

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CHURCH IN THE THIRD CENTURY

#### Roman emperors in the first half of the century

##### *Severi dynasty*

1. Septimius Severus (193-211)

[already discussed under second century]

renewed persecution in AD 200 in an attempt to unite the empire through universal sun worship (*sol Invictus*) while allowing a measure of syncretism:

Conversion to Christianity or Judaism brought a death penalty. Christian leaders were prosecuted while others were made examples

- 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

2. 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

3. Macrinus (217-218)

prefect of the guard; removed by Caracalla's cousin and his family

4. 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

5. 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***

### 6. 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

### 7. Gordianus (238-244)

named by Praetorian Guard; killed by soldiers when fighting Persians

### 8. Philip the Arab (244-249)

some thought a Christian (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 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]

### 1. Dynamic Monarchianism, a.k.a., “adoptionism”

deny deity of Jesus; main spokesman of century, Paul of Samosata (fl. 260-270, Bishop of Antioch)

### 2. Patripassianism: a form of modalism, “the Father suffers” after coming to earth as the incarnate Christ

position of Praxeas who asserted “God is unipersonal,” and of Noetus

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

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

### 3. Sabellianism

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

## **Hippolytus**

(d. ca. 236)

man of three lives: 1) the real man, 2) in Middle Ages considered a saint; 3) in nineteenth century considered an enemy of the popes

## 1. 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 AD 500; fought Roman bishops, accused them of heresy (Patripassianism) and lax discipline; apparently martyred in reign of Maximinus

## 2. His fame in the Middle Ages: a respected saint

## 3. His rediscovery in modern times

1551, marble statue of him discovered near tomb in Rome; on back has Easter date table and list of his writings; includes his writing called, *On the All* (a.k.a., “A Refutation of All Heresies”)

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)  
Johann Döllinger (d. 1890) suggested Hippolytus was the first anti-pope (vs. Callistus)

## 4. 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

## 5. Theory of Johann Döllinger (1799-1890)

Döllinger a brilliant Roman Catholic historian at Univ. of Munich; said Hippolytus led group saying he (Hippolytus) should be bishop of Rome, thus the first anti-pope (the anti-popes are listed after AD 250)

but Döllinger against the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope, espoused in 1870; therefore he was excommunicated

# Clement of Alexandria, and Origen

## 1. The Alexandrian school

Alexandria great center of learning, greatest libraries (since 250 BC); Christianity established there by Mark (per Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 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 teacher in Alexandria, Pantaenus (d. ca. AD 190)—a converted Stoic philosopher, missionary to India, teacher of Clement and perhaps Leonidas

## 2. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 155-220)

sought philosophical truth in cities all over empire; settled in Alexandria; 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, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:23); fled during persecutions of Septimius Severus (202)

## 3. Origen's life (ca. 185-254)

boyhood and father Leonidas' martyrdom in 202 recorded in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6:2; great learning, memorizing the Bible, letter to Leonidas, desire for martyrdom (mother hid clothes to keep him from turning himself in), working to support family (widow and seven children) by giving Greek lessons and copying manuscripts

18 years old, appended 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 (Mt. 19:12; therefore held no office in Alexandrian church)

great writing productivity (ca. 6000 writings)

bishop Demetrius jealous of Origen; Origen went to Palestine, 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; successful (argument with Beryllus); school surpassed Alexandria's; Demetrius died; Origen's pupil Dionysius became bishop, invited Origen back

persecution under Decius (ca. 250); Origen imprisoned and tortured on rack with iron collar (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6:39); released when 69 years old (note statement of Schaff II, 790)

#### 4. Origen's hermeneutics and theology

followed allegorical method:

<i>somatic</i>	1) grammatical-historical ("crass")
<i>psychic</i>	2) moral (better)
<i>pneumatic</i>	3) spiritual (best)

tended to speculate in philosophical areas:

Arius and Athanasius both claimed him since he wavered between homo-ousia and homoi-ousia

- no material resurrection, even of Christ
- pre-existence and fall of souls in a previous state: hence condemned to be born and suffer in the material world
- eternal creation; "this is not the first universe, nor the last"
  - BUT compare Col 1.16; John 1.3; Heb 11.3
- Universalism: the final restoration of all men and angels
- eternal generation of the Son from the Father

#### 5. Origen's writings: 6000+ ("More than other men read!" – per Jerome)

a. The *Hexapla* (critical version of the OT in six columns showing parallel versions)

6 columns:

Hebrew	Hebrew transliteration	Aquila's Greek	Symmachus' Greek	Septuagint	Theodotian's Greek
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took 28 years; used classic methods of criticism

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

PURPOSE:

Hexapla was prepared to aid in apologetics with Jews; great influence on later copies of LXX; original kept at Caesarea (seen by Jerome); seldom copied; destroyed by Muslims in seventh century

b. *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

c. *On First Principles (de Principiis)*

this attempt at dogmatic theology is preserved only in poor Latin translation; source of later heresy charges, although he later did retract some of his errors

d. 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.

1. Decius (249-251)

able general, spent most time fighting 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

\*This was the First Universal Persecution

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage “hid out” for 1-1/2 years, writing letters; most Christians approved of Cyprian’s hiding (Matt 10.23), some did not

during this persecution there were these types of Christians:

- 1) martyrs (“witnesses”)—died for faith (many)
- 2) confessors—professed faith but not killed (often tortured)
- 3) libellatici (*libellus* = “certificate”)—procured false certificates from a magistrate saying they had sacrificed to the emperor
- 4) 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

2. Gallus and Aemilianus (251-253)

both had been generals who continued persecution begun by Decius; both murdered by their troops

3. 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 were 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*, pp. 21-22)

#### 4. 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 licita*; churches built; new bishops appointed

#### 5. 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

#### 6. 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

#### 7. 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

#### 8. Probus (276-282)

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

#### 9. Four more emperors (282-284)

time of chaos; Christians left alone

## 10. 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, pp. 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)

## 1. Early life

wealthy heathen in Carthage; lawyer; 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

## 2. Cyprian’s Idea of the church

regional 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)

## 3. Flight from persecution

Decius persecution of 250 (nearly first one for about forty years); hid 1-1/2 years, wrote letters from exile, defended himself (cf. Schaff 2:61); Presbyter Novatus in Carthage attacked him, but most approved; with death of Decius, Cyprian returned to Carthage and resumed labors for eight years

## 4. Problem of the lapsed

had been excommunicated for apostasy; now wanted back into church; Cyprian strict—need strong evidence of persecution and repentance; Novatus and confessors wanted leniency; when Novatus’ views not prevail, started sect in Carthage; later moved to Rome—Novatians  
Confusion of authority in the church: the “confessors” call for mercy competed with and brought confusion in the face of the bishop’s call for fruits of repentance among the lapsed.

## 5. Schisms in Carthage and in Rome

Novatian of Rome’s schism

meanwhile in Rome, conflict between Cornelius (lenient) and Novatian (strict); Cornelius 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

## 6. Problem of heretical baptism

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

## 7. 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*).

### 1. Mithraism

Mithra, old Persian god of light; mixes elements of Egypt mystery religions (secret brotherhood of the enlightened; secret initiations) and Zoroastrian dualism rooted in astrology: Good vs. Evil, of which Mithra was the mediator

Syncretistic: unlike Judaism or Christianity, Mithraists could hold other open religions

spread to Rome and Gaul in third century A.D.; popular especially among soldiers for its hero worship; no place for women; initiation: baptism with blood of bull (taurobolium excavated in London in 1954); communion meal; definitely not Christian (no influence on Paul; cf. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, pp. 235-237)

### 2. Manichaeism: = state religion of ancient Parthia

Mani, religious prophet brought up by Jews, lived in Persia (215-277 a.d.); new religion combined Christianity and Zoroastrianism as the last universal religion (cf. Bahi); 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

Manichaen church organized with twelve apostles (Mani was an apostle) 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)

- Adam kept the true light imprisoned within
- Christ redeemed the race from the bounds of matter

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

## Neo-Platonism

a.k.a. **Monism**, "the ultimate 'ONE' that lies behind all things"

-Opposed a growing dualism in the world that gave a separate source but equal footing to evil

## 1. Background and nature

combines Greek philosophy with Oriental mysticism; purpose: to save paganism and Platonism; degrades empirical knowledge; monistic—, emanations from the One (i.e., the one World Soul); happiness attained by union with One (through asceticism, meditation, and magic); traces in Philo; developed in Alexandria

## 2. Founder of the movement: Ammoniacus 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: felt Christianity was contradictory (Christ vs. Moses; but note Matt 5.17); taught Plotinus and Origen

## 3. Plotinus (204-269)

an Egyptian; student of Ammoniacus 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

## 4. Porphyry (232-304)

Anti-supernaturalist 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 B.C. 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 of Porphyry 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. Summary for growth: 1) pre-occupation of persecutors, and 2) powerful witness of the confessors.

### 1. 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

### 2. 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 the man

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

### 3. 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

### 1. 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.

### 2. 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.