the original Greek words were. The end by commenting, “We are far from sure that the rendering [we give] is correct.” I have used the translation the American editor of that series recommended, Berington and Kirk.

by this succession the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles and the preaching of the truth have come down to us. This is most abundant proof that there is one and the same life-giving faith, which has been preserved in the church from the apostles until now and handed down in truth.”⁷⁶

Although Irenaeus singles out the church at Rome here, it is clear that the issue is simply the preservation of truth. He speaks of “that tradition which is from the apostles” which “has been preserved.” He says, “In this order and by this succession the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles and the preaching of the truth have come down to us,” and he tells us that “this is the most abundant proof that there is one and the same life-giving faith, which has been preserved in the church from the apostles until now and handed down in truth.”

Then, lest we make too much of the singling out of Rome, he not only tells us gives us the reason that he is singling out Rome (because it would be “very tedious” to “reckon up the succession of all the churches”) he adds:

“Then, again, the church in Ephesus, founded by Paul and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.”⁷⁷

There is really no grounds here to argue that Irenaeus is somehow justifying the rule of the Roman bishop over all other bishops. The issue Irenaeus addresses—the same one Tertullian addressed just a couple decades later—is who is “a true witness of the tradition of the apostles.” On that topic, it is worth noting the way Irenaeus introduced his argument on apostolic succession.

“When [the gnostic heretics] are refuted by the Scriptures, they turn around and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous...Yet, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, which is preserved by means of the succession of elders in the churches, they object to tradition, saying that they are wiser, not merely than the elders, but even than the apostles.”⁷⁸

Again, the topic of apostolic succession in the apologetic writings is very clear. Apostolic succession is simply the argument that “the tradition which originates from the apostles ... is preserved by means of the succession of elders in the churches.” It is not an argument for the existence of a Pope prior to Nicea.

⁷⁶ *Against Heresies* III:3:2

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, III:3:4

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, III:2:2

Chapter Six Faith and Works

One of the biggest controversies of our day is the role of works in salvation. Read through any “cult watch” web site or book, and you will find numerous references to groups that are cults, or at least “abberant,” because they teach “works-based salvation.” Most Christians are aware that the basis of Protestantism is not only *sola Scriptura*, the Bible only, but also *sola fide*, “faith alone.”

The statement of faith of almost every major Protestant organization has as one of its first and most important tenets that salvation is by faith alone. This focus on faith alone, however, arose from controversy. Major and well-accepted denominations reject the concept. The Roman Catholics do not believe it, of course, and even the Church of Christ, one of the most emphatic “Bible-only” sects in existence, rejects salvation by faith alone.

It is not surprising that this controversy exists. There is a tension in Scripture between the role of faith and works in salvation. For example, Martin Luther’s introduction to his German translation of the New Testament lists the letters to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians as best holding forth the great gospel of salvation by faith alone, yet even these say things like:

Romans: “[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.”⁷⁹

Galatians: “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.”⁸⁰

Ephesians: “For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”⁸¹

But the verses that best highlight the tension between faith and works in Scripture are two worded almost exactly alike, one by Paul and one by James, that draw seemingly opposite conclusions:

Romans 3:28: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law.”

James 2:24: “We conclude therefore that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

How did the early church handle this difficult controversy?

It is clear that the primitive, apostolic churches had no idea that a controversy existed. The writers from the early churches handled the issue of faith and works the same way the New Testament does. They seemed to say contradictory things, that salvation is by faith alone, but that it is also by works. It is found almost across the board in the early writings.

Here are just a few examples:

⁷⁹ 2:6-7

⁸⁰ 6:9; the bracketed part is supplied from the context in v. 8

⁸¹ 5:5

The church in Rome, A.D. 95:

We, too, being called by his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, understanding, godliness, or works which we have wrought it holiness of heart, but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men.⁸²

How blessed and wonderful, beloved, are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendor in righteousness, truth in perfect confidence, faith in assurance, self-control in holiness!...Let us therefore earnestly strive to be found in the number of those that wait for him in order that we may share in the promised gifts. But how, beloved, shall this be done? If our understanding be fixed by faith towards God, if we earnestly seek the things which are pleasing and acceptable to him, if we do the things that are in harmony with his blameless will, and if we follow the way of truth, casting away from us all unrighteousness and iniquity...for they that do such things are hateful to God.⁸³

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, AD 155:

Though now you see him not, you believe...knowing that by grace you are saved, not of works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.⁸⁴

He who raised him up from the dead will raise us up also, if we do his will and walk in his commandments...keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness.⁸⁵

Anonymous letter to Diognetus, AD 80-130:

He himself took him the burden of our iniquities, he gave his own Son as a ransom for us, the Holy One for transgressors, the Blameless One for the wicked, the Righteous One for the unrighteous....For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than his righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange!...that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single Righteous One and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!⁸⁶

He has promised a kingdom in heaven, and he will give it to those who have loved him...if you love him, you will be an imitator of his kindness. And do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing.⁸⁷

Pseudo-Barnabas, AD 130:

For to this end the Lord endured to deliver up his flesh to corruption, that we might be sanctified through the remission of sins, which is effected by his blood of

⁸² *First Clement*, ch. 32

⁸³ *ibid.*, ch. 35

⁸⁴ *Letter to the Philippians*, ch. 1

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, ch. 2

⁸⁶ *Letter to Diognetus*, ch. 9

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, ch. 10

sprinkling. For it is written concerning him...thus: “He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; with his stripes we are healed.”⁸⁸

We take earnest heed in these last days, for the whole last time of your faith will profit you nothing unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as befits the sons of God....Take heed, lest resting at ease, as those who are the called, we should fall asleep in our sins, and the wicked prince, acquiring power over us, should thrust us away from the kingdom of the Lord.⁸⁹

Justin Martyr, AD 150:

For Abraham was declared by God to be righteous, not on account of circumcision, but on account of faith.⁹⁰

Each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions.⁹¹

Clement of Alexandria, AD 190:

Faith is power for salvation and strength to eternal life.⁹²

“For by grace are we saved,” but not, indeed, without good works. Rather, we must be saved by being molded for what is good, acquiring an inclination for it. And we must possess the healthy mind that is fixed on the pursuit of the goal. For this, we have the greatest need of divine grace, of right teaching, of holy susceptibility, and of the drawing of the Father to himself.⁹³

As I read through the writings of the early church, it was clear that they knew something about the role of works and faith in salvation that we did not. What seems contradictory to us was quite ordinary to them, not even worth commenting on or explaining. I find Polycarp to be the best example in the passages above. How can he possibly insist, with Paul, that we are saved not by works but by grace, yet turn around a chapter later and say that Christ will only raise us up if we do his will and walk in his commandments? What possible sense could that make?

It made no sense to me, but somehow I was confident that eventually, if I read enough, they would reveal their secret to me. Surprisingly, it came in a flash, like a revelation, rather than in a purposeful explanation. Nonetheless, the “secret” made both the Scriptures and the writings of the early Christians fall into place with such astounding clarity that it seems obvious to me that the idea is correct.

I used to love to listen to Christian radio, and I would turn on some Christian talk show every time I was in my car. I was especially fond of *The Bible Answer Man*, hosted by the apologetic

⁸⁸ *Letter of Barnabas*, ch. 5

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, ch. 4

⁹⁰ *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 92

⁹¹ *First Apology*, ch. 12

⁹² *Miscellanies*, bk. 2, ch. 12

⁹³ *ibid.*, bk. 5, ch. 1

organization, The Christian Research Institute, and another program hosted by Bob George, a pastor and author from Dallas, Texas. On both programs, I regularly heard the principle, “Interpret difficult verses in the light of clear.”

An example of this principle actually used on *The Bible Answer Man* was John 10:28 and 2 Peter 2:20-21. John 10:28, the host said, was a clear verse. It says that no one can pluck Jesus’ sheep out of his hand. Thus, it clearly teaches eternal security, that salvation, once received, cannot be lost. 2 Peter 2:20-21, on the other hand, is a difficult verse. It says that if a man has escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but is then entangled in them again, his last end is worse than the beginning. It seems to contradict John 10:28, and it definitely seems to contradict eternal security, but, according to *The Bible Answer Man*, it does not. It is a “difficult” verse that should be interpreted in “the light” of clear verses like John 10:28.

The problem, of course, is that a denomination like the Assemblies of God, which rejects eternal security, would call 2 Peter 2:20-21 the clear passage and John 10:28 the difficult one. In the end, our arguments make it sound like we believe the Bible contradicts itself. In fact, some of the more scholarly theological books I have read seem to assume that.

Over 20 years ago I read a “systematic theology,” a book outlining verses on certain doctrines. When it got to the doctrine of eternal security, it spent several pages arguing for eternal security, then ended by listing verses that seem to contradict it. The list was nearly 80 verses long. No explanation was given for these verses. The book simply stated that the arguments for eternal security were so sound that it must be true even with all these verses that seemed to be against it.

David Bercot, author of *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*, an excellent introduction to the beliefs of Pre-Nicene Christians, has a teaching tape called “What the Early Christians Believed about Eternal Security.” In it, he mentions a similar book called *Major Bible Themes*, by Louis Sperry Chafer and John Walvoord. It, too, has a chapter on eternal security, this one entitled “Security of Salvation.” There the authors mention, “As many as 85 passages are listed by those holding the Arminian⁹⁴ view as establishing the doctrine of conditional security.” Unlike the systematic theology I read, Bercot says that *Major Bible Themes* goes on to “explain away” all 85 verses.

I do not believe that this is a proper way to handle the Scriptures. The verses of the Bible all have something to teach us. They do not need to be explained away. If we find ourselves explaining away 85 verses of Scripture, there is something wrong with what we are teaching, not with the 85 passages of Scripture.

For me, the light turned on when I read the following passage from the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*, a late 1st century or early 2nd century document:

Being convinced in that time [i.e., Old Testament times] of our unworthiness of attaining life through our own works, it should now, through the kindness of God, be vouchsafed to us. And, having made it manifest that in ourselves we were unable to enter the kingdom of God, we might through the power of God be made able.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ The “Arminian” view is a doctrine, primarily about free will, that says that our eternal salvation will depend in some way on the works of the believer.

⁹⁵ *Letter to Diognetus* 9

It was the phrase “enter the kingdom of God” that turned the light on for me. In the Scriptures, the apostle Paul mentions entering the kingdom of God three times, once in 1 Corinthians 6, once in Galatians 5, and once in Ephesians 5. Each time, he tells us that Christians who practice immorality or the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom. These passages are always mentioned as “difficult” passages by those who hold to eternal security.

The *Letter to Diognetus*, however, gives us the key to interpreting these passages. Paul’s words can be taken at face value as insisting that works will keep us out of the kingdom of heaven, yet salvation can still be “not of works,” as both he and the early Christians taught.⁹⁶ In ourselves, this anonymous writer tells us, we are not able to enter the kingdom of God. However, the power of God can make us able.

Let me explain. I noticed that in both Paul’s letters and the early Christian writings the references to a salvation that is not of works are always references to a salvation we already have. Polycarp, for example, quotes Paul in saying that we are already saved “not of works” but “by grace”; however, in reference to the future, Polycarp tells us that God will only raise us up if we keep his commandments.

Paul puts both these tenses together in Romans 5:9,10:

Much more then, *having now been* justified by His blood, we *shall be* saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we *were* enemies we *were* reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, *having been* reconciled, we *shall be* saved by His life. (italics added for emphasis)

Paul make specific distinctions between our past tense salvation and our future salvation in this passage. Each time he mentions salvation in the past tense, he ties it to Jesus’ death. Each time he mentions salvation in the future tense, he ties it to Jesus’ life. When he speaks in the past tense, he uses the verbs reconcile and justify. When he speaks in the future tense, he uses the verb save.

This past and future tense is very consistent in Paul’s writings, though usually the distinction is the role of works. Romans 3:28, for example, says that we are currently justified apart from works, but when he mentions the future inheritance of the kingdom of God, it is only works that are mentioned as playing a role.⁹⁷

You will find a similar pattern in the passages quoted at the start of this chapter from the early Christians. The first passage quoted from *First Clement* (written by the church in Rome, not directly from Clement) states that we are justified by faith. The second describes how to obtain “the promised gifts” in the future, and this requires doing his blameless will.

Let me explain this in the simplest terms I can think of. The Scriptures teach that all of us are slaves to sin. We cannot free ourselves. No matter how much we want to do good, we end up doing what is not good. Paul ends up concluding, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In another place, he cries out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ephesians 2:9

⁹⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5

⁹⁸ Romans 3:23 and 7:24

Paul answers his own question by telling us that Christ will set us free by his death. Once delivered by his death, we are given the ability to obey God. He says it in these words:

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.⁹⁹

Whereas beforehand we could not obey God, and we were all slaves to sin, we have been freed by the death of Christ. Romans 6:7 tells us, “He who has died is freed from sin.” Right afterward, Paul tells us, “Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”¹⁰⁰ Grace, apparently, is all that we need to overcome the power of sin. He describes it in this way in his letter to Titus:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.¹⁰¹

Once the grace of God appears, living a sinful life is no longer an option:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.¹⁰²

Notice the use of the future tense in this passage. Whereas we were saved from our sinful nature by grace, through faith, we will only live in the future if we actually use that grace. Through grace—or “by the Spirit”—we must put to death the deeds of the body if we want to live.

This is exactly what we were told in our original passage from the *Letter to Diognetus*. We “were unable” to enter the kingdom of God, but by the power of God we are “made able.”

I like to tell people that it is we who are saved by the death of Jesus, not God. The reason that we were not able to enter the kingdom of God is because the judgment is according to works. “[God] will render to each person according to his deeds,” Paul tells us. In another place, he says, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body.”¹⁰³ God did not need to repent for this judgment. Jesus died for us, not for God, and it is we who are changed, not God and not the judgment. The judgment is still according to works, and even Christians must face this judgment. Peter tells us:

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Romans 8:3-4

¹⁰⁰ v. 14

¹⁰¹ Titus 2:11,12

¹⁰² Romans 8:12-13

¹⁰³ Romans 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:10

¹⁰⁴ 1 Peter 1:17

Thus, there is a salvation in the past tense, mediated by the death of Christ, that frees us from slavery to sin, enabling us to face that judgment, in the future, blamelessly. The apostle John writes:

By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.¹⁰⁵

The epistle of Jude adds:

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority.¹⁰⁶

It is clear that the early church understood this concept the same way. The quote from Clement of Alexandria above, for example, reads like this:

“For by grace are we saved,” but not, indeed, without good works. Rather, we must be saved by being molded for what is good, acquiring an inclination for it. And we must possess the healthy mind that is fixed on the pursuit of the goal. For this, we have the greatest need of divine grace, of right teaching, of holy susceptibility, and of the drawing of the Father to himself.¹⁰⁷

Every set of quotes I gave at the start of this chapter follows the same pattern. Each writer mentions that salvation is by faith or apart from works in the context of our deliverance from the power of sin, but then turns around and states that salvation is completely by works in the context of our coming judgment by God. *Pseudo-Barnabas*, for instance, says, “The Lord endured to deliver up his flesh to corruption, that we might be sanctified through the remission of sins, which is effected by his blood of sprinkling,” but then he adds, “The whole last time of your faith will profit you nothing unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as befits the sons of God.” They knew that whereas we were formerly unable to enter the kingdom of God, the power of God would make us able.

I don’t want to spend too much time on the reasons our modern doctrines make it difficult to understand the early church view on faith and works, but there is at least one objection we modern Christians are certain to raise that need to be addressed. It is commonly taught that the judgment of God requires humans to be perfectly sinless. Even one sin, it is said, will cause us to be condemned by God to everlasting torment in hell. James 2:10, for example, says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.”

This view of the judgment, however, does not have much Scriptural backing. James 2:10, for example, is followed just three verses later by “Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” Clearly, James did not believe the judgment would condemn anyone who commits even one sin. James 2:10 is speaking of the way we judge one another, not the way we will be judged on the last day.

¹⁰⁵ 1 John 4:17

¹⁰⁶ Jude 24-25

¹⁰⁷ *Miscellanies* bk. 5, ch. 1

Even in the Old Testament judgment is not spoken of in this way. Ezekiel 33:21-22 tell us, “If the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him: because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.” God’s own description of himself there is, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”¹⁰⁸

Clearly, God does not see himself as someone that visits eternal damnation upon people who commit even one sin. In Isaiah we read, “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”¹⁰⁹ God’s pardon is ‘abundant.’ He will not only forgive one sin to the person who repents, but he will forgive many. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of verses in the Bible that teach the mercy of God in this way.

Nor is this mercy contingent upon sacrifice. God is not looking for sacrifice, but repentance. David, a man after God’s own heart but who was guilty of the worst of sins, tells us, “You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”¹¹⁰

This last truth ties in with everything we have been saying in this chapter. To the modern Christian, Jesus’ sacrifice was a payment for sins so that God could forgive them. To the early Christians, Jesus’ sacrifice was a means to transform us so that we could repent and live a righteous life, and it is this that causes God to forgive us. The apostle John talks about the ongoing mercy of God towards the Christian, but he does not tie it to faith in Jesus’ sacrifice. Instead, he ties it to walking in the light:

If we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us [continually] from all sin.¹¹¹

One early Christian writer addresses this issue directly. We know from Romans 4:8 that there are those whose sin God will not take into account. It was said first of David, but Paul applies it to Christians in Romans 4:8. Justin Martyr, writing about the middle of the second century, expounds on this passage to Jew with whom he is engaged in debate.

If they repent, all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God, and the Scripture foretells that they shall be blessed, saying, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin;” that is, having repented of his sins, that he may receive remission of them from God; and not as you deceive yourselves, and some others who resemble you in this, who say, that even though they be sinners, but know God, the Lord will not impute sin to them. We have as proof of this the one fall of David, which happened through his boasting, which was forgiven then when he mourned and wept, as it is written. But if even to such a man no remission was granted before repentance, and only when this great king, and anointed one,

¹⁰⁸ Exodus 34:6

¹⁰⁹ 55:7

¹¹⁰ Psalm 51:16-17

¹¹¹ 1 John 1:7

and prophet, mourned and conducted himself so, how can the impure and utterly abandoned, if they weep not, and mourn not, and repent not, entertain the hope that the Lord will not impute to them sin?¹¹²

Justin happens to expound specifically on this matter, saying that the ones to whom the Lord will not impute sin are those who live in repentance; however, he is by no means the only early Christian author who believed this way. Irenaeus—a bishop of note in the late 2nd century due to his having been taught by Polycarp, a bishop appointed directly by the apostles—agrees that it is repentance and not sacrifice that God desires when he explains why Cain’s offering was rejected by God.

At the beginning God had respect for the gifts of Abel, because he offered with single-mindedness and righteousness; but He had no respect for the offering of Cain, because his heart was divided with envy and malice, which he cherished against his brother. As God says when reprovng his hidden [thoughts], “Though you offer rightly, yet, if you do not divide rightly, have you not sinned? . . .” [Gen. 4:7, LXX] God is not appeased by sacrifice. For if any one shall attempt to offer a sacrifice merely to outward appearance . . . while in his soul he does not assign to his neighbor that fellowship with him which is right and proper, nor is under the fear of God;— he who thus cherishes secret sin does not deceive God by that sacrifice which is offered correctly as to outward appearance; nor will such an oblation profit him anything, but [only] the giving up of that evil which has been conceived within him.¹¹³

As we can see, God’s concern is with repentance. Jesus’ death changes us so that we can repent and thus enter into life. The description given by “apostles and the brethren” of the Gospel is that it is “the repentance that leads to life.” When Paul describes his own ministry, he says he “kept declaring . . . to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”¹¹⁴

In this way, the confusion about faith and works disappears. The seemingly contradictory passages in the Scriptures and in the writings of the early church no longer contradict at all, but are clear and sensible. It is normal that Paul would say that we are saved by grace through faith and not of works in Ephesians 2:8, but then follow up in Ephesians 5:5 by telling us that immoral, impure, and covetous men cannot inherit the kingdom of God. The former is in reference to our salvation from our fallen nature, already accomplished in us as Christians, and the latter is a reference to the judgment to come, which we can face in hope because of our deliverance from the flesh through the Spirit of God. It is to be expected that Paul would tell the Galatians in 2:16 that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ, then turn around and tell them that they should not lose heart in doing good if they hope to reap eternal life.¹¹⁵

There are two more issues that should be addressed to make your reading of Scripture easier. Paul was a careful theologian, distinguishing between our justification in the past by the blood of Christ

¹¹² *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew* ch. 141

¹¹³ *Against Heresies* bk. 4, ch. 18, par. 3; The Scripture quote Irenaeus uses is from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by Greek-speaking early Christians. The Septuagint is commonly quoted in the New Testament as well, accounting for differences between NT references and OT sources, such as between 1 Cor. 15:55 and its source in Hos. 13:14. Some scholars argue that over 50% of NT quotes of the OT are from the LXX.

¹¹⁴ Acts 11:1,18; 26:20

¹¹⁵ Galatians 6:9; it is v. 8 that tells us what is being reaped in v. 9.

and our future judgment, for which we prepare by letting Christ's life work in us. James, on the other hand, was not so careful. He simply speaks of salvation as a whole, because what good does it do to have been justified in the past if you are not saved on the day of judgment? So James, using almost the same terminology as Paul, speaks of faith and works together, rather than distinguishing their individual roles.¹¹⁶

There is a difference, too, between Paul and John. John, in both the Gospel and in his letters, speaks of eternal life as a current possession of the Christian. Most modern Christians know this, but what they do not realize is that Paul does not follow John's usage. For Paul, eternal life is a reward to be given to us at the judgment. For example, in Romans 2:7, he specifically mentions eternal life as a reward to be given at the judgment to those who "by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality." In Galatians 6:8 he tells us that those who sow to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit. Eternal life, to Paul, is received at the judgment.

My personal opinion is that this is not a contradiction. John speaks of eternal life as being in the Son. "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life," he tells us. Paul believed the same thing; he just doesn't speak of it in quite the same way. He says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Paul lived by the eternal life that was in the Son of God, but he didn't speak of we ourselves as having eternal life until we are granted to live eternally at the judgment.¹¹⁷

*It is not without eminent grace that the soul is winged, soars, and is raised above the higher spheres.*¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ James 2:14-26

¹¹⁷ 1 John 5:11; 5:12; Galatians 2:20

¹¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* V:13

Chapter VII. Judaism and early church

1. The Old Testament was the basic Scriptures of the 2nd century church and was understood to proclaim in advance all the truths of the New Testament.

“The Prophetic Writings were fundamental for the early Christians’ understanding of Christ. His nature, the manner of his life, work, and death, his resurrection, and his glorification were thought to be described in the prophetic writings. While the early Christians wrestled with the law, as we saw in chapter 2, they reveled in the prophets. Isaiah, Jerome said, ‘seems to me to compose a gospel rather than a prophecy,’ and David, he added, ‘makes Christ resound from his lyre’ (*Epistle* 53.8).” (Heine, Ronald E., *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007] p. 97)

“The earliest Christian interpreters of the Old Testament believed that the choice of texts they discussed and their understanding of those texts went back through the apostles to Christ himself.” (ibid., p. 99)

“Afterwards, when he had risen from the dead, appeared to them, taught them to read the prophecies in which all these things were foretold as coming to pass, and when they had seen him ascending into heaven, believed, received power sent from there upon them, and went to every race of men, they taught these things and were called apostles.” (Justin, *First Apology*, ch. 50, c. A.D. 150)

“In the early twentieth century a German scholar named A.F. von Ungern-Sternberg made a detailed study of the Christian use of the Old Testament prophecy as proof that Jesus was the Messiah and that the gospel of Christ supersedes the law of Moses. Ungern-Sternberg was able to show convincingly that there was a common set of prophetic texts that grounded the fundamental points of the Christian faith from the time of Justin in the middle of the second century to the time of Eusebius in the fourth. He argued, furthermore, that the “elements” of this prophetic proof are already present in the New Testament. From this he concluded that there is a uniformity in the proof from prophecy used by the church in the more than 250 years stretching from approximately AD 50 to AD 315. He noted, further, that Adolf von Harnack, a well-known church historian, had asserted that few things from the time of the apostles passed over so directly into the ancient church as did that which is called the proof from prophecy.” (Heine, ibid., pp. 99-100)

“The New Covenant [was] known and preached by the prophets.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 4, ch. 9, par. 3)

2. The Law and the Prophets were read symbolically

“It is written in the Law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.’ God is not concerned about oxen, is he? Or is he speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops.” (1 Cor. 9:9-10)

“Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one of the freewoman....This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves.” (Gal. 4:21-22, 24)

“Why does [God] speak thus: ‘Circumcise the stubbornness of your heart and harden not your neck’? (Deut. 10:16). And again, ‘...All the nations are uncircumcised in the flesh, but this people are uncircumcised in heart’? (Jer. 9:25,26)....Learn then, my children...that Abraham, the first who enjoined circumcision, looking forward in spirit to Jesus, practiced that rite, having received the mystery of the three letters. For it says, ‘And Abraham circumcised ten and eight and three hundred men of his household.’ The ten and eight are thus denoted, ten by iota¹¹⁹ and eight by eta. You have the [initials of] Jesus. And because the cross was to express grace by the letter T [tau], he also says ‘three hundred.’ He signifies, therefore, Jesus by two letters and the cross by one. He knows this, who has put within us the more profound gift of his doctrine.” (*Letter of Barnabas*, ch. 9)

“This is the symbolic significance of unleavened bread, that you do not commit the old deeds of wicked leaven. But you [Jews] have understood all things in a carnal sense, and you suppose it to be piety if you do such things, while your souls are filled with deceit and...with every wickedness.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 14)

“In short, sirs...by enumerating all the other appointments of Moses I can demonstrate that they were types, symbols, and declarations of those things which would happen to Christ, of those whom it was foreknown would believe in him, and of those things which would also be done by Christ himself.” (ibid., ch. 42)

“Perhaps you are not aware of this, my friends, that there were many sayings written obscurely, in parables, mysteriously, and symbolic actions, which the prophets who lived after the persons who said or did them expounded.” (ibid., ch. 48)

“Again, by what Moses and Joshua did, the same thing was symbolically announced and told beforehand. For the one of them, stretching out his hands, remained till evening on the hill, his hands being supported, and this reveals a type of no other thing than of the cross. The other, whose name was altered to Joshua [Gr. *Iesus*, the same as Jesus], led the fight, and Israel conquered....Therefore our suffering and crucified Christ was not cursed by the law, but made it manifest that he alone would save those who did not depart from his faith.” (ibid., ch. 111).

“It would be endless to recount [the occasions] in which the Son of God is shown forth by Moses. Of the day of his passion, too, he [i.e., Moses] was not ignorant, but foretold him, after a figurative manner, by the name given to the Passover¹²⁰, and at that very festival, which had been proclaimed such a long time previously by Moses, did our Lord suffer, thus fulfilling the Passover.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 4, ch. 10, par. 1)

¹¹⁹ Barnabas and all other 2nd century Christian writers read the Hebrew Scriptures in their Greek translation, the Septuagint. Both Hebrew and Greek used letters to indicate numbers, and this is where he is getting the letters from.

¹²⁰ The Greek term for Passover was *pascha*, a word closely related to *paschein*, to suffer. The early Christians did not think this was a coincidence.

3. The early church did not keep any of the Law in its literal sense.

a. General statements on the Law

Most of the quotes backing this up are found below under sacrifices, circumcision, foods, and the Sabbath. I have provided only a couple general quotes under this subpoint.

“For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” (Heb. 7:12)

“‘This is what we are amazed at,’ said Trypho [a Jew and not a Christian], ‘...I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and great that I suspect no one can keep them, for I have carefully read them. But this is what we are most at a loss about, that you, professing yourself to be pious and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them and do not alter your mode of living from the nations. You observe no festivals or Sabbaths and do not have the rite of circumcision. Further, resting your hopes on a man that was crucified, you yet expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey his commandments. Have you not read that the soul shall be cut off from his people who shall not have been circumcised on the eighth day? And this has been ordained for strangers and for slaves equally.’

“‘We do not trust through Moses or through the law, for then we would do the same as yourselves....For the law promulgated at Horeb is now old and belongs to yourselves alone, but ours is for all universally. Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one. An eternal and final law—namely Christ—has been given to us, and the covenant is trustworthy, after which there shall be no law, no commandment, no ordinance. Have you not read this which Isaiah says, ‘...A law shall go forth from me, and my judgment shall be a light to the nations. My righteousness approaches swiftly, my salvation shall go forth, and nations shall trust in my arm’? (Is. 51:4,5, LXX).” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 10-11)

b. Animal sacrifices were considered to be never God’s will rather than merely being replaced by Christ.

“For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you will be my people.’” (Jer. 7:22-23)

“Those who imagine that by means of blood and the smoke of sacrifices and burnt offerings they offer sacrifices acceptable to him and that by such honors they show him respect—these, by supposing that they can give anything to him who stands in need of nothing, appear to me in no respect to differ from those who studiously

confer the same honor on things destitute of sense [i.e., idols].” (*Letter to Diognetus*, ch. 3)

“The Lord, brothers, stands in need of nothing...except that confession be made to him. For, says the elect David, ‘I will confess to the Lord, and that will please him more than a young bullock that has horns and hoofs’ (Ps. 69:31).” (Church of Rome, *First Clement*, ch. 52)

“He has revealed to us by all the prophets that he needs neither sacrifices, nor burnt offerings, nor oblations, saying thus, ‘What is the multitude of your sacrifices to me?’ says the Lord. ‘I am full of burnt offerings, and I do not desire the fat of lambs and the blood of bulls and goats...Who has required these things at your hands?...’ (Is. 1:11-14). He has therefore abolished these things, that the new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is without the yoke of necessity, might not have a man-made oblation....To us, then, he declares, ‘A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; a smell of sweet savor to the Lord is a heart that glorifies him that made it’ (Ps. 51:19).” (*Letter of Barnabas*, ch. 2)

“God, accommodating himself to that nation [i.e., Israel], enjoined them also to offer sacrifices, as if to his name, in order that you might not serve idols.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 19)

“And that you may learn that it was for the sins of your own nation [i.e., Israel], and for their idolatries and not because there was any necessity for such sacrifices, that they were...enjoined, listen to the manner in which he speaks of these by Amos, ‘...I have hated, I have despised your feast days...though you offer me your burnt offerings and sacrifices, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your presence...’ (Amos 5:21-22). And again by Jeremiah, ‘Collect your flesh and sacrifices and eat, for concerning neither sacrifices nor libations did I command your fathers in the day in which I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt’ (Jer. 7:21-22). And again by David...he thus said, ‘I will take no bullocks out of your house, nor he-goats out of your folds, for all the beasts of the field are mine....If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is mine and the fullness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God the sacrifice of praise....The sacrifice of praise shall glorify me, and there is the way in which I shall show him my salvation’ (Ps. 50:9-14, 23). Accordingly, he neither takes sacrifices from you, nor commanded them at first to be offered because they are needful to him, but because of your sins. For indeed he admitted the temple...to be his house or court, not as though he needed it, but in order that you...might not worship idols.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 22)

“Thus, too, he imposed upon the [Jewish] people the construction of the tabernacle...sacrifices also and oblations....He does himself truly want none of these things, for he is always full of good and had in himself all the odor of kindness and every perfume of sweet-smelling savors even before Moses existed. Moreover, he instructed the people, who were prone to turn to idols...calling them to the things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to things that are real by things that are typical, and by things temporal, to eternal...for by means of

types they learned to fear God and to continue devoted to his service.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 4, ch. 14, par. 3)

“When [Israel] turned themselves to make a calf...desiring to be slaves instead of free men, they were placed in a state of servitude suited to their wish...as Ezekiel the prophet, stating the reasons for the giving of such a law, declares, ‘Their eyes were after the desire of their heart, and I gave them statutes that were not good and judgments in which they shall not live’ (Ezek. 20:24-25).” (ibid., bk. 4, ch. 15, par. 1)¹²¹

c. Fleshly circumcision replaced by circumcision of the heart

“To glory in the circumcision of the flesh as a proof of election and as if, on account of it, they were especially beloved by God, how is this not a subject of ridicule?” (Anonymous, *Letter to Diognetus*, ch. 4)

“He speaks moreover concerning our ears, how he has circumcised both them and our heart...[several Scriptures quoted here]...He has circumcised our ears that we might hear his Word and believe, for the circumcision in which [the Jews] trusted is abolished. For he declared that circumcision was not of the flesh, but they transgressed because an evil angel deluded them...[God] says to them...‘All the nations are uncircumcised in the flesh, but this people are uncircumcised in heart’ (Jer. 9:25,26)...We, then, rightly understanding his commandments, explain them as the Lord intended. For this purpose he circumcised our ears and our heart, that we might understand these things.” (*Letter of Barnabas*, ch. 9,10)

“Even you [Jews], who are circumcised according to the flesh, have need of our circumcision, but we, having the latter, do not require the former. For if it were necessary, as you suppose, God would not have made Adam uncircumcised [and] would not have had respect to the gifts of Abel when, being uncircumcised, he offered sacrifice.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 19)

“We learn from Scripture itself that God gave circumcision, not as the completer of righteousness, but as a sign, that the race of Abraham might continue recognizable...These things, then, were given for a sign, but the signs were not unsymbolic...the circumcision after the flesh typified that after the Spirit. ‘For we,’ says the apostle, ‘have been circumcised with the circumcision made without hands’ (Col. 2:11).” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 4, ch. 16, par. 1)

“The noble apostle circumcised Timothy, though loudly declaring and writing that circumcision made with hands profits nothing. But that he might not, by dragging those of the Hebrews who were reluctant listeners away from the law all at once to the circumcision of the heart through faith...he ‘accommodating himself to the Jews, became a Jew that he might gain all.’” (Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, bk. 7, ch. 9)

¹²¹ The quotes given for the issue of sacrifice are drawn from every author in the first volume of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. This only brings us to AD 185, but you will find the same things said throughout the 3rd century writings.

d. Food laws interpreted figuratively

“Moses says..., ‘You shall eat every animal that is cloven-footed and ruminant.’ What does he mean?...That we ought to join ourselves to those that fear the Lord, those who meditate in their heart on the commandment they have received, those who both utter the judgments of the Lord and observe them, those who know meditation is a work of gladness, and who ruminate on the Word of the Lord. But what means the cloven-footed? That the righteous man also walks in this world, yet looks forward to the holy state [to come].” (*Letter of Barnabas*, ch. 10)

“Now the law has figuratively predicted all [men], delineating man by the animals. Whatsoever of these, it says, have a double hoof and ruminate, it proclaims as clean...Who then are the clean? Those who make their way by faith steadily towards the Father and the Son, for this is denoted by the steadiness of those who divide the hoof, and they meditate day and night upon the words of God, that they may be adorned with good works, for this is the meaning of the ruminants.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 5, ch. 8, par. 4)

“With whom, then, are we to associate? With the righteous, he says again, speaking figuratively, for everything ‘which parts the hoof and chews the cud is clean.’ For the parting of the hoof indicates the equilibrium of righteousness, and ruminating points to the proper food of righteousness, the Word, which enters from without, like food, by instruction, but is recalled from the mind, as from the stomach, to rational collection. The spiritual man, having the Word in his mouth, ruminates the spiritual food, and righteousness parts the hoof rightly because it sanctifies us in this life.” (Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, bk. 3, ch. 11)

e. Weekly Sabbath replaced by perpetual Sabbath in Christ

“But as to [the Jews’] scrupulosity concerning meats, their superstition as respects the Sabbaths, their boasting about circumcision, and their fancies about fasting and the new moons, which are utterly ridiculous and unworthy of notice¹²², I do not think you require to learn anything of me. For...to speak falsely of God, as if he forbid us to do what is good on the Sabbath days, how is this not impious?” (Anonymous, *Letter to Diognetus*, ch. 4)

“If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by him and his death...how shall we be able to live apart from him?” (Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* [shorter version], ch. 9)

¹²² *The Letter to Diognetus* is a very early letter, possibly even late 1st century, which was written by someone with no familiarity with either the Old or New Testaments, even though he was obviously very familiar with Christian practices. Thus, his arguments are based on reason and not Scripture. However, his lack of Scriptural knowledge makes this anonymous author all the more of a testimony of Christian practice, because these are obviously not his Scriptural interpretations but his defense of Christianity as it was practiced in his day.

“‘Incense is a vain abomination to me, and your new moons and Sabbaths I cannot endure’ (Is. 1:14). He has therefore abolished these things that the new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is without the yoke of necessity, might not have a man-made oblation.” (*Letter of Barnabas*¹²³, ch. 2)

“Moreover, he says, ‘You shall sanctify [the Sabbath] with pure hands and a pure heart.’ If, therefore, anyone can now sanctify the day which God has sanctified except he is pure in heart in all things, we are deceived. Behold, therefore, certainly one properly resting sanctifies it, when we ourselves, having received the promise, wickedness no longer existing, and all things having been made new by the Lord, shall be able to work righteousness. Then we shall be sanctified, having first been sanctified ourselves. Further, he says to them, ‘Your new moons and your Sabbath I cannot endure’ (Is. 1:13). You perceive how he speaks. Your present Sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but that is acceptable which I have made, when, giving rest to all things, I shall make a beginning of the eighth day, that is, the beginning of another world. Therefore, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day on which Jesus rose again from the dead.” (ibid., ch. 15)

“The new law requires you to keep perpetual Sabbath, and you, because you are idle for one day, suppose you are pious, not discerning why this has been commanded you...The Lord our God does not take pleasure in such observances. If there is any perjured person or thief among you, let him cease to be so; if any adulterer, let him repent. Then he has kept the sweet and true Sabbaths of God.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 12)

“For we too would observe fleshly circumcision, the Sabbaths, and, in short, all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you; namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts.” (ibid., ch. 18)

“The command of circumcision, again, bidding them always circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision...through him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath, our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all days, is called, however, the eighth.” (ibid., ch. 41)

“If some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe such institutions as were given by Moses, from which they expect some virtue, but which we believe were appointed by reason of the hardness of people’s hearts, along with their hope in this Christ...yet choose to live with the Christians and with the faithful...not inducing them either to be circumcised like themselves or to keep the Sabbath or to observe any other such ceremonies, then I hold that we ought to join ourselves to such and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brothers.” (ibid., ch. 47)

¹²³ *The Letter of Barnabas* was considered Scripture by some in the 2nd century. While this does not make it Scripture to us, it does prove that what *The Letter of Barnabas* teaches represents what was taught in the united 2nd century church, which boasted of its unity across the world in basic doctrines. Despite numerous books claiming that the Pre-Nicene church kept the Sabbath and their obscure and out of context quotes, there is universal agreement among the early Christian writers that Christians were to observe a perpetual Sabbath of rest in Christ and holiness of life.

“This same does Ezekiel the prophet say with regard to the Sabbaths, ‘Also I gave them my Sabbaths to be a sign between me and them...’ (Ezek. 20:12). These things, then, were given for a sign, but the signs were not...unmeaning nor to no purpose...but the circumcision after the flesh typified that after the Spirit...The Sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God’s service....Moreover, the Sabbath of God, that is, the kingdom, was...indicated by created things. In which [kingdom] the man who shall have persevered in serving God shall, in a state of rest, partake of God’s table.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 4, ch. 16, par. 1)

“When he had repudiated holocausts, sacrifices, oblations, and likewise the new moons, Sabbaths, and festivals and all the rest of the services accompanying these, he continues, exhorting them to what pertained to salvation, ‘Wash you, make you clean, take away wickedness from before my eyes; cease from your evil ways, learn to do well...and come, let us reason together’ (Is. 1:11).” (ibid., bk. 4, ch. 17, par. 1)

“The Lord...underwent his sufferings upon the day preceding the Sabbath, that is, the sixth day of creation, on which day man was created, thus granting him a second creation by means of his suffering, which is that creation out of death [my note: and thus the eighth day is a new creation, as Justin and Barnabas also said]. (ibid., bk. 5, ch. 23, par. 2)¹²⁴

4. They saw themselves as the new, spiritual Israel

“Let us then draw near to him...who has made us partakers in the blessing of his elect. For thus it is written, ‘When the Most High divided the nations...he fixed the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God. His people Jacob became the portion of the Lord and Israel the lot of his inheritance’ (Deut. 32:8,9). And in another place it says, ‘Behold, the Lord takes to himself a nation out of the midst of the nations...and from that nation shall come forth the Most Holy’ (apparently Num. 18:27 & 2 Chr. 31:14).” (Church of Rome, *First Clement*, ch. 29)

“For the true spiritual Israel and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham...are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 11)

“‘What then?’ says Trypho. ‘Are you Israel?’...I continued, ‘Again in Isaiah, if you have ears to hear it, God, speaking of Christ in parable, calls him Jacob and Israel...As therefore from the one man Jacob, who was surnamed Israel, all your nation has been called Jacob and Israel, so we from Christ—who begat us to God, like Jacob, Israel, Judah, Joseph, and David—are called and are the true sons of God and keep the commandments of God.’” (ibid., ch. 124)

“And when Scripture says, ‘I am the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, who has made known Israel your King’ (Is. 43:15), will you not understand that truly Christ is the everlasting King? For you are aware that Jacob the son of Isaac was never a king....As, therefore, Christ is the Israel and the Jacob, even so we, who have been quarried out of

¹²⁴ See note 7

the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelite race....Understand, therefore, that the seed of Jacob now referred to is something else and not, as may be supposed, spoken of your people. For it is not possible for the seed of Jacob to leave an entrance for the descendants of Jacob or for [God] to have accepted the very same persons whom he had reproached as unfit for his inheritance and promise it to them again.” (ibid., ch. 135)

“The Lord was not known by the people who erred, who were not circumcised in understanding, whose darkness was not enlightened, who did not know God, denied the Lord, forfeited the place of true Israel, persecuted God, [and] hoped to reduce the Word to a disgrace.” (Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, bk. 2, ch. 8)

Chapter VIII. Rise of Heresies

1. These were all gnostic, no catholic (i.e., universal or orthodox) splits until late 2nd century.
2. Montanists – 1st major split, late 2nd century
3. Novationists – 2nd major split, mid 3rd century
4. Minor splits and controversies
 - a. Quartodeciman Controversy – argument over the date to celebrate Passover (now called Easter in modern times)

1. Two Roman bishops tried to excommunicate the whole eastern church (Asia minor) for celebrating it on Sunday rather than on Nisan 14, the actual day of Passover.

2. They were restrained first by Polycarp in the early 1st century, and then by Irenaeus, Polycarp’s disciple, in the late 1st century.

- b. Hippolytus, AD 225 (known to the Roman Catholics as the anti-pope, he split the church of Rome because he didn’t like the new bishop)

- c. Trinity issues – didn’t split church, just controversy within church

1. Tertullian testifies that the relationship between the Father and the Son was so hard to understand that the majority of the unlearned in the church were prone to believing in modalism, the doctrine that the Father and the Son were the same person (re: Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 3)

2. Arius’ brand new doctrine, that the Son was a creation of the Father, almost split the church in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries. This split was mediated—and solved—by Constantine by means of the Council of Nicea, which affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity as had been taught in all the early writings. His solution, however, united the church with the government and ruined Christianity (see point E below).

3. Most history books claim that the doctrine of the Trinity developed over time. I dispute this. Having read all the 2nd century Christian writings, most of them several times, I find their Trinity doctrine to universally match Nicea. In fact, Eusebius, often charged with heresy for his letter explaining the Creed of Nicea, uses all the same Scriptures and arguments used by 2nd and 3rd century writers. Justin, Eusebius and Tertullian all testify that their doctrine of the Trinity was taught to the church by the

apostles. I believe that Clement of Alexandria, Origen's teacher, claims the same, but I am not as familiar with his writings.

Chapter IX. Nicea – controversy within church that completely changed the church

I am deeply saddened that we will not have time at this conference to cover this subject. The story of the Council of Nicea is absolutely fascinating. It addresses exactly what the problems led to the fall of the church as a united and holy body, and it gives great insight into the causes of the disunity and unholiness of later Christianity, including the Christianity of today.

1. The histories of Sozomen and Socrates, written around A.D. 375, contrasted with the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, written in AD 323, shows what a great difference there was in the church before and after the Council of Nicea. While Eusebius' is a history of the formation of the church, of holiness and boldness in the face of persecution, of great men, and of doctrinal controversies, Sozomen and Socrates wrote a history of violence, intrigue, politics, corruption, and bloodshed.

2. While the 2nd century and early 3rd century writers testify of a church that is united, holy, and powerful, the mid and late 3rd century writers were forced to regularly exhort half-hearted Christians and to complain about worldliness.

a. I attribute this to a church that was much larger, had more people falling away, and that dealt with this falling away with rules and doctrines rather than with holiness and life.

b. The difference is most notable in the writings that address persecution. 2nd century writers spoke of persecution often, but only 3rd century writers had to deal with the issue of what to do with those who lapsed during persecution but wanted back in when persecution ended. Denying Christ or sacrificing to pagan gods under persecution was rare in the 2nd century but common in the 3rd.

Chapter X: Why you should be excited about reading early Church writings

“Henceforth, you Greeks, come and partake of incomparable wisdom, be instructed by the divine Word, and acquaint yourselves with the King immortal. Do not recognize those men as heroes who slaughter whole nations. For our own Ruler, the divine Word, who even now constantly aids us, does not desire strength of body and beauty of feature, nor yet the high spirit of earth's nobility, but a pure soul, fortified by holiness and the watchwords of our King, holy actions. For through the Word power passes into the soul.

O trumpet of peace to the soul that is at war!
O weapon that puts to flight terrible passions!
O instruction that quenches the innate fire of the soul!
The Word exercises an influence that does not make poets
It does not equip philosophers nor skilled orators
But by its instruction it makes mortals immortal, mortals gods
And from the earth transports them to the realms above Olympus

Come, be taught
 Become as I am, for I too was as you are
 These have conquered me:
 The divinity of instruction and the power of the Word
 For as a skilled serpent charmer lures the terrible reptile from its den
 And causes it to flee
 So the Word drives the fearful passions of our sensual nature
 from the very recesses of the soul
 First driving forth lust, from which every ill is begotten
 hatreds, strife, envy, jealousy, anger, and such like
 Lust being once banished, the soul becomes calm and serene
 And being set free from the ills in which it was sunk up to its neck
 It returns to him who made it
 For it is right that it be restored to the state whence it departed
 Whence every soul was or is”

-Justin Martyr, *The Discourse to the Greeks*, ch. 5

A. Exhortation and edification – this is how we, too, wish to live

“‘Sir, these commandments are great, good, glorious, and fitted to gladden the heart of the man who can perform them, but I do not know if these commandments can be kept by man, because they are exceedingly hard.’ [The angel] answered me, ‘If you lay it down as certain that they can be kept, then you will easily keep them, and they will not be hard. But if you come to imagine that they cannot be kept by man, then you will not keep them. Now I say to you that if you do not keep them, but neglect them, you will not be saved, nor your children, nor your house, since you have already determined for yourself that these commandments cannot be kept by man....O fool, senseless and doubting! Don’t you perceive how great the glory of God is...in that he created the world for man, subjected all creation to him, and gave him power to rule over everything under heaven? If, then, man is the lord of the creatures of God and rules over all, is he not able to be lord also of these commandments? For...the man who has the Lord in his heart can also be lord of all, and of every one of these commandments. But to those who have the Lord only on their lips, but their hearts hardened, and who are far from the Lord, the commandments are hard and difficult.’” (Hermas, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, bk. 2, ch. 12, par. 3-4)

“[Trypho, a Jew, speaking:] I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and so great that I suspect no one can keep them, for I have carefully read them.... [Justin’s answer:] God proclaimed a new covenant which was to be instituted...We see and are persuaded that men approach God, leaving their idols and other unrighteousness, through the name of him who was crucified, Jesus Christ, and abide by their confession to death, maintaining piety. Moreover, by the works and by the attendant miracles, it is possible for all to understand that he is the new law, the new covenant, and the expectation of those who out of every people wait for the good things of God....By reason, therefore, of the laver of repentance and knowledge of God...we have believed and testify that the very baptism which he announced is alone able to purify those who have repented, and this is the water of life....For what is the use of that baptism which cleanses the flesh and body alone? Baptize the soul from wrath and from covetousness, from envy, and from hatred, and, lo, the body is pure!” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chs. 10,11,14)

“I have shown that Christ is often called a Stone in parable...Blessed therefore are we who have been circumcised the second time with knives of stone. For your first circumcision was and is performed by iron instruments, for you remain hard-hearted, but our circumcision, which is the second, having been instituted after yours, circumcises us from idolatry and from absolutely every kind of wickedness by sharp stones—by the words of the apostles of the cornerstone cut out without hands. Our hearts are thus circumcised from evil, so that we are happy to die for the name of the good Rock, which causes living water to burst forth for the hearts of those who by him have loved the Father of all.” (ibid., ch. 114)

B. Learning (re: whole of this outline)

“Unravel the meaning of ‘what the Spirit says to the churches.’ He imputes to the Ephesians ‘forsaken love’...upbraids the Laodiceans for trusting to their riches; and yet gives them all general admonitions to repentance—with threats it is true, but he would not utter divine threats to one *unrepentant* if he did not forgive the repentant.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Tertullian, *On Repentance*, ch. 8

Glossary

Bishop: Although some first century churches had several elder/bishops, through most of the 2nd century each church had just one bishop who led along with a group of elders. The Greek term was *episkopos*, and is often translated overseer.

Catholic: Today this is usually a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. In the early church, however, “catholic” simply meant “universal,” and it was used to distinguish the apostolic churches from the gnostics and other groups that had split off, such as the Montanists and Novatianists, who were the only divisions of the Pre-Nicene church.

Novatian/Novatianists: From A.D. 253-258 an empire-wide persecution took place under the emperor Valerian. Although few Christians defected during persecution in the 2nd century, larger churches and a more doctrinally-based faith had led to some coldness in the 3rd century. Many Christians lapsed during the Valerian persecution, and when it was over many wanted readmittance. It was decided after much debate to allow lapsed Christians to come back into the church after a time of penitence. Novatian was a Roman Christian who did not agree with this, and he formed his own church in Rome with himself as bishop. Novatian churches spread and prospered for a century, but eventually merged back into the catholic churches.

Pre-Nicene: The era between the end of the apostolic era, circa A.D. 70, and the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.