

CHRISTIANITY: THE FIRST FOUR HUNDRED YEARS the THIRD CENTURY: 200 A.D. TO 300 A.D.

INTRODUCTION

Last week we were able to look at some of the **challenges** facing the church of the second century. These we divided in two: **persecution from without; heretical teaching from within**. We saw that the false teaching was largely related to Gnostic teaching and the teaching of Marcion. We saw what Gnosticism and Marcionism were, and how the Church responded both through the development of Catechetical schools, and the writings of great Church leaders. We also saw what some of the accusations against the church were, and how she responded through the writings of “apologists”.

A few of the names of apologists and teachers we mentioned were:

- ◆ **Aristides:** in 138 A.D.
- ◆ **Justin Martyr:** Wrote: *Apology I and II*, around 155-160 AD, and *A Dialogue with Trypho*,
- ◆ **Athenagoras**, 177-180 wrote, *A Plea for Christians*. He also wrote a treatise called: *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.
- ◆ **Tatian**, *An Address to the Greeks*; Tatian also wrote a harmony of the Gospels in 170 A.D.,
- ◆ **Theophilus**, bishop of Antioch, wrote *Three Books to Autolyucus*, which dealt with the doctrine of God, the interpretation of Scripture, and Christian life.

Teachers (also called Church Fathers):

- ◆ **Irenaeus of Lyons**, made bishop of Lyons in A.D. 178. He wrote extensively against false teaching. We still have two of his books: *Against Heresies*, (otherwise known as *Refutation of the So-Called Gnosis*) 185 AD; and *Demonstration of Apostolic Faith*.
- ◆ **Pantaeus** founded a Catechetical School at Alexandria: in 180 AD he also visited the Mar Thoma Church on the west coast of India
- ◆ **Clement of Alexandria:** he was a disciple of Pantaeus and flourished between 180-200 AD; he died in 215 AD.
- ◆ **Tertullian of Carthage**, (c. 160 – c. 220 AD) was a native of North Africa, possibly a Berber. He converted to Christ in Rome when he was about forty years old, though he lived most of his life in north Africa in Carthage in what is now Tunisia.
- ◆ **Origen**, disciple of Clement of Alexandria was born c. 185, probably in Alexandria, Egypt — died c. 254, Tyre, Phoenicia).

Today, we must continue along the same trajectory.

1. I'll say a word about Tertullian and Origen, two of the leading teachers of the early 3rd century.
2. But more importantly, I'd like to talk about the continued spread of Christianity, where and why it happened.
3. Some of the devastation inflicted on the Church by secular authorities not only in the Roman empire, but beyond, in the Sassanid Empire to the east.
4. How that persecution affected the church internally. And finally,
5. An element that was to have vast implications for later centuries: the birth and development of asceticism. The name usually associated with this is **Saint Anthony of Egypt**. Hopefully, we'll get there by the end of the class.

I. TERTULLIAN AND ORIGEN

So, let's close last week's list of teachers with a brief look at Tertullian and Origen. Why are they

important?

Tertullian of Carthage who lived between **160 and 220 A.D.** is important, among other things, because he was a masterful thinker and a skilled word smith. Some of the words he developed while wrestling with difficult theological concepts are still in use today. **He also wrote in Latin**, one of the first to move away from Greek, and is thus considered the founder of Western Theology.

First a word about his background. You'll notice he was born well within the 2nd century: around 160. But Tertullian, did not convert until he was around 40 years of age, that is, around 200 A.D. And though he spent the lion's part of his life in North Africa in what we now know of as Tunisia, (he was, many believe, a **Berber**, or native North African) he converted in Rome and returned to Carthage in Africa.

Tertullian, it is believed, had a lawyer's training, and when he writes, he writes as a lawyer, marshaling his arguments logically. He does so both in defense of Christianity, against secular authorities; and in attacking the doctrinal error of heretics. But he is also a rhetorician. And as such, he is unsparing in his use of irony and sarcasm. For example, in his most effective work: *Prescription Against Heretics*, in a section treating the teaching of Marcion and Marcion's god he says this: (remember, Marcion believed that there were two gods: the Old Testament god Jehovah, who was evil and who created the world; and the New Testament god, the Father, who loves everybody and will never judge anyone); he writes concerning Marcion's god that, whereas the God of the church has made this entire world and all its wonders, Marcion's god—the one Marcion finds in the N.T.-- hasn't created a single vegetable. And then he asks: “what was Marcion's god doing before his recent revelation in Jesus? Is the divine love that Marcion touts a {quickie} affair of the last minute?” (page 76, Gonzales).

Other teaching:

- ◆ He writes compellingly to the authorities concerning emperor Trajan's ruling—the one we saw last week, that Christians should not be sought out for their crimes, inasmuch as their crimes aren't worth the trouble, but that only if they are denounced should they be punished—Tertullian writes that if their crimes aren't worth seeking out, why persecute Christians at all?
- ◆ Another teaching, one that was to have a very long life: was his conviction that the Scriptures belong to the church, and not to heretics. It is the church that has the right to interpret them, inasmuch as the church in Rome, in Antioch, and in Alexandria has always possessed the Scriptures, has interpreted them uniformly, and is descended from the apostles who wrote them with unbroken lines of bishops and teachers to pass them on; whereas heretics (Gnostics and Marcionites) are coming onto the stage at a later time and taking what does not belong to them and then foisting upon the scriptures interpretations that the church has never recognized. In this way Tertullian appeals to tradition, lineage from the apostles, and uniform interpretation by the churches to denounce heresy and its theft of scripture. This teaching has a long life which reappears at the time of the Protestant Reformation when the Catholic Church denies the right of Protestants to interpret the scriptures, claiming its long line of descent from the early church. But to be fair, Protestants were claiming doctrinal descent from the early church, saying that the Church in the Middle Ages added doctrines that were never there to begin with.
- ◆ One last teaching of Tertullian that has had a long life brings along with it a theological term. I told you that he invented some theological expressions that are still with the church today. And one such term was the word “**Trinity**.” Interestingly enough, this Latin theologian from North Africa, developed this term by denouncing the teaching of a man who was probably the Bishop of Rome at the time. He calls the man Praxeas, in his book, *Against Praxeas*, but he was probably referring to none other than Bishop Calixtus. Calixtus had developed a tantalizing

idea in trying to unravel the mystery of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Praxeas, (or Calixtus) taught that “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were simply three modes in which God appeared, so that God was sometimes Father, sometimes Son, and sometimes Holy Spirit... This is what has been called 'patripassianism' (the doctrine that the Father suffered the passion, from *patri*—father, and *passian*—passion). It is a heresy denounced by the church that is also called more simply 'modalism'--the doctrine that the various persons of the Trinity are 'modes' in which God appears.” (Gonzales, page 77). **Modalism** is like saying that God uses masks: sometimes wearing one mask, say, of the Father, and at other times wearing the mask of the Son, or again of the Holy Spirit. But Tertullian, pointing to Scripture, disagrees. He notes, for example, that the Son prayed to the Father while he was on earth, and returned to him when he ascended. He talks about Jesus' obedience to His Father, and so forth. Subsequently, Tertullian comes to the conclusion that all three members of the godhead exist concurrently. He explains that the Triune God is to be understood as **One divine substance** in three different, but nonetheless perfectly unified **persons who all exist concurrently in one godhead**.

- ◆ Furthermore, in talking about how **Jesus can be both human and divine**, he uses the same terms *person* (*persona*) and *substance* (*ousias*) to speak of Jesus as being one person, but having two natures or two substances, one being divine and the other human. We'll get to more of this later, but I want to underline that these words and concepts were to have a long life, being subsequently widely adopted by Church Councils. They are still standard use in confessions of faith and churches around the world today: to wit, the words: **Trinity; Persons; and Substance**. More of this, next century.
- ◆ The last thing to note is that, here in Tertullian's time and on into the next century, theologians from North Africa and elsewhere—Antioch, Alexandria, Caesarea, etc.--considered themselves on an equal standing with the bishops of Rome and argued their ideas from the scriptures on an equal to equal basis. Tertullian dared face down the bishop of Rome, and it was Tertullian's ideas that were adopted.

Origen of Alexandria born c. 185, probably in Alexandria, Egypt — died c. 254

Just a word about Origen. Origen was one of the great teachers of his day, being head of the Catechetical school of Alexandria in Egypt. People came from far and wide to hear him, including the mother of the emperor before Rome was Christian. Due to a number of factors one of which was jealousy, he was forced out of Alexandria and settled in Caesarea where he taught for another 20 years before being tortured to death during the persecution of Decius. He was extremely intelligent, at times dictating to some 7 secretaries at once, seven different documents. He was orthodox at base, but, was probably, in his desire to build a bridge to pagan philosophy, more Platonist than Christian, letting himself go into wild speculations about the nature and creation of the world. He speculated, for example, that there were two separate creations: first a spiritual one, then a physical one; and that the physical world came about because of the rebellion of spirits in the spiritual world. We ourselves were first created as spirits. God had to create the physical world and form bodies to house our spirits here once we had sinned. So God was creator of the physical world, but did so, only because we'd sinned in the spiritual world, and he needed to find a place for us in order to redeem us. As you can see, this is another variant on how the spiritual world is way preferable to the material world. These ideas are directly descended from Plato. Just so you know, Origen's speculations were condemned as heretical by the church later on. But this man still contributed some very important stuff to the church of his day.

As a scholar Origen wrote the *Hexapla*, an edition of the Old Testament in six columns, four of which were different translations of the Hebrew into the Greek, one of which was the Hebrew text itself, and another a transliteration of the Hebrew into Greek; along with an entire system of symbols indicating

variants, omissions, and additions. This is so you know that early church scholars compared texts too. They wanted to be sure they got back to the original and translated it accurately. And they did this at the Catechetical school in Alexandria as well as elsewhere. What Jesus and the apostles actually taught was very important to them. We didn't invent scholarship and textual criticism at the Reformation.

II. THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

I thought it would be good now take a look at the spread of Christianity and give some consideration as to why the church grew. We only have time for a little, but I do want to give you a glimpse.

- ◆ Around 200 A.D or before the first Christian kingdom came into being. **It was the country of Osrhoene, often known as Edessa**, which was the name of its capitol city. Its king Abgar IX (179-186 AD) converted and made his kingdom Christian. It was a border kingdom to the Empire of Persia and Armenia, sometimes ruled by Rome, sometimes by Armenia, sometimes by the Persians. It occupied at the time the area of land between the Mediterranean on the West, the Black sea to the North, and the Caspian to the North East situated on the **Euphrates River**. The capitol, Edessa, was right at the northern tip of what is now Syria, the south eastern part of what is now Turkey. Its language was Syriac, or Syrian. It was Christian very early and produced many scholars, including Tatian, to whom we referred last week. **Osrhoene, or Edessa**, was later to play a role in the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The Diatessaron, or harmony of the four Gospels that Tatian made was the only Gospel used by the Syriac speaking church until the 5th century when the Diatessaron was condemned and the four original Gospels were re-instated. Another of its cities was **Nisibis**, further east, which became a place of scholarship and missionary enterprise for centuries.
- ◆ The Kingdom of **Adiabene**, to the East of Edessa, converted early as well. Its capitol was **Arbela**, near the **Tigris River, above Tekrit** in Iraq where Saddam Hussein was born, which also became a center of Christian scholarship and missionary activity sending missionaries to the north and east, and doing so for centuries. These were Assyrians. Though it was being evangelized already at the turn of the first century, by 200 it was almost entirely Christian.
- ◆ **Egypt**: We have already seen how Alexandria in Egypt was a major Christian center already in the second century. By the third it was a powerful minority. Already in the second century, our faith was spreading into the country areas, and its teaching was being translated into Coptic, the native Egyptian tongue.
- ◆ **Ethiopia** adopted Christianity in 325 A.D., but the church already had a strong presence in the mid-third.
- ◆ **Nubia**: which occupied that land on the upper Nile from Aswan down to present day Khartoum in Sudan, probably had a church solidly implanted by the third century, though it did not officially convert and become a Christian Kingdom until 540 A.D. That Christian Kingdom lasted nearly a thousand years.
- ◆ **Gaul**: We have already seen how, in the second century, around **178, A.D. Irenaeus**, bishop of Lyons, a city on the Rhone in what is now southeast France, was exercising influence throughout the Christian world by his writings. The church was strong enough to generate riots by its pagan opponents.
- ◆ In **Bythinia**, on the northern coast of what is now Turkey, pagans were neglecting the temples and vendors of sacrificial animals were finding few buyers. That was in the year 111 when the governor Pliny wrote to Trajan.
- ◆ **Carthage** in North Africa had very strong church—we'll talk about this in a minute
- ◆ **Spain**: Both Tertullian and Irenaeus make reference to the church in Spain, and by the mid-3rd century, we have evidence to suggest that Christianity was already a strong minority in that

country.

- ♦ **Persia:** The presence of the church in Persia was huge. More about that in a minute.

So Christianity was spreading quickly. One of the theologians of Edessa, a teacher named Bardaisan, wrote around 196: *“What shall we say of the new race of Christians whom the Messiah has caused to arise in every place and in all climates by his coming? For look, wherever we may be, we are all called Christians after the one name of the Messiah. On one day, the first of the week, we assemble ourselves together....Wherever they are, and in whatever place they are found, the local laws cannot force them to give up the law of their Christ.”* (*Dialogue on Fate*) (page 45, Moffett, volume I).

So: How can we explain the rapid expansion of Christianity? There are many factors, not least of which was the inner vitality of the message of the Gospel itself: forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, historical meaning from Adam to Christ, the teaching of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit. But today, I'd like to take a look at one or two chapters in Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, to attempt to show the power of the Christian ethic itself, and what a shining light it was. Let's begin with the place and the protection of women in the Church

III. THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Women were one of the primary agents of evangelization in the church. For reasons that will soon become apparent, the Christian faith was hugely attractive to women. Why so? Let's dig into the Greco-Roman world of the time and try to catch something of what life was like for women and how the ethic of the Church changed things for them.

Some facts:

1. In the Roman and Greek world, men far, far outnumbered women. Dio Cassius, writing about the year 200 attributed the declining population of the empire to the extreme shortage of females. It is estimated that, in Asia Minor, North Africa, and Italy there were some 140 males for every 100 females. Why is that? Females were so often killed at birth. This was not only legal, but considered morally accepted by all social classes. Both Plato and Aristotle recommended infanticide as legitimate state policy; and the Roman Senate agreed. For that reason, more than one daughter per family was rarely reared. In any one hundred families, only one would raise more than one daughter. Here is a letter written by a man named Hilarion to his pregnant wife Alis:

“Know that I am still in Alexandria...I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home,] if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it. You have sent me word, 'don't forget me.' How can I forget you? I beg you not to worry.” (Stark, pages 97-98).

“During recent excavations of a villa in the port city of Ashkelon, (archaeologists) made a gruesome discovery in the sewer that ran under the bathhouse....The sewer had been clogged with refuse sometime in the sixth century A.D. When we excavated and dry-sieved the desiccated sewage, we found the bones ... of nearly 100 little babies apparently murdered and thrown into the sewer.” (Stark, 118).

In the church, however, infanticide was strictly forbidden. It was considered murder.

2. But infanticide was not the only reason women were far less numerous. Another was the female mortality rate due to infections related to forced abortions. Any husband could command his wife to

abort her child, and so women were forced to use slightly less than lethal doses of poison, taken orally or introduced into the uterus, or horrendous contraptions to hold the uterus open, with blades, and so forth. This not only caused infertility, but was a major cause of death of women due to miscalculations as to the dosage of poison consumed, and infections related to surgical removal. Men, you see, were not eager to be burdened down with children, let alone wives. Caesar Augustus had to pass laws forcing men to marry because so many men, especially in the upper classes preferred to stay single acknowledging that they could not have a really harmonious life with wives. It was much easier to go to prostitutes who could be had for two pennies in the marketplace. (Stark, 117). So if they did marry, one child was probably enough. Was a wife pregnant with another? Command them to abort! And if the wife died, you could always go in to a prostitute or purchase a mistress.

In the Church, however, abortions were forbidden. And husbands were commanded to *“love their wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself”* (Ephesians 5.25-28). And joining oneself to a prostitute was allowing evil to enter God's holy temple, one's body, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

3. In Greco-Roman society, the law classified a woman as a child, regardless of her age, and therefore the legal property of some man at all stages in her life. Males could divorce their wives by simply ordering a wife out of the household. Moreover, if a woman was seduced or raped, her husband was legally compelled to divorce her.

In the Church, however, “fidelity, without divorce, was expected of every Christian. Moreover, the earliest church councils ruled that twice-married Christians could not hold church office...The Church also rejected the double standard that gave men sexual license, but required women to be chaste. *Christian men, not just women,* were urged to remain virgins until marriage, and extramarital sex was condemned as adultery” (Stark, 104).

4. In Greco-Roman society, women had no legal status relating to property she might inherit from her parents. “Should they be widowed, Pagan women faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years. Of course, when a pagan widow did remarry, she lost all of her inheritance—it became the property of her new husband.”

In the Church, however, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. Thus not only were **well-to-do Christian widows enabled to keep their husband's estate**, the church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry. So, for example, in **251 A.D.**, Cornelius, the Bishop of Rome, sent a letter to Bishop Fabius of Antioch, in which he reported that more than **fifteen hundred widows and distressed persons** were in the care of the local congregation, which may have numbered about 30,000 (Stark, 104). **And women had status**, as Paul's letters mentioning **female deacons and even apostles attests.**

5. In Greco-Roman society, girls married young, often before puberty. Plutarch reported that Romans gave their girls in marriage when they were twelve years old, or even younger. Dio Cassius wrote that girls were considered to have reached marriageable age on completion of their twelfth year and Roman law set 12 as the minimum age at which girls could marry, but we know that at least 10% were married at age 11 (Stark, 105-6). Did girls like this? Plutarch thought it a cruel custom and reported the hatred and fear of girls forced contrary to nature.”

6. **In the Church, however**, (and we know this from statistical studies of Roman inscriptions), **some 32% of Christian girls married between 15 and 17, and another 48% waited until 18 or over. That's 80%**. (Stark, 106-107). The Church, apparently, cared about the girls themselves and their own desires.

Is it any surprise that women found the church an attractive place? And the teaching of the N.T a gift of unexpected joy? As often happens in such conditions, women brought their husbands along with them into the Church. Without abortions and infanticide, the fertility rate among women increased. With the Christian exhortation to “multiply and fill the earth”, whereas the population of the Empire was in constant decline, the church grew constantly in number.

IV. EPIDEMICS

Any other clues as to the reasons for the growth of the Church? Well, here's one that is not widely known. It involves the Christian response to epidemics in the Empire.

Many of us have heard of the **black plague** that swept Christian Europe beginning about **1348**, killing anywhere from a 30 to 60% of the population. Something like 100 million people in the world died from it.

But few of us know that epidemics were already a recurring problem at the time of the Romans and probably account, better than decadence, for its fall. Already in the year **165 A.D** during the reign of **Marcus Aurelius**, a pandemic swept the Empire, quite possibly **smallpox**, killing from **a quarter to a third** of the population. Marcus Aurelius himself died from it in Vienna in the year 180 A.D.

Contemporary chroniclers spoke of carts of the dead being brought out from cities and villages. Then again in the year **251 A.D.**, another epidemic, believed to be **measles**, chewed through the population, this time striking farmers and country people as well as city dwellers. Some 5,000 a day were dying in Rome alone. Interestingly, such Church fathers as Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (more on him in a minute, if we have time), Eusebius, the father of Church History, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, all believed that these pandemics contributed heavily to the growth of the church. Why might that be? Now we don't have time today to go into detail on the reasons, but I will outline briefly, three reasons that Rodney Stark gives in his book, The Rise of Christianity, in his chapter, *Epidemics, Networks, Conversion*. They are the following:

1. The epidemics overwhelmed the abilities of traditional Greco-Roman religions and philosophy to provide answers and give meaning to what was happening—the questions of “why?” and “what next?”, whereas Christianity was able to provide a framework of meaning and hope that was eminently satisfactory.

2. The Christian values preached and lived out by the Church of love, charity, and community solidarity shone like the sun in the midst of all this darkness. And not only did this allow them to cope better, but they *survived better*—one would say, almost miraculously in the eyes of the surrounding world, so that, by the time an epidemic had passed through, they made up a significantly higher proportion of the population.

3. Lastly, epidemics loosened the social bonds that tied individuals to existing religious networks, allowing them, without fear of rejection from their families, to adopt new social networks. This last is an important point, because many Christian sociologists today believe that what prevents Muslims from converting to Christianity today is the fear of ostracism from existing social networks within their

communities. But what if those networks are all but destroyed? Then people are free to create new bonds and commitments; to join new networks. And what better than those which provide better meaning, and greater virtue and love? In other words, the Church?

Do we have any proof that this is actually what was happening? Yes we do.

With regard to the question of meaning and hope (1), Christians (Bishops Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria), in the midst of all the dying spoke of the immense joy awaiting those who died in Christ, and of how this life was merely a testing ground for the next., so that, whereas, they noted, pagan populations around them were filled with terror, Christians found consolation and were filled with hope.

Even better, with reference to point two and Christian virtue in the midst of all this darkness, whereas such famous physicians as **Galen** fled to the countrysides to escape the evil, Christians stayed put, and not only ministered to their own, thus saving many, many lives, but ministered to the pagan populations around them. And when they died as a result of contracting the diseases, they counted it martyrdom and a glorious death. Listen to what **Bishop Dionysus of Alexandria** writes at the height of the second pandemic around 260 A.D.

“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.” (Stark, page 82).

A century later, in the mid fourth century, the apostate **Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate**, who tried to bring the Empire back to paganism from Christianity, wrote to pagan priests, encouraging them to do as well as Christians in caring for the poor and sick. He wrote: “The impious Galileans (i.e. Christians) support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us” and complained that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for Christian growth was caused by their “moral character and their benevolence toward strangers (83-4).”

Pagan and Christian writers were unanimous in saying this. **Tertullian** wrote in his Apology (defense of the faith), “*It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another!'*” (87).

Why did Christians act in this way? Well, imagine being a convert to Christianity, and hearing Jesus' words in Matthew 25 for the first time, and taking them literally:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me...Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

And then remember what pagan religion was like. It wasn't as though Greeks and Romans knew

nothing about charity; but their *gods*, their **gods imposed no ethical standards**. All the *gods* cared about was *getting the rituals right*: having the proper sacrifices and prayers addressed to them at the proper times. Ethics had nothing to do with the practice of their religion as the treatment of women, children, the sick and the practice of sexual mores attests. **Is it any wonder, that pagan people, whose lives and social networks were disrupted by epidemics, turned to the one shining light in the midst of them, whose founder and leader had given his life for them?**

We must move on. And to a much darker note. Despite its moral integrity and love, persecution continued against the Church. And some of it was divisive in nature.

V. PERSECUTION

There were two major persecutions in the Greco-Roman Empire in the third century. We'll talk about them briefly.

1. The first was a persecution under the **Emperor Septimius Severus** early in the 3rd century. Severus, after putting an end to a series of civil wars in the Roman Empire felt that the promotion of religious harmony might also bring about a kind of civic harmony as well. Remember, there were still a proliferation of religious groups, sects, and religions within the conquered peoples of the Empire. He decided the best way to promote religious harmony was through a policy of religious syncretism, that is, a kind of synthesis and melding of all religions. He proposed to do this by bringing all religions together under the worship of one chief god—*Sol invictus*—the Unconquered Sun. All religions were to be acknowledged so long as The Unconquered Sun would be recognized as reigning over all. Two groups refused to yield: the Jews and the Christians. So Severus outlawed **the conversion** to either of these, on penalty of death. This was a step up from Trajan's ruling, a century before. And is reflected in the writings of the Koran against conversions to Christianity from Islam, several centuries later. **Irenaeus of Lyons** suffered martyrdom under this persecution. However, it is generally thought that persecution was limited and of relatively short duration, and for some 40 years the church grew. It was during this time that Christians began to take refuge and worship in the **Catacombs of Rome**.

2. Then, in mid-century under the **Emperor Decius, around 249 A.D.**, a second more cruel persecution broke out. Barbarian incursions into the empire were more and more frequent and daring. For an old school emperor like Decius, there had to be a religious reason, and he found it in the neglect of the pagan gods. The gods were angry. Rome had abandoned its gods, so the gods had abandoned them. If Rome was to recover its imperial glory therefore, the worship of the gods must be universally restored. The very survival of Rome itself was at stake. To neglect worship was high treason. He imposed that worship therefore on everyone. And when Christians refused, **rather than killing them** and making them martyrs, his policy was to weaken the Church by forcing Christians **under torture, to recant**. His policy was systematic and widely applied in the Empire. It was during this persecution that the scholar **Origen** suffered torture in Caesarea in Palestine, and later died from the effects. But, whereas *before*, those who kept the faith died and passed on as martyrs, because Decius' policy was to make a spectacle of Christians who denied their faith, in this case, most did NOT die. If, therefore, they make it through torture without denying our Lord, they re-joined the rest of the Living Church with the glorious name of **Confessors**. They were much admired. This was the upside. However, there was a downside too. What if you didn't make it through torture confessing the name of Jesus? What then? And what if you wanted to rejoin the church later when the persecution had died down? This as we shall see, was to have a profound effect on the unity of the Church in later years. Particularly when it involved bishops. Fortunately, this persecution was brief, only about 3 years, and ended with the **death of Decius in 251**. But the consequences of the questions we've just raised, lived

on. Notably, what to do with bishops and believers who hadn't achieved the high standards of some during this persecution. And of the names attached to this controversy, two in particular stand out: one was called **Cyprian, the other Novatian**.

VI. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

Cyprian was a disciple of Tertullian calling him 'The Master', and like him, was a skilled rhetorician and debater. Like Tertullian, he converted at about the age of 40. Shortly thereafter he was elected bishop of Carthage in North Africa; and shortly after that, the Decian persecution began. Cyprian felt the best thing he could do was to flee the persecution along with many of his church leaders, go into hiding, and watch over his flock from a distance through correspondence. **He was, incidentally, one of the best Christian writers of the age.** So, during the year **250-251**, he went into hiding. When he returned at the end of the persecution, he took back his post as bishop of Carthage, a post of influence for the entire North African region. His policy generally speaking was to accept back into membership those who recanted, requiring only confession and repentance, so long as they had not sacrificed to the gods—actually there was a whole range of possible categories, including some who had simply purchased forged documents without really sacrificing to the gods. However, some, especially those who had lived through the persecution in Carthage, were not so sure someone like Cyprian should be deciding which of the lapsed should be restored. Even Rome, after all, had lost its bishop in the persecution. What were Cyprian and his colleagues doing deciding who should, and who should not be readmitted to the church? By what authority? Should not decisions about who should return to the Church fold be put into the hands of **the Confessors**? Those who had been tortured and yet held firm to their faith in Christ? So Cyprian called a Synod of bishops in north Africa in **256, called the Council of Carthage**, to address this question. It was to elaborate a set of rules about who should be readmitted and who shouldn't, and about **what kind of penance** should be prescribed. Cyprian's concern was that the church remain united and not divided. Because, he wrote, the church is the body of Christ and will share in the victory of its Head. Therefore, **“outside the church there is no salvation.”** This didn't mean you couldn't disagree with the Church hierarchy—even he disagreed with Rome on occasion, but he believed that the unity of the church was of supreme importance, and that the actions of the Confessors threatened that unity. He wanted a synod of the church to decide who should be restored, and not a group of dissident Confessors. (Gonzales, pages 89-90). This problem of a church made up of the pure vs one made up of the impure or back-slidden or lapsed who've repented, was one which was to remain an important one in the decades to come, in particular in north Africa. We'll see something about that next week when we talk about St. Augustine and his controversy with the Donatists.

But two salient questions remain with us to this day with which the Church has struggled down through the ages:

1. What constitutes a true church? Who should belong?
2. Can you be saved without belonging to the Church?
3. If someone lapses or sins, in order to obtain re-admittance to the Church, and communion should some kind of penance be required?

The whole penitential system of the middle ages that Luther and the Reformers so firmly rejected over a thousand years later, was a direct outgrowth of these questions.