

Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen (Part Two)

Church History

Martin G. Collins

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Upon establishing His church, Jesus Christ affirms that it would not die out, but continue until His return. This means a body of true believers has continued from Pentecost AD 31 until today.

God inspired the Bible to apply to every generation until the return of Christ. No matter where in history the reader lived, God's Word applies in most passages, though the final fulfillment of many scriptures concerns the latter days and Christ's return.

In Matthew 16:18, and 24:14, Jesus said He would build His church and that it would be preaching the gospel of His soon-coming Kingdom as a witness to the world. But how can we know which is the true church Christ built? The simple answer is found in Matthew 7.

Matthew 7:20-23 "Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Jesus teaches His disciples that they must wisely discern when professed ministers and teachers come into their midst. The life of the minister or religious organization and the results of their influence on others are the fruits that will indicate whether their message is consistent with God's way of life as detailed in His inspired written Word contained in the Old and New Testaments.

According to Jesus, there are many who sincerely believe they are doing His work, yet they are breaking God's laws.

So, how do we distinguish between a false church and the true church Christ built?

When researching or listening to any minister or religious organization there are foundational questions about their beliefs and activities that will answer whether or not they are true ministers or churches of God with members who are producing spiritual fruit. Here is a short selection:

- Do they teach obedience to God's laws?
- Do they keep the seventh day Sabbath and God's statutes concerning the seven annual holy days?
- Do they keep Passover?
- Are they preparing the bride of Christ for the return of Christ?
- Are they preaching the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God?

- Do they teach the law of tithing?
- Do they baptize by complete water immersion?
- Do they reject the false Trinity Doctrine?
- Do they reject the pagan holidays of Christmas and Easter?

These are not all of the signs of the identity of God's people. There are many other important questions on doctrines that reveal the true church of God.

The counterfeit Christian churches treat most of the truths of the Bible as inferior to their own human traditions. The doctrines of Catholicism and Protestantism always supersede the teaching of God's inspired written Word. For example: Sunday is their day of rest, they have a triune God, they keep holidays of pagan origin (e.g., Easter and Christmas), and heaven is their reward when they die. The list goes on and on that do not match Scripture.

Even some of those who speak about the Kingdom of God mistakenly place it in heaven for a thousand years, or in people's hearts, or in some other way distort the fact that Christ is coming to literally rule on earth for a thousand years.

Also, even some who know about God's weekly Sabbath refuse to also honor God's annual Sabbaths, which are still equally applicable today [because] they reveal God's plan of salvation for mankind. Salvation is offered to members of the church—the first-fruits—now; salvation for the rest of humanity comes later.

It is our individual responsibility to prove where God's true church is today. Remember God's church is spiritual not physical. It is not limited to a physical corporate earthly organization. So, who are God's people?

John 4:23-24 "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

So, if these other churches are not following Scripture, and putting out their own traditions instead, then they are not worshipping God in truth. They do not have God's Holy Spirit, because they reject His Word.

However, God is not the author of confusion, so He uses physical organizations to fulfill His purpose. God's ministers organize under corporate names because this is the most effective environment (in this society) in which to guard the truth, to spiritually feed the members of the church, and to preach the gospel to the world.

When God calls a person, and he in faith accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, and he repents of his sins and is baptized, he is not baptized into any physical organization, but into the Family of God.

Church History

With that background and those true evidences of what true Christians believe and do, let us get back into church history. History bonds us to those who came before us and to those who will follow us.

Also, history emphasizes our shared relationship, tying us together with others as we gather to celebrate and observe anniversaries, holy days, and memorials.

As a pattern for life, God wants us to live among others. Keeping our histories alive is a healthy and significant way to safeguard our family relationships. Not surprisingly, God blesses those who follow His will in this respect with abundant blessings. Living among others only works when there is a shared value system.

The Ten Commandments is not merely a list of dos and don'ts. It lays out spiritual principles that allow people to dwell together in unity in the form of love, peace, and joy. And, more importantly, God's commandments succinctly reveal essential principles about how to properly worship God, and how to live His way of life.

This church history series is full of essential spiritual principles, as well as warnings of spiritual pitfalls and persecutions, which plagued the church. Large gaps often appear in the historical records. Information is sometimes very sketchy; at other times erroneous. The true followers of Jesus Christ were very often victimized, and their stories hidden and destroyed.

History reveals the struggles, persecution, and faith of God's people. There were times of weak faith and other times of strong faith. There were failures and successes. They were continuously overcoming faults, and challenges did not dissuade them. They became discouraged, but not defeated. There were false ministers who deceived some of them and led them into apostasy, while others remained steadfast and faithful. There were times of martyrdom and there were times of protection.

During some periods of history, what we know about them comes only from their adversaries. So, sometimes the line of history is fine and sometimes uncertain. Nevertheless, there is a reasonably clear line of continuance.

However, I do not believe that the people and groups mentioned in this series were the only true church of God members in existence over the last two millennia. We know that the original apostles preached and spread God's truth through all of Asia Minor and Europe. They spread it all the way to India and down into North Africa.

There have always been debates over historical accuracies. There are dozens of websites with variations of church history; everyone seems to have an opinion. It is not my purpose to try to prove historical facts. That is not the purpose of these church history sermons, although I am trying to be as accurate as possible.

Please understand this: My focus is on appreciating our church of God heritage; learning from the faithful who have gone before us; and recognizing the patient endurance God's people have had while Jesus Christ personally accomplishes what He and our Father in heaven said they would do. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

The Third Century

In my first sermon of this series, I covered the first and second centuries since Jesus Christ. So now, let us pick up the true Christian church's history in the third century.

The third century is an obscure period for the Christian church. Details of historical accounts related to the true church of God are very sparse. This is a time of turmoil not only for true Christians but for apostate Christians as well—anyone calling himself a Christian. Most of the evidence we have available to us is not as much proof of what they believed by their own statements, as but what they were persecuted for.

So, here is an event which affected all true and counterfeit Christians: The Roman Emperor Decius, also known as Trajan Decius, was Roman Emperor from AD 249 to 251. In January 250, Decius issued a Roman Imperial Edict demanding that the Christian bishops and officers of all “Christian” churches make a sacrifice for the Emperor. It sparked a terrible crisis of authority as various Christian bishops and their flocks reacted to it in different ways. This persecution affected all Christians in the Roman Empire, regardless of their differing beliefs. Anyone, especially Christian followers, who refused to offer a sacrifice for the Emperor and the Empire's well-being by a specified date risked torture and execution. Some Christians did in fact refuse to make a sacrifice and were killed in the process. Towards the end of AD 250, the ferocity of the [anti-Christian] persecution had eased off, and the earlier tradition of tolerance had begun to reassert itself.

Greater and lesser persecutions are something God's church has been used to experiencing for almost 2,000 years. Why? The apostle Paul spells it out clearly in his epistles.

Philippians 1:27-30 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.

I Thessalonians 3:4 For, in fact, we [Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy] told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know.

Right from the beginning, the apostles knew of and expected persecution of Jesus Christ's church for the entirety of its existence in this world.

Early Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, despite persecutions due to conflicts with the pagan state religion. The third century was a time of intermittent persecutions, and the church of God was spread far and wide as small groups were resisting the heresy of false teachers.

Fourth Century

As we move into the fourth century, we find acceptance of the unholy counterfeit Christian church by the Roman Empire, which later in the century became officially known as the Roman Catholic Church. From this time on it became brutally tyrannical.

In AD 312, the struggles of the true church of God were increased by the legalization of Satan's counterfeit “Christianity” through the Emperor Constantine I. But it was not until AD 380, that

Emperor Theodosius I, with the Edict of Thessalonica, made “Nicene Christianity” the Roman Empire's state religion. “Nicene” was named after the Council of Nicaea doctrines, and the Roman Catholic church based its beliefs on this Nicene Creed.

Eusebius

I am going to quote several times from the fourth century Catholic historian, Eusebius. A word of caution regarding Eusebius: His work became the foundation for centuries of Christian scholarship. Eusebius was not only a recorder of history, but one of the key players at a significant turning point for the counterfeit church.

Eusebius' era was marked by the "Great Persecution" under Diocletian and his co-rulers (in AD 303-311), the conversion of Emperor Constantine (in AD 312), and the council of Nicaea (in AD 325). Eusebius wrote as an eyewitness about many [early] events of his time. He wrote:

We saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and the divine and sacred Scriptures committed to the flames in the market-places, and the shepherds of the churches basely hidden here and there, and some of them captured ignominiously, . . .

Although Eusebius was writing on behalf of the Emperor and the Roman Catholic Church, his writings in describing certain events, conflicts, and persecutions regarding the true Christian church, are useful. He was able to observe what was going on during the eventful fourth century.

A flagrant, calculated evil event happened [later] in the fourth century to try to stamp out the true church and the Passover from existence. Eusebius wrote:

But before this time another most virulent disorder had existed, and long afflicted the [Catholic] Church; I mean the difference respecting . . . Easter. For while one party asserted that the Jewish custom (of Passover) should be adhered to, the other (did not).

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. . . .

Then in AD 325, Catholicism was established as the state religion by Constantine, and all other churches were anathemized. Sylvester, bishop of Rome, became head of all Catholic ‘Christendom.’ After the Nicaean Council closed, Emperor Constantine sent the following letter to all the Roman Catholic 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.

The Council of Nicaea, in AD 325, 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 alike observed the seventh day (Saturday) Sabbath according to the fourth commandment, with the exception of a number of bishops in the West in the sphere of the Roman church, who observed both days. (This is the same thing that happened to the Worldwide Church of God in the 1990s.)

In this we see the only authority that later Protestantism had for keeping Sunday as the Sabbath and for keeping Easter instead of Passover. There is no Scriptural support for keeping any other day than the seventh day (Saturday) Sabbath. To this day, the Protestant church remains subservient to the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestantism is the daughter of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, both Catholicism and Protestantism are counterfeit Christian religions which officially *stole* the name “Christian” and placed it on pagan and Gnostic celebrations, and practices in a mystery religion.

The Beginning of the Tribulation

Not all accepted the decrees of the Council in AD 325. 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:

. . . 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 [i.e., the truth of God] by a public manifestation of displeasure [in other words, 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.

So we can imagine what happened to the true church of God at this point. I would expect they were fleeing for the mountains, or other places of safety. The obsequious Eusebius sums up the work of Constantine, in his *Life of Constantine*, by declaring:

And the credit of having achieved this mighty work [i.e., of stamping out the truth] our Heaven-protected Emperor alone, of all who had gone before him was able to attribute to himself.

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.

Though the principles contained in the book of Revelation have applied to all ages, it is written primarily to those living at the end time, and thus its message is primarily for the last days. Nevertheless, Revelation chapters 2-3 is written in such a way that any Christian in any century could examine it and conclude he had some characteristics of each church, just as we can today.

Revelation 2:10 "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."

It is believed that this ten-day period spoken of to the Smyrna church refers prophetically to a ten-year period of persecution against God's people in the early fourth century. Numbers 14:34 shows the principle that a day equals a year in prophetic fulfillment.

Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Chapter 8, mentions that the 10 years were fulfilled in the last great pre-Constantine persecution (that of Diocletian and Galerius) in AD 303 to 313. The persecution lasted in Rome only 3 years. In the eastern Roman Empire, where most of God's people were, it lasted 10 years.

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.

Heretics and the true church are often called by the same names. 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 or scattered families. 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 (the Last Great Day).

As a result of the Council of Nicaea, in AD 325, 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 of Europe and Asia Minor.

Clouded and Confused Identity

So far, we have seen how quickly Satan moved to try to stop the spread of the truth and how he used one of his favorite deceptions to cloud and confuse the identity of the church of God. He established his own counterfeit Christianity based on his ongoing pagan practices. This counterfeit religion was more appealing to human nature and to human desire than what God had instituted.

In I John 2, the apostle John describes this satanic enticement and its contrast to the true church:

I John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Doing the will of God includes adhering completely to what He has established as the doctrine of His church. It means not adding to, nor taking away from His inspired written Word.

The early church of God was not perfect. Sometimes they fell short of doing the will of God. Most of those who were called did not make their call and election sure, but fell into apostasy.

Matthew 22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

This will be very true as we go through the history of the true church.

Many loved the Roman world rather than God. But ‘the called’ who through diligence made their call and election sure, were doing the will of God.

II Peter 1:5-9 But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

This lack of fruit could exist because a person’s “cleansing” was merely an external reformation that did not come from a truly changed heart. But it could also describe a genuine Christian who has fallen into serious error regarding the Christian life. Only God knows a person’s true status. Paul confirms in II Timothy 2:19 that “the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His.”

“Diligence” in verse 5 means, being eager; making every effort. It takes every bit of zeal a Christian can muster, along with the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, to escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires, and to bring in alongside of his faith a complement of virtue. As a Christian does so, he becomes more like Christ, participating more fully in God's divine nature.

II Peter 1:10-11 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The word rendered "election," here in the Greek, *eklogēen*, occurs in only seven places in the New Testament, though corresponding words from the same root denoting "the elect, to elect, to choose," frequently occur. The word, here used, means "election," referring to the act of God by which those who are saved are "chosen" to eternal life.

As the word "calling" must refer to the act of God, so the word "election" must also, because it is God who both "calls" and "chooses" those who will be saved. The word in the Scriptures usually refers to the actual choosing of those who will be saved.

The English word "sure," in verse 10, is translated from the Greek word *bebaios*, meaning "reliable, unshifting, firm." Additional synonyms are: secure, guaranteed, firm, courage, confidence, and in force. This Greek word for "sure" or "surety" (*bebaian*) was used in classical Greek to refer to a warranty deed somewhat like those people use it today on houses and other pieces of property. Our godly behavior is a warranty deed for ourselves that Jesus Christ has cleansed us from our past sins, and that, therefore, we were called and elected by God.

To make our call and election sure we must submit completely to God's authority. In this submission we have the responsibility of overcoming: Satan, the world, and our human nature.

We are told repeatedly in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, through the apostle John, that great and wonderful blessings will come to those who overcome. This was declared in the prophetic letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

During the Days of Unleavened Bread, we mostly focus on overcoming personal sins; and this is as it should be. But there is also much to be learned by looking at the history of the church as a body, to see the trends of spiritual progress and spiritual problems that have been characteristic of the church.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court wrote:

When I want to understand what is happening today or try to decide what will happen tomorrow, I look back.

That is another way of saying that history repeats itself. That is a very effective way of exposing areas in our lives that need to be changed and of reinforcing areas in our lives that produce good character. No doubt, we learn more from our mistakes than we do from our successes. It seems like our failures stick with us a lot longer too.

Now let us continue on through the fourth century.

In AD 364, a major doctrine of the true church was prominently attacked by the Roman Catholic Church. This time, the emphasis was on the weekly Sabbath. The issue of the Sabbath was becoming a hot topic of frustration to the Roman church.

William James, in his *Sermons on the Sacraments and Sabbath*, on pages 122-123 says:

When the practice of keeping Saturday Sabbaths, which had become so general at the close of this century (i.e., the fourth century) was evidently gaining ground in the Eastern church, a decree was passed in the Council of Laodicea, "That members of the church should not rest from work on the Sabbath like Jews."

At the council of Laodicea, held in the year AD 364, where several hundred bishops gathered, a law was passed prohibiting Christians to Judaize, i.e., to rest from their work on Saturday, as do the Jews. This law was thought by the bishops necessary because of the rapid gain throughout the Eastern church of Saturday observance.

An interesting thing is happening these days in Europe. The European Parliament is wanting to establish Sunday as the Sabbath, and make it mandatory so that you could not work on that day, which by default, means that you have to work on Saturdays. So they are trying to put that through. I many have mentioned it in another sermon about a year or so ago, and the unions are all for it. But with the current problems in the EU, could they really reach that point? Probably, they will. But, as we see that is what they try to do. It is not a matter of letting you worship when you see fit. It is a matter of telling you what you can and cannot do, forcing you to keep Sunday, just as they have done for hundreds of years.

Gradually, the first day of the week came into prominence as an added day, but later by civil and ecclesiastical authority as a required observance. The first legislation on the subject was the famous law of Constantine, enacted AD 321 at the Council of Nicaea.

The acts of various councils during the fourth and fifth centuries established the observance of the first day of the week by Roman Catholic authority. In the great apostasy that followed, Sunday rose to prominence. During the centuries that followed, however, there were always witnesses for the true Sabbath, although under great persecution.

Listen to this illuminating quote regarding Roman Catholicism's attitude toward God's inspired written Word, from *Faith of Our Fathers*, by Cardinal Gibbons, page 89, edition of 1917:

A rule of faith, or a competent guide to heaven, must be able to instruct all the truths necessary for salvation. Now the Scriptures alone do not contain all the truths which a Christian is bound to believe, nor do they explicitly enjoin all the duties which he is obliged to practice. Not to mention other examples, is not every Christian obliged to sanctify Sunday and to abstain on that day from unnecessary servile work? Is not the observance of this law among the most promising of our sacred duties? But you may read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and you will not find a single line authorizing the sanctification of Sunday. The Scriptures enforce the religious observance of Saturday, a day which we never sanctify.

This change of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, by the Roman Catholic Church, made the visible sign of the seventh day Sabbath an even greater witness of the identity of the true church of God. Sadly, after the council of Laodicea, in the year AD 364, persecution of seventh day Sabbath keepers became much easier to carry out.

How important is it to you to keep the seventh day Sabbath, which is one of the major identifiers of the true church of God? Another identifier is the keeping of the seven annual feast days. Another day will come when they will try to take this away from us again.

How deeply are you convicted? Is it only a preference? If it is only a preference, you will easily give in and change sides. It is something we have to deeply think about, and pray about, finding out where we stand on these things.

The Paulicians

Although there were probably other truly faithful Christians in the Western world that were too obscure to identify from historical works, in the Eastern Roman Empire, the name given to the people of God by their enemies was *Paulicians*, meaning in the original Armenian, “a follower of wretched little Paul.” Scholars differ on the origin of that name. Some feel it was because of their devotion to the apostle Paul; others think the name is derived from a third century bishop.

The earliest surviving mention of Paulicians is in AD 555. But, the name is not as important as what they believed and taught. Although these Christians existed in hiding from the early fourth century, they would not become known to the world until the seventh century.

Historian A. H. Newman, in his book, *A Manual of Church History*, Volume 1, Page 381, described the Paulician hiding place in Armenia:

It was the huge recess or circular dam formed by the Taurus mountain range that furnished a comparatively secure abiding place for this ancient form of Christianity.

Probably the greatest handicap in studying church history is the lack of original writings from the true Christians themselves. In fact, most of the material available about any non-mainstream Christians is from those who persecuted them. These sources are often unreliable. Nevertheless, there is a great deal that can be gleaned from their records.

But in the case of the Paulicians an astonishing literary discovery was made in the late nineteenth century. British scholar and theologian Fred C. Conybeare discovered seventh and eighth century Paulician manuscripts that had been stored in an Armenian monastery. The amazing find was called *The Key of Truth*.

In that collection were many Paulician customs and beliefs. Of this discovery, Conybeare says he had at last,

. . . understood who these Paulicians really were. All who had written about them had been misled by [slander]. I now realized that I had stumbled on the monument of a phase of the Christian Church so old and so outworn, that the very memory of it was lost.

The reports circulated about the doctrines of these people were slanderous and false. Often “false brethren” who lived among God’s people were confused with those of the true church.

The Key of Truth, the partially preserved record of God’s people called Paulicians, proves that they preached the gospel of the Kingdom; that they believed the church was founded not only upon Jesus Christ, but also upon the apostles and prophets; that they baptized by immersion; that they laid on hands for the reception of the Spirit. They not only continued to keep the Passover on Nisan 14, but they also observed the seventh day Saturday Sabbath, and the festival of Unleavened Bread.

The apostle Paul describes members of God’s church with this very same foundation:

Ephesians 2:19-22 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief

cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Now, the Days of Unleavened Bread are a time in which we work to overcome sin, Satan, human nature, and the world *together*. We are being built as a church *together*. We worship God on Passover, and we worship and receive teaching on the first and last days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread *together*.

Fred Conybeare writes about the faithfulness of the Paulicians to adhere to the teaching of the apostles:

The Sabbath was perhaps kept, and there were no special Sunday observances. . . . Wednesday and Friday were not kept as fast-days. Of the modern Christmas and of the Annunciation, and of the other feasts connected with the life of Jesus prior to his thirtieth year, this phase of the Church knew nothing. The general impression which the study of it leaves on us is that in it we have before us a form of the Church not very remote from the primitive Jewish Christianity of Palestine.

The “primitive Jewish Christianity of Palestine” was that of the early apostolic church.

Through centuries of persecution, God gave the faithful members of the church of God the patience and perseverance to remain faithful to His true doctrine, guarding the truth, and refusing to let anyone take it from them, even unto death. Even through persecuted, they mostly adhered to the faith once delivered.

Constantine of Manaeli

It was about AD 650, that God (as if by miracle) raised up among the scattered remnants of His church in Cappadocia and Armenia a man of the Paulician period who revitalized His people and spread the gospel. This well-educated man, by the name of Constantine of Mananeli, was given a gift of various sections of the Bible. He was utterly amazed by the truth he found revealed in it. Soon he began preaching, and with the help of trained ministers found such a fruitful harvest that there were tens of thousands called to the truth.

In the town of Mananeli, Constantine received a returning resident who had been held captive in Syria. This man had obtained a manuscript of the New Testament. Together they studied the Scriptures.

Constantine eventually took the name of Silvanus, the scribe who wrote down the epistle of I Peter. As more and more people in the area studied and were called, they took biblical New Testament names, and endeavored to live by the teachings of the New Testament as they came to understand. And, their numbers grew rapidly.

In AD 684, to stamp out the movement, the Byzantine emperor dispatched a man named Simeon. He gathered some of Constantine of Mananeli’s followers and, under penalty of death if they did not cooperate, ordered them to stone Constantine.

Sadly, in a group of Christians, some only professing to be Christian may weaken. In this case at least one did, and he stoned his former leader, Constantine, after 27 years of ministry. To some members, God's truth is a preference rather than a conviction.

Simeon, the persecutor, was so moved by the faith of Constantine and his Paulician followers, that after faithful Constantine's death, Simeon himself was called, becoming a member of the Paulicians. He took the name, Titus, in honor of one of the apostle Paul's close fellow ministers.

Much like the apostle Paul, Simeon embraced the doctrine he was sent to stamp out. He renounced his former life, his honors, and his wealth, and he eventually became a leader and minister among the persecuted Paulicians. He was burned at the stake by Byzantine Emperor Justinian II, 6 years later.

Edward Gibbon wrote in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* of these times:

From the blood and ashes of the first victims, a succession of teachers and congregations repeatedly arose.

Simeon's successor was a man named Paul—little is known about him. Later, Gegnesius, his son and successor to this Paul, took the name of Timothy, and convinced Emperor Leo III that the Paulician doctrine was not heresy.

During the seventh century, Paulicianism became an accepted faith in a vast region along the Taurus Mountains in Armenia. It made great inroads in Armenia, Albania on the Caspian Sea, and nearby regions.

But with most Paulicians, numbering in the tens of thousands, it was only a *form* of religion. Many were called, but few were chosen. Many preferred to obey God rather than making it a conviction, which is also the case today.

Truly converted members of God's church were the minority—the few. Often many false members worshipped among God's faithful members, and weak members could not distinguish the difference between the true and the false. As a result, the visible church took on many false doctrines. It is interesting what this situation led to.

During all this time, persecution had not ceased. Even in Armenia an organized persecution was waged as early as the middle of the sixth century. Persecution was nearly continuous in Roman occupied Byzantine territory.

The civil government was replaced by the dominant Catholic Church as the active agent of persecution because it knew best how to hunt down and identify its victims. It knew just enough of true doctrine to detect its intended victims from among the general population.

At first, the persecutors of true "Christianity" found it difficult to condemn Paulician doctrine. When the prosecutors asked, "Do you believe in this or that fundamental "Christian doctrine?", the Paulician could many times answer, "Yes."

Knowing that Catholics neither understood biblical meaning nor even the religious sounding phraseology that they so unthinkingly repeated, many spiritually weak Paulicians allowed themselves

the latitude of mental reservation while outwardly they agreed to the persecutor's demands. This hypocritical and spineless, "save your own skin" mentality, showed little or no faith in God's promises nor loyalty to Jesus Christ and His church.

If we are not careful, we may give in to the same weakness, just as Peter did when he denied Jesus three times. Jesus exposes this weakness.

Matthew 26:32-35 But after I [Jesus] have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And so said all the disciples.

If we start down the road of compromise, our conscience becomes increasingly blurred. In time and with persistence, persecutors of the Paulicians discovered certain pertinent questions that inescapably reduced their Paulician victims either to apostasy or martyrdom. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ prophesied that one of the strong characteristics of the His church was that the relatively few spiritual members of the true church of God would not deny the truth.

Revelation 2:13 I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

We are not sure who Antipas was, but we know that his name means, "agreement to all," or something similar. It was also part of Herod's name, which meant exactly the opposite, along the lines of "not with you."

Jesus knows all the temptations to which we are exposed; all the enticements to sin which surround us; all the apologies for our actions which have occurred depending on circumstances; and all that we are commended for, having been as faithful as we have been. Jesus knows where we live and have lived, which provides insight into our strengths and weaknesses for resisting and overcoming past bad habits and sins.

Someone raised in the inner-city faces crime daily and as a result may be more inclined to violent emotional outbursts than someone raised on a peaceful farm taking care of animals. Tempers can flare in either of these circumstances, but each has been programmed by society in opposite ways. So, God takes our environment into consideration when dealing with us. He helps us, praises us, and rewards us accordingly, as we overcome the sins that society has encouraged us to commit. "I know your works, and where you dwell. Hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith," even when you are faced with martyrdom. In other words, it is easier to be virtuous in some circumstances than in others. Nevertheless, we must be virtuous regardless of our past hang-ups.

And in order to determine how much credit is due a person for his virtues, it is necessary to understand how much he has been called to resist, how many temptations he has encountered, what easily-committed sins he may have, or what enticements may be strong enough to draw him away from obeying God.

Similarly, in order to make a correct judgment about someone who has gone wrong, or has been led to sin, it is necessary to understand what it is about his circumstances that makes it easy for him to

give in to sin, what there was in his situation in life that exposed him to these influences, and what justifications may have been used to lead him astray.

Regarding the Paulicians, many “professing” Christians permitted themselves full external conformity with the dominant false church. They secretly knew they were sinning, but they were afraid. And, they believed that Christ would forgive it. Consequently, many had a problem with idolatry and sexual immorality, going as far in the way of evil as they thought they could get away with.

Satan always tries to corrupt professing Christians by introducing false teachers who teach the “doctrine of Balaam.” What does “Balaam” represent in Scripture?

Numbers 31:16 records how Balaam induced the Israelites to practice idolatry and commit physical and spiritual sexual immorality. Balaam is represented as the archetype of the false teachers of the Christian church who pervert the truth of the gospel in the interests of personal gain, and under the guise of Christian liberty advocate compromise with the world.

The apostle Peter gives a detailed description of the way of Balaam. Peter indicates that the false teachers of the doctrine of Balaam are within the physical organization of God’s church; they directly target baptized members of God’s church.

II Peter 2:15-22 They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

Obviously, Revelation 2:14 connects Balaam to sexual immorality. Simply put, sexual immorality (or fornication) is a sexual relationship outside the bonds of marriage. It is a serious sin. The technical biblical distinction between fornication and adultery is that adultery involves married persons, while fornication involves sexual immorality of those who are unmarried. But the New Testament often uses the term “fornication” or “sexual immorality” in a general sense for *any* sexual relationship outside of marriage. It is a serious sin.

Spiritual fornication, as mentioned in the book of Revelation, is symbolic of how idolatry and anti-Christian religion defiles true worship of God. This type of fornication is spiritual unfaithfulness to Jesus Christ, the church's betrothed husband. Following, or even toying with, false religions and false teachers is spiritual fornication. Spiritual fornication is also idolatry.

James 4:4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Conclusion

We must keep the church pure, free from false doctrine, and worldly living. In the Old Testament, going after false gods is compared to adultery; in the New Testament, worldliness is called adultery.

These false teachers gradually persuaded many Paulicians in the church to celebrate certain idolatrous pagan holidays, particularly the Orthodox feast of Epiphany, supposedly in honor of Christ's birth and then circumcision on January 6. But it was a pagan holiday in honor of the ancient Tammuz, the false "Christ child," son of Nimrod and Semiramis. This ancient pagan celebration was syncretized into the counterfeit Christianity.

The people of God, whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, and Today, must never presume to sin.

I Corinthians 10:6-12 Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

As the result of all these admonitions, let this encourage us not to rely on our own strength. We must never suppose we are strong in the knowledge of His truth. We cannot allow ourselves to feel secure in our own self-confidence. Be careful not to fall into materialism, sexual immorality, idolatry, or any other form of sin.

From Paul's statement here in I Corinthians 10:6-12 we learn: 1) That a confidence in our own security is no evidence that we are safe, 2) Such a confidence may be one of the strongest evidences that we are in danger. It is often that when we feel weak and feeble, then we feel the need of divine help and strength. We will then rely on the true source of strength; and we will be secure, and 3) All Christians should be admonished, because all are in danger of falling into sin, and of dishonoring Christ's name. This urging will never be too often or too urgently pressed, because human nature tends toward slipping into sin.

There are times when we are more susceptible to Satan's deceptions. We should exercise special caution when we feel good about ourselves and when things are going well for us; because then our adversary will be especially eager to draw away our thoughts from God, and to lead us into sin. And, then we will be less likely to be on our guard, and more likely to think we are strong, and not need caution and concern.

Christians who feel especially blessed with material things often feel filled with joy and peace. Yet they often become self-confident and elated; they lose their humility and their sense of their

dependence; they cease to be watchful and prayerful, supposing that all is safe; and the result often is that a period of enthusiasm is succeeded by a time of detachment and weakening.

I Corinthians 10:12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

In verse 12, Paul warns the overconfident, and then encourages the fearful in verse 13.

I Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

What encouraging words! Knowing that we cannot do it ourselves, we remember that God the Father, and Jesus Christ will see us through if we have a humble attitude, if we are teachable.

Next time we will continue to survey the church's history from the seventh century.