

The Testimony of Jesus (2)

Part 2

Lord, it is really a matter of perspective. Some saw Mary's anointing of Jesus with a precious ointment as a waste; we see it as a great treasure. We are thankful, Lord, that You are that great treasure poured out. You gave completely; You did not hold anything back. And because of that we can freely continue in Your presence. Lord, we know that You have made provision for this time in Christ Jesus, and by faith we step into the fulness of all You have for us. As we consider this matter of church history, as we have prayed, and said before, Lord, we are not just looking at the facts; we want to know Your ways. We want to truly understand Your heart, and understand the lessons that we can be encouraged and strengthened by in the days that we are living in. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I Will Build My Church

Matthew 16:17-18: "And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.'" This is our Lord's precious testimony, and this is the promise that we have.

The precious promise we have in that verse is: "I will build My church." As we look at the testimony of Jesus throughout church history, we are thankful we have this precious promise that we can rely upon. As we considered this together last time, we saw how the church had a very good and healthy beginning. The birth of the church was really a very precious testimony. At the right time, at the fulness of time, our Lord Jesus came, and in the fulness of time the church was born on the day of Pentecost.

We also considered and saw that the key issue that we are looking at here is the battle over the testimony of Jesus. We see the intensity of that battle in the early church, we see the intensity of the battle throughout history, and we see the intensity of that battle today. Just mention the name of Jesus or the testimony of Jesus, and there is an immediate battle, there is an immediate attack upon that, particularly in the culture that we find ourselves in.

As we left off last time, we were at the end of the first century, really what we call the New Testament, we saw at that point in time and even though there had been a good healthy birth, there was already starting to be some declension and

some issues within the church. If you look at those letters to the churches in Revelation chapters 2-3, we see some things that the Lord is noticing. He is pointing out and giving ones the opportunity to repent and return to the place He has called them to, and now we want to pick up after that.

The Spread of Christianity

Today, what we would like to look at is how the church spread throughout the Roman Empire, and then how the church suffered through some severe persecutions. It also encounters some serious internal problems. They dealt both with things from without and from things within. Then we will see how Christianity, so called, became legalized under Constantine and the impact of that. It is amazing, what the enemy could not do through persecution, how he corrupted within and was able to bring about a real damage to the old testimony they had of Jesus. So we really want to be able to end with that today.

We are thankful how the church did spread throughout Christianity, and over all we know it was obviously the divine and sovereign hand of God. That is the overriding thing, but the Lord also uses practical things upon this earth. Throughout history we see Him using many practical things. Because of the Roman government they had an excellent road system, they had control of the sea which allowed for safe movement. There were a lot of trade routes and a lot of movement between various cities within the Roman Empire, and this opened it up for the gospel to go forth in many precious ways. There was a common language; there was Greek. Today, we have the common language of English. It is interesting when we go to Brazil or any other country, and they will ask you, "Do you know what language they are going to speak in heaven?" And I say, "I don't know." They say, "English, because the Americans are too lazy to learn anything else." So the whole rest of the world learns English.

The Gospel Offered Unbiased Hope to All

We can see how the common language benefits many things, and we are thankful for that. But when you get down to the primary reason and the hand of God working, the gospel was a new fresh offering to ones that offered an unbiased hope to everybody, and it was a living testimony coming forth through the lives of various ones. And there was also the testimony of the martyrs. We are familiar with the phrase: "The blood of the martyrs waters the seed of the gospel." And through the lives that were laid down the gospel went forth in a powerful way. As we see how the gospel offered unbiased hope to all, we realize that this was such a new

teaching that was coming forth, given the society within the Roman Empire at that time. It offered an unbiased and applicable gospel to everyone, anywhere and anytime, whether you were male or female, free or slave, noble or poor, Jew or Gentile, whatever. This gospel was there for you, and it offered hope to you. The gospel offered a comfort, and it offered this new thought, eternal life. It was something that was totally new.

In most of the other religions there was such a prejudice towards women, in their separating slaves and freemen, and various other things. There were things that were opened to Romans but not to the foreigners. The Jews had this, but they would not associate with the Gentiles. But here was a truth that was coming forth that was for all mankind, and this impacted ones' lives in ways that they had never seen before. It was consistent and without prejudice to all. God's love is without prejudice.

Sin is sin regardless of who you are. Sometimes it would be as in the old times that if you were a rich man you never sinned because you had money. The poor people were the sinners. These ones called sin, sin, and the same thing with forgiveness. Forgiveness was there for anybody, not just the rich people who could pay for something, not the ones who could offer something. No, it was there by the blood of the Lamb for you to be cleansed of all your sins, and you were forgiven. This was a hope, and it was so revolutionary to ones that it was capturing them in a mighty powerful way. They were not trying to create something so-called new, but it maintained family relationships, and it honored work in which you respected your master. All throughout it was showing you how to live upon this earth in this day and time.

The Testimony of Jesus Seen in Believer's Lives

We see too how it was really the lives of believers that was the biggest impact. We will find how the gospel went forth because the testimony of Jesus was seen in believers' lives. As we have been praying for the gospel recently for a serious amount of time on Wednesday nights, I believe this is one of the greatest ways that the gospel goes forth. Certainly, it goes forth in teaching, I am not downplaying that, but it also goes forth in the lives of believers because they saw people whom they knew were living a transformed life. They saw ones whom they knew were sinners, but then they saw how this Person of Jesus Christ coming into a life changed them in such a way that they were living moral lives even in the midst of this immoral society. They saw that ones were not so self-centered, and they were caring for others, for the poor. There was the practical application of the love of

God being lived out in their daily lives, and this had a tremendous impact. Surely this will have a tremendous impact in the days we are living in. Many are living in fear and are scared about what is going on and what is going to happen. When they see ones who are loving and caring without prejudice toward anybody, what a glorious gospel that is! That is what attracts people. And they saw within families how the family life was strengthened, and there was also a new respect for women. Women were not second-class citizens anymore, but they were respected and honored. You found within the church how the women and the men were flowing together, serving together. What a precious testimony that was!

As they looked upon these people, they saw a diverse group, but there was also a unity. There were free ones, slaves, nobles, poor, men and women, Jews and Gentiles, and all of these together were worshiping this one God, this Jesus Christ. And that impacted their lives. As a result, the gospel went forth in a powerful way throughout this time. It was really wonderful because they actually walked the talk. They did not just talk about it, but they walked it, and it was seen in their lives. Is Christ seen in our life? That is our desire; not just to talk about it, but it is actually seen in the decisions and the interactions we have. If we go to the store and somebody cuts in line or somebody does this, is there that fragrance of Christ coming forth from us in a way that gives a testimony in the days we are living in?

One writer testified of the lives of believers, and I thought it was precious. I really could not cut any of it out.

Lives of Believers Were a Living Testimony

“They dwell in their own countries but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth but are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws in their lives. They love all and are persecuted by all. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are reviled, and yet they bless. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers. Undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life.”

Challenges Faced AD 100-312

That life of Christ was seen in these dear ones. That is a precious testimony, and that is what we desire to be living in in these days and times. We have to keep in context that they were living under the Roman Empire in this time. It was not a great free society of democracy and all. There was a Caesar over them, and they faced many challenges during this time. Some of the challenges they faced we could break them down into two categories. There were the external categories as far as the persecution by the Roman Empire and also paganism. It came from a lot of the Greek intellectuals, and the biggest thing was Gnosticism which speaks of the existence of two gods or two principles, good and evil. You have light and dark. They would try and infiltrate the church with this: Jesus is light, and the enemy is dark. They would use the name Jesus, but they were not really recognizing who He was. They said, "Spiritual things are good; material or matter are evil." Therefore, this created a very strong division. It was such an intellectualism associated with it that it sounded like a high teaching: "Oh, these people are so smart. These people know so much." A lot of people were caught up by it. "They are a lot smarter than me and what they are talking about really sounds good. It must be true." It was a false teaching.

Sadly, there were also the internal things that were going on. There were heresies, wrong concepts of both man and of God, disputes over church government, disputes over the Lord's Supper and baptism. All of a sudden, during this period the Lord's Supper, instead of the simplicity of the table and the cup as we remembered the Lord this morning, it was taking on special spiritual powers, special sacrificial powers. And with baptism there was coming in the teaching of infant baptism, unbelievers' baptism. So we see that these are some of the challenges that they faced.

The Roman Persecutions

It is interesting in seeing the underlying persecutions that took place, we find that because of the Lord's love for His testimony, He allows persecutions to purify and strengthen His people. You will find this throughout church history that during times of purification the testimony of Jesus was strengthened. When times became peaceful and very laid back, all of a sudden, the laxity and conformity began to work its way in.

We have already mentioned the persecution under Nero. The underlying reason for this persecution was that Caesar was a god in the Roman Empire, one of

the gods, and they had to bow down and worship or burn incense to him. That was part of the culture. If you were a Roman citizen, you were expected to honor him as god and bow down and worship and burn incense to him. Of course, believers would not do that; therefore, there was an immediate fight that would be going on.

We mentioned Domitian last time. He was the one who had imprisoned John the apostle on the Isle of Patmos.

Trajan

When you come to the second one, Trajan, we see that many of these persecutions were sporadic. During this time the great distinguishing factor occurred between Jews and Christians. Judaism and Christianity were separated totally at this point in time. Jews were free and still treated well by the government, but Christians were beginning to encounter persecution.

Septimus Severus and Decius

In the reign of Septimus Severus things began to get a little more serious. Conversion was literally forbidden at this time. Around AD 202 Christianity became a crime. This was the first time that Christianity was illegal. Before, it was not authorized by the government, but it was not declared illegal; now it was declared to be illegal to be a Christian.

Then around AD 249 to 251 Decius came to power. This was the first empire wide persecution, and everybody had to have a certificate of sacrifice or die. You had to have the mark or you were going to die, and you had to have a certificate saying that you had made your sacrifice to Caesar. Otherwise, you would be put to death. Those were very tragic and trying times.

Diocletian

The worst one was under Diocletian. Churches were burned, Bibles destroyed, all civil rights of believers were taken away. There was over 400,000 who were killed. It was very tragic. Many of the stories are obviously of the martyrs. It is not appropriate to go into a lot of the details, but they can be found in Foxes' Book of Martyrs or some of the history books in which you get some explicit stories of what went on.

For many years I had Foxes' Book of Martyrs beside my bed, I would read one of the stories at night. I read Foxes' Book of Martyrs before I went to sleep. That is

just my weird thinking, and whatever problems I had in life went away. I did not have any problems compared to what they went through.

Polycarp

We find that through the martyrs the seed of the gospel was watered, and it continued to spread. In spite of the persecutions of the Christians, the testimony of Jesus was continuing to spread. We will look at a couple of these martyrs, taking an old one and a young one.

The first was Polycarp who lived in Smyrna. He was over ninety years old and was called the bishop in Smyrna. He was the leading brother there, so there was an arrest warrant put out for him. The soldiers went to get him at a farmhouse where he was staying outside of Smyrna at this time. Before they came for him, the other brothers in the farmhouse said, "You need to escape and flee, they are coming for you." He said, "No, God's will be done." And he chose not to flee and stayed there. When the soldiers knocked on the door, he welcomed them in. They sat down and he said, "Would you like some food, something to drink?" And they did, and he said, "I have one request; would you give me the opportunity to pray for one hour before you take me?" They were not really sure who they were arresting, they just had an arrest warrant. When those big soldiers came and looked at this ninety plus year old guy that they were arresting, they felt bad about it. So he said, "Let me pray for an hour." And he did. He went to the next room and poured out his heart in prayer, and they could all hear him. They were all sobbing, even the soldiers were crying, but not enough to let him go. They were really sorry they had to arrest this old man.

They took him into the city into the amphitheater where they were martyring the various Christians, and the Roman official asked Polycarp: "Look, you are an old man. I do not want to do this to you. Would you just bow to Caesar, burn some incense, and be gone from here?" And this is Polycarp's answer: "Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" So the Roman official became a little more upset and said, "If you don't, I am going to burn you with fire." Polycarp's response: "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come in an everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will." He was not backing down. He was ready to go. He was standing the ground for the testimony of the Lord. They tied him to a post, and in the picture his hands are free. Normally, they nailed people's hands to the post, but he said "No! Let my hands be free so I can praise the Lord

during this time.” They tied him up, put the wood around the post and lit the fire. In historical stories you are never quite sure of the accuracy because you get varied reports. (It is not like the media we have today that tells the truth and reports everything accurately.) But the common report is that the fire was lit and came up around him, but it never burned him. It was flaming and burning all around. The Roman official saw it and commanded the soldier to kill him, and finally the soldier went in with a sword and killed him.

He said he had had a dream a few days before he was going to be burned for Christ. His pillow caught on fire in his dream, and he said, “Ah, I am going to be burned for Christ,” and yet he did not shrink back. That is a precious testimony of one who trusted the Lord. When you look at the lives of these martyrs, sometimes it can be overwhelming. But these brothers and sisters trusted the Lord at that moment in the time in which they lived. When we find ourselves in difficult situations, there is grace for that moment. We do not know how we will act other than to say, “If that happened to me, I would act like this.” No, you don’t! We do not know how we would act, but we know Him, and He is the One who keeps us. Praise God for that!

Perpetua

As we look at some younger ones here, there is a sister whose name is Perpetua. She lived in the city of Carthage which is in Northern Africa. She was twenty-two years old, married and nursing a young baby when she was arrested. Actually, five young people were arrested at the same time, and they were all about twenty-two to twenty-five. They were taken to the prison and made ready to go into the amphitheater to be slaughtered. Perpetua’s father, who was a pagan, came to her and said, “Think of your daughter. Just worship Caesar, bow down to him and you will be free, and your daughter will have a mother.” She would not! In the Eastern culture parents are due a lot of respect, and he said, “Out of respect for your father, please honor my gray hair and just say you are not a Christian.”

This is her response. After her father had just said, “Say you are not a Christian,” she said, “You see this vase?” “Yes, I do,” said he. And she told him: “Could it be called by any other name than what it is?” And he said: “No.” “So too, I cannot be called by anything other than what I am, a Christian.”

They took the three young men and let the wild beasts loose on them—bears, lions, leopards, and they were devoured quickly. But they were considerate of women. They did not turn wild beasts on women. They would put the women in a

mesh net. There was another sister with Perpetua whose name was Felicity, and they were sent out. They turned loose an enraged bull that would knock the net around until it almost killed them, and once they were beaten pretty badly and stampeded on by the bulls, the soldiers would then finish them off. The soldier goes to Perpetua who was the last one living, and he looks at her with a sword in his hand. She literally takes the sword and puts it at her throat and says, "Finish what you need to do. God's will be done." He cut her throat, and she goes into glory. Nobody knows what happened to her husband or her child; it is not recorded. That is an emotional story when you think about a mother who has to choose between her child and her life—such dynamics. There was a relationship with the Lord and something they saw of Christ that even at a young age they were willing to stand for the testimony of the Lord. You can see the faith that they had sent a message to others and it encouraged many.

Early Church Fathers

During this time there were also many heresies and false teachings that were going on, and the phrase that was being used is called 'early church fathers' (which I don't particularly like), but for the history point I will leave it. These brothers were standing for the truth of the Lord as many false teachings were trying to come in. But we will also see that these were just men, and some of the decisions they made related to some of the practices within the church which eventually caused much harm and many problems that are even around today.

Clement

The first one we will look at is Clement, and he is probably the one mentioned in Philippians 4 that Paul wrote about to the church in Philippi. One of the things Clement mentioned and began to stress was apostolic succession. Because the church was entering into a weakened condition, usually at this point one person was overseeing various assemblies. And because the assemblies were in a weakened condition, the one who was the apostle or bishop would appoint his successor. He wanted to make sure that someone spiritual would carry on his assumed position. There were ones out there who were ambitious in themselves such as you find in III John with Diotrephes who was very ambitious. Since there were ones who were ambitious, he was trying to protect the leadership because some of the brethren were not as spiritual as others, and ones were seeking to be the leader out of various reasons. It was kind of a good thought and good intention, but they went about it in the wrong way. At first it looked okay because you were

preserving spiritual leadership, but eventually it grew into something that was never intended. It was sad how it got started, but we see how it evolved.

Ignatius

Ignatius distinguished between bishops and elders, and he opposed gnostic heresy. Polycarp, the dear one that we just spoke of who was martyred, was confronted with the heresy of Marcion which was the basic teaching that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were two different Gods. The God of the Old Testament was cold, judgmental, under bondage. The God of the New Testament was love, forgiveness and liberty, you could do what you wanted to. It was a great contrast, and it brought in a lot of confusion within the assembly, but ones like Polycarp could clarify that. You have ones like the Tertullians who were really developing the teaching of the Trinity. The word Trinity is not in the Bible, but the teaching is there. He was the first one to really clarify the relationship in a very wonderful way between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the oneness They have, and the way They work together. It was beautiful the way he was able to help the brethren in that way. Also, he wrote against infant baptism which was beginning to come into the assembly.

Origen and Cyprian

Origen was one who stood that only born-again ones could be in the church. In other words, in the true church there are only ones who are born again. This came in because certain ones who were not born again were beginning to come in among them; therefore, the distinction was not being made.

Sadly, Cyprian eventually was the one who started asserting the primacy of the bishop of Rome.

We see these brethren who were standing for truth, but some of their practices brought about some changes that really were not scriptural such as the one that was related to the changes in the form of church government. It was done for expediency, trying to preserve the testimony, and make sure spiritual ones were in leadership. It brought about a combination. As the church was getting weaker and there was not as many strong spiritual ones, there would be certain ambitious ones who wanted to step forward. Then there were ones who wanted to step back. We need brothers and sisters who are all working together in the oneness that we have in Him because there are always going to be ones who want to step forward. They always have an answer and are ready to go. Then there are ones who will sit back

and let others do it. The Lord wants the universal priesthood of all believers who really are functioning together.

Changes in the Form of Church Government

We know in the New Testament there were elders and bishops and deacons in local assemblies. Ignatius was the first one who differentiated between elders and bishops, and he said each assembly is governed by a bishop but also has elders and deacons. If we look at this elder/ bishop question, elders and bishops are actually the same person. When Paul called the leaders of the church in Ephesus to Miletus in Acts 20:17 it says: "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church." As he is speaking to them, later on he says in v. 28: "Therefore, take heed to yourselves and all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, or bishops to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

Elder and overseer or bishop are really referring to the same person. The bishop or overseer is simply the office, and the elder is the person. They are not separate as Ignatius tried to make them, and it was very effective in differentiating the two. It progressed from there because in the second century, originally each assembly had a bishop, but as it progressed you would then have a diocesan bishop, a bishop who oversaw several assemblies in a region. The power of the bishop grew, and he was now overseeing like the Richmond Metropolitan area which would have a bishop. It continued to grow getting further away from God's original plan.

Later on, in the third century, elders began to be seen as sacrificing priests at the Lord's table, and the primacy of the bishop of Rome was asserted, and it continued to deteriorate. Fourth century metropolitan bishops or archbishops gained ascendancy over country bishops. There was always a power struggle going on, and at this time the Roman Empire became Western Roman Empire and Eastern Empire. The bishop of Constantinople, which was the Eastern empire, wanted to be equivalent with the one in Rome so it was raised up there.

Finally, Leo in the fifth century claimed supremacy of the bishop in Rome as the successor to Peter. It is sad how ones who thought they were trying to solve a prominent preserve by using man's way as opposed to God's ways opened the door for a great tragedy. To me it is a great lesson that whenever we are faced with problems, whenever we are faced with situations that we are not sure how to handle, there is always a tendency within ourselves for man's ingenuity and expediency to handle it. I am thankful how even little things such as meals that we

have been fellowshiping about that it is not just: “Okay, we will do this.” It was a process, but through the process of a couple of months, a couple different brothers’ meetings, there was a process of coming to the oneness. As it says there in Acts there was a unity that came about in that council of Jerusalem: “It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit.” That is the process. So often it is not what man wants to do; we have to get away from that. It is finding that process and letting the Lord lead through. We see the tragedy that occurred here.

The Lord’s Supper in the Early Church

Also, we have the Lord’s supper, and it is sad how this deteriorated as well. In the early church it was the same as we have it now. It was a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and their documents speak of taking a single cup and loaf and those who were born again shared it together as a testimony and a remembrance of the Lord. Then it began to take on a different flavor. It was not just a sacrifice, but it was sacrificial. What they were doing was offering a sacrifice that was both sacrificial and praise. Cyprian in AD 250 started using the term “the priest” for bishop, elder was then the priest, and the place of celebration was called the altar for the sacrifice. They were praying prayers. Like we offer to Christ who was sacrificed up. In other words, they were really retaking, reliving, redoing the sacrifice that the Lord did once and for all. And we see that has so permeated throughout the Roman Church in this day. These were faithful ones, and most of the ones who stood faithful to the end were martyred for their belief. It was an absolute truth they had on some of the doctrines, but when it came to some of the practices and the way the things were operating within the assemblies, they were leaning on their own understanding and falling back into old ways. But again, we are thankful that there were faithful ones who stood in the midst of all that was taking place.

The Montanists

Now we start getting into all these funny names. One of the things we can take note of is that throughout this whole thing on church history these groups never called themselves by these names. These names were always given to them by others. They were labeled by the outside. They simply called themselves Christians. These Montanists were mainly throughout Turkey and North Africa, and they saw the declension and formality within the Roman church, everything that we have been sharing about. And they called ones back for a return to the Biblical way.

These ones were very Charismatic in nature, and at times to an extreme. Some people in history looked down upon them because at times they got a little too carried away. But most Charismatics at times will get too carried away, and most fundamentalists will get a little too fundamental at times. There is a balance of life, and the issue is His life. They were expecting the Lord's return, and they were waiting and living for the Lord to come back. They rejected the growing power of these bishops and they rejected unbelievers in the church membership. It is precious. At first, they stayed within the Roman Church, and they were able to operate in North Africa. They tried to reform from within, but eventually, they were thrown out. They stayed in the Roman Church for probably two hundred years before they were eventually thrown out. But one of the key ones was the brother Tertullian, and some say he was probably the most spiritual brother of all these church fathers. He had shared some of the most inciteful things that he had seen. One of the things he wrote was that where three are and even if they are the laity, there is the church. Even at that time there was the clergy/laity phraseology beginning to come in. But he says if there is three, and they are just ordinary believers, that is the church.

He was saying this in the sense of what was being said, "If you do not come to this building and this place and do this, you are not in the church." That is why he was saying, "Where the three are..." Today, ones have taken what he said and taken it way out of context. They say wherever a couple of believers are, there is the church. In other words, you can meet over at Starbucks with a few having coffee together, and there is the church. In one sense, it is true; we are part of the universal church, and we are all believers. However, when we are speaking about the testimony of Jesus, that gets expressed through the local assembly. The local assembly is those brothers and sisters who are gathered together, and even if there is just three that are gathered to testify of Who He is, committed to Him, committed to one another, standing for His heart and purpose in these days, that is the expression of His life, and that is what satisfies Him. It is sad today how ones have mistaken this and the whole teaching and said, "Wherever any believer meets that is the church. It is a distortion of what is going on. We are thankful for the universal church where we are one with all believers. Whoever is born again is all part of that church, and that church is everywhere. But what God has chosen to work through is the local assembly, that local testimony where He builds us together, where He rubs us together, where we have to learn to forgive one another and put up with one another. But we see how the Lord is using all of this to strengthen His people.

The Novations

There was another dear group called the Novations, and they were prominent through the 3rd to the 6th centuries mainly in Italy. They came out of the Roman Church and separated from it because it was emphasizing so much on works, performance and formality, but the Novations were emphasizing inner character. It is not just going through the rituals; you need to have the character of Christ within you; you need to have the life of Christ within you. It is not just going through the outward ceremonies, not just going to the meetings, not just doing this and that, but it is living that life with that character being formed within you. That is what they were focusing upon because this was greatly lacking within the Roman Church at that point in time.

There was also a strict view of ones who had “lapsed” during persecutions. Persecutions were very severe at times, and there were ones who, as they were severely persecuted, would deny the Lord, and when things would get a little easier, they would genuinely repent and come back. That was not the issue here. These persecutions would come and go, and there were some believers who were on the fringe that when the persecution came, they just stepped back right away and worshiped Caesar. As soon as the persecution lifted, they went right back meeting with believers. Another persecution would come along, and they stepped back and said, “I am not one of those.” There was no discernment by the ones in these various churches to say, “If you want to come back that is fine.” There was never any genuine repentance, and this is always a tough call in these situations. This is something you cannot be dogmatic about because you will see a lot of persecutions throughout history and ones denying or ones who lapse and come back. I think probably everyone in this room at some point in time have found themselves in a place where we wish we had never gone after being a Christian. Praise God for the blood of the Lamb that we repented and came back, and we got right with Him. But these ones really wanted to take a stand that you just could not be a convenient Christian. They really wanted to stand for the testimony, and that is what they were trying to do. At times they carried it too far; at times it was the proper thing to do. They were trying to stand for the purity of the testimony. As we look back, we have to be very careful on judging ones in the days and times they were living. We find how these ones in general were very faithful to the testimony of the Lord and wanted to stand for Him when they saw so many other things going on.

Constantine

At this point came what we call the big change. Constantine enters the picture, and the Roman Empire was divided between Western and Eastern. They had what they called the tetrarch. There were two main men, one over the East and two over the West, and their successor was underneath. These four guys were rulers. Constantine in the West and the other guy Macedonius were fighting over who was going to be the main ruler of the Western Empire. This battle in AD 312 was a battle between two rivals for control of the Western Roman Empire. This is the Roman army fighting against itself. The battle takes place at Milvian Bridge, and Macedonius had superior forces, the mightiest army. The army of Constantine was a lot smaller. As the story goes, (and there are varying stories on this) the night before the battle Constantine says that he had a vision, and what he saw was an inscription on the cross: "By this sign Conquer." He said that when he saw this picture of the cross, it inspired him. He used that as a motivational thing for all his men. He said, "By this sign Conquer" and they went forth. They actually won the battle, and he became the Emperor of the Western Empire. About twelve years later he conquered the guy Licinianus who was over the Eastern part of the empire, and Constantine united the whole Roman Empire together.

There is a great question as to whether Constantine was really converted because you never find a great change in his life. Or was he simply using religion to motivate his men? We see this going on today, how politicians will try to use religion to motivate different voter bases. However, we see the damage he did to the testimony of the Lord because after he gained power, he announced the Edict of Milan, proclaiming freedom of religion to everyone. He restored all the church buildings and church property. He even sent federal money to the cities to pay the clergy, and they were exempted from local laws. Then, of course, we know who the clergy had to obey. The federal head had government control over it, and the soldiers would get clothes and money for conversion. So they said to these poor soldiers, "Look, you have a choice; you can stay poor, or you can convert to Christianity and we will give you some new clothes and a nice bonus." How many people would not convert at that point in time?

The Impact of Constantine

The impact of Constantine was that an unholy alliance was created in which Christianity became a state religion. There was an alliance between the state and church, and the Emperor became head of this visible church. At the same time, he was also the high priest of that idolatrous pagan religion. He said that he was the

head of the church, and he was making the decisions. Certain heresies would come up, and he would say, "That is the wrong teaching; this is the right one, and I agree with this one." Of course, he did not have a clue what he is talking about. The church in this sense became open to all. It was popular and accepted, and there were many unbelievers within the church. What the enemy could not do through persecution, he did by corruption within through this unholy alliance. Up to this point you could use words like the testimony of Jesus, Christianity, and the church pretty much synonymously in general. But after this there was a great divide that occurred, and that is what we will see next time. By the end of 300 AD Christianity had spread mainly around the Mediterranean area and a little bit up to France, but mainly through Turkey and over into North Africa.

Ones Who have Stood for the Truth

We are thankful that during these times of persecution, there were ones who stood for the truth. There were ones who loved not their lives unto death. It is good for us to be praying as we have been to be prepared for whatever persecution might be ahead that we could be strong in Christ. We also need to maintain that fresh personal relationship with Him and not just fall into the tradition of man or what is expedient. Some of these men had good intentions, but we know the road to hell is paved with good intentions. They thought they were preserving and saving the testimony, but it just ended up being a disaster, maybe not in their lifetime, but some centuries later. Even if we make an adjustment or correction today, we may say, "Oh, it worked well." But in the long term it may not. It is really staying and maintaining that fresh relationship with Him and not getting to a place where you are relying upon one man as we have found in these places where they had appointed bishops who was the spiritual person.

I am thankful as I look around this room that I see a roomful of spiritual people. Everyone has the Lord revealed in them, everyone has the Spirit in them, and we all display Christ in different ways. Everybody has a measure of Christ that enables us to hear and receive from one another. That is what we need because this is one of our greatest protections and assets in the days that we are living in. Therefore, what we face in the future is really listening and caring and loving one another, both the young and the old, the man and the woman, all the different ones. Listening and caring creates an atmosphere in which we can share with one another and take things back to the Lord to find His way through them. It is a tremendous way of being kept by Him and not falling into some of the traps that ones before us have fallen into. We are thankful for the faithful ones who have gone before us. We

are thankful for these faithful ones, and we want to be those who are faithful and serve the purpose of God in our generation.

Lord, we are thankful for You, thankful for Your life, and we are thankful for these ones who went before us. And we do not want to fall into a trap of saying, "I do not see how they could do that. I would never do that." Lord, we do not know ourselves, but we know You, and we want to come into a place of being more and more dependent upon You for the days and times that we are living in because You alone have those words of eternal life, and we want to walk in that way. In Jesus' name. Amen.