

# Church History I

## (Early Church to Scholasticism)

### Week 2 – Apologists and Persecution

**Introduction:** The Christians were subject to trials and tribulations from within and without. It is essential to understand the early church as we look outward towards the future. Each major branch of Christianity, namely the catholic, Orthodox, and protestant, looks at church history, but each one finds its focus more on one of the three formative features: canon, creeds, or episcopates. Protestants are most focused on the scripture (canon), the Catholics are most focused on the bishops' hierarchy (episcopates), while the Orthodox will focus most clearly on the Creeds. **PTQ**

<sup>1</sup>However, all are important and need to be functionally addressed. The 1-3<sup>rd</sup> century gave the church great heroes in the faith, a finished and generally accepted canon of scripture, as well as church traditions which stemmed from the aforementioned creeds, philosophers, and bishops.

#### I. Persecution

##### A. From Without

1. Breaks from the Persecution often occurred due to short reigns, power struggles, and general difficulties in the empire at times drew focus elsewhere. Although it also at times stoked the fires of persecution.
2. This quote by Tertullian gets to the point. "If the Tiber rises too high or the Nile too low, the cry is 'The Christians to the lion.'" <sup>2</sup> **PTQ**
3. Some of this sentiment stems from the idea that the Roman emperor is a God and thus ought to receive worship, and if there is one God, the whole of the empire could get around it, making sense to be the one who is living and in charge of the empire. Thus, Christians in their refusal to worship the emperor were seen as dire threats and causes of the anger of the gods.<sup>3</sup>
4. The persecutions, as stated previously, were not universal across the empire, but were going on consistently on a local level in varying areas from 60 to 325 A.D. Bolded names represent harsher times of persecution. **PTQ**
  - i. **Nero** (37–68): emperor of Rome (54–68); after the fire in Rome, he blamed the Christians; many were arrested and brutally executed.
  - ii. **Domitian** (51–96): emperor of Rome (81–96); demanded he be worshiped with required sacrifices, which led to persecution against Christians and Jews; possibly exiled John to Patmos.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Noll, [\*Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity\*](#), Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 25.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Bennett, [\*Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years\*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, [\*Church History in Plain Language\*](#), ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 49.

- iii. Trajan (53–117): emperor of Rome (98–117); recipient of a letter from Pliny that sought guidance on how to deal with accused Christians (*Letters* 10.96); Trajan agreed with Pliny’s policy of not seeking out Christians and only punishing those who refused to recant if accused.
  - iv. Hadrian (76–138): emperor of Rome (117–138); generally tolerant of Christians and required proof of guilt from those accusing Christians of wrongdoing.
  - v. Antoninus Pius (86–161): emperor of Rome (138–161); Polycarp was martyred during his reign; addressee of *First Apology of Justin Martyr*.
  - vi. Marcus Aurelius (121–180): emperor of Rome (161–180); held a similar view toward Christians as Trajan and, although he did not seek out Christians, he allowed some persecution; Justin Martyr was martyred during his reign. **PTQ**
  - vii. **Septimius Severus** (145–211): emperor of Rome (193–211); Christians were persecuted and martyred during his reign, including Perpetua, Felicity, and Leonides.
  - viii. **Decius** (201–251): emperor of Rome (249–251); all subjects under his rule were required to sacrifice to pagan gods on behalf of the emperor or face persecution; the persecution under Decius was the first large-scale effort by the Roman Empire. **PTQ**
  - ix. **Valerian** (c. 200–260): emperor of Rome (253–260); initially favorable toward Christianity, he later issued edicts against Christians, which led to intense persecution.
  - x. **Diocletian** (245–311): emperor of Rome (284–305; the Great Persecution, the last persecution sanctioned by the Roman Empire, began during his reign, though it is unclear if he was the direct cause; four edicts were issued targeting Christian churches, writings, and leadership, and sacrifices were again required; abdicated in 305, which led to the decline of persecution in the West. **PTQ**
  - xi. Galerius (260–311): emperor of Rome in the East (305–311); continued the Great Persecution after Diocletian abdicated; he issued the Edict of Toleration permitting the practice of Christianity as a *religio licita*.<sup>4</sup>
5. It was most likely for persecution to arise in major hubs of the Roman world.
  6. It is also important to note that Persecution did not always result in death.<sup>5</sup>
    - i. Christians who were killed were called Martyrs.
    - ii. Christians who lived through persecutions were called confessors. **PTQ**
    - iii. Those who recanted their beliefs were called Apostatized or the Lapsed. **PTQ**
  7. This Persecution brought to bear some critical questions?
    - i. Should Christians seek martyrdom?
      - a) Many of them seemed to romanticize the idea.
      - b) Note some of the stories from *Tried by fire*, like Perpetua, and the fact that the only thing that saved Origen was that his mother would hide his clothes from him.<sup>6</sup>
    - ii. Can they avoid it?
    - iii. What happens when they recant?

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Parks, [“The Early Church Is Persecuted,”](#) in *Church History Themes*, ed. Zachariah Carter (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> “How Thousands of Christians Died: Persecution & Martyrdom,” YouTube, March 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpHT20xrxml>.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 52-53.

- a) The church was very divided on this.
- b) Some said the confessors should get to decide, others thought it should be up to the bishops, while some just said no.
- c) The agreed-upon process involved public acknowledgment of sin, investigation of each case by bishops with clergy and laity assisting, and re-admission through the imposition of hands by the bishop and clergy. This approach aimed to balance the need for repentance with the church's role in offering forgiveness. However, those who had sacrificed to idols and never repented were not allowed back into the church. **PTQ**
- iv. This led to the Novationist controversy when we will address shortly. **PTQ**
- v. This brings in important questions later as well, if a bishop is not valid, what about those whom he baptized or put into the ministry?
- B. From Within
  - 1. Several Heresies are addressed on the Final Page. This is not an exhaustive list, and others created some levels of difficulty. (Docetism, Proto-Arianism, and so on.)
  - 2. The need to be rightly guided is what helped lead toward things like trust in the bishops and, most specifically, the bishop of Rome in the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.
  - 3. Some bad ideas came from faithful men in the church who otherwise had generally good theology but had faulty ideas of interpretation and no previous things to base ideas on. **PTQ**

## II. Apologists

- A. Early Apologists, although invaluable to the church in some ways, also often had odd views on different areas of theology. (If anything should be used to combat the idea that one man should not be trusted to be the sole interpreter of everything the bible says, it is that.)
- B. Irenaeus 140-202<sup>7</sup>
  - 1. Known for having written against Marcion and Gnostics.
  - 2. Irenaeus seemed to be the first one to note the distinction of the New and Old Testaments.
  - 3. He also taught the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome, seeing as how Paul and Peter allegedly formed it.
  - 4. Irenaeus believed that all legitimate bishops came from a line of apostolic succession.
  - 5. Showed immense familiarity with all books of the New Testament except Philemon, 3 John, and Jude.
  - 6. Believed in the recapitulation theory where Jesus became the second Adam and Mary became something of the second Eve. (This would be some of what later led to an incorrect Mary – ology) **PTQ**
  - 7. As opposed to seeing Eve as Mary, it seems to make more sense that the redeemed bride of Christ, the church, would represent Eve.
- C. Tertullian 160-220<sup>8</sup>
  - 1. Thought the church was too relaxed on sin.
  - 2. Viewed philosophy as the gateway to heresy.
  - 3. Coined terms like original sin, sacrament, and merit
  - 4. He gives one of the earliest and clearest descriptions of the Trinity.

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Early, *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015) 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

- “One substance and three persons.” **PTQ**
- 5. Refuted Gnosticism and early forms of modalism.
- 6. He also believed that women passed down original sin through sex. **PTQ**
- 7. Became a Montanist later in life.
- D. Clement of Alexandria 150-215<sup>9</sup>
  - 1. Became convinced of Christianity through Philosophy
  - 2. He went to learn in Alexandria, and after his teacher left, he took over teaching the catechetical school.
  - 3. His most famous student was Origen. **PTQ**
  - 4. Origen followed in his footsteps of viewing the scriptures in a literal but primarily in an allegorical way.
  - 5. He focused immensely as Christ as the Logos and was most well-known for three works. *The Exhortation to the Greeks, The Instructor, and Miscellanies*. (Addressing Philosophy, the Logos, and Jesus as the Logical answer)
- E. Origen 185-254<sup>10</sup>
  - 1. Came from a Christian home in which his father was martyred.
  - 2. He claimed he had memorized large portions of the Old and New Testaments.
  - 3. He took over the School teaching from Clement and studied Neoplatonism to be able to give cohesive answers to other philosophers.
  - 4. Origen Castrated himself in attempts to devote himself to the Lord. **PTQ**
  - 5. Origen was ordained and had his ordination revoked due to his castration.
  - 6. He created a 6-fold translation of the scripture called a hexapla, and he also wrote a book addressing how to interpret scripture. **PTQ**
  - 7. One of only Two men in the Early church who were fluent in Greek and Hebrew. **PTQ**
  - 8. He taught a Christocentric view of scripture.
  - 9. However, He talked about the eternal subordination of the Son and universal salvation.
- F. Cyprian of Carthage 200-258<sup>11</sup>
  - 1. Cyprian got saved in his 40s, sold his great wealth, and lived in service to the Lord.
  - 2. He was made a Bishop in 249 and left Carthage to avoid persecution. **PTQ**
  - 3. He maintained his position in exile.
  - 4. He played a vital role in the controversy regarding the lapse.
  - 5. He maintained that no man could call God his father if he did not call the church his mother.
  - 6. He held to the supremacy of the Bishop but not the Bishop of Rome. **PTQ**
  - 7. He brought in the terminology of priest for the Bishop and altar for the Lord’s table.

### III. **Canons**

- A. Different Canons had been accepted over time.
- B. One of the earlier canons produced by Irenaeus and Justin Martyr was called the Muratorian canon.

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<sup>9</sup> Early, *A History of Christianity*, 51-53

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53-56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

1. This canon which likely came about in the latter half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century is noted to be the “oldest extant, though incomplete, list of New Testament writings;”
2. “Includes the Gospels of Luke and John, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, two letters of John, Revelation, as well as the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon; includes references to the “catholic church”<sup>12</sup> **PTQ**
- C. The next Canon list recognized doesn’t come until Eusebius’s canon, which addressed all of the books of the New Testament, noting the complete agreement on some and the regional disagreement of others.
  1. “The recognized books included the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, and 1 John. Hebrews and Revelation were included with some reservations<sup>1</sup>. The disputed books were further divided into those generally accepted (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John) and those considered not genuine (such as Acts of Paul and Shepherd of Hermas)”<sup>13</sup> **PTQ**
- D. The early church had finalized the recognition of the canon in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- E. How do we deal with the claim that the Catholics gave us the canon?

#### IV. Creeds

- A. Early Christian Creeds can be found in the New Testament as well as in the early church.
- B. In the New Testament, they are understood and recognized in passages like Phil 2:5-11, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, and may have even had some passages adopted to be like hymns, for instance, 1 Timothy 3:16.
- C. In the early church, the Old Roman Creed came out, helping define the orthodox movement in the mid-100s. **PTQ**
  1. I believe in God the Father almighty;  
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,  
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,  
on the third day rose again from the dead,  
ascended to heaven,  
sits at the right hand of the Father,  
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead,  
and in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Church,  
the remission of sins,  
the resurrection of the flesh  
(the life everlasting).
- D. In the 300’s, what became known as the Apostles Creed was established. This was a further delineated Roman Creed.

#### V. Councils

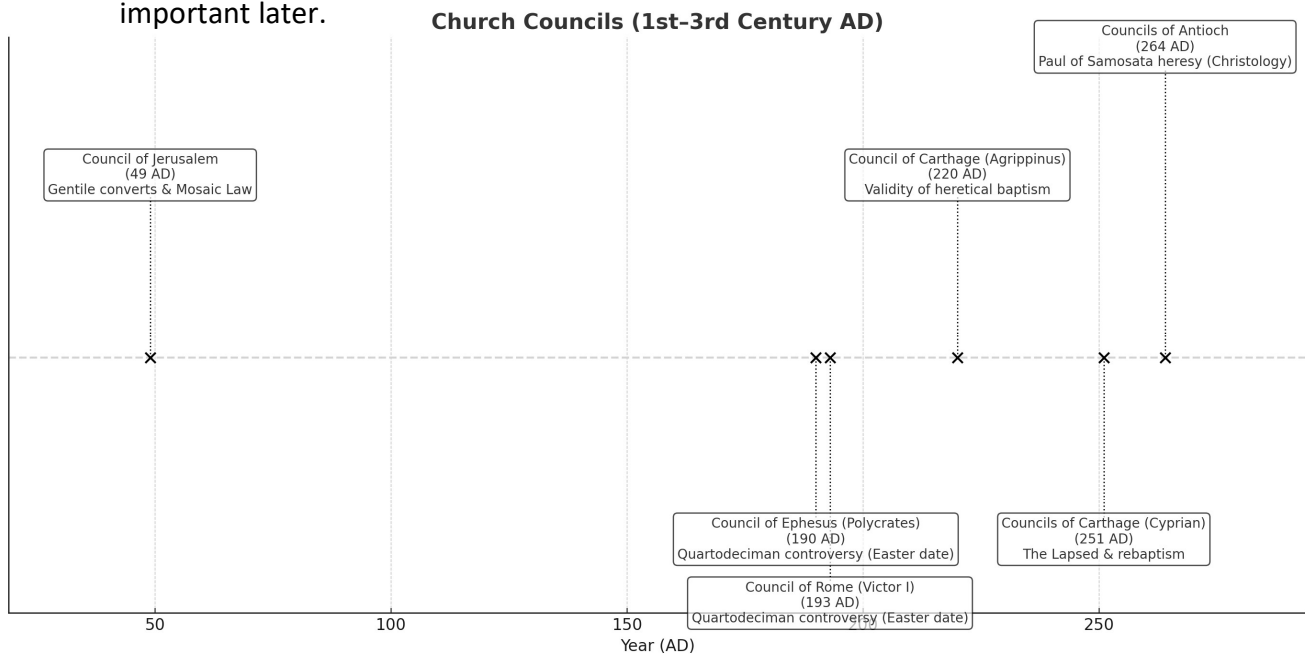
- A. The councils were more localized, although some did deal with other churches across the empire. This was primarily the case regarding the Quartodeciman controversy.

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<sup>12</sup> Jessica Parks, “[The Rise of Orthodoxy in the Early Church](#),” in *Church History Themes*, ed. Zachariah Carter (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, [An Introduction to the New Testament](#), Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 734.

- B. The first truly ecumenical council occurred in 325. Thus, although these councils addressed topics that affected all people, they were not necessarily representative of all people or churches by any means.
- C. These councils showed a desire for Orthodoxy (AKA consistency) and sometimes some levels of pettiness.
  - Irenaeus actually told the Bishop of Rome to calm down as he was trying to divide the church between east and west over when Easter was to be celebrated.<sup>14</sup> **PTQ**
- D. In general, councils were a minor part of the Christian church at this time, but became far more important later.



## VI. General Historical Overview

- A. The Christian church continued to expand regardless of the difficulties it faced.
  1. As Tertullian stated, “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.”<sup>15</sup>
- B. The church from the time of the apostles came into all the lands of the Roman Empire and even past it.
  1. This includes Asia and more than just Northern Africa, although it is not often addressed.
  2. So while it is true that Europe eventually did become the center of world Christianity, this occurred when the faith was already in its twenty-fifth or thirtieth generation in parts of Asia and Africa.<sup>16</sup> **PTQ**
- C. The Church, which came from Jewish roots, had a pretty significant break from Judaism by the end of the first century.
  1. Rome, although religiously tolerant in many ways, required sacrifice to the Roman Emperor as a god in almost every case. In one notable instance, Rome dropped the requirement of

<sup>14</sup> James White, “18 - Melito and Irenaeus,” SermonAudio, November 16, 2016, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/1113161145434/a?autoplay=1>.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, *Tried by Fire*, .

<sup>16</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 102.

- burning incense to the emperor. “The Jews, with their fanatical loyalty to their one true God, and their readiness to turn their homeland into a blood-soaked wilderness before they acknowledged any other deity, were the exception.”<sup>17</sup>
2. So once Christians were no longer associated with the Jews, the persecution could rightly be addressed towards them by requiring them to make a sacrifice.
  3. This was done at different times and via different emperors. Most particularly by Decius and Diocletian.
- D. The church had spread from not just to the women and slaves, but to every echelon of society.
1. Some emperors were suspected of being Christians
  2. Christians also had to be removed from the military and governing positions on different occasions.
  3. Origen was even asked by Julia, the mother of Emperor Alexander Severus, to come and explain Christianity to them.<sup>18</sup> **PTQ**
- E. The Primacy of the Bishop of Rome was starting to be established, although his reach was not accepted across all of Christendom.
1. This came from the text in Matt 16.
  2. The fact that the church was supposedly started by Peter.
  3. The fact that it was the place Paul and Peter were martyred also played a role.
  4. The bishops in general were expected to have the keys of the kingdom.
  5. Endorsements of this belief by particular early church fathers.
- F. The Canon was being figured out, and the books of the current canon were getting closer to being finally and officially recognized.
- G. The church had pretty successfully defended itself from different heresies. While the apologists had pushed the boundaries of knowledge, Christian ethics, and theologies in general.
- H. This entire scenario had been setting up the church to move into a brand new period that may be the most destructive point in the Christian faith. Steps towards Christendom. **PTQ**

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<sup>17</sup> Shelley, [\*Church History in Plain Language\*](#), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2018).

### Ante-Nicene Heresies

HERESY	LEADING TEACHERS	HISTORICAL INFORMATION	CHARACTERISTIC TEACHINGS
EBIONISM (Elkesaites, Mandaeans)		Originated in Palestine in the late 1st century, later spread to Asia Minor. Was made up mostly of Jewish Christians. Used gospel of Matthew in Hebrew.	Taught universality of Mosaic law (needed for salvation). Advocated antipathy to Paul. Jesus acknowledged as the Messiah, but only as a man on whom the Spirit came at his baptism. Looked for imminent Millennium.
GNOSTICISM	Simon Magus (1st century) Cerinthus (late 1st century) Basilides (early 2nd century) Saturninus (early 2nd century) Marcion (d.c.160) Valentinus (d.c.160) Tatian (110–172)	Had roots in pagan philosophy, especially Platonism. Was influenced by Oriental mysticism. Had little appeal to the masses; most influential among church leaders. Appeared throughout Empire. Worship ranged from very simple to very elaborate. Forced church to formulate Rule of Faith and New Testament canon. Caused church to emphasize apostolic succession as repository of truth.	Thought themselves possessors of unique higher insight (gnosis). Thought themselves to be of spirit, other people of soul or body. Taught matter is evil. Held to hierarchy of aeons (Pleroma). Produced either sensuality or asceticism. Were dualistic. Generally rejected Old Testament and Judaism. Used allegorical interpretation. Said that the world was created by Demiurge (=Jehovah). Believed Christ's body was an illusion.
MONTANISM	Montanus (2nd century) Priscilla (2nd century) Maximilla (2nd century) Tertullian (c.160–c.220)	Originated in Phrygia. Later spread to Rome and North Africa.	Were ascetic. Were chiliastic. Expected imminent start of Millennium. Practiced glossolalia. Were generally orthodox in doctrine. Thought themselves to be spiritual, others carnal. Continued prophetic revelation. Held to universal priesthood of believers. Opposed art of any kind. Sought martyrdom.
MANICHAISM	Mani (215–277)	Originated in Persia.	Held dualistic view of creation (light vs. darkness).



		<p>Contains many elements of Zoroastrianism.</p> <p>Mani was flayed alive, his skin stuffed and hung over city gate in Persia.</p> <p>Augustine was a follower early in life.</p> <p>Similar to later Paulicians, Bogomils, Cathari, Albigensians.</p> <p>Was characterized by strict hierarchical organization.</p>	<p>Believed Christ was representative of light, Satan of darkness.</p> <p>Said that the apostles corrupted Christ's teaching, Mani revealed it in pure form.</p> <p>Taught that Christ's body was illusory.</p> <p>Followers were severely ascetic.</p>
NOVATIANISM	Novatian (d.c.257)	<p>Originated after Decian persecution in North Africa.</p> <p>Novatian elected pope by strict party who opposed appointment of Cornelius as bishop of Rome.</p> <p>Novatian martyred under Valerian.</p> <p><b>PTQ</b></p>	<p>Novatian theologically orthodox, wrote fine work on the Trinity.</p> <p>Opposed allowing those who had lapsed during the persecution to return to the church.</p> <p>Condemned as schismatic, not heretical.</p>

<sup>19</sup> Robert C. Walton, [\*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History\*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 19.

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