

# The Pilgrim Church - Part 4

by E.H. Broadbent

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*This sermon explores the history of the primitive church and its struggles with the growth of clerical domination and the misuse of history.*

**Scripture:** Acts 5:29, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 10:14, 2 Corinthians 6:17, Colossians 2:8, 2 Timothy 3:12, 1 Peter 2:9, 1 John 5:19, 1 John 5:21

**Topics:** "Church History", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

E.H. Broadbent preaches about the historical conflict between the Roman Church clergy and ordinary believers who emphasized holiness and renewal by the Holy Spirit, breaking down the clergy-laity distinction. The divergent views of the Church led to persecution of those who desired independence and adherence to Scripture. The persistence of primitive churches, distorted histories, and the growth of clerical domination are highlighted, along with the persecution faced by saints who refused to comply with the dominant World-Church. The misuse of history, obliteration of true histories, and the spread of idolatry and image worship are discussed, leading to the rise of movements like the Paulicians and Bogomils who denounced idolatry and faced severe persecution.

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## Transcript

[Clergy-Laity Distinction Opposed]

Such teachings soon brought these circles into conflict with those of the Roman Church, especially as represented by such a scheming, political bishop as Hydatius. The clergy saw in the holy life of the ordinary believer that which assailed their peculiar position. The power of "apostolic succession" and of the priestly office was shaken by teaching which insisted on holiness and constant renewal of life by the Holy Spirit and communion with God. The distinction between clergy and laity was broken down by this, especially when the magical working of the sacraments was exchanged for a living possession of salvation through faith.

[Divergent Views of the Church]

The breach was irreparable because due to two distinct views of the Church. It was not only a question of suppressing conventicles or of opposing what threatened to become an order of monks apart from the Church, but of a complete difference of principle. The policy of Hydatius was to strengthen the power of the Metropolitan as representing the See of Rome, with a view to carrying out the Roman centralizing

organization which was as yet unpopular in Spain and incomplete and was opposed by the lesser bishops. The circles with which Priscillian was associated were in principle diametrically opposed to this; their occupation with Scripture and acceptance of it as their guide in all things led them to desire the independence of each congregation, and this they were already putting into practice.

After the death of Priscillian and his companions the circles of those who shared their faith increased rapidly, but, although Martin of Tours succeeded in modifying the first burst of persecution which followed that tragic event, persecution was continued and severe; nevertheless it was not until some two centuries later that the meetings were finally dispersed.

#### FOOTNOTES:

[16]"East and West Through Fifteen Centuries" Br. General G. F. Young C.B.

[17]"A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church" translated and annotated by J. C. Pilkington M.A. Edited by Philip Schaff.

[18]"Dictionary of Christian Biography" Smith & Wace.

[19]"Monasticism" Ad. v. Harnack.

[20]"Latin Christianity" Dean Milman. Vol. 4.

[21]"Irland in der Kirchengeschichte" Kattenbusch.

[22]Priscillian ein Neuaufgefundener Lat. Schriftsteller des 4 Jahrhunderts. Vortrag gehalten am 18 Mai, 1886, in der Philologisch-Historischen Gesellschaft zu Würzburg von Dr. Georg Schepss K. Studienlehrer am Humanist. Gymnasium Mit einem Blatt in Originalgrosse Faksimiledruck des Manuscriptes, Würzburg. A. Stuber's Verlagbuchhandlung, 1886.

[23]The quotations are from a translation earlier than that of Jerome (the Vulgate).

[24]"Priscillianus Ein Reformator des Vierten Jahrhunderts. Eine Kirchengeschichtliche Studie zugleich ein Kommentar zu den Erhaltenen Schriften Priscillians" von Friedrich Paret Dr. Phil. Repetent am Evang.-Theol. Seminar in Tübingen. Würzburg A. Stuber's Verlagsbuchhandlung. 1891

### Chapter III

#### Paulicians and Bogomils

50-1473

Growth of clerical domination--Persistence of Primitive churches--Their histories distorted by their enemies--Early churches in Asia Minor--Armenia--Primitive churches in Asia Minor from Apostolic times--Unjustly described by their opponents as Manichaeans--The names Paulician and Thonrak--Continuity of New Testament churches--Constantine Silvarius--Simeon Titus--Veneration of relics, and image worship--Iconoclastic Emperors--John of Damascus--Restoration of images in Greek Church--Council of Frankfurt--Claudius Bishop of Turin--Mohammedanism--Sembat--Sergius--Leaders of the churches in Asia Minor--Persecution under Theodora--The Key of Truth--Carbeas and Chrysocheir--The Scriptures and the Koran--Character of the churches in Asia Minor--Removal of

believers from Asia to Europe--Later history in Bulgaria--Bogomils--Basil--Opinions regarding Paulicians and Bogomils--Spread of Bogomils into Bosnia--Kulin Ban and Rome--Intercourse of Bogomils with Christians abroad--Bosnia invaded--Advance of Mohammedans--Persecution of Bogomils--Bosnia taken by the Turks--Friends of God in Bosnia a link between the Taurus and the Alps--Bogomil tombs.

The union of Church and State was in all times looked upon by many of the Lord's disciples as contrary to His teaching; but whenever the Church had the power of the State at its command, it used it for the forcible suppression of any who dissented from its system or in any way refused compliance with its demands, and great numbers through indifference or interest or fear yielded at least an outward obedience. There were, however, always some who could not be induced to do this, but who still endeavoured to follow Christ and keep the teachings of His Word and the doctrine of the Apostles. These were continually objects of persecution.

The history of the centuries which followed Constantine unfolds the growth in worldliness and ambition of the clergy, both of the Eastern and Western Catholic churches, until they claimed entire dominion over the possessions and consciences of mankind, enforcing these claims with a violence and guile that knew no limits. It also reveals vistas here and there of the path of tribulation trodden by countless saints who, at all times, and in various places, have suffered all things at the hands of the dominant World-Church, rather than deny Christ or be turned back from following Him.

[Misuse of History]

The true histories of these have been obliterated as far as possible; their writings, sharing the fate of the writers, have been destroyed to the full extent of the power allowed to their persecutors. Not only so, but histories of them have been promulgated by those to whose interest it was to disseminate the worst inventions against them in order to justify their own cruelties. In such accounts they are depicted as heretics, and evil doctrines are ascribed to them which they repudiated. They are called "sects", and labels are attached to them which they themselves would not acknowledge.

They usually called themselves Christian or Brethren, but numerous names were given to them by others in order to create the impression that they represented many new, strange, and unconnected sects, opprobrious epithets being applied to them to bring them into disrepute. It is therefore difficult to trace their history; what their adversaries have written of them must be suspected; words from their own lips wrung out by torture are valueless. There is, however, in spite of these hindrances, a large body of trustworthy evidence, continually being added to by further investigation, which shows what they were and did, what they believed and taught; and these their own records afford a safe guide to their faith and practice.

Even in the first three centuries there were numerous bodies of Christians who protested against the growing laxity and worldliness in the Church, and against its departure from the teachings of Scripture. Movements of revival have never ceased to be repeated, and even when no connection between one and another is visible, the underlying cause is the same--a desire to return to the practice of some New Testament truth. In the early centuries Asia Minor and Armenia were frequently the scene of such revivings, as well as being the refuge of churches that had from the first, in varying degree, maintained purity of doctrine and godliness of life.

[Apostolic Churches in Asia Minor]

The Gospel had spread northward from Antioch in its earliest days. The Apostles Barnabas and Paul, and many others, had preached and founded churches throughout Asia Minor. The Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians give a vivid picture of the powerful, enlightening, and sanctifying effects of the Apostles' doctrine on the Christians of those early congregations, as well as of the strength of the opposing teachings which had to be combated. The Catholic system (so called because of its claim to be the entire and exclusive Church) with its clerical rule, developed rapidly there, but there never ceased to be those who resisted it.

In the third century the kingdom of Armenia anticipated the union of Church and State under Constantine the Great, by making Christianity the state religion of Armenia. Yet the continuity of churches maintaining New Testament principles remained unbroken.

From the time of Mani the churches of believers who called themselves Christians, thus distinguishing themselves from others whom they called "Romans", had always been accused of being Manichaeans, though they declared that they were not and complained of the injustice of attributing to them doctrines they did not hold. The frequency with which anything is repeated is no proof that it is true, and since such writings as remain of these Christians contain no trace of Manichaeism, it is only reasonable to believe that they did not hold it. So far from accepting the sectarian names so lavishly given to them, these people not only spoke of themselves individually as "christian" or "brother", but also claimed to be collectively the "holy, universal, and Apostolic Church of our Lord Jesus Christ", and as the departure from the Scriptures of the worldly churches, Greek, Latin, or Armenian, became increasingly flagrant, they denied to them the title of churches, declaring they had forfeited it by their union with the State, by the introduction of unbelievers into their circles through the system of infant baptism, by their giving the Lord's Supper to unbelievers, and by various other evils they had introduced.

The name Paulician was frequently given to these churches. The reason is not clear. They were also called Thonraks, after a place where they were at one time numerous. The persecutions to which they were subjected and the systematic destruction of their literature, hide from us all but occasional glimpses of their history, though what remains is sufficient to show that there were in those wide regions of Asia Minor and Armenia, around Mount Ararat and beyond the Euphrates, churches of baptised believers, disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who kept the teaching of the Apostles received from Christ and contained in the Scriptures, in an unbroken testimony from the first.

[Gaps in the History of the Churches]

The claim of these numerous congregations to be the true descendants of the Apostolic churches (not necessarily in a natural sense from father to son, though that might often be the case, but as having maintained in unbroken succession their spiritual characteristics) is not invalidated by the large gaps in their history of which at present we possess no account. These are the natural consequence of the determined efforts that were unceasingly made, first by the Pagan Roman Empire and then by the State Churches, to destroy the people and their histories.

These efforts had, to a large extent, their intended effect. There can be no doubt that in many districts, and at different times, such efforts were entirely successful, and that priceless testimonies of saints and churches have been utterly wiped out, never to be known again until the Day of Judgment comes.

Rather is it a matter for surprise that so much has been preserved, and the existence of these numerous bodies of Christians of primitive doctrine and practice can be accounted for only in the way they

themselves explain it, namely, by their adherence to the New Testament teaching. The absence of organization among them and of any earthly controlling centre, with the fact that they recognised the independence of each congregation, would lead to variety in the different churches.

Then the characteristics of prominent leaders among them would also cause one generation to differ to some extent from another in spirituality or in the particular line of teaching emphasised. But they all claimed to draw their doctrine from the Scripture and to continue the Apostolic tradition, and this claim must be allowed, since nothing sufficient can be urged against it, nor can the contrary be proved.

[Constantine Silvanus]

Some accounts have been preserved of men who devoted their lives to visiting and strengthening such churches and to preaching the Gospel,[25] men of Apostolic spirit, strong, patient, humble-minded and of an undaunted courage. One who attached himself to these companies was Constantine, later called Silvanus.

About the year 653 an Armenian, who had been held captive by the Saracens, was released, and on his homeward journey was received and kindly entertained by Constantine in his house. The conversation between them showed the observant Armenian that he had been led to a man of unusual capacity, and seeing how deeply interested his host had become in the Scriptures which they had read together, the grateful and farseeing traveller left with his new friend a very precious gift--a MS. which contained the four Gospels and the Epistles of Paul.

This book became the absorbing study of Constantine, and was the means of bringing about a radical change of life in him. He soon began to bear witness to what he had received, changed his name to that of Silvanus, the companion of the Apostle Paul, and, by attaching himself to the believers who rejected the image worship and other superstitions of the Byzantine Church, drew upon himself the anger of those in authority. He made Kibossa in Armenia his dwelling place, and from there as a centre he worked among the various peoples round about for some thirty years, many being converted, both from among the Catholics and the heathen. His journeys brought him along the Euphrates valley, across the Taurus Mountains, and into the western parts of Asia Minor, where his successful activities attracted the attention of the Byzantine Emperor, Constantine Pogonatus.

This Emperor issued a decree (684) against the congregations of believers and against Constantine in particular, sending one of his officers, named Simeon, to put it into effect. In order to give special significance to the execution of Constantine, Simeon supplied a number of his personal friends with stones and ordered them to stone the teacher whom they had so long revered and loved.

Risking their own lives by their refusal, they dropped the stones, but there was a young man present named Justus, who had been brought up by Constantine as his adopted son and treated with especial kindness; he flung a stone at his benefactor and killed him, thus earning high praise and reward from the authorities, who compared him to David slaying Goliath.

[Simeon Titus]

Simeon was profoundly moved by all that he saw and heard at Kibossa, and, conversing with the Christians there, was convinced of the truth of their doctrines and the rightness of their practice. Returning to Constantinople, he could find no peace of soul at the court, and after three years of inward conflict,

abandoned everything, escaped to Kibossa, and there, adopting the name of Titus, took up and continued the work of the man whom he had caused to be put to death. It was not long before he, too, joined the great company of martyrs, for, two years later, Justus, making use of his knowledge of the ways of the brethren, gave to the bishop--and he to the Emperor Justinian II--information which led to the capture of a large number of them.

Expecting to terrorise the rest of the "heretics" into submission, the Emperor had these, including Simeon, all burnt together at one time. The fortitude of the sufferers, however, defeated his plan, fanning the faith and courage of many into a flame of devotion and testimony, so that more preachers and teachers were raised up and the congregations increased. They endured affliction with courage, unresisting, until a time of respite came to them through circumstances which took place in the Catholic world.

[Veneration of Idols]

Veneration of relics began at an early stage of the Church's history. Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, brought from Jerusalem wood supposed to be part of the cross, and nails which she believed had been used at the crucifixion. Pictures, images, and ikons began to be valued. Churches were built to receive relics or to commemorate the death of martyrs. Insensibly the meetings of the disciples of the Lord, in simple houses and rooms, changed to the gathering of all, willing or unwilling, believers or not, in consecrated buildings dedicated to the Virgin or one of the saints, filled with images, pictures, and relics, which became objects of worship.

Prayer was diverted from God to the Virgin and the saints, and the idolatry of Paganism was reproduced in the gross superstitions that grew up around the images, the priests, and the forms of religion. It is a mark of the power of the revelation of Christ contained in the Scriptures, that even when Pagan idolatry and superstition had succeeded in gaining possession of the Catholic churches, there were to be found in them, then as now, great numbers of believers, whose hope of salvation was in Christ and whose lives were pious and godly. They, however, were a remnant, hidden in the mass of those who had been misled into the system of idolatry with its accompanying sin and ignorance, and their protests were raised in vain.

Such companies as those called Paulicians and other names, denounced the prevailing idolatry, and this was one of the chief reasons for the bitter persecution they suffered.

[Leo the Isaurian--680-740]

In the regions where they were numerous, in the Taurus Mountains, Leo was born, who became Emperor of the Eastern, or Byzantine Empire, and is known as Leo the Isaurian. He was one of the best and most successful of the Byzantine Emperors, defending Constantinople from the Saracens and strengthening the Empire internally by his vigorous and wise reforms. Perceiving that the prevalent idolatry and superstition were among the chief causes of the miseries that were so evident in both East and West, he set himself to root out the evil. In 726 he issued his first edict against the worship of images, and followed it by a campaign of forcible destruction of images, and persecution of those who held to them. This initiated a struggle which lasted for more than a century.

[John of Damascus 675-749]

Leo found that he had stirred up a host of adversaries, of whom the most eloquent was the learned John of Damascus.

He taught,[26]

"... since some find fault with us for worshipping and honouring the image of our Saviour and that of our Lady and those too of the rest of the saints and servants of Christ, let them remember that in the beginning God created man after His own image, ... in the Old Testament the use of images was not common. But after God in His bowels of pity became in truth man for our salvation ... lived upon the earth, worked miracles, suffered, was crucified, rose again and was taken back to heaven, since all these things actually took place and were seen by men, they were written for the remembrance and instruction of us who were not alive at that time in order that though we saw not we may still, hearing and believing, obtain the blessing of the Lord. But seeing that not every one has a knowledge of letters nor time for reading, the Fathers gave their sanction to depicting these events on images as being acts of great heroism in order that they should form a concise memorial of them. Often doubtless, when we have not the Lord's passion in mind and see the image of Christ's crucifixion His saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship, not the material, but that which is imaged.... But this is an unwritten tradition, just as is also the worshipping towards the East and the worship of the Cross and very many other similar things."

Almost all the priests and monks were against Leo; the aged Pope of Constantinople refused submission to his order and was replaced by another; the Pope of Rome, Gregory II, and his successor, Gregory III were implacable opponents. In Greece a rival Emperor was chosen and attacked Constantinople, but was defeated. In Italy the orders were condemned and disobeyed. Leo called "the Iconoclast" because of his destruction of images, was succeeded by his son Constantine and by his grandson Leo IV, who followed out his policy with even greater rigour than he.

On the death of the last, his widow, Irene, reversed his policy, but for several reigns the conflict was continued with varying result, until (842) the death of the Emperor Theophilus, an opponent of image worship, left his widow, Theodora, regent during the minority of her son Michael III. Under the influence of the priests a secret supporter of image worship, Theodora, as soon as she was able, re-established the images. In the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople a great celebration of their restoration was solemnised. Images and pictures that had been kept in concealment were brought out and the dignitaries of the Church and of the State did reverence before them.

[The Council of Frankfurt 794]

The question of images had an important place in the Council called and presided over by Charlemagne at Frankfurt (794).[27] Both civil and ecclesiastical rulers were present, so that it legislated on all matters. The Pope sent his representatives. The decisions of the Second Council of Nicaea, which had established the service and adoration of the images, were set aside, though they had been confirmed by the Pope and accepted in the East. In their zeal for images, those who favoured their use went so far as to call their opponents, not only iconoclasts, but also Mohammedans. Nevertheless it was laid down in Frankfurt that all worship of images was to be rejected; there was to be no adoration, worship, reverence, veneration of them; no kneeling, burning of lights or offering of incense before them, nor any kissing of lifeless images, even though representing the Virgin and the Child; but images might be allowed in churches as ornaments and as memorials of pious men and pious deeds.

Also the teaching that God can only be worshipped in the three languages, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, was controverted, and it was affirmed that "there is no tongue in which prayer may not be offered." The

representatives of the Pope were not then in a position to protest. The general feeling of the Franks, in their wars against, and missions to, the heathen Saxons, was not favourable to idolatry.

[Claudius of Turin ?-839]

Louis, the third son of Charlemagne, who was at that time King of Aquitaine, succeeded his father as Emperor (813). He was an admirer of a Spaniard named Claudius, a diligent student of the Scriptures, who had become renowned for his Commentaries on the Bible. As soon as he became Emperor, Louis appointed Claudius Bishop of Turin. The new bishop, with his knowledge and love of Scripture, took immediate advantage of the favourable circumstances created by the Council of Frankfurt, going even beyond its decrees in removing from the churches of Turin all images, which he called idols, not excepting the crosses. So many approved that no effective resistance could be made in Turin. Claudius also taught publicly that the Apostolic office of St. Peter ceased with his life, that "the power of the keys" passed to the whole Episcopal Order, and that the Bishop of Rome had Apostolic power only so far as he led an Apostolic life. There were naturally many who opposed this. Prominent among them was the abbot of a monastery near Nîmes, yet even he admitted that most of the Transalpine prelates thought with the Bishop of Turin.

[Mohammed 571-632]

Greater events, but also connected with the question of images, arose from small beginnings in Arabia. In 571 Mohammed was born in Mecca, and at his death in 632 the religion of Islam, of which he was the founder and prophet, had spread over the greater part of Arabia. Islam, or "submission to the will of God", had as its creed: "There is no God but God and Mohammed is His Prophet". It utterly repudiated images or pictures of any kind. Its book, the Koran, contains many confused references to persons and events spoken of in the Bible. Abraham as the Friend of God, Moses the Law of God, Jesus the Spirit of God, are all venerated, but are excelled by Mohammed the Prophet of God.

This religion was mercilessly spread by the sword, and such was the resistless energy of the new enthusiasm that in less than a hundred years from the death of Mohammed, the dominion and religion of his followers stretched from India to Spain. The choice of conversion to Mohammedanism or death constantly reinforced the armies of Islam, but untold numbers died rather than deny Christ.

In North Africa especially, where the churches were so numerous and had such traditions and records of the faith unto death of those who had suffered there during the persecution by the Pagan Roman Empire, a great proportion of the population was blotted out. Mohammedanism was a judgement on idolatry, whether Pagan or Christian.

The iconoclastic movement[28] had brought respite to the persecuted brethren in Asia Minor, but when (842), under the Empress Theodora, the supporters of images had triumphed, it was determined to exterminate the "heretics" who had so consistently and powerfully proclaimed that images, pictures and relics were valueless, and had maintained a spiritual worship and the priesthood of all believers.

[Sambat 8th-9th century]

For the testing time that was to come they were prepared by the devoted labours of able men, such as Sambat, born at the end of the eighth century, who was of a noble Armenian family and so prominent in ministry that long after his death Catholics spoke of him as the founder of the Paulicians.

[Sergius 800-834]

Another leader was Sergius (Armenian, Sarkis). "For thirty-four years" (800-834), he says, "I have run from east to west and from north to south, preaching the Gospel of Christ, until my knees were weary". He had a strong conviction of his call to the ministry, and with great authority healed divisions, and united and instructed the saints; yet he could appeal to those who knew him and ask, with a clear conscience, whether he had despoiled any one, or had ever acted in an overbearing manner. Though he worked as a carpenter, yet he visited almost every part of the central Highlands of Asia Minor. His conversion came about through his being persuaded to read the Scriptures. A believing woman asked him why he did not read the Divine Gospels. He explained that only priests might do this and not the laity. She replied that God is no respecter of persons, but desires that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and that it is a trick of the priests to deprive the people of their share in the Gospels. He read and believed, and long testified most effectually for Christ. His epistles were widely circulated and greatly valued, his activities being ended only by his death, when he was cut in two with an axe by his pursuers.

["and others"]

He was one of the most distinguished of a series of men whose godly character and devoted service enshrined their names in the memory of an heroic people. Constantine, Simeon, Genesisios, Joseph, Zacharias, Baanes, Sembat, Sergius, are names that survive the wreckage of the persecutions that followed. So imbued were these brethren with the spirit of the Acts and the Epistles, so desirous of continuing unaltered the traditions of the New Testament, and especially of preserving in their own countries the remembrance that their apostles had laboured and founded the first churches, that they habitually took the names of men and of churches from the inspired records. Thus Constantine was called Silvanus; Simeon, Titus; Genesisios, Timotheus; Joseph, Epaphroditus.

Very different were the names given them by their adversaries, who called Zacharias the "hireling shepherd", and Baanes the "filthy one". Similarly the "true Christians", as they called themselves by way of distinction from the "Romans", gave memorial names to churches that were centres of their activities. So Kibossa, where Constantine and Simeon laboured, was their Macedonia; the village of Mananalis, around which Genesisios worked, was their Achaia; while other churches were named after Philippi, Laodicea, Colosse, and so on.

These men laboured during 200 years, from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the ninth century. It was in their time, and possibly by one of them, that a book, "The Key of Truth", was written, which gives a vivid picture of them. The persecutions under the Empress Theodora at the close of this period, and the wars which followed, scattered the churches, and many of the believers crossed over to the Balkans. The churches were not without periods of internal trouble as well as attacks from without.

In the time of Genesisios divisions caused such disturbance that he was summoned to Constantinople to give account. The well-disposed Emperor, Leo the Isaurian, found no fault with his doctrines, nor did the Patriarch Germanus, and Genesisios was sent back with letters ordering protection for the "Paulicians". But the Government did not permanently help the churches; its forcible suppression of the worship of images failed to loosen their hold, and it was liable to be actuated by motives of political expediency; thus Leo the Armenian, though an iconoclast Emperor, in order to please the Greek Church allowed an attack to be made on the "Paulicians", so weakening and alienating those who were his real strength.

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