

# Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up

by David Bercot

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*The early Christians were characterized by their separation from the world, unconditional love, and childlike obedience to Jesus, and they trusted in God's sovereignty and faith in God's goodness.*

**Duration:** 1:30:05

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:31, Hebrews 10:26

**Topics:** "Early Christianity", "Salvation By Faith"

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## Description

This sermon delves into the beliefs and practices of early Christians between 90 and 199 AD, emphasizing the importance of obedience, faith, and works in salvation. It contrasts the teachings of the early Christians with the heretical Gnostics who denied Jesus' humanity and salvation by grace alone. The sermon challenges the modern Church to reevaluate its focus on material blessings and return to the simple holiness and obedience of the early Christians.

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## Transcript

Who were the early Christians? By the term early Christians, we are primarily referring to the Christians who lived between 90 and 199 AD. The Apostle John was still living at the beginning of this period. The first generation of early Christians were men like Polycarp who had been personally taught by one or more of the Apostles.

The period ended with a man who was only one human link removed from John, Irenaeus, a pupil of Polycarp. By the term early Christianity, we are referring to beliefs and practices of the worldwide community of early Christians who maintained bonds of fellowship and communion with each other. We are not referring to the beliefs or practices of anyone labeled as a heretic by that church.

So we're not describing the entire field of wheat and weeds mixed together, but only the wheat. Although this presentation primarily focuses on the Christians who lived between 90 and 199, the common beliefs and practices of these early Christians were generally maintained by Christians living in the next century. For that reason, the discussion that follows will also include quotations from writers who lived between 200 and 313, as long as their teachings agree with those who lived in the period immediately after the Apostles.

Were these the early Church Fathers, you may ask? These men were not Church Fathers. Most of them were fairly ordinary, hard-working Christian leaders with above-average education. They would have been

highly indignant at being called Church Fathers.

The only Church Fathers they recognized were the Apostles. Actually, the very fact that these writers were not Church Fathers is what makes their writing so valuable. If these men had been great founders of theology, their writings would be of limited value to us.

They would simply tell us what doctrines these particular founding theologians had developed. But these men did not write theological treatises. In fact, no one in the 2nd century Church can even be called a theologian in the modern sense, and there is no real systematic theology in the entire pre-Constantine Church.

Instead, the early Christian writings primarily consist of 1. apologetic works explaining universally held Christian beliefs to the Romans and Jews, 2. works defending apostolic Christianity against heretics, and 3. correspondence between churches. These writings are a witness to what the Church in general believed and practiced during the period shortly after the Apostles had died. This is what makes them invaluable.

In fact, the only person during the entire period between 90 and 313 who can rightly be called a theologian is Origen. But Origen didn't impose his views on other Christians. Instead, he was one of the least dogmatics of all the writers of the early Christian period, and this was an age when nobody was very dogmatic on matters beyond the few essential Christian doctrines.

One of the noticeable features of early Christianity is the relative lack of rigidly defined theological dogma. In fact, the further one goes back in Christian history, the less defined dogma he finds. Nevertheless, there still were some essential doctrines and common practices that all Orthodox Christians held to.

This presentation will focus on these common or universally held beliefs and practices. To that end, we have not represented any beliefs or practices as being those of the early Church in general unless they met the following criteria. All early Christian writers who mention the subject express the same view, and at least five early Christian writers, separated by time or geographical distance, discuss the subject.

Actually, most of the matters discussed in this presentation are supported by testimony from more than five writers. The three distinguishing marks of the early Church were separation from the world, unconditional love, and childlike obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ. 1. Separation from the World If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you.

If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you're not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 2. Unconditional Love A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.

As I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. 3. Obedient Trust You believe in God, believe also in me.

He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me. 4. Separation from the World No one can serve two masters, declared Jesus to his disciples, Matthew 6.24. However, Christians have spent the greater portion of the past two millenniums apparently trying to prove Jesus wrong. We have told ourselves that we can indeed have both the things of God and the things of this world.

Many of us live our lives no differently than do conservative non-Christians, except for the fact that we attend church regularly each week. We watch the same entertainment, we share the same concerns about the problems of this world, and we are frequently just as involved in the world's commercial and materialistic pursuits. Often our being not of this world exists in theory more than in practice.

But the church was not originally like that. The first Christians lived under a completely different set of principles and values than the rest of mankind. They rejected the world's entertainment, honors, and riches.

They were already citizens of another kingdom, and they listened to the voice of a different master. This was as true of the second century church as it was of the first. The letter to Diognetus, the work of an unknown author, written in about 130, describes Christians to the Romans as follows.

They dwell in their own countries, simply as sojourners. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven.

They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time they surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned.

They are put to death, but restored to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich. They possess few things, yet they abound in all.

They are dishonored, but in their very dishonor are glorified. And those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred. Because the earth wasn't their home, the early Christians could say without reservation, like Paul, To live is Christ, to die is a game.

Justin Martyr explained to the Romans, Since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men put us to death. Death is a debt we must all pay anyway. A second century elder exhorted his congregation, Brothers, let us willingly leave our sojourn in this present world, so we can do the will of Him who called us.

And let us not fear to depart out of this world, deeming the things of this world as not belonging to us, and not fixing our desires upon them. The Lord declares, No servant can serve two masters. If we desire then to serve both God and money, it will be unprofitable for us.

For what will it profit if a man gains the whole world and loses his own soul? This world and the next are two enemies. We cannot therefore be the friends of both. Cyprian, the respected overseer of the church in Carthage, stressed a similar theme in a letter he wrote to a Christian friend.

The one peaceful and trustworthy tranquility, the one security that is solid, firm, and never changing, is this, for a man to withdraw from the distractions of this world, anchor himself to the firm ground of salvation, and lift his eyes from earth to heaven. He who is actually greater than the world can crave nothing, can desire nothing from this world. How stable, how unshakable is that safeguard, how heavenly is the protection in its never-ending blessings, to be free from the snares of this entangling world, to be purged from the dregs of the earth, and fitted for the light of eternal immortality.

The same themes run throughout all the writings of the early Christians, from Europe to North Africa. We can't have both Christ and the world. Lest we think that the early Christians were describing a lifestyle that they didn't really practice, we have the testimony of the Romans themselves.

One pagan antagonist of the Christians remarked, They despise the temples as houses of the dead. They reject the gods, they laugh at sacred things. Wretched, they pity our priests.

Half-naked themselves, they despise honors and purple robes. What incredible audacity and foolishness! They are not afraid of present torments, but they fear those that are uncertain and future. While they do not fear to die for the present, they fear to die after death.

At least learn from your present situation, you wretched people, what actually awaits you after death. See, many of you, in fact by your own admission, the majority of you are in want, are cold, are hungry, and are laboring in hard work, yet your God allows it. He is either unwilling or unable to assist his people, so he is either weak or unjust.

Take notice, for you there are threats, punishments, tortures, and crosses. Where is the God who is supposed to help you when you come back from the dead? He cannot even help you in this life. Do not the Romans, without any help from your God, govern, rule over, and have the enjoyment of the whole world, including dominion over you yourselves.

In the meantime, living in suspense and anxiety, you abstain from respectable pleasures. You do not attend sporting events, you have no interest in public amusements, you reject the public banquets and abhor the sacred games. Thus, wretched as you are, you will neither rise from the dead nor enjoy life in the meanwhile.

So if you have any wisdom or sense, stop prying into the heavens and the destinies and secrets of the world. Persons who are unable to understand civil matters are certainly unable to discuss divine ones. When we read the criticisms that the Romans leveled against the Christians, we must painfully realize that no one would accuse Christians today of those same charges.

We aren't criticized for being totally absorbed in the interests of the heavenly kingdom, ignoring the things the world has to offer. In fact, Christians today are accused of just the opposite. We are accused of being money-hungry and hypocritical in our devotion to God.

A Love Without Condition At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire Church as it did in the first three centuries. And Roman society took notice. Tertullian reported that the Romans would exclaim, See how they love one another.

Justin Martyr sketched Christian love this way, We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refuse to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.

Clement, describing the person who has come to know God, wrote, He impoverishes himself out of love so that he is certain he may never overlook a brother in need, especially if he knows he can bear poverty better than his brother. He likewise considers the pain of another as his own pain, and if he suffers any hardship because of having given out of his own poverty, he does not complain. When a devastating plague swept across the ancient world in the 3rd century, Christians were the only ones who cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves.

Meanwhile, pagans were throwing infected members of their own families into the streets even before they died in order to protect themselves from the disease. Another example illustrates both the brotherly love of Christians and their uncompromising commitment to Jesus as Lord. A pagan actor became a Christian, but he realized he had to change his employment because most plays encouraged immorality and were steeped in pagan idolatry.

Furthermore, the theater sometimes purposefully turned boys into homosexuals so they could better play the roles of women on stage. Since this newly converted actor had no other job skills, he considered establishing an acting school to teach drama to non-Christian students. However, he first submitted his idea to the leaders of his church for their counsel.

The leaders told him that if acting was an immoral profession, then it would be wrong to train others in it. Nevertheless, since this was a rather novel question, they wrote to Cyprian in nearby Carthage for his thoughts. Cyprian agreed that a profession unfit for a Christian to practice was also unfit for him to teach, even if this was his sole means of support.

How many of us would be so concerned about righteousness that we would submit our employment decisions to our body of elders or board of deacons? How many church leaders today would be so concerned about offending God that they would take such an uncompromising position? But that isn't the end of the story. Cyprian also told his neighboring church that they should be willing to support the actor if he had no other means of earning a living, just as they supported orphans, widows, and other needy persons. Going further, he wrote, If your church is financially unable to support him, he may move over to us and receive whatever he needs for food and clothing.

Cyprian and his church didn't even know this actor, yet they were willing to support him because he was a fellow believer. As one Christian told the Romans, If Christians today made such a statement to the world, would the world believe it? The love of the early Christians wasn't limited simply to their fellow believers. Christians also lovingly helped non-believers, the poor, the orphans, the elderly, the sick, the shipwrecked, even their persecutors.

Jesus had said, The early Christians accepted this statement as a command from their Lord rather than as an ideal that couldn't be actually practiced in real life. Lactantius wrote, For this reason, God has declared that we should hate no one, but that we should eliminate hatred, so we can comfort our enemies by reminding them of our mutual relationship. For if we have all been given life from the same God, what else are we but brothers? Because we are all brothers, we are all brothers.

God teaches us to never do evil to one another, but only good, giving aid to those who are oppressed and experiencing hardship, and giving food to the hungry. The scripture teaches that a Christian shouldn't take his brother to court. Rather, he should suffer fraud at the hands of his brother, if need be.

1 Corinthians 6-7 In contrast to many professing Christians today that don't hesitate to sue their brothers and sisters in Christ, early Christians not only refused to take their fellow Christians to court, most of them refused to take anyone to court, since they viewed every human as their brother or sister. It's no wonder that Christianity spread rapidly throughout the ancient world, even though there were few organized missionary or evangelism programs. The love they practiced drew the attention of the world, just as Jesus said it would.

A Childlike Trust in God To the early Christians, trust in God meant more than a teary-eyed testimony about the time I came to trust the Lord. It meant believing that even if obedience to God entailed great suffering, God was trustworthy to bring a person through it. A person who does not do what God has commanded shows he really does not believe God, Clement declared.

To the early Christians, to claim to trust God while refusing to obey Him was a contradiction, 1 John 2-4. Their Christianity was more than verbal. As one early Christian expressed it, We don't speak great things, we live them.

One distinguishing mark of the early Christians was their childlike, literal obedience to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. They didn't feel they had to understand the reason for a commandment before they would obey it. They just trusted that God's way was always the best way.

Clement asked, Who then is so irreverent as to disbelieve God and to demand explanations from God as from man? They trusted God because they lived in awe of His majesty and wisdom. Felix, a Christian lawyer in Rome and a contemporary of Tertullian put it this way, God is greater than all our perceptions. He is infinite, immense.

Only He truly understands His true greatness. Our hearts are too limited to really understand Him. We are making a worthy estimation of Him when we say that He is beyond estimation.

Anyone who thinks he knows the magnitude of God diminishes his greatness. The supreme example of their absolute trust in God was their acceptance of persecution. From the time of the Emperor Trajan, around AD 100, until the Edict of Milan was issued in 313, the practice of Christianity was illegal within the boundaries of the Roman Empire.

Being a Christian was a crime punishable by death. But the Roman officials didn't generally hunt out Christians. They ignored them unless someone formally accused a person of being a Christian.

As a result, persecution was intermittent. Christians in one town would suffer horrible tortures and death, while Christians in a nearby area would be untouched. It was totally unpredictable.

Yet every Christian lived daily with a death sentence hanging over his head. The very fact that Christians were willing to suffer unspeakable horrors and to die rather than disown their God was, next to their lifestyle, their single most effective evangelistic tool. Few, if any Romans, would die for their gods.

There had to be some substance to Christianity if it meant so much to those who practiced it. In fact, the Greek word for witness is martyr. Not surprisingly, this is also the Greek word for martyr.

In many places where our Bibles use the word witness, the early Christians were reading martyr. For example, in our Bibles, Revelation 2.13 refers to Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city. The early Christians were understanding the passage to say, Antipas, my faithful martyr.

Although most Christians tried to flee local persecution when possible, they rejected any mass exodus from the Roman Empire. Like little children, they believed their master when he said his church would be built on a rock and that the gates of Hades would not overpower it. Matthew 16.18 They realized that thousands of them might die monstrous deaths, experience excruciating tortures, and suffer imprisonment.

But they were absolutely convinced that their father wouldn't let the church be annihilated. Christians stood before the Romans with naked hands, letting them know that Christians would not use human means to try to preserve the church. They trusted God and God alone as their protector.

As Origen told the Romans, When God gives the tempter permission to persecute us, we suffer persecution. And when God wishes us to be free from suffering, even though surrounded by a world that hates us, we enjoy a wonderful peace. We trust in the protection of the one who said, Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.

And truly he has overcome the world. Therefore the world prevails only as long as it is permitted to by him who received power from the Father to overcome the world. From his victory we take courage.

Even if he should again wish us to suffer and contend for our faith, let the enemy come against us. We will say to them, I can do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord who strengthens me. Origen had lost his father to persecution when he was a teenager, and he himself eventually died from torture and imprisonment at the hands of the Romans.

Yet with unshakable confidence he told the Romans, Eventually every form of worship will be destroyed except the religion of Christ, which alone will stand. In fact, it will one day triumph, for its teachings take hold of men's minds more and more each day. Is right and wrong simply a matter of culture? Early Christianity was a revolution that swept through the ancient world like fire through dry timber.

It was a counter-cultural movement that challenged the pivotal institutions of Roman society. As Tertullian wrote, Our contest lies against the institutions of our ancestors, against the authority of tradition, against man-made laws, against the reasonings of the worldly wise, against antiquity, and against customs. How strange it is, therefore, that the modern Church claims that the Christians of the first few centuries were merely teaching and practicing the culture of their day.

This is particularly ironic since the Romans bitterly criticized the Christians for just the opposite, for not following the cultural norms of their day. But the relationship of the early Christians to their culture is not simply a matter of past history. It is something that should deeply concern the Church today.

For most of the cultural issues facing 20th century Christians are the very same issues that faced the early Church. However, our response to these issues has generally been quite different from theirs. Divorce, a Roman Plague As in most societies, the family was the core unit of Roman civilization.

But as is true today, marriages were often unhappy. Both husbands and wives frequently had lovers. By the time of Christ, extramarital affairs on the part of both husbands and wives were so frequent that they were no longer scandalous.

Not surprisingly, divorce was fairly commonplace. Roman men and women often married four or five times. As Tertullian remarked, As for divorce, women longed for it, as though it were the natural consequence of marriage.

In Roman society, most marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. Newly wedded couples were not usually in love with each other and often hardly knew each other on their wedding day. Frequently, there was a considerable age difference between husband and wife.

This was true among Christians as well as Roman society in general. So it would be far easier to justify divorce in Roman society than in 20th century America. Nevertheless, the early Christians didn't rationalize matters from a human viewpoint.

Even though divorce was considered perfectly proper in their society, they didn't permit divorce except for adultery. As Origen wrote, Christians took Jesus' words seriously when he said, The strict position of the early Christians against divorce obviously was a reflection of their culture. But what about our attitude toward divorce? Haven't our views followed the trends of our culture? Forty years ago, an evangelical Christian wouldn't have dreamed of divorcing his or her spouse merely because of incompatibility.

Today, the divorce rate among evangelicals is fast approaching that of the world. What has changed? Certainly not Scripture. Rather, the conservative bloc of American society has changed its views on divorce.

Evangelicals often pride themselves for opposing worldly attitudes and trends, but in reality, what we so often oppose is merely the liberal segment of the world. Once a practice is accepted by the conservative element, the Church soon follows in stride. Divorce is a prime example.

Peter had instructed women, Paul gave similar instructions, In giving these exhortations, the apostles weren't simply reinforcing the cultural norms of their day. They were doing just the opposite. A fashionable Roman woman used virtually every beauty aid that her modern-day counterpart uses.

She began the day by arranging her hair and putting on her makeup. She painted her lips, applied black eyeshadow, put on false eyelashes, coated her face with white powder, and smoothed rouge onto her cheeks. She wore her hair in an elaborate hairdo, complete with curls, bangs, and ornate layers of braids.

Some women wore imported wigs from India, and many dyed their hair blonde. Roman women adorned the rest of their bodies as much as their faces. When going out, they would array themselves with jewels, often wearing expensive rings on every finger.

Fashionable women insisted on wearing gowns made of imported materials such as silk, even though pound for pound, silk cost as much as gold. Clement commented whimsically, Even many Roman men wore cosmetics and dressed as lavishly as the women. In contrast, the Church discouraged the use of cosmetics and exhorted men and women to be content with simple clothing.

Not only was simple clothing less costly, but luxurious dresses were often transparent and clung sensuously to a woman's figure. Clement remarked, Even though they cannot actually see the body itself, such clothing is meant for looking, not for covering. Nevertheless, the early Church did not try to legislate the type of clothing Christians should wear.

While the Church emphasized the principles of simple, modest dress, the specific application of those principles was left up to the individual Christian. Aside from clothing, the Christian standard of modesty for both men and women also differed from those of Roman society. This was particularly apparent in public and private baths.

Few other societies, except for the Japanese, have had such a penchant for hot baths. Bathing was the national pastime, and public baths were one of the primary meeting places of Roman society. In the early days of the Roman Republic, baths for men and women had been strictly segregated.

However, by the 2nd century, mixed bathing in the nude was customary. Upper-class Romans often had baths in their homes, but modesty there was little different. Clement describes these private baths, Some women will scarcely undress in front of their own husbands out of a pretense of modesty.

But anyone else who wants to may see them at home shut up naked in their baths, for they are not embarrassed to strip before spectators as if exposing their bodies for sale. Those who have not become utterly destitute of modesty shut out strangers, yet they bathe with their own servants. They even strip naked in front of their slaves and are massaged by them.

In sharp contrast, Christians taught that men and women should not bathe publicly in each other's presence. Their attitudes toward modesty wasn't a reflection of Roman culture, but of godly culture. Don't the Roman attitudes on modesty also have their parallels in today's American society? Most Americans would be quite embarrassed to be seen in public in their underwear, yet they would think nothing of relaxing at a poolside in swimsuits that are no less revealing.

And don't we Christians generally follow right along with our culture? We appear in public in swimwear that would have shocked even non-Christians only 50 years ago. Yet, because our swimwear is acceptable to the modern conservative community, we think nothing of it. Roman R-Rated Entertainment Upper-class Romans enjoyed a lot of leisure time.

They filled their evenings and holidays with gluttonous banquets, the theater, and sporting events at the arena. Banquets sometimes lasted as long as 10 hours. It was not unheard of for a banquet to consist of 22 courses, including such delicacies as pig's udders and peacock tongues.

But Christians took no delight in these gluttonous feasts. The Roman theater was borrowed from the Greeks, and the favorite dramatic themes were crime, adultery, and immorality. Either boys or prostitutes played the female roles.

Although the theater was a favorite pastime of educated Romans, Christians shunned the theater with disgust. Lactantius wrote, I am inclined to think that the corrupting influence of the stage is even worse than that of the arena. The subject of comedies are the deflowering of virgins or the loves of prostitutes.

Similarly, the tragedies parade before the eyes of the audience, the murder of parents and acts of incest committed by wicked kings. Is the art of the mimes any better? They teach adultery by acting it out. How do we expect our young people to respond when they see that these things are practiced without shame and that everyone eagerly watches? Tertullian added, The father who carefully protects and guards his virgin daughter's ears from every polluting word takes her to the theater himself, exposing her to all its vile language and attitudes.

He asked rhetorically, How can it be right to look at the things that are wrong to do? How can those things which defile a man when they go out of his mouth not defile when going in through his eyes and ears? Although it was mainly upper-class Romans who attended the theater and banquets, the rich and poor alike enjoyed the arena. The games in the arena were designed to quench the Romans' undying thirst for violence, brutality, and blood. The brutal chariot races were the favorite event.

In the course of these races, chariots would inevitably crash, catapulting their drivers onto the racetrack, where they would either be dragged to death by the panic-stricken horses or trampled by another driver's team. All the while, the crowd would go wild with excitement. However, the death and violence that

accompanied chariot racing failed to satisfy the Roman thirst for blood.

So wild animals, sometimes hundreds of them, were brought into the arena to fight each other. Wolves against stags, lions against bulls, packs of dogs against bears, and just about any other combination that twisted minds could dream of. Sometimes, armed men hunted down animals.

Other times, starved animals hunted down unarmed Christians. But the Romans wanted even more. So human gladiators were pitted against each other to fight to the death.

Gladiators were normally prisoners who had already been condemned to death. The Romans thought they were being noble to give these men a fighting chance. If a gladiator triumphed in repeated fights, he could eventually win his freedom.

Once again, however, Christians didn't follow the culture of their day. Lactantius told his fellow Romans, He who finds it pleasurable to watch a man being killed, even though the man has been legally condemned, pollutes his conscience, just as much as though he were an accomplice or willing spectator of a murder committed in secret. Yet they call these sports, where human blood is shed.

They see men placed under the stroke of death, begging for mercy. Can they be righteous when they not only permit the men to be killed, but demand it? They cast their cruel and inhuman votes for death, not being satisfied by the mere flowing of blood or the presence of gashing wounds. In fact, they order the gladiators, although wounded and lying on the ground, to be attacked again and their corpse to be pummeled with blows to make certain they are not merely feigning death.

The crowds are even angry with the gladiators if one of the two isn't slain quickly, as though they thirsted for human blood. They hate delays. By steeping themselves in this practice, they have lost their humanity.

Therefore it is not fitting that we who strive to stay on the path of righteousness should share in this public homicide. When God forbids us to kill, he not only prohibits the violence that is condemned by public laws, but he also forbids the violence that is deemed lawful by men. Are we willing to take such an uncompromising stand toward entertainment today? After reading such counsel, do we step back and take a look at ourselves? Does our culture dictate our standards for entertainment? Perhaps you avoid movies that would be considered risqué by the conservative community, yet you end up watching entertainment that was saturated with violence, crime, and immorality, so long as the motion picture industry didn't give the movie a rating worse than PG-13.

If so, you let the motion picture industry decide for me what is or isn't fit to see. Your culture has determined your standards for entertainment. To the Romans, all persons were not created equal.

Virtually every human society has maintained class distinctions, and Rome was no exception. Wealthy Romans looked down on poor Romans. Freemen looked down on slaves.

Certain occupations were viewed as superior to others. Even the Jews had such class distinctions among themselves. Roman citizens viewed themselves as superior to all other peoples.

Once again, however, the early Christians went against the cultural current of the day. In fact, their teachings on the brotherhood of man were nothing short of revolutionary. Clement wrote, It is monstrous for one person to live in luxury while many are in want.

Writing a century later, Lactantius stated, No one is rich except the one without an abundance of virtues. The reason why neither the Romans nor the Greeks could possess justice was that they had so many class distinctions. The rich and the poor, the powerful and the lowly, the highest authority of kings, and the common individual.

However, someone may say, Isn't it true that among Christians some are poor and others are rich? Some are masters and others are servants? Isn't there some distinction between persons? But there is none. In fact, the very reason we all call each other brothers is that we believe we are all equal. Although the physical circumstances of Christian lives may differ, we view no persons as servants.

Instead, we speak of them and treat them as brothers in spirit and as fellow servants of Christ. The role of women in Roman religion Paul had told the Corinthians, And he told Timothy, In no other area are the Scriptures so frequently attacked today than on this teaching about the role of women in the Church. It's frequently said that the Apostles and early Christians were simply reinforcing the cultural attitudes of their time concerning the role of women in religion and society.

But Roman women were hardly known for their submissive character. As one Roman commented, In Roman religions women served in the same roles as men. Female high priestesses governed many temples.

Mark Felix, a Christian lawyer, described Roman religion this way, In fact, the leading religious figure in the ancient Mediterranean world was the oracle or prophetess of Delphi, and this oracle was always a woman. If the role of women in the Church had been simply a matter of culture and not apostolic teaching, we would expect to find that women served the same roles in both the Orthodox Church and the heretical groups. But this isn't the case.

Women were allowed to teach and officiate in most heretical sects. Tertullian made this comment about the role of women in such groups, They are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake healings, and perhaps even to baptize. So the exclusion of women from roles of teaching and oversight in the Church was definitely not a matter of Roman culture.

Wait a minute, you may be thinking, maybe the Church didn't follow Roman culture in this matter, but it was certainly following Jewish culture. And it's true that women were excluded from the Jewish priesthood. But remember that the Jewish priesthood wasn't a product of human culture, it was divinely instituted.

Furthermore, by the middle of the 2nd century, the vast majority of Christians were Gentiles, and they most definitely didn't follow Jewish culture. They didn't keep the Sabbath, practice circumcision, follow Jewish dietary laws, observe Jewish festivals, or follow any other Jewish customs that didn't specifically coincide with Christian teaching. The early Church simply obeyed the apostolic teachings on the role of women in the Church, the same as they obeyed all the other teachings of the Apostles.

And once again, they went against Roman culture, rather than following it. Feminists and modern theologians claim that the Church's position on women was a product of the contempt for women held by the Apostles and early Church leaders. But the writings of the early Christians speak differently.

For example, Felix wrote, Clement wrote, Let us understand that the virtue of man and woman is the same. For if the God of both is one, the Master of both is also one. But let's come back to us.

Why is it that the role of women in the Church has become such an issue today? Is it because we've found new Bible manuscripts that teach differently than our present Bibles? Or is it because our culture says that men and women should not perform different roles? Once again, who is unable to resist the culture of the day? We or the early Christians? If our prosperity preachers had checked the writings of John's companion, they would have found an urgent warning against seeking material prosperity, not a message of physical health and material wealth. In fact, the early Christians testify that the Apostles themselves lived in poverty, not material wealth. Rather than viewing wealth as a promised blessing from God, the early Christians viewed it as an entanglement that could cost a Christian his eternal life.

They base this understanding on Scripture passage such as, The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have. Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.

A bishop then must be blameless, not greedy for money. Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches. Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you.

Your riches are corrupted, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. You still lack one thing.

Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and Mammon. Applying some of the verses cited above, Hermas wrote, These are those who have faith in deed, but also have the riches of this world. When tribulation comes, they deny the Lord on account of their riches in business.

As a result, those who are rich in this world cannot be useful to the Lord unless their riches are first cut down. Learn this first from your own case. When you were rich, you were useless, but now you are useful and fit for life.

Refrain from much business, and you will avoid sin. Those who are occupied with much business also commit many sins, being distracted by their business affairs instead of serving the Lord. Clement warned that wealth can single-handedly puff up and corrupt the souls of those who possess it and turn them from the path of salvation.

He described wealth as Cyprian, a wealthy man who gave all his goods to the poor upon becoming a Christian, admonished the members of his congregation with these words, and prepared for or comfortable with departing this earth in persecution when their wealth fettered them like a chain. Therefore the Lord, the Teacher of good things, forewarning of the future, says, If rich men did this, they would not perish by their riches. Heart, mind, and feeling would be in heaven if the treasure were in heaven.

He who had nothing in the world would not be overcome by the world. He would follow the Lord unfettered and free as the apostles did. But how can they follow Christ when they are held back by the chain of their

wealth? They think that they own, when actually it is they who are owned.

They are not the lords of their money, but rather the slaves of money. Drawing from Jesus' illustration of the broad and the narrow roads, Lactantius warned against those who promised wealth and prosperity. Satan, having invented false religions, turns men away from the heavenly path and leads them into the way of ruin.

That path seems to be level and spacious and delightful with all kinds of flowers and fruits. For Satan places on this path all the things which are esteemed on earth as good things, wealth, honor, leisure, pleasure, and all sorts of enticements. But hidden along these are also injustice, cruelty, pride, lust, fights, ignorance, falsehood, folly, and other vices.

But the end of this way is as follows. When they have reached the point of no return, it is suddenly removed, along with its beauty. And it is so sudden that no one is able to foresee this fraud before he falls headfirst into a deep abyss.

In contrast, the heavenly path seems to be difficult and hilly, covered with painful thorns and strewn with jagged rocks. As a result, everyone must walk with the greatest care and must take precautions against falling. On this road, God has placed justice, self-restraint, patience, faith, chastity, self-control, peace, knowledge, truth, wisdom, and other virtues.

But along with these go poverty, loneliness, work, pain, and all kinds of hardships. For whoever has extended his hope beyond the present life and chosen better things will be without these earthly goods. Because he is lightly equipped and free of hindrances, he can overcome the difficulty of the way.

For it is impossible for the man who has surrounded himself with royal pomp or loaded himself with riches either to enter this path or to persevere in the face of these difficulties. But the early Christians didn't just talk about poverty. The majority of them were poor, and the Romans ridiculed them for it.

For example, one Roman taunted the Christians, See, many of you, in fact, by your own admission, the majority of you are in want, are cold, are hungry, and are laboring in hard work, yet your God allows it. Admitting the truthfulness of this accusation, the Christian lawyer Mark Felix answered, That many of us are called poor. This is not our disgrace, but our glory.

As our mind is relaxed by luxury, it is strengthened by poverty. Yet who can be poor if he does not long for anything, if he does not crave possessions of others, if he is rich towards God? He rather is poor who, although he has much, desires more. The anti-materialistic message of the early Christians was so strange to the Romans that they ridiculed Christianity.

The Roman critic Celsus asked the Christians, Some might argue that these Christians lived in poverty only because they rejected God's prosperity and gave their wealth away. But how can a person outgive God? If wealth is from God, a Christian can't lose it by obeying God's word and sharing his wealth with the poor. In the first few centuries, it was the heretics, not the church, who taught prosperity theology.

For example, one of the most famous heretics of the 3rd century, Paul of Samasata, both taught and practiced a message of wealth. A group of elders living in his day described him this way, Did the early Christians enjoy better health? As to the gospel of health, the records of both secular and Christian history show that early Christians enjoyed no better health than the world around them. Letters written by early Christians testify to the fact that Christians suffered from the same plagues and calamities as the rest of

mankind.

Early Christians believed in divine healing, but their testimonies about healing miracles indicate that such miracles were primarily administered to non-believers as a sign. They weren't something Christians normally received as a promised blessing. Cyprian discussed the fact that some Christians were disappointed when they suffered from a severe plague.

It disturbs some that the power of this disease attacks our people in the same way it attacks the pagans, as if the Christians believed in order to have the pleasures of this world and a life free from illness, instead of enduring adversity here and awaiting a future joy. As long as we are here on earth, we experience the same fleshly tribulations as the rest of the human race, although we are separated in spirit. So when the earth is barren and with an unproductive harvest, famine makes no distinction.

When an invading army captures a city, all are taken captives alike. When the serene clouds withhold rain, the drought is alike to all. We have eye diseases, fevers, and feebleness of the limbs, the same as others.

Early Christianity wasn't a religion that promised material prosperity and better health in this life. Yet the early Christians surely believed in the power of God. Their faith in the power and protection of God surpassed the trust of most Christians today.

However, their conflict with us went far beyond the issue of prosperity. They clashed with us on several moral issues that face the church today. What did Jesus mean when He said, Do not swear? On the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, James wrote similarly, Many Christian denominations refuse to take oaths.

Have they taken Jesus' words too literally? The early Christians uniformly refused to take oaths. As Clement remarked, Tertullian explained to the Romans, There is nothing about false swearing, since even swearing is not lawful. Origen, Cyprian, and Eusebius also verify that this was the standard position of the early Christians as to swearing.

Is war morally wrong? Church history books mention that the early Christians generally refused to serve in the military. Many of those books said the early Christians weren't opposed to bloodshed. Rather, they rejected military service in order to avoid participating in idolatrous practices.

But that's not true. In their writings, the early Christians clearly stated they opposed war because they literally followed Jesus' commandments to love your enemies and turn the other cheek. They viewed war as morally wrong.

Justin Martyr wrote in his Apology to the Romans, We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war upon our enemies. Tertullian raised the following question about war, When pagans began circulating a rumor that Christianity was a sect that had broken away from Judaism by armed revolt, Origen answered this false charge with these words, They would not have adopted laws of so exceedingly mild a character. These laws do not even allow them on any occasion to resist their persecutors, even when they are called to be slaughtered as sheep.

Arnobius, an apologist living in the 3rd century, explained the Christian position to the Romans in this manner, That our own blood should be shed rather than to stain our hands and our conscience with that of another. As a result, an ungrateful world has now, for a long period, been enjoying a benefit from Christ. For by His means, the rage of savage ferocity has been softened, and the world has begun to withhold

hostile hands from the blood of a fellow creature.

At a time when military valor was considered to be the greatest of virtues, a early Christian stood alone in declaring that war was simply murder on a grand scale. How ironic, therefore, that evangelical Christians in the United States not only condone war, but are generally more militaristic than other segments of society. We are often labeled as warmongers by the world.

In fact, I know of no war in the entire history of the United States that evangelical Christians opposed in any significant numbers. But doesn't a Christian have a responsibility to help defend his country, you may ask? The early Christians would have answered, Yes, but in a very different way than the world. The Romans made the same charge to the early Christians, and the Christians replied, We are urged to help the king with all our might, to work with him in the preservation of justice, to fight for him, and, if he requires it, to fight under him, or to lead an army along with him.

Our answer is that we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, but in a divine way, putting on the whole armor of God. We do this in obedience to the injunction of the apostle. I urge, therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings, and for all those in authority.

The more anyone excels in holiness, the more effective is his help to kings, even more than is given by soldiers who go out to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. To those enemies of our faith who would require us to bear arms for the empire and to slay men, we reply, Do not the priests who attend your gods keep their hands free from blood so that they may offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods with hands unstained and free from human blood? Even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. If, then, that is a praiseworthy custom, how much more so that while others are engaged in battle, Christians too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure.

By our prayers we vanquish all demons who stir up war. In this way, we are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. And none fight better for the king than we do.

Indeed, we refuse to fight under him, even if he demands it. But we do fight on his behalf, forming a special army, an army of righteousness, by offering our prayers to God. We may be inclined to call their view unrealistic.

The early Christians called it trust. Who is right? History would indicate that perhaps these Christians weren't as naive as they might seem to us. During the period from the birth of Christ to around the beginning of the 3rd century, the Roman Empire didn't experience even one successful invasion of its frontiers.

Historians call this the Pax Romana, or the Roman Peace, and view it as a rather extraordinary period in the history of Roman civilization. For 200 years the ancient Mediterranean world enjoyed peace, something it did not have before the Pax Romana and something it has never had since. Of course, no secular historian would credit this peace to the presence and prayers of the Christians, but the early Christians firmly believed that it was a result of divine intervention.

For example, Origen asked the Romans, In contrast, after the time of Constantine, when Christian teachers such as Augustine began teaching the doctrine of holy war and Christians supported Rome with the sword, the entire Western Roman Empire collapsed within a few decades. Did the Roman Empire fall

because the church changed its position on war? No human can answer that question with certainty, but at the very least it's certainly a remarkable coincidence that Rome prospered and was safe from its enemies so long as the Christians served as a special army of righteousness, trusting only in God for the Empire's protection, and that once Christians began to wage physical war on behalf of Rome, the Empire collapsed. Are humans capable of obeying God? The early Christians didn't attempt to live such uncompromising lives simply on their own strength.

They realized their need for divine power. Of course, that's nothing new. Throughout the centuries, Christians of all denominations have realized that we need God's help in order to walk by His commandments.

The problem isn't that the church doesn't preach about the need for relying on God's strength. In fact, evangelical Christians generally teach that we are incapable of doing anything good on our own strength. The early Christians never taught that humans are incapable of doing good or overcoming sin in their lives.

They believed that we do have the ability to serve and obey God. However, first we must have a deep love for God and a profound respect for His commandments. As Hermas phrased it, At the same time, the early Christians didn't believe that they could overcome all their weaknesses and remain obedient to God day after day simply on their own strength.

They needed power from God. But it wasn't a matter of sitting back and asking God to do all the work. They believed that our walk with God is a joint project.

The Christian himself must be willing to sacrifice to pour his energy and very soul into the project. But he also must recognize his need for God's help. As Origen explained, The early church believed that a Christian must earnestly desire and seek God's help.

It wasn't a matter of a one-time request either, but a continual process. Clement taught his students, To save the unwilling is the act of one using compulsion, but to save the willing, that of one showing grace. So the early Christians viewed personal righteousness as a joint project between God and man.

There was an infinite supply of power from God. The key was to be able to tap into this power. The earnest desire had to come from the Christian himself.

As Origen remarked, We are human beings capable of desiring God and of responding to him. In referring to the necessary eagerness on our part, Clement wasn't referring simply to a bare desire. Rather, he said we had to be willing to suffer painful internal persecution.

Putting to death our fleshly ways is going to hurt. And if we aren't willing to suffer internally, wrestling with our sins, then God isn't going to supply the power. Romans 8.13, 1 Corinthians 9.27 Some people may be disturbed by this early Christian teaching, but as Jesus said, Before we disparage the theology of the early Christians, we had better have a good explanation for their power.

We can't deny the fact that they had incredible power. Even the pagan Romans didn't dispute this. As Lactantius declared, Boys and delicate women, not to speak of men, silently overcome their torturers.

Even the fire is unable to extort a groan from them. These persons, the young and the weaker sex, do not endure mutilation and burning of their whole bodies because they have no other choice. They could easily

avoid this punishment if they wished to by denying Christ, but they endure it willingly because they put their trust in God.

Are we saved by faith alone? If there's any single doctrine that we would expect to find in the faithful associates of the apostles' teaching, it's the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. After all, that is the cornerstone doctrine of the Reformation. In fact, we frequently say that persons who don't hold to this doctrine aren't really Christians.

The early Christians universally believed that works or obedience play an essential role in our salvation. This is probably quite a shocking revelation to most evangelicals. But that there's no room for doubt concerning this matter, I have quoted below an approximate chronological order from early Christian writers of virtually every generation, from the time of the apostle John to the inauguration of Constantine.

Clement of Rome, who is a companion of the apostle Paul and overseer of the Church in Rome, wrote, It is necessary, therefore, that we be prompt in the practice of good works, for he forewarns us. Behold, the Lord comes, and His reward is before His face, to render to every man according to his works. Let us, therefore, earnestly strive to be found in the number of those who wait for Him, in order that we may share in His promised reward.

But how, beloved ones, shall we do this? By fixing our thoughts on God by faith, by earnestly seeking the things that are pleasing and acceptable to Him, by doing the things that are in harmony with His blameless will, and by following the way of truth, casting away from us all unrighteousness and sin. Polycarp, the personal companion of the apostle John, taught, He who raised Him up from the dead will also raise us up, if we do His will and walk in His commandments and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness. The letter of Barnabas states, Hermas, who wrote between the years 100 and 140, stated, There is no life in them.

All, therefore, who despise Him and do not follow His commands deliver themselves to death, and each will be guilty of his own blood. But I implore you to obey His commands, and you will have a cure for your former sins. In his first apology, written sometime before 150 A.D., Justin Martyr told the Romans, And so we have received this teaching, that if men by their work show themselves worthy of His design, they are deemed worthy of reigning in company with Him, being delivered from corruption and suffering.

Clement of Alexandria, writing in about 190, said, By refusing to obey, they might be condemned. This is the proclamation of righteousness. To those who obey, rejoicing.

To those who disobey, condemnation. Whoever obtains the truth and distinguishes himself in good works shall gain the prize of everlasting life. Some people correctly and adequately understand how God provides necessary power.

But attaching slight importance to the works that lead to salvation, they fail to make the necessary preparation for attaining the objects of their hope. Origen, who lived in the early 200s, wrote, The soul will be rewarded according to what it deserves, being destined to obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its actions shall have procured this for it, or to be delivered up to eternal fire and punishments, if the guilt of its crimes shall have brought it down to this. Hippolytus, a Christian overseer who lived at the same time as Origen, wrote, To those who have done well, there will be justly assigned eternal happiness.

The lovers of wickedness will be assigned eternal punishment. But the righteous will remember only the righteous deeds by which they reach the heavenly kingdom. Cyprian wrote, Even though he is found in all these things, unless he walks in the observance of the right and just way.

The Lord says, Finally, Lactantius, writing in the early 300s, explained to the Romans, The first, which is appointed for the body, is transitory. The other, which belongs to the soul, is everlasting. We received the first at our birth.

We attain to the latter by striving. That immortality might not be available to man without some difficulties. For this reason he has given us this present life, that we may either lose the true and eternal life by our sins, or win it by our virtue.

In fact, every early Christian writer who discussed the subject of salvation presented this same view. Does this mean that Christians earn their salvation by works? No. The early Christians did not teach that we earn salvation by an accumulation of good works.

They recognized and emphasized the fact that faith is absolutely essential for salvation, and that without God's grace nobody can be saved. All the writers quoted above stress this fact. Here are just a few examples.

Clement of Rome wrote, Polycarp wrote, Barnabas wrote, Justin Martyr wrote, As the blood of the Passover saved those who were in Egypt, so also the blood of Christ will deliver from death those who have believed. Clement of Alexandria wrote, Aren't faith and works mutually exclusive? You may be saying to yourself, I'm confused. Out of one side of their mouths they say we are saved because of our works, and out of the other side they say we are saved by faith or grace.

They don't seem to know what they believed. Oh, but they did. Our problem is that many theologians have convinced us that there is an irreconcilable conflict between salvation based on grace and salvation conditioned on works or obedience.

They have used a fallacious form of argumentation known as the False Dilemma by asserting that there are only two possibilities regarding salvation. It's either 1. a gift from God or 2. it's something we earn by our works. The early Christians would have replied that a gift is no less a gift simply because it's conditioned on obedience.

They believed that salvation is a gift from God but that God gives his gift to whomever he chooses and he chooses to give it to those who love and obey him. Simply because a person is selective in his giving, it doesn't change the gift into a wage. They taught that even though salvation is conditional, it is nonetheless a gift from God that could not be earned.

And please don't accuse the early Christians of not reading their Bibles. As Josh McDowell points out in Evidence That Demands a Verdict, J. Harold Greenlee says that the quotations of the Scripture and the works of the early Christian writers are so extensive that the New Testament could virtually be reconstructed from them without the use of New Testament manuscripts. If we look at Clement of Alexandria who wrote from 150 to 212 A.D., 2,400 of his quotes are from all but three books of the New Testament.

Tertullian who wrote around 160 to 220 A.D. was a presbyter of the church in Carthage and quotes the New Testament more than 7,000 times of which 3,800 are from the Gospels. Geisler and Nix rightly

conclude that a brief inventory of this point will reveal that there were some 32,000 citations of the New Testament prior to the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. These Christians were well aware of what Paul had written concerning salvation and grace. After all, Paul personally taught men like Clement of Rome.

However, the early Christians didn't put Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians on a pedestal above the teachings of Jesus and the other apostles. They read Paul's word about grace in conjunction with such other Scriptures as He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. All who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation.

If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed. If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.

Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me to give to everyone according to his work. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

They profess to know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body according to what he has done, whether good or bad. He will render to every man according to his works.

To those who by patience and well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. So the real issue isn't a matter of believing the Scriptures, but one of interpreting the Scriptures. The Bible says that, By grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

And yet the Bible also says, You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Our doctrine of salvation accepts that first statement, but essentially nullifies the second. The early Christian doctrine of salvation gives equal weight to both.

As was pointed out earlier, the early Christians didn't believe that a man is totally depraved and incapable of doing any good. They taught that humans are capable of obeying and loving God. But they also believed that for a person to live obediently throughout his entire life, he needs God's power.

In short, obedience isn't totally dependent on human strength, nor is it totally a product of God's power alone. It is a mixture of both. To them, salvation was similar.

The new birth as spiritual sons of God and heirs of the promise of eternal life is offered to all of us purely as a matter of grace. We do not have to be good enough first. We do not have to earn this new birth in any way.

And we do not have to atone for all the sins we have committed in our past. The slate is wiped clean through God's grace. We are truly saved by grace, not by works, as Paul said.

Nevertheless, we also play a role in our salvation, according to Scripture and the early Christians. First, we have to repent and believe in Christ as our Lord and Savior in order to avail ourselves of God's grace. After receiving the new birth, we also have to obey Christ.

Yet obedience itself is still dependent on the continuing grace of God's power and forgiveness. So salvation begins and ends with grace. But in the middle is man's faithful and obedient response.

Ultimately, salvation depends on both man and God. For this reason, James could say we are justified by works and not by faith alone. Can a saved person be lost? Since the early Christians believed that our continued faith and obedience are necessary for salvation, it naturally follows that they believed that a saved person could still end up being lost.

For example, Irenaeus, the pupil of Polycarp, wrote, But we should beware, lest somehow, after we have come to the knowledge of Christ, if we do things displeasing to God, we obtain no further forgiveness of sins, but rather be shut out from His kingdom. Tertullian wrote, Is not this gift taken away from many? Cyprian told his fellow believers, One of the scripture passages that the early Christians frequently cited is Hebrews 10.26. After we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left. Our preachers usually tell us that the writer of Hebrews wasn't talking about saved persons.

If that's the case, the writer certainly didn't communicate it very effectively to his readers. All the early Christians understood this passage to be talking about persons who had been saved. Incidentally, some of the quotations from the early Christians might make you think that they lived in eternal insecurity, but that's not the case.

Although they believed that their Heavenly Father could disinherit them if He chose to do so, the overall spirit of their writings showed that obedient Christians didn't live with a constant morbid dread of being disinherited. Does an obedient son constantly worry and fret over the possibility of being disinherited by his earthly father? The group that preached salvation by grace alone. As surprising as all of this may be to you, what you are about to hear is even more bizarre.

There was a religious group labeled as heretics by the early Christians who strongly disputed the church's stance on salvation and works. Instead, they taught that man is totally depraved, that we are saved solely by grace, that works play no role in our salvation, and that we cannot lose our salvation once we obtain it. Perhaps you are thinking, this group of heretics were the real Christians and the orthodox Christians were really heretics, but such a conclusion is impossible.

It is impossible because the group in reference are the Gnostics. The Greek word gnosis means knowledge, and the Gnostics claimed that God had revealed special knowledge to them that the main body of Christians did not have. Although each Gnostic teacher had his individual version of teachings, they all basically taught that the Creator was a different God than the Father of Jesus.

This inferior God had acted without the authority of the Father in creating the material world. This Creator botched things up and man is inherently depraved as a result. The God of the Old Testament is this inferior Creator who possesses different qualities from the God of the New Testament.

Because humans are the flawed work of this inferior God, they are totally unable to do anything toward their own salvation. Fortunately for mankind, the Father of Jesus took pity on humans and sent his Son for our salvation. However, because the flesh is inherently depraved, the Son could not have actually become

a man.

Rather, the Son of God simply took on the appearance of man. He was not truly man and he never really died or was resurrected. Since everything about man is inherently flawed, our works can play no part in our salvation, but rather we are saved purely by the grace of the Father.

In case you have any lingering doubts on whether the Gnostics were true Christians, notice what the Apostle John himself said about them. Many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

The Gnostics were the ones who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh and they are the ones to whom John was referring. He made it clear that they were deceivers and antichrists. So if our evangelical doctrine of salvation is true, we are faced with the uncomfortable reality that this doctrine was taught by deceivers and antichrists before it was taught by the Church.

Reassessing Today's Church Perhaps the entire Church needs to ask itself, how does God view the Church today? Is He smiling with favor on us and showering us with blessings? Or does He view us as a worldly apostate Church? If Jesus were writing a letter to the Church today, would He say to us what He told the Church in Smyrna? Or would He repeat His words to the Church in Laodicea? Churches today that emphasize material blessings, healings, and miracles are growing at an explosive rate. But is such growth really evidence of God's approval? Jesus forewarned us. It's not too late to return.

Christianity was originally a revolution that challenged the attitudes, lifestyle, and values of the ancient world. It was more than a mere set of doctrines. It was an entire way of life.

And all the military, economic, and social forces of the Romans could do nothing to stop it. But after 300 years, the revolution partially foundered. It ran aground because most professing Christians lost their obedient trust in God.

They imagined they could improve Christianity through human means, by adopting the methods of the world. But they didn't improve Christianity, they gutted it. There was nothing wrong with early Christianity, but the 4th century Christians became convinced that they could improve Christianity.

If Christianity meant material blessings and prosperity instead of suffering and deprivation, we could convert the whole world, they reasoned. But in the end, the Church really didn't convert the world. The world converted much of the Church.

Yet somehow the lessons of history have failed to convince Christians today. The Church is still married to the world, and Christians still think they can improve Christianity through human means. But Christianity will not improve until the Church returns to the simple holiness, genuine love, and cross bearing of the early Christians.

Our divorce from the world is long overdue, and this is one divorce that would have God's unequivocal blessings. The cross and revolutionary banner of early Christianity are still lying where the early martyrs left them. It's not too late for the Church to return and carry them again.

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