

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #27

Second Century Church Overseers

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When the last apostle of Jesus, John the Evangelist, died at Patmos toward the end of the first century, Christianity and the church of God was left in the hands of local overseers, generally called bishops. The Greek biblical term used is “episcopos,” Strong’s #1985.

These first bishops of the church who were not apostles, sometimes called the Anti-Nicene Church Fathers (meaning the church leaders BEFORE the Council of Nicea held in 325AD), knew one or more apostles personally. Often they were the apostles traveling companions, disciples and assistants in the work of these church leaders.

At least one early bishop had even known Jesus. That was James the Just, the oldest brother, or half-brother, of Jesus. James apparently became not only the bishop of the church in Jerusalem but he headed its Council of Elders which included the Apostles Peter and John. Peter, John and James are characterized as the pillars of the early church by Paul in Gal. 2: 9.

The exact meaning of this word “episcopos,” and how it relates to other Biblical terms such as elder, apostle, evangelist, pastor and teacher, and how men got such titles or offices in the spiritual church body of believers, is in itself a interesting and lengthy study. Suffice it to say that Jesus never used this word in Scripture and also that no person is identified by name in the Bible as a bishop of any particular church!

If you think the apostle Peter was the first bishop of Rome, or perhaps even the first “Pope” of the Roman Catholic Church, you did not get that idea from the Bible. The reality is that the pertinent information concerning the continued growth, doctrine and leadership of the church after the death of the Apostle John is necessarily found in non-Biblical documents.

It is because of this fact that this is the first of the 52-week *Lord of the Sabbath* Program series without any scriptures quoted to support what is preached. I am now relying on the understandings and writings of men, hopefully relying on the Holy Spirit of God, to make observations about how the practice of Sabbath keeping was changed to Sunday-keeping. What I discovered was not comforting. I see a church that rather quickly abandons many of the teachings or doctrines of the apostles, including keeping the weekly Sabbath and the Feasts of the Lord. The “Church Fathers” come up with new ways to worship God.

However, it is clear from the Bible that there were people known as bishops holding that kind of office or position or title in the church according to Paul. We can see this in the greeting in his letter written to the Philippians where he addresses it to “bishops” in Philippi. This letter was apparently written in the period of 60-67 AD. So, I will assume there was in each major city some recognized church leaders or elders, whether they be a

pastor of a single, reasonably large congregation, or perhaps even an overseer of a number of such pastors throughout a national territory, an ethnic region or city.

So, who were these bishops of the church as the second century begins? Let's start with the city where the church began: Jerusalem. We do know from the Bible that after the murder of Stephen, who was a Hellenist Jew filled with the Holy Spirit, at the desire of his own countrymen, many disciples fled Jerusalem in fear in 33 AD, except for the apostles.

For example, we see evidence of Peter and Paul visiting Jerusalem off and on until Paul's arrest there in about 57 AD. After this event, the Bible describes nothing more of events in Jerusalem. It does not mention either the Jewish rebellion that began in about 66 AD or its culmination with the destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70 AD. I am surprised that this is NOT mentioned in any books of the Bible, especially those which were supposedly written AFTER this major event that was seemingly prophesied by Jesus to occur. I cannot explain this. If you have an explanation for this, please contact me.

However, the Jewish historian Josephus, who was a general for the Jews in this uprising against Rome, was personally aware of the destruction of much of the holy city. In his book, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, he mentions Jesus. Believe it or not, there are Jews today who insist there is no document outside the Bible itself that even recognizes the existence of Jesus. Yet, here is a non-Christian, a Jew, who does. Go figure!

Josephus, and other early Church Fathers, write that the remaining Christians in Jerusalem fled safely before the siege to Pella (a Greek name) in the "free" territory of Decapolis beyond the Jordan to the east and outside the land of Israel. This town took its then current name from the birthplace of Alexander the Great.

One early writer says that the leader of the band of Christians fleeing from Jerusalem included James the Just, Bishop of Jerusalem. It is certainly possible that James was still alive at that time. Others have suggested the group merely took his bones with them when they fled to Pella. They claim the Pharisees demanded James stand at the top of the Temple wall and deny to the crowd of people gathered for the Passover (including Jews and Gentiles) that Jesus was not the Messiah.

When James instead proclaimed that Jesus now sat at the right hand of God in heaven, they threw him down from the wall but he did not die. He rose to his knees and prayed that God forgive them. An enraged Jew, one who dyed cloth as a trade, flung his staff used for wringing the dyed cloth at James which killed him. James was buried there and a memorial was built to his memory near the Temple.

Not long after the death of James the Just, Vespasian came to put down the Jewish uprising. So, it does appear that a new bishop led the Christians safely out of Jerusalem before the destruction of the city and the Temple.

Hegesippus, born about 110 AD, an early chronicler of Church history, in about 170 AD,

wrote that Symeon, son of Clopas, when 120 years of age, suffered martyrdom under Emperor Trajan. Symeon, reportedly, was a son of the Lord's uncle, and had been bishop in Jerusalem after James the Just. Trajan ruled, following Domitian and a short reign of Nerva, during the end of the first century. Trajan also persecuted Christians, apparently including the Church at Pella, which, by that time, had Symeon as its bishop.

Hegesippus was born in Jerusalem. He was a Jew who converted to Christianity as an adult. He visited Corinth briefly while on his way to Rome where he lived twenty years and researched the early church. In later years he retired to Jerusalem where he died about 180 AD.

Hegesippus was the first known person to trace and record the succession of the bishops of Rome from Saint Peter to his own day. Considered the father of ecclesiastical history; little of his writings have survived, but he was highly recommended by other early church writers including Eusebius and Jerome. Hegesippus made it clear that he found Corinth still abiding by the doctrines of the apostles, but in many regions, false teachers were springing up and teaching their own doctrine.

This is relevant because it tends to confirm that Corinth was still keeping the doctrines taught by Paul, including the weekly Sabbath assembly and the Feasts of the LORD, such as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, about which Paul had earlier corrected their practice.

The early group of Christians in and around Jerusalem and Judea was also known as the Nazarene sect of Judaism. "Nazarenes" was a name used for Jews who accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah BEFORE they were first called "Christians" by others in Antioch.

While accepting Jesus as Messiah, Nazarenes were known for being very zealous for the law of God given to Moses. Some writers refer to those Christians in Pella as Ebionites after a leader (perhaps a successor to James as Bishop) named Ebion. There is no information of the church at Pella ever moving. There are no preserved letters from their time in Pella. They appear to still have a presence well into the third century but appear to have kept to themselves and did not influence any major known events in the history of the church.

There are groups today practicing Nazarene Judaism and claiming to follow this first century group as a true, unpolluted church of Jesus, the Christ. Whether this is true or not, they do keep both the weekly and annual Sabbaths of the Lord.

About 60 years after the destruction of the Temple, about the year 130 AD, Emperor Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem, calling it Aelia Capitolina (after himself - Aelius Hadrian). He erected a temple to Jupiter there. A special tax was levied on the Jews to pay for the upkeep of the pagan temple Jupiter Capitolinus. Jerusalem was back on the maps of the world, but it was no longer the holy city of God.

By 135 AD another Jewish rebellion began, this one led by Bar-Cocheba. According to

Justin, "In the recent Jewish war, Bar-Cocheba ...ordered that only the Christians should be subjected to dreadful torments, unless they renounced and blasphemed Jesus Christ." By 136 AD there was another conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. More than 500,000 Jews were put to the sword. Emperor Hadrian then forbade Jews to return to Jerusalem from where they had been dispersed over the earth.

Another major example of bishops of the Church after the apostles died out are the bishops of Asia Minor. This would include the "seven churches" to which the Book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John who seemed to be their overseer.

Among the key names of bishops from Asia Minor who had further impact on the growing church, are Polycarp (70-155AD, a Bishop of Smyrna) and Polycrates (130-196 AD, a Bishop of Ephesus).

Many see Bishop Polycarp as one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Christianity. He reputedly was a student of the Apostle John and bridged the period of the time of the apostles to the time of the first non-apostolic church fathers. We have a letter written by Polycarp to the church at Philippi warning against materialism and how to handle financial dishonesty that was creeping into the church. He wrote other letters to neighboring church bodies but no copies have survived. He is known for addressing the Gnostic heresies that began overturning many doctrines of the apostles.

Polycarp visited Rome towards the end of his life, to consult with Pope Anicetus of Rome over the "Quartodecimian" controversy. This dispute was over when "Easter" should be celebrated. The Christians of the east (like Polycarp) celebrated it on the 14th of Nisan, the day of the Jewish Passover, regardless of what day of the week it fell. While those in the west celebrated it on the first Sunday after the Jewish Passover. Upon his return Polycarp was arrested and after refusing to recant his faith was burnt to death. The account of his martyrdom is preserved in the second century *Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

Polycarp may be best known for his martyred death which is well documented and involves reported miracles reminiscent of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego dancing in the fiery furnace. What had Polycarp done to deserve death? He refused to acknowledge Caesar as Lord! He responded, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

It is about this time in history, almost 100 years after Jesus rose from the dead, that we first begin to see Sunday becoming a day of religious celebration in some churches. Here, we see it coming up in the celebration of the Lord's resurrection and the Lord's Supper. As we will see in the next program, this preceded the change to Sunday as the weekly day of the Lord for rest and worship for Christians.

I am going to turn now to the other main region of the church, Rome, the capital of the Empire. We know from the Bible that Paul goes to Rome to defend himself against charges brought by the Jews at Jerusalem against him. It is not clear from the Bible that Peter goes to Rome, but non-Biblical writings suggest that he did.

Were Peter and Paul both in Rome at the same time to found what is called the Roman Catholic Church? I have not seen any convincing proof of that. The Bible does not teach it. It appears that Peter may have gone to Rome before Paul and was martyred there (supposedly crucified like Christ but upside down at Peter's own request for not being worthy to die as his Lord did) about 64 AD, having spent only a year or so in Rome. Recall that Nero blamed the great fire of Rome of 64 AD on the Christians. If Peter was there at that time, it would not be difficult to understand why Nero would seek Peter's death that very same year.

So, Peter may have already been dead when Paul arrives in Rome for his second trial in about 65 AD. And, Paul may have been in Rome about 60 AD for his first trial and his imprisonment until released in 63 AD. It is possible that Paul left before Peter arrived in Rome. In any event, when Paul is brought back to Rome as a prisoner about 65 AD, he is eventually beheaded there by Nero in 67 or 68 AD.

So, who was the first bishop of Rome? Was it Peter? When did Peter become the Bishop of the church and on whose authority? Some say Peter was the first Pope and Bishop of Rome. Some writers believe that Peter served in that capacity for twenty-five years. Others think it was a short time of less than a couple of years.

I will not try to resolve that, one way or another, as it is not really germane to my subject. I have no doubt that Peter was a Sabbath and Holy Day keeper until the day he died, just like the Apostles Paul and John were. And, there is no agreement, and little information, available on the year or place Peter was crucified or where he was buried originally and where he rests in peace today. Are you surprised about this uncertainty concerning Peter and the Popes of Rome? I surely was.

One possibility was that after Paul died, a man named Linus, who Paul mentions in 2 Timothy 4: 21, actually became the first, non-apostle, bishop of the church at Rome. Linus seems to have been succeeded by Bishop Anacletus who is not mentioned in the Bible. About 90-100 AD, Clement of Rome, a disciple of Peter, seems to be its bishop and is referred to as Pope Clement by modern writers. Many believe that Clement was anointed or ordained by Peter, but that too is not a well-documented fact.

However, we have two letters written by Bishop Clement to the church at Corinth. The second has a fragment missing. In them Clement is advising the church body at Corinth to reinstate their elders whom they had removed. Clement pleaded for a type of apostolic succession and a hierarchy of "episcopos" over its "presbyters" who were their "elders" and worked as local pastors.

In Chapter XVIII of the first letter, verse 14, Clement advises the church at Corinth to do everything orderly as the only way to please God and writes:

"And particularly, that we perform our offerings and service to God, at their appointed seasons: for these he has commanded be done, not rashly and

disorderly, but in certain determinate times and hours.”

I can't tell whether this is in reference to the seasonal Feasts of the LORD, but it very well might be as Paul had earlier criticized their celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But, there is still no sign of any change in the Day of the Lord or of the Sabbath being changed to Sunday.

I have also not been able to tell from the information I found of whether Clement is writing in a response to a request from Corinth for guidance, is offering unsolicited but heartfelt advice to a church in leadership turmoil, or he is already, at the start of the second century, of the opinion that all the churches in the Empire should comply with the rules of the Bishop of Rome.

From the Roman Catholic Encyclopedia you can get a list of Popes (Bishops of Rome) and their terms in office. You might be surprised to learn that there were thirteen Popes (excluding Peter) over the 170 or so years after the resurrection of Jesus through end of the second century. You might also be surprised by how little is known about the earliest “Bishops” in Rome, and what they did while in office, including Peter!

As time seems to be flying by, not only from the second century of the church, but on this program, I will continue next Sabbath with the fascinating interplay between the Bishops of Asia Minor and the Bishops of Rome heading into the third century. You will then see how and why the seeds of the change in the appointed times of worship from the Jews to the Christians were sown and began taking root in the third century.

With the balance of time for today, allow me to just mention one other key second century Bishop on whom we must rely to try to get a picture of how the doctrines of the apostles began to change and how more and more false prophets, teachers and doctrines crept into an increasingly organized and supposedly “universal” church of Jesus. This is exactly what Paul prophesied would happen.

Let's consider the church at Antioch, Syria where the Apostle Paul spent a considerable amount of time. First, we know that after the death of Stephen, according to Acts 11, many Jewish believers fled Jerusalem heading as far north as Phoenicia (which is north of Galilee in what would now be Lebanon), the island of Cyprus in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, and to Antioch in Syria along the sea.

These disciples of Jesus initially told the gospel only to the Jews in these places. Wasn't this the command of Jesus? We then see that Christians from Cyprus and from Cyrene (a Greek city on the coast of northern Africa, go to preach the gospel in Antioch to GENTILES. Indeed, it was not ONLY Paul who preached the good news of the coming Kingdom of God to the Gentiles. When the church at Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to find Saul. He does so and also brings Saul back to Antioch.

During Paul's time, Antioch was the third largest city in the Empire with over 200,000 inhabitants. No city other than Jerusalem is so intimately connected to the apostolic

church. Peter visited there too. The first Gentile church was formed at Antioch. The brethren of Jesus were first called 'Christians' there. Paul began all three of his missionary journeys from Antioch.

The most noted Bishop of Antioch is Ignatius who died in 107 AD. Tradition holds that Ignatius was a disciple of the apostle John and the second or third Bishop of the church at Antioch. During the ninth year of Emperor Trajan, Ignatius was brought before the emperor for refusing to sacrifice to their idols. Ignatius firmly refused to renounce Christ, and confessed, "there is but one God, who made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all that are in them; and one Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, whose kingdom may I enjoy." Trajan commanded that Ignatius be taken to Rome to be "devoured by the beasts, for the gratification of the people."

While traveling to Rome under guard Ignatius composed seven letters to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrneans and lastly to Polycarp. We have copies of these letters but there are several versions in different languages.

Polycarp, another disciple of the apostle John from Asia Minor, later mentioned the death of Ignatius in his letter to the Philippians as an example of obedience and patience. He also recommends to them the letters written by Ignatius "for they treat faith and patience, and all things that tend to edification in our Lord." I have read them all and they really do suggest just that. However, there is no evidence in those letters which indicate to me that a teaching against Sabbath-keeping was part of Ignatius' "Christian" understanding.

What I have tried to convey in this program is that after the apostles had died, the churches established by the apostles, from Africa to Rome, were run for almost two CENTURIES by its highest ranking local elder whom we have been calling a Bishop.

Please consider what this must have been like. These geographically separated Bishops were expected to lead and govern the church in their region pretty much on their own. Many had known no more than one of the apostles. Many had not met any other Bishop.

Compare this to the apostles who not only had Jesus as their sole, full-time teacher for about three years, but who knew one another intimately. When a serious church issue came up, they were able to convene in a council (like the Jerusalem Council) less than 20 years after Jesus had risen from the dead to heaven.

Next Sabbath we will move into the third century and look at a couple of the earliest and strongest disagreements and challenges in the church and how they were handled. And, we will get specific on how the issue of whether Gentile Christians should keep the Sabbath was finally resolved. The facts knocked me on my ear. It is a story every person who respects the Ten Commandments of God written by the very finger of God will want to learn as they grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.