

Early Church Conversion

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Preacher: Harvey Guest

- [0 : 0 0] So, down to business, if you will. Just a bit of background for today's book review. It's been said, I'm sure you've heard this, I've said this in this place before, that if you want to be a great preacher, the first thing you must do is arrange to be born in Scotland.
- That's the key, apparently. Scotland has produced much greatness over the years. You will agree. Historians of ideas tell us there was a Scottish Enlightenment. Big names there, David Hume, Thomas Reid. He should be better known, Thomas Reid.
- A great, astonishing philosopher, Scottish philosopher, scientist, poets. Quite the array of thinkers do their business, have done their business, do do their business in Scotland.
- And today, I want to share with you a look at a little book, lectures, really this book, called, as Alexandra indicated, Why on Earth, a bit of a lengthy title for a modern volume, Why on Earth did anyone become a Christian in the first three centuries?
- Lectures. Lectures given by a chap named Larry W. Hurtado, H-U-R-T-A-D-O. Lectures given at Marquette University this year, down in the U.S.
- [1 : 3 0] Mr. Hurtado was born in Missouri. A bit of background about our author in Kansas City, Missouri. After his school days, he moved to Vancouver.
- That's a good move to make. And he taught at Regent College, another good move to make. And then, after Regent College, he moved on to the University of Manitoba.
- He was missing winter or something. In 1996, and this is directly from his bio, his resume, He accepted the professorial chair in New Testament language, literature, and theology in the University of Edinburgh.
- Yes, so we arrived back in Scotland. At that storied place, Mr. Hurtado, he founded the Center for the Study of Christian Origins.
- He is, further background about him, a bit interesting, I think. He is an authority on the history of the textual transmission of the Gospel of Mark.
- [2 : 4 0] I know a subject which is of great interest to people in this room. If you are curious about the earliest Christian artifacts, manuscripts, and Christian origins, you might consult his book by that title.
- Mr. Hurtado has written a volume soon to appear in better bookstores. In fact, I have to say now, it has appeared, the Regent College bookstore, with the title, Destroyer of the Gods, Christian Distinctives in the Roman World.
- Isn't that a lovely title? Destroyer of the Gods, Christian Distinctives in the Roman World. These lectures are, I take it, I've held that bigger, larger volume in my hands just last week.
- These lectures are, in some measure, really a preview look at this new, larger work. Again, these lectures were delivered at Marquette University, a Catholic school, as you will know, in the United States.
- Over the years, over the years, here's a generalization for you for sure.

[3 : 54] Traditional Catholics have taken, again, I think I can justify this kind of observation. Traditional Catholics have taken a close interest in the early centuries of the Church, and perhaps we can say Protestants less so.

Again, I know that's a generalization, but I think it's true enough. As a Protestant myself, I might observe, with a Catholic conversation partner, that the Catholic interest in these early centuries might be seen by a Protestant, with all due respect, as simply not early enough.

That's the traditional Protestant observation when this kind of topic comes up. Our tradition says, without apology, start with the New Testament.

Here is the supreme source. The deep mystery of it all is witnessed to in the New Testament. Of course, this conversation unfolds between Protestants and Catholics.

The New Testament obviously gives rise to the Church, or is it that the Church has given rise to the New Testament? There you go.

[5 : 08] So much meaning of a text obviously comes from how it is read and even where it is read. The New Testament always is fundamentally a text read in the Church.

It doesn't sit rarely. Its importance for a library or other folks is interesting, but it's a text in the Church for the Church. There you go.

But nevertheless, the Church's ways and means, if you will, its preaching, her teaching, her sacraments, everything comes from its source, the New Testament.

So there's a kind of circle of observation that goes on here. Is it New Testament becomes Church, or is it Church produces New Testament? Both sides in this old discussion, it's a good discussion, both sides somehow right, you feel, but seen in the other as somehow wrong.

That's maybe an encapsulation of what's gone on in Protestant-Catholic relationship to the early Church and Scripture, the relationship thereof. But this, I think, more than think, I'm quite certain this is changing.

[6 : 16] It's been changing for quite a while now. Very, very influential Catholic thinkers have most eloquently and powerfully called to their own Church, the Roman Communion, for a return to the Church's deep sources.

Go back to Scripture. Great Catholic theologians have said that in our time. It's one of the reasons Vatican II happened, because there's a groundswell of feeling in the Roman Church.

We have to go back and look at things from the wellspring of it all. Catholics being Catholics, they speak of this in Latin terms. Of course, they speak of *ad fontes*, back to the sources.

Isn't that lovely? Certainly, Protestants, we, in our tradition, in love with the vernacular, the language of the people, would usually call this something like, what do you say we go back to square one? Which is an argument that maybe we could use a bit of Latin in our tradition.

It's to the point, isn't it? It is encouraging, therefore, to see a good Protestant, like Mr. Hurtado, at a good Catholic institution, talking about the early Church.

[7 : 26] That's an interesting backdrop to it all. Early here, getting to the point of today's talk, early here, when people talk about the early Church, it's really good to zero in on what do you mean by early.

Some people mean, well, from Jesus out to 100. That's maybe, or out to 70 AD, when the temple was destroyed. But here, early is going to mean three centuries. Three centuries.

If you were alive in the year 2000, of course, we all were. Three centuries means, say, from 1700 to 2000. That seems like a good stretch of time. A lot can happen in three centuries.

A lot of change, a lot of interesting things. But this is a look at three centuries of the early Church. Three centuries of it. And 300 is a very interesting time to end a kind of discussion.

about the early Church, obviously. And you know why, obviously. A significant stopping point is at 300, because at 300, the Church approaches her, what can be called her Constantinian watershed.

[8 : 33] Mr. Hurtado doesn't go into this in these lectures. Perhaps he didn't have time for it. This is obviously what he's thinking of. The Constantinian watershed is in view at 300. The Church changes at that point.

The great general himself, Mr. Constantin, winning battles, the famous one at the Milvian Bridge. He converting to the Christian faith.

Some hotly contested kind of religious move here, of course. It will always be discussed. What really went on in the soul of that man? Do we have access to such a question?

And then the gathering at Nicaea, where the Church decided what words she would use to confess that Jesus is Lord. I was at the 7.30 service this morning, and we said that creed.

So it's still said in most of Christendom, every Sabbath. So in a very real sense, we are still in this story, aren't we?

[9 : 38] History never goes away. It just shifts. We're in this story today. What happened to the Church in the first three centuries? What happened to our community, I might want to put it, in the first three centuries?

What happened to us, our story? Straining forward to what lies ahead is a gospel imperative. So mere traditionalism is futile.

We don't look back at three centuries of churches past just for fun. Otherwise, it does become a kind of traditionalism. Perhaps in some Roman circles over time, they've fallen into that trap.

But the gospel also says that we are to remember the good deposit, remember what the gospel has been doing. The faith is given.

So we do look back. It's a happy necessity to look back to Scripture and to see it's the community that read Scripture over time. Bible and its readers.

[10 : 38] You can't have a book without readers. The Church is the reader of Scripture. It's the way it works. So today, with Mr. Hurtado, this very learned fellow, we will hear, if you will, from Scotland.

Perhaps, I hope, better than that, even a distant echo, something heard from our sisters and brothers in Christ in the Church's first three centuries.

Quite specifically, looking at Mr. Hurtado's meditations on this very interesting question, I find it so. Why did our brothers and sisters in Christ, why did they become Christians over those three centuries?

Today's talk, a book review. Before we jump in, after that intro, let me say a word of prayer. Lord, we would look at the gospel in many different ways.

And one way we trust, which is good for us, is to look at how it has grown and moved in the world and what it's done. So may we see the gospel with a bit of more, a bit more clarity by looking at your people in these centuries.

[11 : 55] Lord, give us wisdom and light in these things. Amen. It is interesting to note, right off the bat, as does our lecturer, very, very interesting, intriguing lectures.

interesting to note that some very big powerful minds, some very big names, have taken a real interest in this question. It's interesting how people have really thought this is important from all sorts of different angles.

Edward Gibbon, the famous historian of Roman antiquity, a great 18th century man of the Enlightenment, a fine fellow. Adolf Harnack, Harnack, in the late, is it late 19th century, early 20th century, took a real interest in the early church.

These, these centuries intrigued him. In our time, a great sociologist, American fellow, Rodney Stark, has written about the early church and its rise, its membership, a lot of things.

There, the work of these, perhaps these notable ones, giving rise to a lot more work. A lot of classicists, New Testament scholars, historians, have taken a real interest in this issue of the early church these centuries and have addressed different questions, including this question today, why did people become Christians in these centuries?

[13 : 24] That very widespread interest. It is simply, to begin with, I hope you'll agree, a good question. Very just interesting. Historians, classicists, find this kind of stuff interesting.

What they do for a living. However, having said that, beneath the surface of academic inquiry, there are hot issues percolating in this inquiry.

There always are, and anything that's significant to look into. There are interesting contests of scholarship here. What does the church look like in these centuries?

Specifically, we're speaking here specifically in the Mediterranean world. That's important to note. Church moving out across the Mediterranean world.

Where the church made its first great impact, we can safely say. Moving swiftly out from Palestine. It's good to get the feel, the drama of this.

[14 : 24] There is a drama here. These people on Middle East, Palestine, moving out across the Mediterranean world.

How come? Why does it happen? Moving swiftly. What motivates this movement? Why did this movement hold together as an institution?

Why was it institutional? That is to say, if you met a Christian 500 miles away from this Christian, how is it that you would recognize them as Christians? Why was there a recognizable movement here?

What class of people in social terms embraced this set of beliefs? This has been a very interesting topic of inquiry. Who were these Christians?

We went back to 150 somewhere in the Mediterranean world. We ran into a Christian group. Who were they? What did they look like? In what we would call social terms. Were they mostly slaves?

[15 : 24] Were they mostly female? Were they mostly rural? Were they mostly urban? Were they artisans? Etc. All of the above? What were they? How was it viewed, this movement, as it became more and more prominent?

How was it viewed by Roman folk? Were they attractive, these Christians? Were they unattractive? Many, many questions may be asked, have been asked, and have been given strong, influential answers.

At the heart, I'm going to be very swift today with going over Mr. Hurtado's lectures, because I want to lots of time for conversation. At the heart of our author's approach is to note the kind of question, kind of questions, and the kind of answer, or answers, which have tended to prevail.

This is an important stream of his thinking. He's a real world-class expert on this stuff, Mr. Hurtado. What kind of questions have been asked by scholars, roughly say, since Gibbon through the 19th, 20th century?

What kind of questions have been asked? What kind of answers have tended to prevail? But before we get to just that, just a few earlier observations, less difficult observations, not contested really, but very interesting, already just in passing noted it, but stop and ponder it for just a moment.

[16 : 57] So, noting again the very, very obvious but quite remarkable fact, as sort of a backdrop to the kind of inquiry that Mr. Hurtado leads us into, the evidence seems quite, quite clear that the Christian movement had a very wide and, so to speak, very swift geographical spread.

It had, obviously, wide appeal. It spread out over large tracts of land and somewhere there's something like 1,500 miles or something to mention.

We'll go into those kind of details. It really spread quickly. How come? Now, sociologists have noted, Mr. Hurtado tells us, I've never noted this from sociologists, is that new religious movements rarely have what they call trans-local appeal.

New religions pop up frequently. They're all over the place and they peter out. And if they get spread out around here and there, they usually lose their identity. Everything goes wonky.

Excuse a technical term. That's just something to note. It really boomed.

[18 : 16] There it is. It moved out quick across the Mediterranean world. Even Paul's epistles have reflections of this. Paul traveled widely. Christian communities got set up in a lot of places and they grew from there that the New Testament does not witness to, but they did.

Boom. They started spreading. You know. How come? Wide appeals. Also, this movement had a wide social appeal.

Many from different classes were found as adherents. Still, this for a long while was less certain. It is still open to inquiry. More inquiry is done on this one.

than the geographical spread fact because that seems indisputable. But the evidence increasingly suggests, Mr. Tattle informs us, that it did have indeed wide social appeal against slaves.

We're in the church in these centuries. Both genders. Some highly placed ones in Roman culture.

[19 : 30] Mystocrats, we might call them. Public officials on occasion joined. They were a mixed bunch. Christians in these first three centuries had wide social appeal.

Again, you can just slow down. It's the way thinking happens. You go slow. You say, I wonder why. Why did they have appeal across, apparently across, many different types of people?

For instance, this challenges earlier Marxist historians who saw these Christians as almost always members of the underclass. They must have been almost all slaves.

People who lived at the edge even of destitution. you know the old story from Marxism, a proletariat looking for comfort in a heartless world.

But, this is now very hard to sustain. It has seemed much, it's much more likely that in fact it was all sorts of people who didn't need any evident religious comfort in their lives social terms.

[20 : 43] This extent, geographically and socially, is probably, now here is where, as referred to earlier, controversy tends to set in on this topic.

Historians are maybe a bit shy here, as I read Mr. Tato. These facts might appear to justify a word about the first Christians in the first three centuries.

A word something like unique is going on here. But, you know, some historians are going to wince at that. Why would we want to call the Christians unique?

Something different about this movement, something surprising. Maybe a word like uncanny here presents itself. Why this movement?

Why this geographical spread, this appeal across social classes? What kind of narrative, that's what historians do for a living, isn't it?

[21 : 50] They produce narratives about, they think they have discerned as facts about the past. What kind of narrative adequately captures the data in this?

What an interesting question. How shall we talk about this Christian movement in its first three centuries? And the answers, Mr.

Hurtado is very, very interesting on this, have tended to look to what we would call some of this anachronistic, but it's true enough, have looked to the social sciences for guidance here.

That is to say, things like this are typical observations amongst the people who inquire about this. alienated people will be attracted to a community which offers acceptance and status.

That's true. That seems okay. Yeah. Here, hence, slaves, the ultimate disadvantaged ones in the Roman world, and women who often were almost always disadvantaged, here in a community like the church, they would find a warm acceptance and some measure of status.

[23 : 05] So they saw this gathering in the church as a good place to be. Well, yeah, that's out there, that's very common in the literature apparently. Leaders in this group, the church, there's always leaders around, they may have suffered from, this is some of the language from the social sciences, which Mr.

Tattle makes his readers familiar with, they may have suffered the leaders from status dissonance, the poor chaps, of some kind. You know, they had gifts, people in this society have gifts, which unfortunately are unrecognized, you know, life's tough, not fair, but they found an outlet in this new social group, they could, you know, be big fish in a small pond, that's where the Christian leaders came from.

They got unhappy, miserable women and slaves, with socially disoriented leaders who didn't have their gifts recognized properly, so this explains where the church came from.

End of story. Whoops. There you go. Variations on these kind of themes abound in the literature.

I would have thought when I first heard them from Mr. Tattle, I first heard this actually from Charles Taylor, who writes a lot about Gibbon, the 18th century historian, early Christians apparently sold themselves as effective miracle workers, and this drew the ignorant multitudes.

[24 : 35] There you go. That's our background, folks. That's our genealogy. They were good at miracle workers, and they sold themselves to this, and so people poured it into the church because they wanted to get to know these miracle workers.

There's another explanation for why the Christian church grew. That last argument, apparently, Edward Gibbon took it very seriously, the 18th century learned historian of the Roman Empire.

Mr. Hurtado contends, I think it's probably quite obvious that the shadows of people like Mr. Gibbon and Adolf Harnack are very much still present and shaping the inquiry of modern inquiries about why in the world did people become Christian in the first three centuries.

Mr. Harnack, as you know, is the great liberal Protestant who thought that pretty well set aside something like the Nicene Creed and said that Christianity really comes down to God's a nice father and we're all sisters and brothers.

Get rid of the ideas there. The former, of course, am I being unfair, Mr. Gibbon, an enlightenment despiser of the Christian faith. Mr.

[25 : 50] Hurtado doesn't stop and say these kind of things but I'm doing it for him right now. Just an aside here, just an aside, Christianity's greatness, would you agree with this, is shown by its capacity to produce great enemies.

It's a truth about our faith. We have a lot of big enemies over the centuries because it's tough to deal with Christianity because it's got a power about it.

At this point in these lectures, keep an eye on the time here, Mr. Hurtado gets really interesting. What is missing, and I'm going to be very swift about this, but you'll get the gist of it, I'm sure, what is missing in this modern discussion, often, not always, perhaps it's shifting a bit now, what's missing is something really quite simple, and so it may be stated simply.

Too often, it is either denied or overlooked that ideas, that beliefs, I'll go very slow here, not just take this sort of thing in, ideas, beliefs may be very powerful forces in people's lives.

This is crucial to Mr. Hurtado's move here, as he makes his contribution to this scholarly inquiry. This social dynamic, beliefs, and ideas must be looked at seriously.

[27 : 20] A direct quote from Mr. Hurtado, beliefs, he says, beliefs, ideology, and rhetorical framing, how a movement presents itself to people, beliefs, ideology, and rhetorical framing help to produce, he says, social and historical phenomena, and should themselves be considered historical and social phenomena.

When you read a sentence like that, it seems obvious, but often apparently in the discussion about Christianity in the first three centuries, it becomes, it's sort of quietly set aside and begins to disappear a bit.

There you go. Ideas, again, may be powerful forces. Why might we think, and here's how Mr. Hurtado continues his argument, why might we think that Christian ideas, or some subset, really, of Christian ideas, would be received by people in the first three centuries as powerful, and this quite important for Mr.

Hurtado's argument, necessarily powerful. How might the Christian ideas have been received in the first three centuries as powerful, really powerful in one's life?

power? And, and necessarily powerful is, again, worth noting, and Mr.

[28 : 47] Hurtado does note it. Why would Christian ideas, beliefs, we call them Christian identity forming conceptions, be necessarily strong? Why would they be nerving in one's life, if you will?

Why would they be potent in one's life? Why might we see them as such? Because, and this is both obvious but frequently forgotten, there were very powerful reasons not to become a Christian in the Mediterranean world, in the church of the first three centuries.

This is a big part of Mr. Hurtado's argument. There were a lot of good reasons not to be a Christian in those three centuries, for sure.

And Mr. Hurtado, very effectively overviews them. Swiftly, two reasons. And the first, strangely enough, perhaps not of the first importance, because it's the best known of them.

Christians did, as we know, on occasion, at this time in history, suffer what we would call now forms of official judicial violence. This is fairly well known, isn't it?

[30 : 01] Significant, furious, state hostility sometimes descended upon Christians in the first three centuries. It could be nasty in the Roman Empire to be a Christian.

When Rome felt the disruptive presence of Christians, we'll go on to mention why in just a moment, when it felt that disruptive presence as Christians became, Rome reacted.

Rome knew how to do the iron fist thing, as we all know, for sure. Christianity was seen as disruptive, in fact, to the social cohesion offered by state-sanctioned religious pluralism.

Somewhat anachronistic language, I think, there, but accurate enough. The Romans liked religion. They were nuts about it, but they controlled it. There was acceptable religion, and then every now and again something might show up that was not acceptable.

The Christians fell into that last category. This is known well enough. Christians tortured in the first centuries. Just a point here that Mr.

[31 : 18] Hordado doesn't make, but I like to stop and make it. Oliver O'Donovan has an eloquent passage about if we'd been at the Council of Nicaea, and we have seen bishops, church teachers, theologians, perhaps literally marching in liturgically into their great gathering hall, Nicaea.

Something that would leap out to us would be rather disturbing. That bishop has no eye. That chap has no arm. That guy is lame because many of the Christians at Nicaea had been tortured for their faith.

When we say that creed, remember, it was galvanized by people who had known what it meant to suffer for Christ. Christians were tortured.

They were thrown to the lions. The most popular thing about we Christians in the early centuries, people love to think of us getting thrown to the lions. Nowadays it's not always with sadness. The hidden catacombs, these dreadful things happen.

But second, and Mr. Hortado thinks this is much more significant, much more significant about Christians in the first three centuries was the ongoing social cost of belonging to a Christian gathering.

[32 : 34] This is much more important, he says, than the violence, the episodic violence that Christians would suffer on occasion. In the workplace, in the family, in work guilds, wherever people gathered, being identified with the church in any way, this often would confer upon the believer the status of the awkward, sometimes the extremely awkward outsider.

This was the ongoing price you'd pay for being a Christian in the first three centuries. This would be daily. This would be all the time.

It was a really difficult thing in social terms to be a Christian in the first three centuries. A summarizing of this with a direct quote.

Birth, death, marriage, the domestic space, civil and wider political life, trades and work, life in the military, socializing, just getting together with folks, entertainment, arts, and music.

were all imbued with religious significance and association. And the association was with, of course, various kinds of divine beings.

[34 : 01] The Roman Empire was simply saturated with this. You go out for dinner, you might be asked to do obeisance to some god. Before a business deal, let's do obeisance, let's ask for the help of serapis or some named god.

Everywhere, at the birth of a baby, at a funeral, when you got together, quote, socializing, in the military, everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, you had to do obeisance to the gods.

And if you were a Christian, this was a big problem. Ongoing, daily mess of it all.

This would, of course, manifest itself with different intensities at different times. Just to highlight that, let that stand as a given, this is what Mr. Taddo argues very convincingly.

But I never come across this before. It's good to read, you know, sometimes you come across something that you just never imagined. But he makes this point with backup from other scholarship here and there.

[35 : 14] In many domestic spaces in these centuries, one would think, especially perhaps in wealthier houses, homes, I don't know. It was understood in the Roman world, Mr. Taddo tells us, that if you were a slave, and we know a lot of Christians were slaves, Paul addresses slaves in his epistles, there were slaves in the churches, Roman emperor was filled with slavery.

slavery, if you were a slave in most institutions, it would be understood, and excuse this point, because it's rather blunt and brutal, but it's understood that you would be sexually available.

That's just a fact of the ancient world, Mr. Taddo said. It would just be understood that that was part of the scene, part of the culture. You would be sexually available to who owned you, other authorities in the house.

Never really thought about that before. When Paul talks about slaves, when he addresses them, he must have known, Paul would know what difficulties they may have faced in being in the church, gathering where some churches Paul had founded himself.

That would be an ongoing daily issue with these people. What am I going to do about that, Paul? You know? What would you do about it?

[36 : 50] Leave? Probably destitution? Maybe some member of the church could take you in? Maybe, maybe not? What would a Christian slave do?

Just leave that with you. you realize how often these early Christians in this kind of social environment, these, again, are brothers and sisters in Christ.

How often they must have pondered and prayed over words from the gospel like, be as meek as doves, yes, and as wise as serpents. You would have to be as wise as a serpent to negotiate your way around daily life in the Roman empire as a Christian.

It would be a challenge. Very, very difficult to be a Christian in the early centuries. Why would somebody choose to join?

Why did it make such huge geographical gains and why did so many people throughout the culture want to join? Why the success in the face of ugly, pervasive, vicious at times opposition?

[37 : 59] Hmm. I simplify, but I must move on. What made this cost endurable? What gave strength to step into a Christian identity, if you will, entailing such a complexifying, to put it mildly, the complexifying of one's life?

And here's, be very swift to my conclusion here, Mr. Tattles, it's obvious and powerful, I find, his argument here. Mr. Tattles thinks that two beliefs made the difference.

I take it in his big scholarly volume, he expands on this, I don't know, but in these lectures he puts it forward as a contribution to the conversation.

Two ideas made the difference. What nerd you, what gave you the power to take on a life of perpetual social disadvantage and perhaps violence in the first three centuries?

first idea is this, God loves you. God loves you. So that's Mr. Tattles' first big argument.

[39 : 05] God loves you. Pagan gods were an interesting bunch. Wow, were they ever. If placated properly, they might help you with the crops or a business deal.

Just any old challenge in life, the pagan gods might come in handy if you placated them properly. There they were. They just might help. But never, never, ever, ever, that's me, not Mr.

Tattles, you don't write like that. Never did they announce, these pagan gods, that they loved you. They didn't love you by name and they didn't love you with an everlasting love.

No, they didn't. Loving gods or love for gods simply did not figure in pagan piety. Simply did not figure in pagan piety.

Mr. Hurtado there references one Ramsey McMullen. Great classicist, great historian of our time. Not a friend of the Christian story, as I understand it.

[40 : 07] So, comes from a source like that. Loving gods or love for gods simply did not figure in pagan society. Why, why isn't it true that we take this theme for granted?

We ask ourselves as Christians, why do we take it for granted? We take this theme for granted. In antiquity, so argues Mr. Hurtado, it was enough to set the heart aflame and it was enough to make you might to be willing to live a new kind of life, even a life filled with new dangers.

Hmm. Hmm. To be a Christian in antiquity, and this kind of shows a kind of throws about a kind, I think, exegetical light.

Mr. Hurtado goes into this a bit. Some exegetical light on some of the things that we take, we read in the New Testament from our modern perspective that may have been read so differently in antiquity.

To be a Christian in antiquity may have been always seemed to be a call to be, in fact, an incarnation of the gospel. Come, join the church, and become an incarnation of the gospel in your own life.

[41 : 23] I am crucified with Christ, Paul says. The early church, a martyrdom church sometimes, a suffering church, may have just read that, yes, I am called to be crucified every day, and I will become, therefore, in different to status, indifferent to the acceptance, daily acceptance, the reinforcement that we live by in a culture.

Without affirmation, without acceptance, life becomes almost intolerable. The early Christians, their uncanny power came from this idea, God loves me, and I am crucified with his son, Jesus, because he loved me that much to die for me.

Second, and clearly following on this, and I think this is a great theme, yes, God is love, and this God, this God who is love, this God of Israel, who is the God and Father of Jesus Christ, has given you the assured promise of immortality.

God is love. God has and is giving you the gift of immortality. Here is, Mr. Hurtado argues, a most powerful, effective, speaking to the heart, speaking to reorder one's emotional life, a most powerful, effective belief, nerving, strengthening the believer for a very difficult, again, a very difficult life.

Not just the judicial violence, which happened here and there, but the daily cost, the awkwardness, the social alienation, the exclusion from the workplace, the exclusion from the family, the broken relationships everywhere that might come about because you took on this difficult life of being a member of the church of Jesus Christ and becoming thereby an incarnation of the gospel.

[43 : 33] I am crucified with Christ. These people may say, every day I'm crucified with Christ. Every day. Social disincentives, to use some of the language that comes across in these lectures, social disincentives were many and they were often undoubtedly effective.

These beliefs, God is love, God has the gift of immortality for you, challenged and overcame them. Such is the essential argument of Mr.

Hurtado in these lectures. Just again, before I race to a conclusion, I hope I see we will have good time for conversation and I want that.

So again, these lectures, just think of what they're saying. The church, we're looking at the church, three centuries of it. geographically everywhere in the Mediterranean world, members from all strata of society, recognizable in belief and a way of living.

They were persecuted, sometimes again with violence, always with social suspicion, with different levels of intensity undoubtedly, making life dangerous or at the very, very least, very complex.

[44 : 52] And again, what enables the decision to become a Christian in such an environment? And at its deepest, the answer is love and immortality.

Love and immortality. Edward Gibbon, we start out by a look at him, great man of the enlightenment. He totally discounts the power of religious beliefs.

He regarded any religious belief as simply so ludicrous that one couldn't take it seriously. That's the major, the man who put his major stamp on this inquiry about the early church in modernity.

That's the way the enlightenment wants to see religious belief. Ludicrous. Let's look for the real story. Let's not pay attention to the ideas of the gospel.

No way. Let's run off in with other explanations. Charles Taylor, by the way, Mr. Hurtado doesn't mention this.

[45 : 58] Charles Taylor has a magnificent dissection of Gibbon in his magisterial book A Secular Age. Gibbon is finally dealt with, I think, adequately and profoundly by Charles Taylor.

Gibbon's approach to the Roman Empire and Christianity is just, I think, scandalous. He doesn't, not religion, ideas. These people are a loopy.

So he found other reasons why anybody would become a Christian. He couldn't take it seriously. But I must close. Life in antiquity may have simply been deeply shaped, in fact, by a dull hopelessness.

As here, even, I've been asked before, why are you putting glossolalia on the board? This was an interesting, and gravestones, quite frequently found in antiquity, these words appear.

Non-fui. Non-fui. I once didn't exist. You know, before I was born, I was nowhere. Fui, I existed. This is the story of all of our lives, I once have one.

[47 : 13] Non-fui. I am not anymore. Oh, I'm dead. That's why you're standing in front of my grave. But this is devastating. Non-curo. I don't care.

There's antiquity. Maybe in a nutshell. I wasn't. I was. I'm not. I don't care. Mmm.

There's antiquity. Imagine living by that worldview. And one day you hear, God loves you. It's the gift of immortality from you. Christianity grew.

This is the sickness unto death, as Sorin Chikigor calls it. People are in despair, but they frequently don't know it. This guy, before he died, knew it.

This guy knew he was in despair. A lot of people in our culture are in despair that don't know it yet. They are. Here is the mighty clash of civilizations.

[48 : 15] In the big book, Mr. Hurtado quotes a Yale historian. He's an historian about the massive cultural shift that must have occurred because of Christianity in the first three centuries.

Maybe this discussion is shifting over into a way to be more pleasing to the Christian. Maybe there's things are getting better. Here is the mighty clash of the civilizations.

These people were dying without hope, and now into their world, they're left out from Palestine, a new people with a new witness. Dying, and behold, we live. That's what Paul says to the Corinthians.

That's different than that worldview. Dying, yes, but behold, we live. We'll die the daily death of alienation from you, but we live in Christ. There is the power to be different.

And it may become increasingly the power to be different in 21st century Vancouver, in 21st century paganizing Western world.

[49 : 16] There it is. A strong tradition of scholarship has tried to mute the gospel word as it looks for reasons why the Christian church grew and why people believed in it.

This kind of, these lectures challenge that tradition. Very quietly, very gently, in a very scholarly manner, Mr. Taddo does his business as should be done.

So as I say, a footnote, really, here's a word from Scotland. And how our faith, for instance, encountered a place like Scotland, I have no idea.

It would have, it would be so different than how it went out into the Mediterranean world. It would have, it would have family resemblance, I'm sure. It's the same gospel.

But it must have negotiated its way into that kind of, the northern European culture in quite a different manner. quite a, same story, but quite different at the same time.

[50 : 16] But that's maybe for another day. Some of you learned ones who know all about Scotland can, can unfold that for us. The gospel is a power.

And it makes its way in the world with amazing power. It's good to be reminded of that in a nice little volume like this. Why a nerd did anyone become a Christian in the first three centuries?

Good reading. Just excellent stuff. And I enjoyed speaking about it all with you this morning. So it's five to ten. Let me say a word of prayer and then let us discuss.

Lord, we thank you for our brothers and sisters in the faith who've gone before us and we look to them for encouragement and hope. And may this, our inquiry about them, give us new, new insights into the gospel and a renewed desire to walk with you in our moment as well.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm trying to remember the name of that book.

[51 : 27] Sure. Mary, her title. Okay. You're good at Latin, I must say. Oh, yeah, I know. It's my forte.

You could put that on a t-shirt to be funny. Yeah, that would be nice. You know, I'm soon and then wear it to work. Yeah. Conversation starter. I might do that actually, just to be funny.

Good sir. Good sir. I thought I would think that the Holy Spirit had a role in this and an extraordinary place is for the rapid video of spreading.

F.F. Bruce in his the spreading flame attributes the rise of the church in the first century to this extraordinary role of the Holy Spirit.

Is that on the letters of service? Yes, it's not on the surface in lectures like this and I guess in most academic circles they would. But implicit in his he wants to go back to sources again and say love, God's love, the gift of immortality is part of the gospel.

[52 : 33] Paul says that Timothy, the gospel brings to light immortality. So yes, it's implicit, is it not, in his, I want to say, gospel ideas.

It's the chief force making for rapid spread and through different social levels. So yes, it's implicit in that, but he doesn't say it on the surface of his lectures.

In the geography department at UBC, were you ever allowed to bring up the Holy Spirit and the formation of that mountain ranger? Only at coffee time.

Yes, well, I hope. With his Catholic confreres at Marquette, I hope he would, they would talk about the blessed spirit. Undoubtedly. He's praising, I think implicitly, he's all praise to the Lord is here.

But it's, it's just waiting there, you know. There's a sense in which the whole thing is a miracle. Oh, for sure. Yeah. But if, uh, yes.

[53 : 39] The strongly thing in reading Spreading Flame is how in that first century, rather than the three centuries, you, you have the presence of individuals who had seen there is in Christ in, or very least had friends.

Mm-hmm. Yeah, that, thank you very much for that. That's why we go, uh, when, when someone says early church, I, I've, best thing is, okay, give me some years. He's going right up to 300.

Good, sir. That is actually a very important point to the spread of the early gospel.

Mm-hmm. Uh, what we see between Nicaea and the end of the, uh, the, uh, writing of the New Testament is really only five generations.

Mm-hmm. It's really only five generations between the end of the writing of the New Testament to Nicaea. Yeah, that's... So, we have to take the New Testament documents in its, say, its social context.

Mm-hmm. Which is, it's a document being spread by people who either were there or knew people who were there.

[54 : 52] Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So, because of the concreteness of the Gospels, as opposed to just making these ethereal promises, it just lines out biography and of actual eyewitness.

Mm-hmm. Confirmed by the people who were actually transmitting it. Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm. And that concreteness gave it a power that was much superior than, say, its competitors.

Mm-hmm. Because the Roman Empire at the time was a time of extraordinary claims.

Mm-hmm. There were many religions running around saying all sorts of fabulous things, making incredible promises to the point that the public was actually quite jaded.

Mm-hmm. So, here comes along this religion that's making something very, very concrete.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Saying, we're not making any sort of concrete claims other than this is what we saw.

Mm-hmm. And you draw your own conclusions from what has been seen. Mm-hmm. Oh, and by the way, I knew a guy who was there. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. That's very, very powerful.

[55 : 52] Mm-hmm. And then you have, on top of all this, you have people who are doing extraordinary things spiritually. Mm-hmm.

Mm-hmm. Like exorcisms and healings and the charismata. Mm-hmm. And that's going to provide a witness on top of the eyewitness testimonies.

Mm-hmm. Yeah, yes. Thank you very much for that. That's wonderful. And I think for Mr. Tattle's purposes, when he talks about very briefly in lecture, God is love. Mm-hmm.

If you have a few steps, okay, stop. Let's have an hour on that. How would the early Christian community have unfolded that great, astonishing claim? He would have gone on to all the kind of things you've said. Of course, 1 Corinthians 15 would have been, Paul says, I tell you, here's the folks I've known who saw him.

And then why is one untimely born? So the witness to God's love is unfolded in that kind of concreteness, for sure. Yeah. You can't lay it at, say, just one cause. No, no.

[56 : 57] And this is always going to be a debate subject to conjecture. Yeah. Sure. Of course. Yeah. Even, yeah. Re-establishing the subjectivity of Christians, say, over a course of three centuries, Mr. Tattle thinks is a challenge.

Other scholars agree that it's a challenge. But more and more efforts are being made at that. What about the ordinary Christian? What was their subjectivity like?

Mr. Tattle takes a go at it with Paul. They felt themselves incarnations of the gospel. I'm crucified with Christ. That would nerve you to be different in that.

He leans, how difficult was it to be a Christian then? He thinks it was really difficult. Work, family, everywhere. And so something had to give these people strength.

And he thinks it's those. He decides those are the two focal points for the strength, yes. But it could be unfolded, of course, with the gospel itself. But the transmission lines were very short.

[57 : 58] Oh, for sure, for sure. And most of the ancient church was within, say, a stone-stone distance of one of these very short lines of transmission.

The early Christian church had a very small core set of followers, but a very extended set of, say, satellite followers.

Is that, not to go on footnote controversies in another context, but that's why the early church took a lot of care about, well, who made your bishop a bishop?

Because that line back to Palestine and who saw Jesus was important to them. It was. You know, we're not wandering around here with new religious ideas. We always go back to the concreteness, as you so helpfully point out.

And the early church saw itself really very much an extension of messianic Judaism. Oh, for sure, for sure.

[59 : 03] Well, all of this, Mr. Tattle wants to say, say again, not to bore you, all of this has been set aside in much of the scholarship. Gibbon doesn't want to talk about the gospel. Harnack, Harnack, supposed to be a Christian of sorts, but he melts it down to a couple of generalizations.

That's it. So they naturally then fall into what we now would obviously call the social sciences to try and figure out why this weird and very effective, fast-moving, across-all social grouping thing is happening.

And they don't want to look at the gospel itself, as Sir Tattle boils it down to, love, immortality. I'm getting old, older. You people are also young. So the idea of immortality becomes increasingly of interest to me.

Every time I go to the doctor, he's saying, you know, this, this. I never heard of these things before. So, sorry, Sir. What strikes me in your presentation and the good comments that we just had is at a very high level a sense of discontinuity.

Although I will credit you toward the end, you took a turn back towards a modern continuity with that situation.

[60 : 29] Where I'm trying to go with this is the origins, the limited period, the very early, the direct experience.

And nowadays, two millennium on, where is the continuity?

How are things actually the same, not very different? And I'm minded of something that I encountered in my preparations for a couple of weeks from now, where Kierkegaard says, you know, you cannot say, well, Christianity is great because it's been around for 2,000 years and it must be, you know, it must be true because it's lasted so long.

You can't do that. You should not do that. What you have to do is recognize that in each generation, you are starting from scratch in a subjective personal sense.

And the key point there is that God became man. And you have a relationship to this unique historical occurrence.

[61 : 56] And either you recognize it or you don't. Yeah. Well, yeah, I mean, that's, yeah. Kierkegaard is wonderful in his subjective passion.

His weakness, I would say, is that he, it's a passionate objectivity at the same time. He loses track of ecclesiology sometimes. But because he was in the, or he wouldn't have heard about Jesus if it wasn't for the church.

You know, the church carries the message. It's sort of like the turns that you took. I mean, you can always take it and turn it again. Thanks. Yeah. The continuity, I, yeah, you can ask.

And he was very involved with the church. The continuity is, in symbolic terms, I think is most effective. We have absolute continuity. It's water, bread, wine, word.

Sacrament, word. And they live by that in the first three, and so do we today. Out there, it's word, bread, wine. You get baptized with it. Exactly. So there's the deep continuity.

[62 : 56] Sir, please. Yeah, I'm just thinking of that passage in Acts, where after Peter had healed the crippled man in the name of Jesus and brought before the Sanhedrin, and then you've got Gamaliel, the highly revered member of the Sanhedrin, who was, scriptures say, honored by all, referencing a few spiritual movements that died out after their readers died.

Gamaliel points that out to the Jewish ruling body, and then says those words, which are so powerful. Therefore, in the present case, in reference to the Jesus movement, I advise you, leave these men alone, let them go, for if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.

But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God. Yes, yes. So there's the argument that it is a miraculous movement, and that that is an explanation.

And then I just flipped over Acts 11, the church in Antioch. There's persecution breaking over Antioch. And verse 21, chapter 11 says, the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed in terms of the Lord.

So you've got, I mean, that's just staggering for you to actually, to think the Lord's hand is with the Christians, and that it's God empowering his church to move forward.

[64 : 30] Yeah, no, that's, yes, yes. You encouraged me. Here's a quote from Lucian. Lucian. He's in this period.

I wish I knew more specifically. The poor wretches. Here's a description of Christians. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them.

Furthermore, their first lawgiver, Jesus, persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another. After they have transgressed once and for all by denying our Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself, living under his laws.

You know, there's a kind of amazement that, oh, who are these people in our midst? He's sort of, there's another echo of, well, it'll probably peter out. That's sort of a, but he should have heard Gamaliel.

Well, it's not petered out by his time. And when's it going to peter out? But, uh, oh, sorry, someone, Sheila? I find his conclusions a little unsatisfying in that he doesn't, excuse me, offer any provenance.

[65 : 49] Is this guy a historian? Is Hurtado a... He's a New Testament scholar. Okay, I'm not quite sure what that means in terms of historical stuff.

But, you know, a historian would look for a grape that had something different than that. Oh, yes, oh, yeah. You know, a historian would, well, the evidence that this gentleman was named, sorry, I don't know you.

I mean, you should. Oh, I did answer that. Yeah. When the next call, you're saying, oh, no, he doesn't. These are, these would be proofs that would support his conclusions that love and the promise of immortality are what prompts us.

Well, you know, immortality has really no value unless it is a better life than the one you've got now. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, well, so the question is, do you think he's, he's extremely thorough?

I don't think he has supported his conclusions. Oh, oh, oh, sorry. I'm, I'm, I'm reviewing lectures. Uh, he, he'll support you with a thousand footnotes per half sentence if you want that.

[66 : 57] He's interacting with all the classicists and all the historians who've dealt with this issue. As a professional scholar, he's doing that. Uh, he nuances everything. You know, of course there were people in the ancient world who thought about immortality, but it was, it was infrequent and it doesn't seem to have any power.

Um, there were religions that promised immortality. I didn't know this until reading these election, the Mithra, Mithraeus, is what they were called or something. Apparently to get in, you had to fork over a lot of money to join.

These were really weird groups. You know, they, and they, they quote famously, as I brought, petered out. No, this is a nuanced scholarly discussion. He's not throwing out, okay, that proves this and this quote proves that.

He's, he, he, he'll, he'll torch you with his, his nuance and his scholarly footnotes if you want that. It's there for sure. Sure. Sure. I would want proof, not just footnotes.

Well, well, what, a proof is an overall, you, you produce a narrative and you say, does this capture what we think we know about this, this period? And certainly, certainly, the earlier scholarship that dominated with Gibbon and others is a, I'd say, a travesty of scholarship.

[68 : 16] Oh, the Christians, we, well, our presupposition, our pre-understanding is that religious people are loopy. So we know that's in place with Gibbon. And so he cannot take seriously any Christian idea.

So he looks around for what we would call social dynamics that make people want to become Christians. So he refuses to take the ideas of the movement with any seriousness.

Now, there is a travesty and Gibbon was, has been very influential. That's why I, I delight in Charles Taylor's dismantling of Gibbon.

Gibbon taught our culture how to sneer religion. You meet it every day. The Enlightenment taught us how to sneer at religion.

You know, and this, this kind of scholarship says, come on, let's get serious, let's look at the dynamics that we can discern at work here. So anyways, no, thanks. If you think he's just, this is not a preacher in a church, he's doing serious, scholarly inquiry here, for sure.

[69 : 21] This would be taken seriously everywhere. You know, he's, he's, he's a, he's a, is a New Testament scholar automatically a classicist? In a sense, they are.

In a sense, they have to look at the abiding cultural history in which the New Testament happens. In that, in that sense, they are. You know.

Anyway, good point. The book's good. The book's good. Thank you. Are we getting running out of time? we just have to leave. We have to. No, no, we, we, we, we need to have deadlines too.

Although we could stay here and have more snacks. They're still going over there. Any more? Bill, Bill, Bill, go ahead. I thought that was a good comment about slavery.

Slavery was universal for Asia, Africa, Americas. or the Mediterranean and these folk were property and simply couldn't leave unless they fled.

[70 : 23] Yeah, yeah. And it was, as you point out, incredible. Quandaries that you can see in Paul's that comments to the slaves as well. Just another comment.

I don't think that there was a lot of good world tradition about Christ and the apostles floating around the third century.

If there was this, it certainly hasn't emerged. And Larry would, I think, agree with that.

I want you two to have a talk. You two to introduce yourselves. It's a fascinating area of inquiry. I mean, what goes on?

You just hit hopscotch across the world in a way that the witness, the apostolic witness that is preserved in Scripture through the Spirit, I would argue, just didn't reach in so many ways.

[71 : 26] then. And so there was a great amount of ignorance about the person of Christ, I think, in the early church. And I think the evidence is there in the epistles that know that ignorance often.

Well, yeah, it's always historical developments are always complex the closer you look at them, aren't they? For sure. For sure. Okay, I'm going to suggest we close with one last question.

Then her title, when and where was he born? What year? What part of the world? Is he still alive? Yes, he's still alive. Yes, he's still alive.

He was a Pentecostal, young Pentecostal who went to Bible school with Sven Soderlund. There you go. I worked in Chicago for a while and he had established, Larry had established a church in the Chicago area where all of the other staff were from that church.

What a fascinating story. Well, thank you very much. Thanks. Thanks.