CHAPTER 4: THE CHURCH IN THE THIRD CENTURY

Roman emperors in the first half of the century

Severi dynasty

Septimius Severus

(193-211)

[already discussed under second century]

 Renewed persecution in A.D. 200:

- Leonidas (Origen’s father) beheaded
- Potamiaena (young girl) boiled in oil
- Perpetua and baby burned; her slave Felicitas killed also

Died on campaign in Britain

Caracalla

(211-217)

Brutal and cruel; murdered family members, including brother Geta; favored the army; built baths; extended Roman citizenship to all, in order to tax all; dropped persecution in middle of reign; was assassinated by his army on a Parthian campaign

Macrinus

(217-218)

Prefect of the guard; removed by Caracalla’s cousin and his family
Heliogabalus

(218-222)

Cousin of Caracalla, controlled by his mother Soaemias and grandmother Maesa (Caracalla’s aunt); real name was Elagabalus; Latin authors name Heliogabalus

14-year old priest of Syrian sun god; brought Syrian “Baal” (conical black stone) to Rome; unbelievable sexual depravity; grandmother convinced him to adopt cousin Alexander; slain by Guard

Alexander Severus

(222-235)

14 years old; well trained and prepared; ruled by mother; temperate and modest, opposite of Heliogabalus; private chapel icons: Jupiter, Orpheus, Apollonius, Abraham, Christ; put golden rule in house and many public buildings; very efficient administrator, lowered taxes; weak against Germans, bribed them; assassinated in tent by army, under Maximinus

Anarchy; army control

Maximinus

(235-238)

Huge soldier (they say 8 feet tall); hated culture and education; never entered Rome; confiscated property of upper classes; murdered by soldiers he punished

Gordianus

(238-244)

Named by Praetorian Guard; killed by soldiers when fighting Persians

Philip the Arab

(244-249)

Some thought a Christian (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 6:34); fought Decius (some think this caused Decius later to persecute Christians); killed by Decius at Verona
Growth of Monarchianism

[For beginning of Monarchianism, see previous chapter]

Dynamic Monarchianism

Deny deity of Jesus; main spokesman during third century, Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch (fl. 260-270)

Patриpassianism

Position of Praxeas and Noetus

Callistus, bishop of Rome (ca. 220)—was Patриpassian; he excommunicated Sabellius and Hippolytus

Beryllus of Bostra (Petra in Arabia)—Jesus human, Father came on him during life; council in Arabia (AD 244), Origen asked for recess, talked with Beryllus, convinced him for Trinity

Sabellianism

“Modalism”; named for Sabellius; one God, manifests himself in three ways; no essential Trinity

Hippolytus

(d. ca. 236)

Man of three lives: the real man, in Middle Ages considered a saint; in nineteenth century considered an enemy of the popes.

His life

Heard Irenaeus preach; became presbyter under bishop Zephyrinus; competed with archdeacon Callistus; Origen heard Hippolytus preach in Rome in 212

Became bishop of Portus (six miles from Rome); first great Roman church scholar; believed world created 5500 BC, Christ to return A.D. 500; fought Roman bishops, accused them of heresy (Patриpassianism) and lax discipline; apparently martyred in reign of Maximinus

His fame in the Middle Ages
A respected saint; sometimes confused with other people—e.g., a soldier converted by St. Lawrence (in the Roman Breviary)

His rediscovery in modern times

1551, marble statue of him discovered near tomb; on back has Easter date table and list of his writings; includes writing called On the All

1851, found manuscript of Philosophumena, claiming to be by Hippolytus; tenth book mentions On the All, thus confirming its genuineness; the Philosophumena follows pattern of Irenaeus: lists and exposes heresies—32 Gnostic-Ebionite heresies; also very critical of popes (note: 1870, date for papal infallibility doctrine)

His attitude toward popes

Concerning Zephyrinus (202-218):

- Weak and ignorant
- Aids Patripassians

Concerning Callistus (218-223):

- Wicked and dishonest
- Heretical (Patripassian)
- Ruined Christians with lenient discipline

Theory of Johannis Dollinger

Dollinger a brilliant Roman Catholic historian (1799-1890); said Hippolytus led group saying he (Hippolytus) should be bishop of Rome, thus the first anti-pope (the anti-popes are listed after A.D. 250)

But Dollinger against the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope, espoused in 1870 (Vatican I, 1869-1870). Dollinger therefore was excommunicated in 1871. He joined the Old Catholics, a new German group beginning in 1870 and established in 1874.

Clement of Alexandria, and Origen

The Alexandrian school
Alexandria great center of learning, greatest libraries; Christianity established there by Mark (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2:16); catechetical school there developed into higher instruction under over-all direction of bishop of Alexandria

**Emphases:**

- Careful literary and textual study (cf. Alexandrine criticism of the classics)
- Opposition to many heresies (e.g., Gnosticism, Monarchianism)
- Allegorical interpretation (cf. Homer’s interpreters, Philo on the OT, etc.)
- Strict Christian life

First known Christian teacher in Alexandria was Pantaenus (d. ca. A.D. 190)—converted Stoic philosopher, missionary to India, teacher of Clement and perhaps Leonidas

**Clement of Alexandria**

(ca. 155-220)

Brought up in a pagan home, converted to Christ as a young man; sought philosophical truth in cities all over empire; settled in Alexandria and studied under Pantaenus; headed school after death of Pantaenus (ca. 190); scholar in philosophy and classics (quotes classics at length, thus portions preserved which otherwise would have been lost)

Fought Gnostics, put faith ahead of knowledge and prerequisite for it; fully adopted allegorical method in practice; relates story how aged John rescued and restored young Christian who had become a bandit (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3:23); fled during persecutions of Septimius Severus (202)

**Origen’s life**

(ca. 185-254)

Boyhood and father Leonidas’ martyrdom in 202 recorded in Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 6:2); great learning, memorizing the Bible, letter to Leonidas, desire for martyrdom (mother hid clothes), working to support family (widow and seven children) by giving Greek lessons and copying manuscripts

18 years old, appointed by bishop Demetrius as head of catechetical school; travels and studies: Rome (saw Hippolytus), Greece, Arabia, Palestine (learned Hebrew); many students, converted many

Strict asceticism: one coat, no shoes, refused students’ gifts; prayed most of night, slept on floor; emasculated himself (Matt 19:12; therefore no office in Alexandrian church)
Great writing productivity (ca. 6000 writings)

Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria jealous of Origen; Origen went to Palestine, was ordained a presbyter by bishops of Jerusalem and of Caesarea; Demetrius angry, brought charges, removed Origen from school; Roman church agreed with actions; bishop of Caesarea invited Origen to start school there

Caesarea school successful (argument with Beryllus); school surpassed Alexandria’s; Demetrius died; Origen’s pupil Dionysius became bishop, invited Origen back to Alexandria

While in Caesarea, argument with Beryllus of Bostra (in Arabia); in a church council Origen convinced Beryllus that he was in theological error, denying the human soul of Christ; Beryllus thanked Origen for correcting him (Schaff HCC 2:580)

Persecution under Decius (ca. 250); Origen imprisoned and tortured on rack with iron collar (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 6:39); released when Decius died; died a few years later at age of 69 as a result of his tortures (note statement of Schaff HCC 2:790)

**Origen’s hermeneutics and theology**

Followed allegorical method; each passage has several meanings:

- Grammatical-historical (“crass”)
- Moral (better)
- Spiritual (best)

Tended to speculate in philosophical areas:

- Arius and Athanasius both claimed him
- No material resurrection
- Pre-existence and fall of souls
- Eternal creation
- Final restoration of all men and angels
- Eternal generation of the Son

**Origen’s writings**

**The Hexapla**
Took 28 years; used classic methods of criticism

6 columns: Hebrew text, Hebrew transliteration, Aquila, Symmachus, Septuagint (5th), Theodotian

Sometimes other versions used (now lost mainly): Quinta, Sexta, Septima

Prepared it to aid apologetics with Jews; great influence on later copies of LXX; original kept at Caesarea (seen by Jerome); seldom copied; destroyed by followers of Mohammed in seventh century

**Against Celsus**

Celsus a pagan (ca. 150); tried to refute Christianity (Bible contradictions, etc.); this work defended Christianity, blamed faults on Gnostics and other heretics

**On First Principles**

Preserved only in poor Latin translation; source of later heresy charges

**Devotional writings**

Many of these, including miscellaneous writings and sermons

**Roman emperors in the second half of the century**

The chaotic condition of the emperorship continued throughout most of the third century, until the time of Diocletian. Most emperors had short terms. Whoever controlled most of the army usually became the next emperor.

**Decius**

(249-251)

Able general, spent most time fight the Goths

250, edict to restore Roman religion, destroy Christian movement; strategy—capture and kill the bishops (leaders) and prominent Christians; scare the rest into submission so they would worship the emperor and the Roman gods

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage “hid out” for 1½ years, writing letters; most Christians approved of Cyprian’s hiding, some did not
During this persecution several terms were applied to different categories of Christians:

- **Martyrs**—died for faith (many)
- **Confessors**—professed faith but not killed (often tortured)
- **Libellatici**—procured false certificates from a magistrate saying they had sacrificed to the emperor
- **Lapsi**—actually denied the faith and sacrificed to the emperor

Decius was defeated through treachery during a battle with the Goths

> “He could not even be buried. Stripped naked, he provided food for beasts and birds, as is proper for an enemy of God.”
> —*Lactantius*

### Gallus and Aemilianus

(251-253)

Both were generals; both continued persecution begun by Decius; both murdered by their troops

### Valerian

(253-260)

Empire being attacked on all sides at once; Valerian now 60 years old; Valerian took charge in East, his son Gallienus in charge in West

Two officers split off, established independent “kingdoms”—Postumus in Gaul, and Odenathus in East (Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt; also his widow Zenobia, “Queen of the East”); these officers held back Goths and Persians during next few years

Renewed persecution in 257; first banish and confiscate property; then torture and death; Cyprian martyred under Valerian; Valerian captured by Persians in 260, his fate unknown; first Roman emperor to be captured by an enemy of Rome (cf. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, 21-22)

### Gallienus

(260-268)
Continued war on all fronts; Gallienus especially active in West (opposed by Zenobia); reformed the administration

261, edict of toleration for Christians; for first time, Christianity a religio licit; churches built; new bishops appointed

**Claudius II**

(268-270)

Murdered Gallienus; took army to Greece and defeated Goths there; thus kept them away from Rome for a time; died of pestilence

**Aurelian**

(270-275)

Chosen by army when Claudius II died; had risen through ranks of army; motto “Manu ad ferrum,” “Hand on sword”; re-disciplined army; defeated attacks of Goths and Vandals (who invaded Italy three times); 272, defeated and captured Zenobia

For first time, new walls around Rome and other Italian cities; the empire fading; steps to medieval feudalism; country homes became country castles

274, short time of peace, Aurelian established himself as representative of sun god, built a temple in Rome; tried to fuse several monotheistic eastern religions; at same time, edict of persecution; but plan cut short when murdered by troops in 275

**Tacitus**

(275-276)

Army asked Senate to appoint emperor (no one wanted job—dangerous, etc.); Senate appointed 75-year old man, claimed descent from historian Tacitus; he died of exhaustion in six months

**Probus**

(276-282)

Good general; kept barbarians out; built wall between Rhine and Danube; set troops to work clearing swamps, etc.; they murdered him
Four more emperors

(282-284)

Time of chaos; Christians left alone

Beginning of Diocletian’s reign

(284-305; abdicated in 305, died in 313)

Son of a Dalmatian freedman; ambitious and talented; rose to head of palace guard; pacified all parties, quelled internal strife; established type of socialism, government control of all prices (didn’t work, repealed by Constantine—see Durant, CC, 641-645)

Reorganized the government to cope with invasions:

- 2 “Augusti”—himself in Nicomedia in Asia Minor (just south of Byzantium), and Maximian (general) in Milan
- 2 “Caesars”—each appointed by his respective Augustus—Galerius in Sirmium (East), and Constantius Chlorus in Treves
- Each Augustus was to retire after 20 years; Diocletian retired in 305
- This plan worked well for defense (empire saved for over 100 years), but bad for unity (great civil war followed)

In Nicomedia Diocletian assumed clothing and manners of an Oriental monarch; his wife and daughter Christians; his daughter married the “Caesar” Galerius

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage

(ca. 200-258)

Early life of Cyprian

Wealthy heathen in Carthage; converted; gave all to poor, studied Bible and fathers; favorite father—Tertullian, “The Master”; after only two years, elected bishop of Carthage; excellent administrator for ten years
Cyprian’s idea of the church

Unity under the bishops vital; Roman bishop has authority from Peter, but limited to Rome; Roman bishop is fallible (arguments with him); high regard for Tertullian (Montanist)

Cyprian’s flight from persecution

Decius persecution of 250 (nearly first one for about forty years); hid 1½ years, wrote letters from exile, defended himself (cf. Schaff 2:61); Novatus in Carthage attacked him, but most approved; with death of Decius, Cyprian returned to Carthage and resumed labors for eight years

Problem of the lapsed

Had been excommunicated for apostasy; now wanted back into church; Cyprian strict—need strong evidence of repentance; Novatus wanted leniency; when Novatus’ views not prevail, started sect in Carthage; later moved to Rome—Novatians

Schisms in Carthage and in Rome

Called the Novatian schism

Meanwhile in Rome, conflict between Cornelius (lenient) and strict Novatian (different person from Novatus); Cornelius was elected pope; Novatus changed views, supported Novatian (Cyprian had considered Novatus a troublemaker); Cyprian, somewhat mellowed, wrote to support Cornelius, for unity’s sake

Novatian then elected an “anti-pope”; started Novatian church; very strict; lasted 300 years; some of Novatian’s writings preserved by Catholic church

Problem of heretical baptism

What to do about former Gnostics, Montanists, Novatians, people from Novatus’s Carthage sect? Cyprian—rebaptize, recognize no baptism except by Catholic; Bishop Stephen of Rome—not rebaptize; any baptism good with proper formula; Cyprian protested against Stephen’s arrogance (not infallible pope!)

Cyprian’s martyrdom

(258)
Banished eleven months by proconsul; stepped forward during Valerian’s persecution; great composure; treated respectfully because of very high class and social standing; refused to recant; beheaded; ended criticism of flight and accusation of cowardice

Two new Oriental religions

This period saw the general breakdown of Roman pantheism. In its place new, robust sects sprang up. A few of them had superficial similarities to Christianity; for example, some have compared the biblical account of the virgin birth of Jesus to stories in the mystery religions (for detailed answer, see J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth*).

Mithraism

Mithra, old Persian god of light; mixes elements of Egyptian mystery religions; cult drew from Zoroastrian dualism, Good vs. Evil

Spread to Rome and Gaul in third century A.D.; popular especially among soldiers; no place for women; initiation: baptism with blood of bull; communion meal; definitely not Christian (no influence on Paul; cf. Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*, 235-237)

Manichaeism

Mani, religious prophet, lived in Persia (215-277); new religion combined Christianity and Zoroastrianism; at first liked by Persian king, opposed by priests; Mani fled to India and China; later returned; successful, but later condemned; crucified (or flayed alive) and his skin stuffed and hung on city gate; followers continued many centuries, finally wiped out by universal persecution

Manicaen church organized with twelve apostles and bishops; dualistic: good Light trying to shine out of evil World; ascetic, celibate; Jesus said to be a spirit from kingdom of light (Docetic)

Powerful in northern Africa; Augustine for nine years an auditor of Manichaeism

Neo-Platonism

Background and nature

Combines Greek philosophy with Oriental mysticism; purpose: to save paganism; degrades empirical knowledge; monistic—everything is God, emanations from the One; happiness attained by union with One (through asceticism, meditation, and magic); traces in Philo; developed in Alexandria
Ammonius Saccus

(ca. 175-243)

Established the system; started schools in Alexandria and Rome; his biographer Porphyry said he was reared a Christian and then rejected it because of his learning; taught Plotinus and Origen

Plotinus

(204-269)

An Egyptian; student of Ammonius Saccus in Alexandria; taught in Rome; followers gathered notes: six Enneads of nine sections each, obscure and intricate (in Great Books); accepted Greek gods, but explained them away; opposed exclusive Christianity

Porphyry

(232-304)

Disciple of Plotinus; wrote Against Christianity (270); strong attack against Bible; blasted allegorism in OT interpretation (if allegorism correct, then Bible means nothing); claimed discrepancies in Bible and lives and teachings of Christ and the apostles; according to Jerome, Porphyry claimed that Daniel written in second century BC and thus not a prophecy (same position taken by many “evangelicals” today)

Somewhat answered by Christian writers (Methodius of Tyre, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Eusebius of Caesarea); all copies burned by order of Roman emperors in 448

Forty years of freedom and growth

This period (262-303) saw great expansion of the Christian church and relative freedom from persecution. One main reason for this freedom was that the empire’s government was so chaotic that no pagan emperor was able to devote sufficient time to persecute the church. Also, more people were becoming Christian or familiar with Christians, thus dispelling some of the false ideas people had about the new faith.

Great growth

Persecutions of leaders (250-260) lead many into church; no outstanding leaders in this period (had been killed); churches built; some bishops even living in luxury; worldliness increasing
Paul of Samosata

(Fl. 260’s)
Bishop of Antioch; denied personality of Logos and the Holy Spirit (Dynamic Monarchianism); believed in gradual elevation of Christ

Three councils of bishops condemned him, but he was protected by Queen Zenobia of Palmyra; 272, pagan emperor Aurelian defeated Zenobia, deposed Paul

Lucian of Antioch

(Ca. 250-311)
Presbyter in Antioch; textual scholar; edited Septuagint and NT (“Lucianic recension”); made both more flowing and grammatical

Severely ascetic; influenced by Paul of Samosata (earlier bishop of Antioch); apparently tried to explain Christology and Trinity, fell into Monarchianism; confessed his faith in Diocletian persecution; died in prison under torture

The church of Rome in the third century

No great men

[Dr. MacRae’s “list” of 30 most influential and important Christian leaders from NT times to Leo I in AD 440—with possible exception of Clement, not one a bishop of Rome]

If this list or a similar one is accepted, it provides clear evidence that the papal office is not superior to the church.

Not much known of the bishops of Rome

About fifteen of them in third century; many known to have been martyred (good men); on the other hand, many totally obscure or even “bad apples”:

- Zephyrinus, then Callistus—Patripassian sympathizers, opposed by Hippolytus
- Cornelius (251-253)—called incompetent by Novatian
• Stephen (254-257)—defended heretical baptism, called arrogant by Cyprian
• Eutycian, Caius, Marcellinus—nothing known of them; Marcellinus perhaps denied the faith

The strength of the church in persecution came from all the people, produced of course by the Holy Spirit.