

Discussing How To Restore The Early Church

Returning Intimacy and Power to the Father's Children

*"I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*
(Matthew 18:19,20)



SECTION 2 - LESSON 19

**The Loss of Our Hebraic Roots:
The Roman Conquest Of The Church
*The Reformation: Only The Beginning***



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The Loss of Our Hebraic Roots The Roman Conquest Of The Church

“They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”
(Revelation 12:11).

Ever since the stoning of the faithful witness Stephen, Christians had been counting the high cost of following Jesus. Living for God as disciples of Christ had brought ever-increasing persecution from both the non-Messianic Jews and the Romans. From his throne in Rome, Nero had sought scapegoats for the military and economic distresses of his empire. The unpopular Christians were easy targets for the burnings and crucifixions which followed.

Under the Roman Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117), those accused of the crime of being Christian faced torturous interrogation. Those who admitted their “guilt” were executed. Those who denied the charge were freed only after reciting a prayer to the Roman gods, worshiping the emperor’s statue, and cursing Christ.

The faithful of the early Church understood what it meant to sacrifice self, dying daily to all that was of the flesh and willing even to offer up life itself for the sake of the Gospel.

You might want to ask yourself: If *you* were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would *you* endure to the end?

“My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge [of Me]. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as My priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against Me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful”
(Hosea 4:6,7).

By the fourth century few were willing to pay the price that faith had demanded of their spiritual ancestors. A pivotal moment for the church occurred when it entered into alliance with the Roman Empire. In AD 312 the Roman Emperor Constantine called on the Christian God for victory during a crucial battle with his opponent Maxentius for control of the Empire.

Triumphant, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan the following year, ending the persecution of Christians by the Empire. Endorsed from the throne, Christianity became the favored religion. In time it became so identified with the Roman Empire that everyone born in the Empire was automatically considered “Christian.”

With the dangers of persecution removed, membership in the church became attractive to growing numbers who entered for worldly reasons to benefit themselves. These new churchgoers were readily accepted by their society, a far cry from the attitude toward the

“peculiar” believers of the Hebraic first-century Church. (A similar situation exists today in referring to the U.S. as a “Christian” nation.)

The children of the Empire were counted as children of the church. No longer relying on the need for people to turn from their sins in repentance and trust in the Lord Jesus before being baptized, *infant baptism* became universal.

The hierarchical structure of the church, which through **syncretism** was already a clone of the Empire, merged effortlessly with the political government. This consolidation was to culminate in the establishment of the papacy: The role of *Pontifex Maximus*—the chief priest of the cults of the Roman Empire—became the Roman Pontiff of Christendom.

In the manner of pagan priests, a paid, professional clergy class evolved in Christianity, setting themselves apart from the daily lives of the people. The *priesthood of all believers* expressed by the apostle Peter was forsaken. Again incorporating syncretistic practice, the religious garb of the priests was modeled after that of the Roman praetorian guard. This allusion to worldly power couldn't be missed by the common folk!

Sacerdotalism, the system of ordained clergy who stand between God and the “laity”, is a firmly established occupation in contemporary Christendom. What so many today don't realize is that sacerdotalism mimics the pagan pattern of an elevated hierarchy of priests. Most of what people today accept as the duties of clergy were adapted from practices conducted before false gods!

Exalting the clergy above the common man was accomplished by creating non-biblical titles such as “Cardinal”,

“Father”, even “Reverend”, and conferring authority on those who were hand-picked by the religious establishment leadership to carry out their policies. Jesus had warned His disciples about the danger of accepting man's deferential adulation through titles: “*And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven*” (Matthew 23:9). God shares His glory with no one.

The merger of church and state represented the second major turning point for the church. (The first turning point, the widespread influx of Gentiles and Hellenistic thought into the body, had resulted in the loss of the church's Hebraic roots and the rise of anti-Semitism.)

The period after the AD 313 Edict of Milan brought massive destruction to the faith as it had been practiced in the first century. With imperial approval the church leadership embarked on achieving unity through stronger organization. **Ecclesiastical hierarchy** and **enforced creedal allegiance** formed the basis for religious cohesion. Lost was dependence on the Holy Spirit to unite and equip the body of believers to live as a *priesthood themselves* of called-out ones for service in the KINGDOM.

In one form or another, the Roman model continues to represent the organizational structure of most denominations today. In any religious system in which the will of God and spiritual guidance are removed from individual responsibility and are determined by and/or enforced by some form of intermediary, the Roman Empire still exists.

The history of the “organized” church during the centuries following Constan-

tine is well-documented. If you studied it thoroughly you'd conclude that the Roman Empire conquered the church! The **Roman state-church** consolidated its position until its dominion was absolute.

Many *revisionist* writings appeared at this point to validate the bureaucratic structure acquired from the Romans. For instance, ecclesiastical leadership crowned Peter and the other apostles with a *hierarchical authority* that neither the Bible nor the early Church writings substantiated.

Peter was declared the first Pope by a system in which countless others would be nominated and selected through criteria which had nothing to do with the Hebraic example of wisdom and obedient trust that personified biblical leaders. The state-church grew so far removed from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and so politically dominant, that it led the way into the corruption and ignorance of the Dark Ages.

Following the traditions of contemporaneous pagan religions, Constantine also built temples in which Christians could gather. Since public buildings were provided for worship by the emperor, believers moved from meeting in homes to congregating in structures designed to imitate the temples inspired by the writings of Plato.

Influenced by Hellenist dualism, church/state leadership imitated pagan ceremonies, many from Rome's pantheon of gods. Each one outdid the other in solemn pomposity. The ecclesiastical authorities constructed massive cathedrals, filling them with statuary and art. Having lost sight of the KINGDOM of God, the established church schemed and persecuted but missed its

prime directive: "*The greatest among you will be **your servant***" (Matthew 23:11).

The early Hebraic Christians understood from their Messiah that God could be *known* as Father and Lord; they had an intimate relationship with Him directly through His Spirit. They saw no need for stained glass windows and steeples to point upward to a God beyond their reach. The high ceilings and vaulted windows conspired to induce an awe founded in *material trappings*. (Is this why people so often whisper when they enter a church building?)

So it was, that in AD 323, almost three hundred years after the birth of Jesus, Christians began to meet in a building now errantly called a "church." These structures, named after Newer Testament believers (saints), paralleled the pagan temples named after their gods.

Many of the "visual images" common in the church today—statues, candles, feast days, sacraments, ceremonies, processions—were copied from heathen rituals and adapted for church use. One example is the celebration of Christmas on December 25th. That day was also the culmination of the Roman celebration for the god of agriculture. The pagan holiday was marked by partying, feasting and gift-exchanging—much like today's holiday festivities.

Early believers, finding no basis for this in the Word, refused to participate. Rebuffed and affronted, their Roman neighbors publicly maligned the Christians contemptuously, calling them "cannibals" because of their devotion to Jesus in remembering His death and resurrection victory through communion. These accusations brought about grave persecution.

In time, however, practices which had once seemed repulsive to Christians were adopted. Thus we have the widespread celebration of Christmas. (The irony is that today, in most cases, if you *don't* celebrate Christmas with parties and gifts, you appear *un-Christian*.) The sacred has compromised with the secular; the holiness of the Incarnation has blurred with self-gratification—the deceit of *spiritual adultery*.

The Roman church hierarchy recognized that people's minds could be controlled if their knowledge was controlled. All education was therefore conducted in Latin, a language of which the masses were ignorant. Only a select few had access to reading materials or the ability to read, for that matter.

Since the printing press had not yet been invented, access to the Bible was exceedingly limited. The Roman church further forbade the printing of any Scriptural material in a language other than Latin. The common people were totally dependent on the educated clergy for any religious instruction.

For *eleven hundred years* the hierarchy prevented God's people from being able to read and apply the Word of God for themselves. Not until the intervention of courageous Reformers such as Wycliffe and Tyndale was the Bible made available in a language the people could readily understand and apply.

Sadly, even after Scripture was made available in the common tongue, most Protestant theologians relied on the revisionism of Roman Catholicism that had established a division between the people of God and those with authority over them. While the Reformers restored

great biblical truths of dependence on God's grace, on the inerrant authority of His Word and salvation by trust in Jesus, they failed to fully rely on apperception and restore the Hebraic foundations from which these truths had emanated.

In order to structurally unite the religious practice of all who claimed to be members of the organized church, the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great invented an order of worship, designating it the *only one* for all the congregations in Christendom.

For Roman Catholics, that "order of worship" has remained basically unchanged. Gone was the Spirit-inspired, participatory gatherings of the early Christians that Paul declared:

Whenever you come together, let everyone be ready with a psalm or a teaching or a revelation, or ready to use his gift of tongues or give an interpretation; but let everything be for edification (1 Corinthians 14:26).

During the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin also developed a pattern of worship that has remained the standard for most Protestant churches to this day: welcoming prayer, hymns, announcements, prayer, offertory, sermon, hymn, benediction.

The Protestant community as well never regained the intimacy that earliest gatherings of extended spiritual family had exemplified in the Hebraic model: openly worshiping God, candidly sharing with and edifying each other, and freely ministering service to others in the church and in the world.

Describe what you think the role of clergy to be. What is your source for your views?

Is there anyone that you *expect* to live a more holy life than you do? Yes or No? If yes, what role does that person play in your life? Do you treat any person as an intermediary between you and God? Yes or No? If yes, why do you put them in that position?

List the special “Christian” holidays you observe. Why do you participate in them? Is there a biblical foundation for your observance?

“Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”

(Acts 20:30).

From Constantine onward, the glory of the church was found not in intimate relationship with God but in its riches, rituals and forms. Church leaders were held in awe as great men on the earth; over the centuries even heads of nations bowed to them. Their power represented the authority of men, enforced, if need be, by the sword.

Grasping the sword of human power made it increasingly necessary to use that weapon even to the extremes of Inquisitional ruthlessness and cruelty. Dependence on human wisdom excluded more and more the Spirit-revealed wisdom of God, producing ever-increasing darkness.

The imposing church organization, with all the might of its authority, still found itself powerless to exercise spiritual control over the hearts of sinful men. Rome could neither unite people in true worship nor guard the foundations of the faith that had been passed on to them.

Testifies Alexander Hay, “What the New Testament evangelists had accomplished in their material poverty and defenselessness through the weapons of faith, prayer and the Word of God, the humanly organized Church with its wealth and power was impotent to do.”¹

With the merging of Roman hierarchy and Greek thought, a relationally loving God Who interacted with His people was displaced by “Someone way out there.” Under the dualist influence the faithful were always trying to reach out to a God to Whom they could never draw near. Forsaken was the Hebraic, biblical reality that He was present through His Holy Spirit within a *temple cloaked in human flesh*.

In contrast, worshipers had to go to a “holy place” in order to get closer to Him. Creating a God who was distanced from the needs of the personal lives and daily concerns of the people, the hierarchy developed ethereal messages about a remote and uninvolved deity.

Christians fell into “spectator Christianity,” lulled into allowing the profes-

sional clergy, the sacerdotals, to approach the distant Almighty on their behalf. And, with the development of *sacraments*, the clergy found the key to absolute control over the people: only the clergy were “ordained” to perform these rites.

The structured organization of ritualism and sacerdotalism necessarily meant the *demise* of the free exercise of *spiritual gifts*. Today many believers regard the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit as something *peculiar to the early Church*. Several denominations even have doctrinal statements to that effect.

How far the church has strayed from the *priesthood of believers equipped by the Holy Spirit to minister to one another*. However, our Lord has never been without faithful witnesses. There has always been a remnant of Spirit-empowered believers striving to remain faithful to the teaching and practices of the early Church. As best as they could, they kept themselves from all compromise with the world, walking and serving in the wisdom and power of the Spirit.

Many faced persecution and martyrdom, but as the centuries passed, the door to free expression of Truth began to crack open.

When you gather for fellowship with others, describe your time together.

How does what you just described align with Scripture?

The Reformation: Only The Beginning

“I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace”
(Acts 20:24).

The period which Church history knows as “The Reformation” restored some of the Hebraic foundations. Many spiritual truths that had been lost for centuries were reemphasized, especially a focus on the relationship between God and man.

Some of the revived biblical facets which were grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures and claimed as part and parcel of life in Jesus are dear to His followers today: *sola scriptura*—Scripture as the sole and final authority for Christians; *sola fides*—acceptance by and reconciliation with God through faith alone; *sola gratia*—deliverance from sin only by God’s grace. Each of these biblical tenets is Hebraic to the core, permeating the Newer Testament as well as the Hebrew Scriptures from which they were drawn.

The Reformation would have been a key point in history to also restore such Hebraic foundations as personal responsibility for spiritual growth, and the extended spiritual family of righteous, loadbearing followers of Jesus who flourished spiritually in one another’s homes.

The tenacious roots of Roman revisionism, however, maintained the clergy

class of professionals, and the "holy buildings" to which crowds of people flocked so that others could tell them how to live.

As we've mentioned in a previous lesson:

Revisionism has created the over 23,000 competing Protestant denominations that vie for today's believers.

Let's review a little of our Reformation heritage. One of the persevering firebrands for the faith who refused to be silenced was **John Wycliffe**, a fourteenth century preacher and theologian. "His intolerance of Church abuses, begging friars, unlearned clergy, politically motivated bishops and inaccessibility of the Scriptures in the language of the common people, as well as the Church's demands on the monarch and its involvement in civil law and order, resulted in his championing the separation of church and state."²

Remember, for eleven hundred years *before* the Reformation the common people had no direct access to God's Word in their own language. One hundred and fifty years after Wycliffe, **William Tyndale** would be so consumed with zeal to put the Word of God into the hands of his English countrymen that he would pay the ultimate price with his life.

Once the Bible had been translated into the vernacular of the people, the Holy Spirit Himself could then breathe life into the sacred text for those earnestly seeking the truth to apply it to their lives.

Can you sense the tension and resistance that swirled around the church hierarchy that people might read the Bible *for themselves* and forsake their clergy-dependence? During the early sixteenth century, the church establish-

ment had approached near-insanity in persecuting those who clung to biblical faith rather than religious organization.

A case in point: In 1517 in Coventry, England, five men and two women were burned at the stake for the heresy of teaching their children the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English. (Severe persecution for choosing to follow Jesus without compromise continues worldwide among the body of Christ.)

At great risk was birthed the great spiritual awakening of the Reformation. Yet, as history has proved, the sacrifices of men and women obedient to their God were used by Him to rekindle faith in Christ's ultimate sacrifice. As T.S. Eliot expressed in *Murder in the Cathedral*, "Martyrdom is no accident. A martyr is always made by the *design of God* for his love of men, *to warn them, and to lead them back to his ways.*"³ (emphasis added)

Because of the continuing powerful influence of the Hellenist writings of **Origen** and **Clement**, however, the simplicity of the early Church order and practice failed to materialize. The right of all believers to take part in ministry through the gifts of the Spirit was minimally regained since there was still an ongoing distinction between clergy and laity. "Lay" men were permitted to hold certain positions such as "elder" in some denominations, but they were still considered inferior to professional clergy.

Even the great reformer, Martin Luther, feared that the illiterate laymen of his time were ill-prepared to lead. This became his impetus to translate the Newer Testament into the German vernacular of his people in order that they could be trained up to study the Word of God for themselves.

Revisionism manifested itself mightily in the work of the translators of the 1611 King James Version. They were required to follow *Bancroft's Rules to Be Observed in the Translation of the Bible*. For example, Rule #3 states, "The **old Ecclesiastical Words** to be kept, viz. the Word *Church* not to be translated *Congregation*, & c."⁴

An unfortunate result of applying the entirety of this rule book was that Nicolaitan-supported ecclesiastical positions were reinforced in the church. Bancroft's Rule #3 perpetuated a clergy class within the church that had been neither intended nor indicated in the Newer Testament.

Rule #3 not only *nullified* the Hebraic relational framework that was required for the priesthood of all believers. It also *perpetuated* the anti-Semitic stance of the converted Greek philosophers and the Nicolaitan dominance of Christendom.

By defining the word "Church" with a meaning of structural hierarchy, this rule of interpretation prevented a return to the more relational Hebraic interconnectedness of "congregation." The earliest followers of Jesus related to one another as *extended spiritual family*. They *congregated* as biological and spiritual families intent on sharing their spiritual giftings with one another. The *people*, not a place, were "the church".

The King James translators further promoted Nicolaitan dominance by inserting the word "pastor" in both the Older and Newer Testaments instead of the more precise word "shepherd." By this act they nullified the biblically-Hebraic basis for wise, older men to "pastor": *shepherding* in the context of caring diligently for a flock of sheep.

For example, in the King James

Version of Jeremiah 2:8, the Hebrew word *raah* (raw-aw), meaning "to tend a flock" or "to pasture" a flock, is translated "pastor" instead of shepherd: "*The priests said not, Where is the Lord? and they that handle the law knew me not: the **pastors** also transgressed against me...*" Emphasis is placed here on a *position* rather than on the function of a shepherd-leader.

The King James translators again substitute "pastor" for "shepherd" in Jeremiah 17:16: "*As for me, I have not hastened from being a **pastor** to follow thee.*"

From the time of Greek and Roman influence, the definition of "pastor" has placed an undue emphasis on *title* and *position* rather than on the intimate and relational serving, caring, leading and protecting that was carried out by keepers of sheep. Contemporary use of the word "pastor," as well, often refers to an *occupation*. Sadly, in many faith communities, a pastor has little or no intimate knowledge or understanding of the *individuals* that comprise the flock supposedly in his care.

However, in other verses in which *raah* or a derivative is used, it's most often translated "shepherd" as in a person who lovingly watches over sheep. In Psalm 23 the related Hebrew word *ro'iy* (roh-ee), also translated "shepherd," vibrantly depicts the personal devotion of the herdsman toward those in his care:

*The Lord is **my** shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me **lie down** in green pastures, he **leads** me beside quiet waters, he **restores** my soul. He **guides** me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are **with me**; your rod and your staff, they **comfort** me (Psalm 23:1-4).*

Intimate knowledge and interaction with the flock are encompassed in this passage. Similar “shepherd” uses appear in Zechariah 10:2: “[T]herefore they went their way as a flock, they were troubled, because there was no **shepherd**,” and Isaiah 40:11, “He shall feed his flock like a **shepherd**.”

As a result of the substitution of the word “pastor” for shepherd in certain select passages, a clergy class has unscripturally been perpetuated within Christianity. Regrettably, the true elder/shepherds whom our Father has called to “pastor” His children in the intimate manner He has prescribed are most often prevented from doing so by clergy who have no biblical basis for the position they occupy.

To undergird a clergy/laity distinction in the Newer Testament, translators not only of the King James Version but of virtually all commonly read translations use the word “pastor” in Ephesians 4:11: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be **pastors** [shepherds] and teachers.”

Had the Greek word used here, *poimēnas* (poy-men-oss), meaning “shepherds,” been translated as such, this passage would have kept continuity with the other Newer Testament passages that refer to the shepherding role of the biblical elder, *presbuteros* (prez-BOO-tair-oss). The inaccurate translation creates a false distinction between the Greco-Roman ecclesiastical position of “pastor” and the Hebraic scriptural function of “shepherding by elders.”

The Reformation awakened a zeal for learning and for exploration of God’s Word, but it failed to restore spiritual unity and power within the church. The

various faith communities that were organized continued to depend primarily on various forms of Romanism in their governing structure.

Protestant clergy were simply replacements for the Roman Catholic priesthood — still occupying the role of sacerdotal intermediaries between God and His people. The various faith communities and clergy structure that emerged resembled reformed Roman Catholic congregations rather than fully participative, Spirit-led communities served by biblical, mature elders (Hebrew *zakenim*). Protestant denominations continued to train young, inexperienced men to shepherd the Father’s children, rather than restoring the biblical pattern of older men of wisdom.

Some of the reformers recognized and understood the Hebraic foundations of the early Church, but deemed a number of them impossible to return to. The vested interest of the clergy system kept this from happening. Once again the “ambulance was placed at the bottom of the cliff.”

The Protestant denominations had not only lost the enforced union which the Church of Rome’s human organization had provided; it had also failed to regain the true spiritual unity of the Hebraic early Church. The unity of the Church of Rome had been derived from its centralized, autocratic, totalitarian organization with the Pope at its head.⁵ The Protestant Church, lacking such authoritarian structure, paved the way for the factions and denominational splits that plague it to this day.

An important point to consider: Armed with the well-documented history of the Reformation whose participants attempted earnestly to cleanse and

change church practices, we in the twenty-first century can now see with clear hindsight. Any attempt at reform without fully apperceiving the Hebraic foundations of the early followers of Jesus will miss the mark. The early Church determined to equip believers in *relationship* with one another to serve and disciple and evangelize.

Most of the Hellenized theologians of the Reformation feared to depend entirely upon the leadership of the Lord and on the power of the Spirit to change individuals, families and societies as did the early Church. Through Hellenist **sylogistic reasoning** and **human debate** they constructed **creeds** for churchgoers.

Has your spiritual life been characterized by doctrinal parameters formulated by others, or by revelation of truth from God's Word and the Holy Spirit? How would you evaluate your effectiveness as an "ambassador of Christ"?

From what you've read so far in these lessons, how do you feel about your convictions as a follower of Jesus? Have any changed? Yes or No? If yes, describe what changes have taken place.

Concluding Comments

"He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets"
(Acts 3:21).

We realize that as you've gone through this lesson, you've seen a lot of focus on Roman Catholicism. If you think this material doesn't concern you because you may be a Protestant, you're in grave error. I [Mike] was a counselor to Protestant leaders for over 10 years. In the course of discussion with many of them, it became clear that although they perceived that their particular denomination had a corner on truth, revisionism had indeed sneaked in to revise the same old errors from the Greco/Roman era.

An example may help. The Roman church endorsed the sale of indulgences in which the faithful would pay to have their time in purgatory remitted. A Protestant would staunchly renounce that sort of practice, especially since purgatory is an unbiblical concept.

But that same individual might then watch one of the Protestant TV evangelists who pleads something like, "If you want to be blessed by God, just write a check out to my ministry. Blessings and health will be given to you in abundance!" Do you think that from God's perspective there is really any difference between the two practices? There really are more similarities between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism than there are differences.

The Christendom that has emerged structurally and spiritually over the centuries has few points of similarity to the Church founded by Jesus and the apostles on Hebraic foundations. In both Roman

