

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

Pastor Stephen Chitty

### #29 The Rise of Bishops (second & third centuries AD)

The Apostles were the largely unchallenged leaders of the church in the 1st Century. As churches were established, the leadership revolved around pastors who were called "Elders" (presbuteroi), "Shepherds" (poimen), and "Overseers" or Bishops (episcopoi). To the best of our understanding, the Elders were primarily responsible for preaching and teaching, leading the worship services, and administering church discipline. I personally believe that Overseer, Shepherd, and Elder were descriptive titles speaking of the church leadership in general, not of three separate offices. Sometimes the titles overlapped. For instance Paul referring to Elders, spoke "especially of those whose Elders whose responsibility is teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17).

The Elders were assisted by the deacons in caring for various congregational needs. The New Testament deacon had its parallel in the Jewish Almoners, who cared for the flock, especially in regard to physical needs and temporal care.

By the early 2nd Century, Ignatius seemed to indicate this system had settled into the idea of a single bishop or pastor in each church, assisted by several elders with various responsibilities, and a group of deacons who served the needs of the congregation. This pattern didn't emerge everywhere at the same time (we know Alexandria did not fall into this pattern until nearly a century later). Also, there were locations with a Bishop presiding over the churches in a town, but with each congregation having its own pastor.

With time, the model described by Ignatius seemed to be the predominant pattern by the end of the 2nd Century, though there may be a few exceptions.

Modern Christians hold opinions along four lines of thinking:

1. Some feel the model described by Ignatius reflect a departure from Christ's intention.
2. Some feel it reflects the idea that Christ left no concrete instructions, and so the Church is free to improvise culture by culture.
3. Others feel the model reflects the process of maturity. The Church was free to grow to what it is now.
4. Others (myself included) feel the model Ignatius described reflects the way it largely had been from the beginning. Multiple leadership (the elder rule model) may have reflected a collective group of churches in a city, not the structure of every house church in existence (Acts 19, 20). In other words, it may not be that the church structure evolved during the first two centuries as much as extra-Biblical writings (such as the letters by Ignatius) brought clarity to our understanding.

In other words, the first view may be based upon a misunderstanding of what was being represented in the New Testament. The second and third positions essentially remove any scriptural guidelines. Everything can be "out-grown."

I believe the fourth view holds to the integrity of Scripture without forcing the church to function only in homes or other small group settings.

With the beginning of the 3rd Century, the Church was seeing a lessening in the purity and fervor that had been the evidence of her success in previous generations.

The first half of the 3rd Century was a period of peace for the Church, as persecution began to diminish, so did the rigorous demands of holy living placed upon Believers. However, one serious problem emerged when Christians who had denied the faith or fallen into moral laxness during the severest trials wanted to re-join their churches. Callistus, Bishop of Rome (217-222), readmitted members who had committed adultery and infanticide. Many felt these sins were beyond a bishop's authority to forgive (murder, apostasy, and sexual immorality were thought by some to lie beyond the authority of the local church and were

reserved only for God's judgment). Some historians feel this was the first step toward what we know today as the Papacy. Tertullian objected to this act, but the Church leaned toward the decision of Callistus.

Then, in 250 AD, the most violent persecution the church had known was unleashed by Emperor Decius. Many Christians complied with government demands to sacrifice to traditional Roman gods. Yet many Christians who refused were imprisoned or executed, among them the Bishops of Rome, Jerusalem, and Antioch. Those who remained faithful were called "Confessors," those who compromised were called "Lapsed" or fallen ones. When Decius was killed in a battle with the Goths, the persecution ended. Though the persecution was over, division within the church remained. The "lapsed" Christians applied for readmission, with sometimes as many as 75% of a congregation needing reinstatement.

Two things emerged. First, there was the recognition and honoring of Martyrs. Martyrdom had been seen as a possibility all Christians might be called upon to face, but now the martyrs seemed to be honored as an elite group. Some believed such suffering actually atoned for the failure of the lapsed. Some historians believe this may have been the origin of the veneration of Saints.

Secondly, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, emerged as the dominant voice in regard to this controversy. Declaring "there is no salvation outside the church," he superintended the readmission of multitudes who had lapsed. Though he was pressured to announce "blanket amnesty," Cyprian eventually announced a case by case approach. Mercy would only be extended to those who had experienced torture, thereby claiming their bodies, not souls, had failed. Those who sacrificed to the gods willingly would not receive leniency. To these unfortunate ones, a system of penance was set in place. When sufficient humiliation, deeds of repentance, or time of probation had passed, they would appear before the congregation in sackcloth and ashes, and be reinstated by the Bishop.

We must not be guilty of oversimplification on these points, but it was in the 3rd Century that we see an increasing emphasis on the role of the Church as the mediator for sins,

and a de-emphasis on what I believe is the New Testament teaching of grace and faith. In this very difficult and complicated era, the power of the Spirit was misunderstood; the power of grace and mercy from God was marginalized; and the role of works emerged as dominant. It was the beginning of days darker than persecution had ever wrought.