

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #28

Third Century Church Heresies and Edicts

Kenny Kitzke

LawstSheep Ministries

It was a turbulent time for the church of God after John the Evangelist, the last of the apostles, died toward the end of the first century. The church was left in the hands of bishops, or overseers, called in the Greek, “episcopos,” in all the major cities and regions throughout the Roman Empire.

Last Sabbath, I discussed four key bishops and the churches that they led during the first century which were in Jerusalem, Asia Minor, Rome and Antioch, Syria. There were others such as the church and bishops from Alexandria, Egypt and from Africa, supposedly planted by the Apostle Mark, which I will only mention briefly today.

All these bishops and their successors played a role in the early church of God. The known history is fascinating despite some contradictory written accounts by various church leaders and early church historians written many decades later. Winds of challenge from outside the church and winds of dissension and competition within the church clearly began to blow on those who named Jesus as Lord.

For example, non-believing Jews pressured those who accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah. There was a wall of separation between them that continues to this very day between Jews and Christians, and between the religious beliefs and practices of Judaism and Christianity.

And, just as clear is the pressure on the early church by pagans with no religion, and those not of Jewish or Christian religions, which also continues to the present time. The Biblical term used in the New Testament for such people and nations is Greeks or Gentiles.

A distinguishing gospel being preached by the early church was about Jesus as the Christ and about His crucifixion and resurrection. The Apostle Paul told us in 1 Cor. 1: 22-23 what the effect of that preaching would be on non-believers:

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,

Praise God! Look at His wisdom! For this message of Jesus crucified as our Passover Lamb is still being preached, yet remains a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks and pagans even to this day just as Paul was inspired to write. We could fill a weekly program for a year discussing the heresies of both the Gnostics and the Jews.

But, my focus is on how the believers in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of Israel, changed to a first-day Sunday keeping Church. How did they quit keeping the word of

God, following Him and keeping the custom and practice of the apostles, regarding the seventh-day Sabbath even long after Christ's ascension?

My friends, this was an inside job. It was done by false teachers within the church who had crept into the very body of Christ and began to teach heresies contrary to the teachings and doctrines of the apostles. This also was prophesied by Peter in 2 Pet. 2: 1:

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them,

Who do they deny? They deny the Lord of the Sabbath who bought their salvation with His sacrificial death as our Passover Lamb! Men in the church falsely make Him to be the Lord of the first-day of the week: Sunday! That is a false teaching. Let's take a closer look at how and when this false doctrine came into being.

As we learned in the previous program, the church of God had its original leaders in Jerusalem. We see this in the famous Jerusalem Council of about 49 AD almost two decades after Jesus had ascended to the Father. We see James the Just, brother of our Lord, counseling Paul when he returns to Jerusalem about eight years later in 57 AD and is arrested. According to James, thousands of Jews were zealous for the law AND for Jesus. The Council leaders are obviously all Sabbath and holy day keepers and are guiding the church of God including Gentiles.

But, we see this Church at Jerusalem wane in power and importance when it flees to Pella after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD by Titus. By 135 AD, Emperor Hadrian completely destroys Jerusalem as the city of God. He drives the remaining Jews out, whether believers or not, and bans their religious customs, especially Sabbath-keeping.

In Jerusalem a new Christian church is eventually established reflecting few of the historical doctrines of the church began at Jerusalem on the LORD'S Sabbath of Pentecost. We see this new Church eventually adopting the new view of Easter to replace the Passover and of Sunday to replace the Sabbath. But, history makes it clear that this Church was following these changes made by other Christian authorities rather than originating them.

So who led the change to Sunday keeping if it was not the established apostolic Church at Jerusalem? Was it the Church at Antioch? No. The most influential early bishop of Antioch was Ignatius who died about the same time as John. Ignatius did not start or encourage Sunday keeping. What he did do was to introduce another heresy. He taught a doctrine of the power of the bishop over the flock. This teaching led to a bishop of bishops, a type of Pope with human authority over the entire church of God controlling its beliefs and worship practices. Of course, we know from scripture that Jesus is the head of the church of God; not any one man or Pope.

For anyone preaching that Jesus built His church on Peter, on one apostle, one man, the

calling of the Jerusalem council should clearly expose this heresy. It was not in the minds of the apostles, much less Peter, of who had authority over the church.

The change toward Sunday was indeed led by the bishops of the Church at Rome. It was resisted for a time mainly by the churches of Asia Minor. These facts are well-documented in secular literature.

What happened in the Church of Rome cannot be separated from the government of the Roman Empire also headquartered there. Our Bible gives us a number of key events that show how the empire's attitude toward Christians and Jews began as neutral, turned negative and finally turned positive. I believe it is prophesied to turn negative again.

At the time of Jesus' ministry, and for most of the first three decades afterward, the government was quite tolerant toward the Jews and even to the budding sect of Judaism called Christians. It appears that Roman intellectuals were favorably intrigued by the Jewish beliefs. However, by the fourth decade, we find Emperor Claudius ordering that Jews be expelled from Rome as trouble-makers.

By the sixth decade, we find Emperor Nero blaming the Christians in Rome (mostly Gentiles) for the fire that consumed much of the city of Rome. Nero inflicted great persecution and torture on Christians to the pleasure of most citizens of Rome. Nero at the time was married to a Jewish princess. Even though the Jewish section of Rome was undamaged by the fire, which led some to suspect that the Jews started the fire, it was the Christians who Nero attacked. Recall that it was toward the end of the sixth decade AD when both the Apostles Peter and Paul were murdered in Rome by the government.

Supposedly, some Gentile Christians believed that the Jews had approached the government and pointed the blame for the fire toward them. Needless to say, the already existing animosity between Jews and Christians on religious belief grounds intensified. While the "Christians" were initially regarded by the world as a sect of Judaism, the Jews wanted nothing to do with these "traitors" to God and the Hebrew sons of Abraham.

Soon the rebellion of the Jews in Jerusalem against Rome, led by Barcokeba, found the government turning sharply against the Jews. Barcokeba also hated the Christians. By 70AD, Titus had put down the Jewish rebellion and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. It has been estimated that close to 600,000 Jews were killed or died as a result of that war.

It would not be long before contempt for Jews, and anything Jewish, including Sabbath keeping, permeated the government of Rome, the pagan citizens of Rome and now even the Gentile Christians and their bishops in the Empire. The fires of hatred in Rome toward the Jews were reinforced by the second round of Jewish rebellions and riots throughout the Empire about 133-135 AD. These rebellions were soundly put down by Emperor Hadrian.

Jews were then prohibited under the penalty of death from even entering the new Gentile

city of Aelia Capitolina that Hadrian established in place of Jerusalem. And, he outlawed the practice of Judaism and specifically the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath as holy. This period saw an explosion of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Secular writers and philosophers wrote many essays attacking the Jews both socially and theologically.

It is about this same time that we see the first historical mention of any Christians keeping Sunday instead of the Sabbath. The link is pretty clear, isn't it? The Sabbath was associated historically ONLY with the Jews and it NOW was outlawed in the Empire!

The Gentile Christian church not only wanted a different holy day than used by the Jews, they needed one to appease the government. And, the bishops of the Church at Rome began to reconcile themselves to the Roman Empire government, including changing some of the apostolic church doctrines and liturgy.

But, something as important as the Sabbath day within the church of God soon got connected, even if indirectly, with what would become the weekly holy day of Christianity. It was called the Quartodeciman Controversy concerning the celebration of Passover. You may have heard of it? The name comes from the Latin word for the fourteenth day of the month.

There were several major aspects of this controversy. One concerned the day of the celebration of Passover. The others concerned fasting and the symbolic Lord's last supper meal of remembrance using the bread and the wine, the symbols of the New or Renewed Covenant in His broken body and His shed blood. This is what some Christians call the sacrament of holy communion.

Of course, from the Feasts of the Lord given to Israel as described in Leviticus 23, and from the custom of Jesus and His apostles, the 14th day of the month called Abib, also called Nisan, the first month of a new year, was recognized as the day for slaying the Passover lamb. And, that lamb, along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, would be eaten that night, which on God's calendar would now be Abib 15, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

It was over this Passover liturgy issue that the bishops of the church truly began to butt heads. And, the main arguments were between the bishops of Asia Minor who had learned at the feet of the Apostle John and those bishops of Rome who had been without Peter or Paul to guide them for the last 35 to 100 years.

For example, the Passover practices were discussed by Polycarp, the aged and highly respected Bishop of Smyrna, when he visited Pope Anicetus, a fellow Syrian and Bishop of Rome, in about 155 AD. Though their observances of Passover already differed, they remained friends and simply agreed to disagree. Polycarp became an inspirational martyr of the church of God.

As time passed this Passover celebration liturgy became more confrontational. For the

churches and bishops of Asia Minor continued to keep the customs of the Apostle John and celebrated Passover on the 14th day of Abib, regardless of on what day of the week it occurred. However, the Church of Rome had begun to celebrate what would eventually be called Easter which would always be observed on a Sunday after the Jewish Passover.

So, we find Polycrates, the eighth Christian Bishop of Ephesus, writing to Pope Victor, Bishop of Rome, in about 196 AD explaining the custom of the Eastern churches to continue to keep Passover on the 14th day of Abib. Polycrates seems to have presided over a synod of Asiatic bishops which came together to consider this matter of the Paschal feast. I quote now, the words of Polycrates in his letter to Pope Victor:

As for us, then, we scrupulously observe the exact day, neither adding nor taking away. For in Asia great luminaries have gone to their rest, who shall rise again in the day of the coming of the Lord, when He cometh with glory from heaven and shall raise again all the saints. I speak of Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who is laid to rest at Hierapolis; and his two daughters, who arrived at old age unmarried; his other daughter also, who passed her life under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and reposes at Ephesus; John, moreover, who reclined on the Lord's bosom, and who became a priest wearing the mitre, and a witness and a teacher—he rests at Ephesus. Then there is Polycarp, both bishop and martyr at Smyrna; and Thraseas from Eumenia, both bishop and martyr, who rests at Smyrna. Why should I speak of Sagaris, bishop and martyr, who rests at Laodicea? of the blessed Papirius, moreover? and of Melito the eunuch, who performed all his actions under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and lies at Sardis, awaiting the visitation from heaven, when he shall rise again from the dead? These all kept the passover on the fourteenth. day of the month, in accordance with the Gospel, without ever deviating from it, but keeping to the rule of faith.

Moreover I also, Polycrates, who am the least of you all, in accordance with the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have succeeded—seven of my relatives were bishops, and I am the eighth, and my relatives always observed the day when the people put away the leaven—I myself, brethren, I say, who am sixty-five years old in the Lord, and have fallen in with the brethren in all parts of the world, and have read through all Holy Scripture, am not frightened at the things which are said to terrify us. For those who are greater than I have said, "We ought to obey God rather than men."...

I might also have made mention of the bishops associated with me, whom it was your own desire to have called together by me, and I called them together: whose names, if I were to write them down, would amount to a great number. These bishops, on coming to see me, unworthy as I am, signified their united approval of the letter, knowing that I wore these grey hairs not in vain, but have always regulated my conduct in obedience to the Lord Jesus.

You may have noted the hint of coercion perceived by Polycrates on the part of Pope Victor from North Africa to step in line with the Church of Rome, and other Churches of

the Empire's major cities, regarding Easter. Polycrates would not budge. Pope Victor was known for his intolerance for any lack of uniformity in the church. He was known to have excommunicated bishops who disagreed with him about the celebration of Easter and other matters concerning the nature of Jesus.

Irenaeus, a student of Polycrates, and eventually a Bishop in Lyon in Gaul, what we now call France, and other bishops of the church of God, so objected to this excommunication that apparently this attempt by Pope Victor failed. Irenaeus also tried to keep what became the Eastern and Western wings of the church of God in a common bond. There is even some evidence that to do so, at least parts of the Eastern Church still kept the Sabbath as a day of rest, but began to meet on Sunday for worship in the cause of unity.

Prior to Pope Victor, the mass in the Church of Rome was said in Greek. Pope Victor not only introduced the famous Latin mass celebrated for centuries, he was the first to began writing doctrine and theology in Latin. Victor was Pope at the end of the second century.

It is noteworthy to give some background on the African church and its bishops from where Victor came. Christianity had blossomed in Alexandria, Egypt. According to tradition, the Apostle Mark was the founder of the Christian Church in Africa. There is evidence that St. Mark preached the word of God there in the year 43 AD. He died a martyr in the year 63 in Alexandria and he is considered to be the proto martyr (first martyr) and missionary of Egypt and consequently of the entire African continent.

Mark preached the Gospel and converted many people to Christ, including Anianus, who was later consecrated Mark's bishop and who became his successor. Alexandria at that time was known as a cosmopolitan center. Until the founding of Constantinople, Alexandria was the second greatest city of Christianity after Rome. Even from those early years, the name Alexandria and Greek thought sounded loudly throughout the whole of the African continent and in many parts of Europe.

One of the famous Bishops of Alexandria was Clement, not to be confused with Clement of Rome. This Clement was from Athens and was a prolific author and teacher. He became director of the Catechetical School of Alexandria toward the end of the second century and served there through 203 AD.

Clement of Alexandria was a lay theologian closely connected to the doctrine of creation, which, of course, began on the first day of creation week. He felt there was much to learn from the Greek philosophers and their gnostic ideas. He connected the idea of the creation on the first day with the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week. This explains in part why this Alexandrian Bishop and other bishops from Africa like Victor had no problem with a Sunday holy day or a practice of observing Passover on Sunday.

So, it was also of little wonder why Pope Victor from North Africa had so little tolerance for the views of the church of Asia Minor who wanted to hold to the traditions and teachings of the Apostles regarding the Sabbath or the Passover.

It was during the reign of Pope Sixtus around 135 AD, about the same time of Emperor Hadrian, and a time of intense animosity for anything Jewish, that the practice of Easter Sunday seems to have begun in Rome. The practice obviously spread into Palestine itself through the new Greek Christian bishops in Aelia Capitolina.

Over time, the Eastern church of God lost power and influence in the Empire as prophesied in Revelation. As the third century rolled in, the Church of Rome gained power and influence over the beliefs and practices of the church of God.

But, back to the origin of Sunday keeping, we find that Justin Martyr was the first Bishop to describe Sunday service. Earlier, men like Ignatius and Barnabas (not the Barnabas who accompanied the Apostle Paul) had expressed displeasure with the “Jewish” Sabbath. But, in about the middle of the second century, over 100 years after Jesus had ascended to heaven, we find the first reference to Sunday as a day of worship in Rome.

In 140 AD, Justin Martyr wrote his *Apology* to the emperor Antonius Pius (138-61). He gave a description of the Sunday service and I quote:

“On the day called the Feast of the Sun, all who live in towns or in the country assemble in one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read as time permits. Then, when the reader has ended, the President instructs and encourages the people to practice the truths contained in the Scripture lections. Thereafter, we all stand up and offer prayers together ...

Now, I hope you noticed something Justin said. The day is called the Feast of the Sun. Is this the same as saying the Lord’s Sabbath Day had now become Sunday for Christians? Hardly. Well, if you want to conclude that somehow the Lord of the Sabbath intended to change the day to Sunday, I guess you can try to read this into the words of Justin.

But, there is another plausible explanation for what this Feast of the Sun was about. In the second century, one of the competing religions to Christianity in Rome was Mithraism. It was especially popular among the soldiers. By 307, Emperor Diocletian dedicated a temple to Mithra at Carnuntum on the Danube. Mithra was a sun god, and his faith emphasized loyalty to the emperor.

As the Roman emperors became Christians, Mithraism faded. Mithra had been the most important Persian god prior to Zoroaster's time. Mithric sanctuaries were caverns. Only men attended the ceremonies of this faith, and there was, apparently, no religious hierarchy as in the Church of Rome.

The leaders of the Church of Rome, as we get into the third century and have the claimed conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity, make it the official religion of the Empire. There is evidence that there was an effort made by the bishops to align some of the pagan religious celebrations such as the vernal equinox in the spring, and the fall equinox, with important events of Christianity such as the celebration of the death and birth of Jesus, respectively. The idea seemed to be to use the interest by citizens in the

pagan Roman holidays to help convert them to a new belief in Jesus as Savior.

Now we get to the final chapter in the institution of Sunday as the day of worship for Christians. Emperor Constantine convenes the Council of Nicea in 325 AD to bring the Roman Empire into uniformity concerning such things as the celebration of Easter and worship on Sunday. Following the recommendations of the Council, here is what Emperor Constantine writes to all the churches:

When the question arose concerning the most holy day of Easter, it was decreed by common consent to be expedient, that this festival should be celebrated on the same day by all, in every place. ... it seemed to every one a most unworthy thing that we should follow the custom of the Jews in the celebration of this most holy solemnity, who, polluted wretches! having stained their hands with a nefarious crime, are justly blinded in their minds. It is fit, therefore, that, rejecting the practice of this people, we should perpetuate to all future ages the celebration of this rite, in a more legitimate order, which we have kept from the first day of our Lord's passion even to the present times. Let us then have nothing in common with the most hostile rabble of the Jews. We have received another method from the Saviour. A more lawful and proper course is open to our most holy religion. In pursuing this course with a unanimous consent, let us withdraw ourselves, my much honored brethren, from that most odious fellowship. ... As it is necessary that this fault should be so amended that we may have nothing in common with the usage of these parricides and murderers of our Lord; and so that order is most convenient which is observed by all the churches of the West, as well as those of the southern and northern parts of the world, and also by some in the East, it is judged therefore to be most equitable and proper, and I pledged myself that this arrangement should meet your approbation, viz. that the custom which prevails with one consent in the city of Rome, and throughout all Italy, Africa and Egypt, in Spain, Gaul, Britain, Lybia, the whole of Greece, the diocese of Asia, Pontus and Cilicia, would be gladly embraced by your prudence, ... and to have no fellowship with the perjury of the Jews. And, to sum up the whole in a few words, it is agreeable to the common judgment of all, that the most holy feast of Easter should be celebrated on one and the same day.

Do these words of an Emperor of Rome, supposedly turned Christian by a vision in the sky, instituting new days for worship of God according to the Gentile Church at Rome trouble you as much as they trouble me?

I see my time is about up for this week. Next Sabbath, we will reflect on what we have learned about how the Sabbath became Sunday and why it may be important to the Lord of the Sabbath...none other than Jesus our Savior and our Lord! This is Brother Kenny praying that God will be gracious to you this week as you follow Him!