

Church History (Part 1): A.D. 31-325

History of the True Church

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The history of God's church is entirely different from what most people believe, and it's totally different from the history of this world's churches. The truly important aspects of its history are revealed in the first three chapters of Revelation. The one true Church of God began with Jesus Christ and the disciples whom He specially chose and trained to carry on the work He began. Through all ages, in every generation, that church has continued until a succeeding era has begun—all the way down through history, to today.

To start, I'm going to review some foundational background principles to church history. As we go through this hopefully short series on CHURCH HISTORY, there's a lot to be learned from it. This first episode of church history that we'll go through will be from 31 A.D. to 325 AD, and it's amazing how much it has to do with Passover. So, it is very timely at the same time.

Jesus said, "For many are called, but few chosen." That is a scripture that rings in our ears, and always has. We are very familiar with it. This saying appears in only two verses—Matthew 20:16 and Matthew 22:14. Both times it is said as a concluding remark of a principle to a parable. The first parable deals with God calling people to His work, and the second parable with God calling people to the Wedding Supper.

Look at the terms *called* and *chosen*. In the Greek, they are related. Called is *kletos*—meaning invited, appointed, or summoned. It is used in general, but on occasion the apostles used the term to refer to one who has been called to an office—for example, called to be an apostle. The word chosen is *eklektos* in the Greek—meaning called out, picked out, selected, and then (by implication) favored or choice. *Eklektos* is usually more specific in its usage than the word for "called." Sometimes it is translated elect—meaning one who is specifically picked out to the exclusion of others. So the word is either [translated] "chosen" or "elect" in the New Testament.

To illustrate the difference in their basic sense, what if you went to a store and chose all your shirts (or, all your shoes) to fill your closet. You like them all obviously, because you chose them. But one in particular is your favorite. All your shirts (or, all your shoes) are "called," but that favorite shirt (or, the favorite shoes) is "chosen."

We can see this illustration in the Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22. The king first sent his servants out to gather those who were invited, and they were not willing. Then he sent out other servants to invite them in, but they gave excuses; and they killed the servants who were out to invite everyone they saw. They brought in good and bad, until the hall was filled. So far, all we've seen here in this illustration are people being *called*. Then the king comes in, and he immediately begins evaluating the group. He sees one who does not have on a wedding garment, and he rejects him. This is the negative part of *chosen*.

At this point, what can we conclude? Well, calling is far more general. In our modern world,

Protestants think it's as simple as hearing the gospel preached. But John 6: 44 says that God prepares a person's mind to hear the truth. There is a work that goes on before a person is actually "called." The calling is a process. The qualifications for being *called* are fairly simple. God will call bad and good, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, or man and woman.

Once *called*, however, the choosing begins. It is nothing more than what Peter says in I Peter 4: 17: "Judgment must begin at the house of God." This is where things narrow down to *the few*. And as we go through church history, we'll notice that the term "the few," or "little," is a key phrase to God's people. So this narrows it down to the few. Few are willing to endure it and to make the effort to overcome, grow, and produce fruit. Even many who attend Sabbath services with God's chosen people may prove to be without the wedding garment and show, at last, that they were NOT the *chosen* of God—although they had been "called."

God is not limited to working with any particular political entity or group that is formed by man. Salvation is given on an individual basis to those whose faith is accompanied by works. Faith without works is a dead faith—a useless faith. Salvation cannot be earned. It is a gift from God. Nevertheless, God expects submission to His authority and fruit produced as a result of our using the Holy Spirit that He gives to us.

We have a huge part to play in *the choosing*. We have to put on the wedding garment and "the new man." This can only be done with the help of God's Holy Spirit. We have to *yield* to being molded into the image of God—*growing* in character, in grace, and in knowledge. This choosing is a joint effort. We work, and the Father works, and Jesus Christ works. There's a lot of work to be done. Our part is to show Him our faithfulness, loyalty, commitment and obedience. In doing so, we grow in the love of the Father.

God *calls* many, but He *selects* only a few. He makes His truth available generally; but, by comparison, only a few succeed in passing the "strait gate" and the "narrow way." (Those are very familiar terms from the New Testament.) So, tens of thousands of people—throughout the almost 2000 years of the true church's history—have been introduced to God truth and then gone back to religions of this world, or have formed their own personal religions.

A prime example of how easy it is for human beings to go back to 'what they came out of' is what we saw happen to our many friends and acquaintances—who seemed to know the truth, but went back to Sunday keeping (or even Christmas and Easter). And to this day, our minds are still baffled as to how they could have done such a thing. We found it near impossible to believe, but it was just a continuation of what has happened to tens of thousands of people who were called and didn't make their *call* and *election* sure throughout the history of the church.

There are certain trends in human nature that God's people tend to fall into, which show up more dramatically as a group—as a whole body, or as the church as a whole. If one individual is sinning, it doesn't necessarily show up in an obvious way in the church. But when many are committing the same sin, then the sin is obvious in the church body; and, if left uncorrected, it is eventually devastating to a human organization through which the Church of God may be working.

Laurence J. Peter, author of *The Peter Principle*, insightfully states: "History teaches us the mistakes we are going to make." (I'm sure he learned that the hard way, as we all do.) So

there's a lot we can look back on in the history [of the church] to see, in full and complete way, the major sins of those groups. It's wise, then, if we look at the history of God's church to see what mistakes we will want to avoid.

Several questions naturally arise when addressing the characteristics of the true Church of God through history. What sins have been apparent throughout the history of the church? Why does it seem that the church was unable to overcome those sins? What are the tendencies that have caused most attendees of the Church of God throughout its history to go into apostasy? Does the history of the Church of God repeat itself? These are some of the questions we'll be answering.

Before we begin what I'll call this "trek through church history," let me make this qualifying statement: In my research, I have used many different references (both theological and secular) in addition to God's written word, the Bible—references such as A History of the True Religion by Dugger and Dodd; the Ambassador College Correspondence Course; notes from the Ambassador College church history course taught by Ronald Kelly; the 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica; church history articles by Herbert Armstrong in the GOOD NEWS magazine; A True History of the True church by Herman Hoeh; as well as various commentaries and other sources as well.

As much as possible, I've referenced some works; but I've also tried not to disrupt the flow of history any more than was necessary throughout this series on church history. I do not consider this sermon (and those sermons that will follow) regarding CHURCH HISTORY to be my original work, but rather a presentation of the long hours of labor by others—to research the obscure records necessary to put together a reasonably accurate church history tradition for our edification and admonition as members of the true Church of God. I do hope to bring out valuable spiritual principles and cautions as we travel through history. This has been a very, very interesting study to go through, and see what the problems and the strengths were—of the church, as a whole.

Large gaps often appear in the historical records. Information is sometimes very sketchy. At other times, it is down right erroneous. The true followers of Jesus Christ were very often victimized. During some periods of history, what we know about them comes only from their adversaries. Sometimes the line of history is fine and uncertain. But there is a distinct line—a line that Jesus Christ has made sure was always there, because it is promised.

The premise from which I am going to present this history is that Jesus Christ Himself clearly prophesied: "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades (that is, the grave or death) shall not prevail against it." That church, foretold by Jesus, would never be extinguished. Christ's church is to last through the ages! He also said

Luke 12:32 "Do not fear, little flock, [Or you could say, "Do not fear, you few."] for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

So we have very encouraging statements from Jesus Christ—in the way of promises and guarantees—that His church will continue down through the ages. It is a small and very often persecuted church, as described in Revelation 12—but a church that would always exist

somewhere on earth. The information that I have to present to you is not all of the information. We don't know of some of the obscure groups that may have survived in some of the other areas. But this is the main thrust that we see of the work, that I will present to you.

Satan deceives the whole world to look at his carefully planned *illusion* of history. For the past almost 2000 years, the world has focused in the wrong place for the church that Jesus Christ built. A huge chasm lies between (1) the apostolic church Jesus founded and (2) the earliest beginnings of today's professing Christian churches. Nearly all the writings of that period after 70 A.D. have been destroyed—either on purpose, or by decay. Bible prophecy and the slandering enemies of the true church help us to identify the true church in history. (That, as well as the prophecies of Revelation 2 and 3.)

Lessons about the spiritual state, or attitude, of each of the seven churches are expressed within the first three chapters of the book of Revelation—revealing more than 1900 years of church history. Seven times Jesus Christ warned, "He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." That indicates to me that, if you have an ear to hear, if you are a human being then this is for you. Revelation 2 and 3 list, in time order, the past and present epochs of God's church. It is a spiritual body and is composed of those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. That is, those who obey and teach God's commands. Revelation 12:14 points to:

Revelation 12:14 ...the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

These are the general categories of the signs that show God's church. Both the prophecy of Revelation 2 and 3 and secular history show that God's church did NOT grow large and become a powerful organization, exerting powerful influences on the world. The influence that it has on the world is of a spiritual nature (not of any recognizable, visible nature).

Is it any surprise that the visible organization calling itself "Christian" and ruling over the nations during the Middle Ages was NOT God's church—but Satan's counterfeit? So then, Satan certainly has tried to overshadow and destroy the true Church of God since its establishment. Satan's counterfeit church is described in Revelation 17 as a fallen woman dominating the political rulers of this world. The true church continued as a tiny "little flock"—as "the few"—almost unnoticed by the world, almost unknown to later historians.

Jesus actively taught for a comparatively short time—only 3 ½ years. During that time, perhaps many thousands heard Him; but only a few hundred really believed what He said. From among those few hundred, Jesus trained twelve to be apostles of His church. On the day of the Passover in A.D. 31, Jesus was crucified. It appeared for a moment—even to the twelve disciples—that the movement was over. But three days after His death, the most momentous event in history took place: Jesus was raised from the dead to spirit, self-contained life. For forty days, He appeared to His apostles and to many of His disciples. They were thoroughly convinced He, who had been dead, was now alive. He left them with these final instructions:

Matthew 28:19-20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you

always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

There is another guarantee, stated by Jesus Christ. Ahead lay the work of the church to teach others God's way of life, and to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom of God. So, with that background to church history, now we will begin the history with the establishment of the church [beginning with] the Ephesian Era—31 to 135 A.D.

Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem, and He promised He would send them help. Ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost in 31 A.D., the New Testament Church of God was established. And so began the first era of the church—traditionally called the Ephesian Era in church history. The "help" Jesus promised was the Holy Spirit—the spiritual power sent from God to inspire those God*called* into His church.

The true church is *the collective body of individuals*—called out from the ways of this present world—who have totally surrendered themselves to the rule of God; and who, through the Holy Spirit, become the sons of God that Jesus has purchased by shedding His own blood for it. The apostle Paul said:

Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

Jesus Christ has a very personal interest in His church! The true church is NOT some politically organized denomination that we join, or become a member of, in order to be saved. Jesus did NOT die for some one religious organization called a church. Joining a local church congregation does NOT put us into God's church. We can't "join" the true church! Only God can put us into it—with His Spirit. God makes us a member of His church—if we surrender our lives to Him, even if we have no local church with which to fellowship. (But, in those cases, we should certainly search for a local church to fellowship with.)

The church is called "the body of Christ" because it is a spiritual organism whose living active Head is Jesus Christ, in the same sense that the husband is head of the wife. So, how do we enter *the true Church of God*—that is, this spiritual union?

Acts 2:36-39 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Now when they hear this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

The Church of God is NOT a lot of divided, quarreling denominations—but one church composed of many scattered members, one church united in Spirit, in mind, in heart, and in attitude because its members have totally surrendered their wills to God and have yielded to correction and admonition from the Word of God. There we get the indication that there is work, work, work to be involved—by God the Father, by Jesus Christ, and by each one of us.

Jesus promised, in John 16:13, that He would send the Spirit of truth that will guide us into all truth. Here is the key that proves which individuals are in God's church. It is composed only of those who are growing into truth as God reveals it. The moment anyone ceases to grow (but wants to retain only what he had five or ten years ago), from that moment on, the Holy Spirit dwindles and ceases to live in him. That's a very sobering thought—for the work must be constant.

It is the few—not the many—who understand the truth in any era of God's church.

I Corinthians 1:26-29 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

As we travel down through the history of the church, that is exactly what we are going to see of God's people. They were not of notoriety. They weren't the leaders of the civil organizations that were in their city. The world cannot receive the truth, because they have not been *called*. The apostle John said, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it." Jesus explained why:

John 3:19-21 "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

So we see the reason why the world cannot understand God's truth and cannot be part of God's church—the true spiritual church. It is because they don't want to be in the light, where their sins are exposed. But the world doesn't believe that its deeds are evil—because the whole world has been deceived without realizing it! They want to be lulled to sleep by false teachers who teach what people want to hear.

There was a song on the radio several years ago that was a very popular song. It seemed they played it quite often on various different radio stations. And its lyrics really typifies this attitude that we are going to see on down through the antagonists of the true Church of God. Those lyrics said, "Tell me lies. Tell me sweet little lies." Some of you may remember that song. It so typifies the attitude of the world and how comfortable they feel with Satan's way of life.

Scarcely twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the apostle Paul (in one of his first inspired letters) cautioned Christians not to be deceived by false preaching, or by false letters purporting to be from the apostles. So it didn't take long after the church began for those false prophets, and those false preachers, to come in and try to pull people away. Paul warned:

II Thessalonians 2:3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not

come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition.

The wholesale departure of professing Christians from the truth was the first event prophesied to befall the true church; and that's exactly what happened, as Paul stated. In Acts 20, Paul—the teacher of the Gentiles—explained how the apostasy would begin. He gathered the ministers of the church at Ephesus to deliver them a final message concerning their responsibility over the local congregations.

Acts 20:29-32 "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

The apostle Paul apparently spent a good strong three years warning the church of the Ephesus Era that these "wolves" would come in and try to take people away. Once that began, it never stopped to this date in history. It has continued continuously, consistently, all the way down through history. Paul instructed the minister Timothy to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all patient endurance and the teaching of Jesus Christ.

II Timothy 4:3-4 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables [or, lies].

Not only Paul, but also Peter, warned the churches that many would be misled. And just as he cautioned, false teachers came in among the true Christians—bringing in their heresies. In II Peter 2:2, it says, "And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed."

Also Jude, brother of Jesus, had to include in his letter the stern admonition that every Christian should *earnestly contend* for the faith which was once delivered to the saints. He warned that there were certain men who had crept in, and the brethren were unaware of them. So we also can assume that, in God's church today, there are those—within the church, within the congregations that house the Church of God—who have crept in without us knowing. These self-seeking men are ungodly men who turn the grace of God into a license to sin, and deny God the Father and Jesus Christ. These are sensually oriented people—who cause divisions, and do not have the Spirit to guide them in decent behavior.

These deceivers are deceived themselves, and are typical of the constant manifestation of false Christians down through the ages. They turn the unmerited pardon of God into license to disobey the commandments. And they say such things as we hear today occasionally, in Protestantism especially: "*You don't have to keep the commandments, but you should want*

to—because of the love of God in your heart. "Doesn't that sound like such a nice statement—one that we can all warm up to? Well, this is a typical deceitful statement. The first half is a lie, and the second half is the truth. But half-lie and half-truth equals a lie. Even in mathematics, a negative times a positive equals a negative.

Jude says these teachers first separate their followers from the body of the church. Then they form their own churches of a false Christ. But they were no longer real Christians. The apostle John saw the same apostasy develop in his day, and every era of God's church saw the same thing happen eventually. Many in the world believe the countless false teachers. The few listen to and believed the apostles of Christ. The worldly oriented members, and those with their own agenda, didn't believe the true apostles; but, rather, they accepted the false teachers who rose up in the church.

I John 2:18-19 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

Those are hard hitting statements—statements that each and every individual [one of us] do NOT NOT want to ever be said about us. This is why there are so many denominations and splinter groups today. The phrase in verse 18—"by which we know that it is the last hour"—has an ongoing sense in that the natural result of an increase of traitors (that is, false teachers and false leaders) in any organization is the destruction of that organization. It doesn't matter whether it is in a nation, or a business, or a religious organization. The end result is always the same when there are no longer faithful dealings between people.

The disintegration of an organization may be mostly spiritual, and the organization grows for a time. But a transformation takes place in the character of the organization—forcing the honest ones out. Whenever false ministers were able to influence a majority of a local church congregation, they began to expel the faithful ones. The true Christians were forced out. This trend happens consistently throughout history—beginning in the First Century of the church that we are looking at here now. The apostle John saw this, and wrote about it in his letter to Gaius.

III John 9-10 I wrote to the church, but Diotrefes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.

Keep in mind that these churches, these groups of God's people, were splintered and scattered very similarly to how we are today. There were large congregations, but there were also those who were scattered and isolated. The true Christians, who alone comprise the true church, were being put out of the visible organized congregations. They were the scattered ones of whom John mentions in I John 3:1 — where he said, "Therefore the world does not know us."

But that did not mean the scattered individuals were not part of the church. They were THE

CHURCH because they were joined to Christ through the Holy Spirit. Those who drove them out became the false church, the church of the god of this world, and became part of "the synagogue of Satan." But Jesus promised to be with the faithful remnant of His church to the end of the age to guide His people into the truth.

There were two nineteen-year cycles in the history of the apostolic church—during which the gospel was carried to the Old World. It was nineteen years from 31 A.D. (when the church was founded) to the time Paul went into Europe at about the time of Pentecost in the late spring of 50 A.D. From 50 A.D., it was another nineteen years until the fleeing of the headquarters church at Jerusalem—in 69 A.D.

In the first thirty-eight years—as congregations and conversions multiplied—the distant churches had frequently appealed to the authority of "the mother church" in Jerusalem. But then a period of *declining zeal* set in for the entire church. The excuse was that Christ had not returned, as many expected, at the height of the crisis in Jerusalem in 66 to 70 A.D. The reason was that in their waning zeal, they failed to remain close to God in prayer, in Bible study, in fasting, and in diligence. This condition was foretold in the prophetic messages to the seven churches in Revelation. 2.

Meanwhile, in the Greek world to which the apostle Paul was sent (in the East) Antioch became a secondary headquarters. It was equally accessible from Jerusalem and Syria, as well as from the Greek-speaking area in western Asia Minor. Paul, Barnabas, and other leaders continued to work in Gentile lands in Asia Minor from Antioch. The Churches of God that God raised up through Paul in Asia Minor were later under the general supervision of the apostle Peter. Even long after apostolic days, Antioch remained a chief center of the church.

The First Century Jewish historian Josephus, in his works Wars of the Jews, book VI, chapter V, section 3 recorded a very unusual occurrence that happened in 69 A.D. on the Feast of Pentecost.

"Moreover, at the feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner court of the temple... they said that in the first place they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a multitude, saying, 'Let us remove hence.'"

God's people did "remove hence" at that time. In 69 A.D., the Christians in Jerusalem fled northeast to the town of Pella, beyond the River Jordan. From that time forward, the united power of the Church of God to spread the gospel of the Kingdom ceased. Christians throughout Judea were scattered because of the Jewish wars.

Paul's later headquarters in the West, when he went to Europe, was Ephesus. Luke records, in Acts 20: 30, that it was from Ephesus that Paul stated "from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves." Ephesus was so important a city on the Aegean Sea that it naturally served as the later headquarters of the Ephesian Era, to which it gave its name. It was not coincidence that Christ chose Ephesus to represent the first era of His church.

While the church in the East was being held together through Pella and Antioch, the church in

the West (that is, that was primarily around Rome), with most of its leaders martyred, became the prey of false teachers. As soon as Peter was martyred (probably around 80 A.D.), events moved to a climax. There was no James, or Peter, or Paul. John alone was in charge. The apostasy was developing rapidly, especially in the West. Many people, who listened to the false teachers, began to look for new leaders and new headquarters—as they rejected the true ministers of God.

Sadly, they didn't look to Christ, the Head of the church. The new leaders systematically "clarified doctrine" with human reasoning and Greek logic. As one doctrine was changed by these false leaders, another had to be altered so as not to conflict with the doctrine that was changed. All of the doctrine of Jesus Christ is so interlocked that it is virtually one doctrine. It cannot be separated out and changed individually. That is what the Worldwide Church of God and the Tkachs found. As they changed one doctrine after another, there was "a domino effect"—because they are all interrelated.

About 90 A.D., Roman Emperor Domitian began the second imperial persecution. John was imprisoned on the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, where he received the Revelation and the command to write it down. He was eventually released. And, according to Greek tradition, both John (the last survivor of the original twelve apostles, at about 98 years of age) and Philip (who had originally been a deacon) died in Ephesus.

Jesus Christ highly commended the first era of the church—the Ephesian Era—for its labor, and patience, and goodness. These were the good things that were said about it. What they had to put up with, with the false teachers, took a great deal of patience to wait for God to work out His plan. They were obviously a very good people in that they had genuine love for one another. But the love that they had for one another apparently didn't carry over as greatly to the love that they had for God's truth.

But Christ also had something against this church era. They had left their first spiritual love, as Revelation 2: 4 states. Christ threatened to remove the church out of its place as a result of this. This was done physically "in type" even before the prophecy was written, when the Jerusalem headquarters church was transferred to Pella. It was done spiritually when the authority and respect in which this "mother church" had been held was stripped from it in 135 A.D.—after the second major Jewish war with Rome, which also ushered in the Smyrna Era of God's church.

In 135 A.D., the majority of the Pella congregation apostatized. They elected a Gentile leader named Marcus, who disfellowshipped those few clinging to the truth. The apostatizers returned to Jerusalem and joined what we may call "the synagogue of Satan."

At the time John penned the words of Revelation 2 and 3, around 96 A.D., Jesus Christ already knew the performance record of the church at Ephesus. The Ephesus church congregation was chosen by Christ, the Head of the church, as a "type" of the entire church in apostolic times. Jesus didn't use the Jerusalem church for this purpose because John's headquarters was not at Jerusalem or Pella but at Ephesus at this time. But the church as a whole never repented of leaving its first love for the truth of God. Jesus was now about to fulfill His warning, which John recorded in Revelation 2.

Revelation 2:1-3 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says

He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary."

So we see there that they had a diligence for God's work, in their own way, and a diligence in applying it to each other.

Revelation 2:4-5 "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent."

The Ephesus church had let down. It had *not continued* its work to all nations after 69 A.D. And by 135 A.D. God removed their lampstand from its place, because the church as a whole didn't repent of their lack of enthusiasm for God's church, and God's truth, and for teaching the gospel, and for feeding the flock. That ended the first age of the church—typified by the church at Ephesus.

The literal city of Ephesus also suffered the stern sentence of Christ. In later years the site was completely deserted. The local population moved to a higher location more than a mile to the northeast—which is today called "Ayassoluk" in Turkish. That name itself is a corruption of the Greek words for "John, spokesman of God." And you can see the association there!

Next the leadership shifted to Smyrna, and the Smyrna Era (in church tradition) is from 135 to 325 A.D. It is significant that, after his release, John trained Polycarp—an elder of Smyrna, a city near Ephesus in the providence of Asia.

The brethren of the prophesied church at Smyrna appeared physically poverty-stricken. Yet it was spiritually rich and alive, though suffering through persecution. This was the setting and character of God's church during the next three centuries, under the persecuting power of the Mystery Babylon religion dominating the Roman Empire.

Polycarp and Polycrates presided over the Church of God for half a century after John's death. Polycarp stood up boldly for the truth, while many fell away. Many of them began associating with the Catholic bishops of Rome. Among the Gentiles, the churches in Asia remained the most faithful to the Word of God. Polycarp and Polycrates were fiercely persecuted because they kept and taught the true Passover, instead of Easter.

Isn't it interesting that the first major doctrine to be attacked was that of Passover? As we keep Passover this coming week, we can really appreciate what we have—because there has been a big effort to remove it and to take it away from God's people for almost 2000 years now.

The early Catholic historians admit the truth about the origin of the true Church of God, and that the Catholics themselves made sure that the true Passover was replaced with the pagan festival now called Easter. According to the Catholic historian Eusebius, who lived in the time of Constantine—in his Ecclesiastical History, book V, chapter 24, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene

Fathers, volume 1:

"But Polycarp also was not only instructed by the apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church of Smyrna. [Keep in mind that this is a Catholic writing about Polycarp, a member of the true church.] ...He it was who, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus [the bishop of Rome around 154 A.D.] caused many to turn away from the...heretics to the Church of God, proclaiming that he had received this one and sole truth from the apostles...While at Rome, Polycarp discussed with the Roman bishop the matter of the introduction of the pagan Easter in place of the Passover. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe it [that is, the Passover] because he had always observed it with John the disciple of our Lord, and the rest of the apostles, which whom he associated; and neither did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it, who said that he was bound to follow the customs of the presbyters before him."

Bishop Anicetus had no scriptural grounds for Easter observances. He determined to follow the customs of men. He followed the traditions of the pagan priests before him, who were part of that Mystery Babylon religion. In about 154 A.D., when Polycarp was about 85 years old, he traveled to Rome over the matter of Passover. His mission was not successful. The bishop of Rome, Anicetus, observed communion on Sunday and refused to be persuaded against it. The following year, in 155 A.D., Polycarp was burned to death by a mob in Smyrna—within 35 years of the time Polycarp confronted the bishop of Rome over Passover and other changes Rome had made in its version of Christianity.

Polycarp's disciple and fellow minister, Polycrates, became leader. The confrontation turned heated between Polycrates (of the true church in Asia Minor) and Victor of Rome. Victor claimed the authority of excommunication and began an attempt to cut off whole churches of God who observed the true Passover. This was around 190 to 198 A.D.

So the first sign of the true Church of God that was used to persecute people in a great way was the Passover. The reason was that many, many people—even in the Catholic Church (in fact, most of the people in the Catholic Church)—were still keeping the seventh day, Saturday, Sabbath. It was the Passover that was attacked in a big way first.

A very revealing letter is preserved in volume 8 of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, pages 773-774. Here is part of the forthright answer given in the letter of Polycrates to Victor of Rome:

"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 [He's speaking of the apostles.], who shall rise again in the day of the coming of the Lord...I speak of Philip, one of the twelve apostles...John, moreover, who reclined on the Lord's bosom...Then there is Polycarp...These all kept the Passover on the 1⁴th day of the month, in accordance with the Gospel, without ever deviating from it, but keeping to the rule of faith."

We see the result of this argument on Easter, still alive in the King James Version of the Bible.

Acts 12:4 (KJV) And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after *Easter* to bring him forth to the people.

The original translates that Passover—not "Easter." Other, more honest, translations will have *Pa: Passover* there (as is in the original), and not "Easter." But we see the results going back all those years—1900 some years—and the change that was made back then, still affecting even the record of God's truth today.

One man, that I've known for over 30 years and who grew up attending the Worldwide Church of God, made a very revealing observation about taking God's truth for granted. After the doctrinal changes in Worldwide became more flagrant and obvious, some who stayed in far too long finally began to panic over what was being taken away from them. This man was one of them. And he made this statement to me that I don't think I will ever forget. It was so eye opening to me that I think it's helped me since. He said, "I never knew how important God's truth was until they started taking it away."

This was also what these people—at the time of Polycarp and Polycrates—were going through. There was a fierce movement to take Passover away from them. That is, the very foundation of the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

A flagrant, calculated, evil, event happened in the Fourth Century to try to stamp out the true church and the Passover from existence. The Catholic historian Eusebius wrote this:

"But before this time another most virulent disorder had existed, and long afflicted the Church [It's the Catholic Church that he is talking about.]; I mean the difference respecting...Easter. For while one party asserted that the Jewish custom (as to time) should be adhered to, the other (did not)."

So even back then, their issue with Passover and the calendar (which was part of this) is an issue of "Oh, that's Jewish." or "We don't do Jewish things." It's that type of an attitude; and anti-Semitism was part of it too. That was just an instrument that Satan used.

Continuing on with Eusebius' quote:

"Accordingly, the people being thus in every place divided in this respect...no one appeared who was capable of devising a remedy...because the controversy continued equally divided between both parties...Constantine appeared to be the only one on earth capable...He convoked a general council..."

In 325 A.D., Catholicism was established as the state religion by Constantine; and all other churches were anathematized. Sylvester, bishop of Rome, became head of all 'Christendom.' After the Nicene Council closed, Emperor Constantine sent out the following letter to all the churches:

"At this meeting the question concerning...Easter was discussed...First of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this...feast we should follow the practice of the Jews...Let us then have nothing in common with the Jews...It

has been determined by the common judgment of all, that the...feast of Easter should be kept on one and the same day."

In 325 A.D., the council of Nicea decided, under the Emperor's authority, that Easter must be celebrated on Sunday, and that the Passover must be forbidden! It was also at this council where the first edict was made in favor of the 'venerable day of the sun' being observed as the day of rest. Up to this time, Jewish and Gentile Christians observed the seventh day (Saturday) Sabbath—according to the commandment—with the exceptions of a number of bishops in the West in the sphere of the Roman church, who observed both days.

Not all accepted the decrees of the council. To those who continued to follow the truth, the Emperor wrote the following official letter, recorded by Eusebius' historical work *Life of Constantine*, book 3:

"Victor Constantinus, Maximus Augustus, to the heretics:"

He [Victor] has this real long title, but the true Church of God is just "the heretics." That's a typical viewpoint from a Catholic historian.

"...To speak of your criminality as it deserves, demands more time and leisure than I can give...Why not at once strike, as it were, at the root of so great a mischief [He's talking [He's talking about the Church of God.] by a public manifestation of displeasure? [In other words, he's saying, by inciting persecution.]"

"Forasmuch, then, as it is no longer possible to bear with your pernicious errors, we give warning by this present statute that none of you henceforth presume to assemble yourselves together. We have directed, accordingly, that you be deprived of all the houses in which you are accustomed to hold your assemblies: and (we) forbid the holding of your superstitious and senseless meetings, not in public merely, but in any private house or place whatsoever...Take the far better course of entering the Catholic Church."

"...We have commanded...that you be positively deprived of every gathering point of your superstitious meetings, I mean all the houses of prayer...and that these be made over without delay to the Catholic Church; that any other places be confiscated to the public service, and no facility whatever be left for any future gathering, in order that from this day forward none of your unlawful assemblies may presume to appear in any public or private place. Let this edict be made public."

It is my personal belief that we will see a similar edict some day—being sent out against God's people in this era of God's church. The wording just sends tinglings and chills up my spine, because of the wording being so similar to some of the things that we are already seeing.

Everyone was now forced to observe a pagan Easter, or flee the confines of the Roman Empire. Not even the persecutions of pagan Rome matched the terrible slaughter of Constantine's "Christian" Rome.

Revelation 2:10 [Jesus Christ says:] "Do not fear any of those things which you

are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

As you know, Numbers 14: 34 shows the principle that a day equals a year in prophetic fulfillment. Eusebius—in his Ecclesiastical History, chapter 8—correctly mentions that the ten years were fulfilled in the last great pre-Constantine persecutions (that of Diocletian and Galerius) in 303 to 313 A.D. The persecution lasted in Rome only three years. In the eastern Roman Empire, where God's people were, it lasted ten years. The name Smyrna interestingly means "bitter." The Smyrna Era was certainly bitter for the Church of God, because of the persecution that they received.

It is only from the enemies of God's church that we have scanty, malicious records of God's people—who were maligned as "heretics": and "enemies of the church." These records often attributed beliefs to God's people that they never held. [Real] heretics and the true church are often called by the same names during this time of written history.

For centuries, Catholic writers mention small remnants of the true church that they commonly labeled "heretics" within the bounds of the Roman Empire. Sometimes they were individuals. Sometimes [they were] scattered families. And, especially in the Near East, there were still a few local congregations keeping the commandments and preaching the gospel.

According to Bingham's Antiquities of the Christian Church, as late as the beginning of the Fifth Century in Asia Minor the bishop Chrysostom bewailed members of the Catholic Church who, upon learning the truth from scattered remnants of the true church, repented of their ways and began to observe the Sabbath, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of the great expiation (or, the Last Great Day). So, according to Bingham's history, there were people who were members of the Catholic Church who were *called by God* into the true church. Apparently there were quite a few, because the "ruffled the feathers" (so to speak) of the Catholic Church itself.

As a result of the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the great false church—known as the Roman Catholic Church—commenced 1260 years of tribulation upon the true Church of God with full force. The true church fled into the valleys and mountains in Europe and Asia Minor. Edward Gibbon, author of The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, appropriately said regarding the Roman system of Mystery Babylon: "*History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.*"

This is true of the fruitlessness of the lives of those who rebel against the awesome Creator of the universe. But for those of us who submit to the authority of God the Father and Jesus Christ—reverencing them and genuinely accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior—He promises wonderful, eternal rewards.

The promises to the Ephesian and Smyrna churches in Revelation 2 are not only for them, but for all true Christians—for our encouragement and for our admonition.

Revelation 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in

the midst of the Paradise of God."

We were just reading about the Ephesus church. Now let's see what He says about the Smyrna church.

Revelation 2:11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death."

There's a message to each and every one of us. One of the primary things that we should be doing as God's people is overcoming. For all seven churches, He says "to him who overcomes" He will give all those wonderful things. He doesn't promise that we will have a rose garden to live in, or through. He doesn't promise the sailing will be easy. But Jesus Christ does let us know that we will be tested and persecuted throughout the whole history of the Church of God—as we read down through Revelation 2 and 3.

So the fact that we have hard times, and that sometimes as individuals in the Church of God we feel alone (as we did in the Worldwide Church of God, when we met there), this is a characteristic trait of the church down through history. Many times the members—as far as having friends and acquaintances—would feel alone, as they were the only ones. And those who are scattered today, that are meeting by themselves, quite often feel alone. This was a very common situation for the Church of God down through history, as we'll see.

But God promises such wonderful things to those that obey Him, and guard the truth, and help prepare the Bride, and prepare themselves as the Bride of Christ. He promises wonderful and awesome things for us—although we have to go through many hard times. Sometimes they are all at once, and sometimes they are occasionally. But we do have that promise by Jesus Christ. And it is a wonderful and an awesome promise that we have.

Next Sabbath, we will continue where we left off with the history of the true church—with the Pergamos Era. We'll go into the Pergamos Era, and cover that, and part of the Thyatira Era. It has wonderful lessons for us and for during the Days of Unleavened Bread as well.