Bible 101 • Summit View Church of Christ • Spring-Summer 2026

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

201-300 C.E.

March 25, 2026

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: The church experiences alternating periods of sporadic, localized persecution and intense, widespread persecution • Martyrs are many • The first monks appear

Key Questions: How do Christians respond to persecution? Who will be faithful? What do we do with those whose faith lapsed?

Key Places: Rome (church there growing in leadership among the churches; government the source of most intense persecution)

Key People: Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 - ca. 215; important teacher & writer at an evangelistic school in Alexandria) • **Origen** (ca. 185-254, important Christian teacher & writer in Alexandria & Caesarea)

Church Leadership: Bishops in every city, with bishops in key cities becoming more powerful

Key Dates:
202-203 — Septimius Severus's intense persecution of the church
203-250 — no official, empire-wide persecution of Christians
250-259 — Decius's persecution, followed by lesser attempts to persecute the church
260-303 — no consistent, empire-wide persecution

1) PERSECUTION

"Whereas prior to this period harassment and persecution arose largely from popular hostility, now they came increasingly from official sources and took on a more systematic and organized form. The more Christianity succeeded, the more it threatened a deteriorating and unstable government. The emperors, however, were by no means consistent, and the churches took advantage of every respite to enlist converts and to solidify their own constituency. Four severe spates of persecution [through 313 CE] came as heavy blows, but they did not destroy the growing movement. The blood of martyrs only served, as Tertullian insisted, as 'seed.'" *— E. Glenn Hinson, The Early Church, 119*

- 202-203 — EMPEROR SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS (reigned 193-211)
  - at first, showed some sympathy for Christianity; later concerned about Christianity's rapid expansion
  - beginning in 202, prohibited conversions and decreed punishment for both converts & converters
  - some believers paid money to avoid persecution and martyrdom; others were tortured and killed
  - persecution declined in 203, but some persecution continued until Severus died in 211
- *Alexander Severus (emperor 222-235) — His mother respected Christianity, and he seems to have had many Christians working in his palace (recall **Philippians 4:22**, written from Rome). He had the golden rule inscribed on the façade of his palace. He worshiped Abraham, Jesus, and some of the emperors along with other gods. He allowed churches to own property. But he was a poor ruler, and violence against Christians persisted in various places.*
- *Philip (emperor 242-249) — Came from a Christian family, but did not live as a Christian himself. His wife Otacilia was a Christian openly. Philip was overthrown by Decius; the masses supported Decius because they despised Philip's partiality toward Christians.*
- 250-251 — EMPEROR DECIUS (reigned 249-251)— Concerned about the loss of Rome's traditional heritage and culture as Rome's 1000-year anniversary approached. He required every resident of the

Roman Empire to sacrifice to the gods annually. Upon doing so, each person received a *libellus*, a certificate confirming their sacrifice. Those who refused were imprisoned, tortured, and/or killed.
- The goal was not to kill all the Christians (there were far too many), but to terrify them so no one would join them. The number of actual deaths was relatively small. Decius's goal was to promote apostasy, not martyrdom. Many years of relative peace had made it easier to be a Christian, so many believers were unprepared for such a test and renounced their faith.
- Decius died in June 251.

• EMPEROR VALERIAN (reigned 253-260) — at first, halted persecution of Christians. Later, though, he noticed that while the economy struggled, churches held massive wealth in vast charities to help the poor and others. He targeted church leaders and required that they sacrifice to the gods of the empire. He prohibited Christian assemblies on penalty of death. In 258, he toughened his orders, and the number of deaths and exiles increased. Fewer people recanted their faith than under Decius, though; the church, purified by persecution, had grown tougher.
- While fighting Goths and Persians, Valerian was captured and spent the rest of his life as a personal slave of the Persian king. Christians considered this fate appropriate, given his persecution of the church. *Some persecution continued after this time, but it was local, spotty, and inconsistent.*

The 200s were a time of both suspicion of and curiosity about the church. Peace led to mass conversions but lower commitment; persecution caused the weak to fall away but also purified and strengthened the church. Church teachers and writers wrote in-depth defenses of Christianity; opponents argued against them and sometimes slandered them.

INFLUENCE OF THE MARTYRS

• Martyrdom was highly honored. Reverence for martyrs ran so deep that any relics or body parts left by them were thought to ward off diseases, bring good fortune, or give power over demons.

• Martyrdom was regarded as a second baptism. The first baptism washed away past sins, but martyrdom wiped out all sins. Origen (*Sermons on Judges* 7.2) wrote, "Only the baptism of blood makes us purer than the baptism of water." The baptized may sin again, but martyrs can never sin again.

• The martyrs set a high standard for full, faithful commitment to God. In times of peace, the ideal of a martyr-like faith led some to move to solitary places like those to which the faithful had fled or been exiled in times of persecution, to devote themselves to God there.

• Anthony (251-356), a wealthy Egyptian Christian, left his fortune in 271 to became a hermit in the Egyptian desert, where he lived a life of solitude, prayer, and manual labor. He was not the first Christian hermit, but came to be considered the "father of all monks". He became so popular in his isolation that he had to move further into the wilderness to escape the crowds. He inspired many to such a life of spiritual solitude. He died at the age of 105.

• Desert monks like Anthony focused on complete obedience to God achieved through solitude, self-discipline, and prayer. They often also practiced fasting and bodily self-mistreatment like not bathing, wearing chains, starving themselves, etc.

ORGANIZATION IN RESPONSE TO PERSECUTION

• Persecution from outside and the dangers of heresies that arose from within pushed the churches to…
  (a) confirm which books they followed as Scripture, authoritative for faith and practice — that is, to develop an official <u>canon</u> of Scripture;
  (b) develop <u>creeds</u> that stated the whole church's beliefs clearly;
  (c) urge obedience to the <u>bishops</u>, who defended sound doctrine and determined who was faithful and who was not;
  (d) write <u>defenses</u> of the Christian faith, against the arguments of critics and against false teachers.

2) GROWTH & UNITY OF THE CHURCH

- IN ROME — By 250, the church in Rome was organized into 7 districts. There may have been some 46 congregations and a total Christian population of 30,000. (The population of Rome at the time is estimated around 1 million.)
- Christianity had spread to Britain by 200.
- More and more, the unity of the church was seen as depending on the agreement of the bishops in synods and on the individual's connection with the local bishop.

3) DEVELOPMENT OF THE SACRAMENTS

BAPTISM

- Baptisms were typically administered on Easter and Pentecost.
- Churches' requirements preceding baptism varied. Some kind of preparation was pretty much always required at this time. On the strict end, Hippolytus (ca. 170-235, in Rome) required 3 years of study followed by separation from the church for a time to prove one could live by Christian standards. People who worked as magicians, cult priests, military commanders, etc. had to quite their jobs. Candidates for baptism had to go through multiple rounds of demon exorcism just before their baptism. Prayer was spoken over the water to invoke the Holy Spirit. Baptism was done naked (and privately). After baptism, the new believer was anointed with the "oil of thanksgiving," then dried, dressed, rejoined the believers, and received the Lord's Supper for the first time.
- Baptism was normally by immersion. Sometimes pouring was practiced (for example, if no body of water big enough for immersion was available).
- By 206, some practiced infant baptism, though the practice was not accepted by all.

LORD'S SUPPER (EUCHARIST)

- The Lord's Supper began to be thought of more as a sacrifice offered to God and less as a memorial (as in 1 Corinthians 11:24-26) or a sign of Christian fellowship (as in 1 Corinthians 10:17, 11:18-22, 11:29). The more it was thought of as a sacrifice, the more it seemed necessary for the bishop or his designee, and not just any ordinary Christian, to be the "priest" who offered it.

BISHOPS

- Both baptism and the Lord's Supper came to be rites that only an ordained or appointed member of the clergy (bishop, minister, deacon, etc.) could perform. (These clergy came to hold a position analogous to the priests of Israel, who alone could perform certain religious rites.)

4) DIVISIONS & CONTROVERSIES

THE LAPSED

- Between persecutions, churches debated whether the lapsed could be readmitted to the fellowship of the church. (Recall the warning of **Hebrews 6:4-8**.)
- Some required that the lapsed pay penance. Some required rebaptism.
- The bishop had the strongest voice in determining who was allowed back into the church. If the bishop did not accept the individual, they were considered to be outside the fellowship of the church.

MANICHEANISM

- named after its founder Mani/Manichaeus (216-277)
- taught that people were created by a being who came from the ruler of the kingdom of light, but the king of darkness tricked early human beings so that mankind became mixed with both light and darkness — the body was bound to darkness, the soul was linked to light
- Christ gives liberation from bondage to the matter of the body.
- Asceticism was emphasized, sex was considered evil, and staying unmarried was considered superior.
- Manicheanism continued through at least the 400s.
- ***Response:*** *Notice* ***Colossians 2:16-23*** *and* ***1 Timothy 4:1-5****.*

MONARCHIANISM

- a belief that God is One King, not Three Persons (hence denial of God's trinitarian nature)
- SABELLIUS (after 200) — promoted Modal Monarchianism
  - taught a trinity of <u>forms</u> rather than of <u>essence</u> — God is not 3 Persons in unity. Rather, God appears in 3 different forms in relationship to us, just as a man may be son in one relationship, a brother in another, and in a third, father.
  - denied the separate personality of Christ
- PAUL OF SAMOSATA (bishop of Antioch, late 200s) — founded Dynamic/Adoptionist Monarchianism
  - taught that Christ was a good man who achieved divinity and saviorhood by righteousness and the divine Logos coming upon him at baptism

5) PRACTICES

BUILDINGS FOR CHURCH USE

- Churches began to own property during this time. Originally, churches met in homes. During this period, some houses were apparently being converted into meeting places for whole congregations.
- The oldest surviving church building is at Dura-Europos, a Roman frontier community on the Euphrates River. It's a house that was converted into a meeting place for the church. It dates to about 232 and contains the oldest known Christian paintings. It was discovered in 1931. It had a main meeting room, another room probably for teaching, and a baptistery. It probably looked like a normal house from the outside.

KEY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

- Sunday worship, regular prayer, assemblies for instruction almost daily, fasting on Wednesdays & Fridays, mutual encouragement

CARING FOR EACH OTHER

- helping prisoners and exiles — *Consider how important such service would be during times of persecution.*
- helping the sick during plagues (e.g., in Carthage, ca. 250; in Alexandria, ca. 259)
- hospitality to strangers and assisting churches in need
  - The church in Rome grew in influence because of its generosity to sister churches everywhere.

THE AGAPE MEAL

- became disconnected from the Lord's Supper
- some groups abused it, treating it more like a pagan banquet (recall Paul's concern in **1 Corinthians 11:17-22**) — some Christian teachers/writers admonished the church to behave properly at the congregational meals

WORSHIP

- services began to split into separate gatherings for the believers and for the catechumens (learners working toward baptism) — "At the end of the sermon, catechumens were dismissed. The formula *Ite! Missa est* ('Go! You are dismissed or sent!') may have been the source of the title 'Mass' for the services." *— Hinson, 173*
- services usually had 2 main parts, with the sermon in the first part and the Lord's Supper in the second part — but there was diversity across the churches

SPECIAL DAYS

- Sunday, the day of worship
- Easter — with fasting for 1-2 days before, then an all-night prayer and Scripture-reading vigil the night before, and baptisms of new believers on Easter
- Pentecost — a feast day, no fasting allowed; baptism of new believers
- Lent was not around yet, but fasting associated with Easter was beginning

SCRIPTURE

- nearly all churches were using our current 27 New Testament books by the end of the 200s; some question still remained about the authenticity of Hebrews and Revelation
- it's believed that the church leaders in Ephesus were the first to collect Paul's 13 letters

LEADERSHIP

- the bishop was the leader among the elders in the early 200s, but by the late 200s he was more like a high priest over the congregation
- under the bishop were the elders (presbyters) and the deacons; some churches also had official readers of Scripture, exorcists, widows who served and prayed (see **1 Timothy 5:3-16**), and in some cases female deacons who did for women what male deacons did for men (providing care, teaching, etc.) — there was debate about whether women could teach, debate, exorcise, and baptize
- the bishops of Rome, Ephesus, and Antioch had special prestige because of both the size of their church populations and their historic connections to the apostles (particularly in Rome (Peter + Paul))
- early councils started in the very late 100s to deal with questions of debate in the churches (heresies or possible heresies, disagreements about proper date of Easter, etc.); they became common in the 200s as bishops worked together to address various problems shared across the churches
- churches began to use "father" as a title of affectionate loyalty for their bishops, especially in the West
- the doctrine of apostolic succession (authority handed down from the apostles to the bishops) gained momentum during this time and was not widely opposed, probably because the church needed strong leaders during periods of persecution and when battling heresies
- the church in Rome grew in prestige because of…
  - a historical connection to Paul and especially to Peter (both were martyred in Rome)
  - its size and wealth — already by 100 it was one of the largest and wealthiest churches
  - its location in the capital city of the empire
  - its reputation for unswerving commitment to sound teaching in the face of heresies