

# History of Christian Movements and Theology



## 2. The Church Fathers and Ongoing Persecution

### Key Dates

130	Death of Papias, an early Christian leader in Hierapolis (in modern Turkey)
130	Conversion of Justin Martyr, one of the first great apologists of the church
144	Expulsion of Marcion for false teaching
150	Birth of Clement of Alexandria
155	Martyrdom of Polycarp, an early church leader
156	Birth of the Montanists
160	Birth of Tertullian
161	Marcus Aurelius becomes Emperor - increased persecution of Christians
165	death of Justin Martyr
167	Christianity declared a crime against the state in Asia Minor
180	End of Marcus Aurelius' reign
185	Birth of Origen
192	Death of brutal/corrupt Emperor Commodus (of <i>Gladiator</i> fame, 2000)
202	Septimus Severus renews persecution of the church for refusing his pagan religion reforms
202	Irenaeus is martyred
216	Birth of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, a fusion of Persian, Christian and Buddhist teachings
225	Death of Tertullian
245	Conversion of Cyprian, who becomes Bishop of Carthage in 247
249-251	Reign of Decius - renewed persecution of Christians
254	Death of Origen
258	Martyrdom of Cyprian
284	Persecution by Diocletian commences

### Overview

Half a century earlier, the Apostle Paul had written: “a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me” (1 Corinthians 16:9). The second and third centuries of the Christian era are marked by ongoing evangelism and church planting, a steadily growing number of Christians in different communities, traditions and social classes across the entire empire, needing organisation and sound, godly leadership, in the absence of an agreed New Testament and common creed, facing political, economic and social issues establishing and regulating a common Christian community while persecution continues.

The term church “fathers” refers to influential Christian leaders (teachers, theologians, whose works are sometimes called “patristic”) who were essentially the next wave after the Apostles (who disciples many of them, according to tradition) and those who ministered alongside them. This period saw the emergence of a number of serious heresies and exponential growth.

This lesson identifies the main leaders (sometimes called “apologists”<sup>#</sup>) and concludes with a discussion of ongoing persecution of the church.

<sup>#</sup> So-called, not because they apologised for the Christian faith, but because what they wrote (often addressed to political leaders, such as emperors, the Senate, or educated groups of citizens, was designed to explain and defend the faith (a reasoning faith, in the face of misunderstanding and slander) as preferred to paganism, answer the accusations of their opponents, appeal to the broader population and use such an approach, including intellectual argument, to win more people to Christ.

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## Some Influential Christians During the Second and Third Centuries

### *Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155AD)*

Polycarp was a Christian Bishop of Smyrna, now Izmir (Turkey). He had been a disciple of the Apostle John. He quoted first century Apostles in his writings and teaching. He died at the stake. Legend has it that the flames built to kill him refused to do so, so he was stabbed to death by the superstitious Romans; so much blood flowed from his body that the flames were extinguished.

“Sixty and eight years have I served Him, and He has done me nothing but good; and how could I revile Him, my Lord and Saviour.” (Polycarp, on his arrest)

### *Irenaeus of Gaul*

Bishop of what is now Lyons, in France. An early Christian writer who sought to systematize Christian theology. A disciple of Polycarp. In 180- he wrote a book entitled “Against Heresies”. He proposed that the only way for the Christian community to be united and stand against false doctrine was to set up episcopal councils (led by bishops). It was Irenaeus who first proposed that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John be accepted as canonical and was one of the first Christian leaders to cite all 27 books in his writings. It is easy to focus on particular teachings of individual Christian leaders (and where they differed from our patterns of orthodoxy), but it must be remembered that the early church did not have an agreed New Testament as such to draw on, which made it all the more important for what was believed (cf “those who walk by this rule”) to be codified quickly.

### *Clement of Alexandria*

A distinguished teacher in Alexandria; this says something, given that Alexandria was a cultural centre established by Alexander the Great and was one of the main centres of scholarship in the early Christian era. He headed up a Christian school teaching those preparing for baptism (indicating baptism had moved into a more formal tradition than it was in the first century, and was seen as linked to becoming a Christian). He drew on Greek philosophy and linked them to Christian traditions and doctrines. Some historians believe that he ended up with a Christian Platonism. Others insist that he was simply using methodologies to interpret and apply Christianity (in the absence of an *Introduction to Theology* course or denominational creeds). His writings sound syncretistic.

### *Justin Martyr (100-165)*

Born in Nablus. After studying various Greek philosophies he embraced Christianity. Justin was inspired by the examples of early Christians who were suffering and dying for their faith. He set up a teaching school in Rome, but his teaching became syncretistic (mixing pagan philosophy and religion with the Christian message). Martyr taught that the “logos” (as seeds of truth, not a person) is to be found in all religions, but that only Christianity had the complete truth. He was eventually denounced by his enemies, scourged and beheaded.

### *Origen of Alexandria*

Son of an early Christian martyr, a scholar and well known early theologian in Alexandria. He updated the Jewish Septuagint and wrote commentaries.

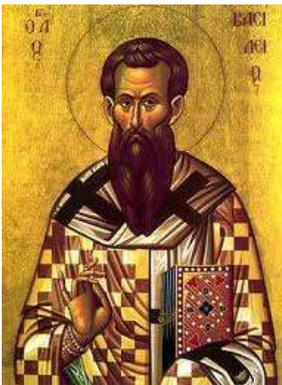
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Origen drew on Greek philosophy and tried to harmonise it with Christianity. For example (following Plotinus) he taught that the soul passes through successive stages before incarnation as a human and after death, eventually reaching God. He taught that God was not Jehovah/Yahweh but a First Principle, and that Christ, the Logos, was subordinate to him. Origen had a hierarchical view of the Trinity and emphasised the ascetic life.

Origen was exiled from the church a number of years, relocated to Palestine, was imprisoned for his faith and died not long after being released from prison in 254AD.

## *Tertullian (160-225)*



The son of a Roman centurion, born in Carthage. He was a trained lawyer, a writer of apologetic, theological and ascetic works. He became very influential and was eventually recognised as the Father of the Latin Church (Alexandria was a predominantly Latin city.). He eventually based himself in Rome, where he practised as a lawyer. He is said to have introduced the term “Trinity” into Christian vocabulary. He objected to Justin Martyr’s use of pagan philosophy to defend the Christian message; one of his maxims was “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

But as a trained lawyer Tertullian became well-known for ably defending the Christian message in a pagan community, and against Gnosticism. Tertullian is one of the first Christian leaders who spoke of a New Testament and accorded it similar weight as the existing Old Testament. However, he also emphasised Christian tradition as equal to the Scriptures if it was consistent with Scriptural teaching. (Some denominations continue to give equal weight to tradition as they do the Scriptures.) He also taught that good works could complement grace as a way of salvation.

Tertullian eventually embraced the teachings of the Montanists and fell out of favour with other church leaders.

## *Cyprian of Carthage (died 258)*

Cyprian was a prominent man in the city of Carthage, who became a Christian in 246AD after listening to the testimony of a church elder. He later became a Bishop and was a prolific writer. He had orthodox views about salvation, the Lord’s Supper (initially his interpretation was correct, however he later came to see the Lord’s Supper as a fresh sacrifice of the actual body and blood of Christ, on each occasion, which led in later centuries to the doctrine of transubstantiation) and the role of the church in demonstrating Christian charity in a non-Christian world.

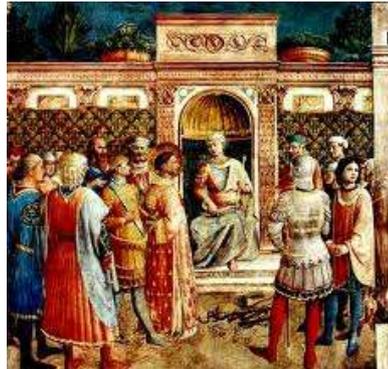
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Cyprian was a centrist in terms of church government and the authority of bishops (and the apostolic succession), using Old Testament models of ordinances and sacrifices as models for the church. Died as a martyr by being beheaded 65 kilometres from Carthage.

The individuals mentioned above are only a small sample of (better known) church leaders/influencers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. Some Christian denominations are tempted to elevate them (and Christians of note) as “saints”, to whom prayers may be addressed and who are believed to be able to bring about events/results in the life of the church on earth. Such teaching is not Biblical.



Death of Ploycarp



Trial of Justin Martyr

## Formulation of the Canon of the New Testament

“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-7)

Christians believe that the New Testament is part of the revealed inspired Word of God. The 27 books brought together over a period of more than 100 years and took into account:

- oral tradition
- consistency with historical facts known to the early church
- consistence with earliest known Bible writings/revelation
- acceptance by church leaders
- availability of early manuscripts of texts eventually included in the NT
- ratification by various church councils

## Montanism

Originated in 156, names after Montanus, its founder. Montanus came to believe that he was the personal incarnation of the Paraclete (John 14:16); he claimed to have received a series of visions from the Holy Spirit; taught that Christians who fell from faith could not be restored.

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Along with two women who accompanied him (Priscilla, and Maximilla) he had ecstatic visions and utterances about end times and asserted that he was proclaiming the Word of God. The cult split many Christian communities in the second and third centuries, including between those who believed in continuing revelation and a coming Day of Judgement, and those who claimed that revelations and visions during ecstatic experiences reminded them of pagan “oracles”, and that God’s revelation and prophecy were now complete (a debate that continues to our day).

## **Marcionism**

Marcion claimed that God’s revelation was limited. He was anti-Jewish. He rejected the Old Testament (and the leadership of Peter, James and John, who were committed to the Old Testament) and most of the New testament, accepting only a cut-down version of Luke’s Gospel and ten of Paul’s letters (but not the pastoral Epistles). He taught that Jesus only appeared to be human. Marcion taught asceticism and purity of life, including water instead of wine for communion; total celibacy (claiming that the command to be fruitful and multiply came from the God of the Old Testament, whom he rejected (and whom he claimed was not the Father of Jesus Christ); and enjoyment of food and wine as sinful. The simplicity of his teaching appealed to many. Marcion was expelled from the church in 177 AD.

- One of the positive spin-offs of Marcion’s teaching was that it encouraged other Christian leaders to define which books they were prepared to accept and progressed formulation of the NT canon.

## **The Birth and Spread of Manichaeism**

Manichaeism was a religious movement that had its origins in 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Persia. Its founder, Mani (born in what is now Iraq), termed himself the “Apostle of Light”. A mixture of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism and Christianity, it was a syncretistic religion in its own right. Mani claimed that he was the latest in a long line of prophets that started with Adam. He claimed that all previous religions were limited in some ways, in part because they were monocultural, nationalistic or too local.

Mani believed his role was to replace all religions.

Manichaeism spread into the Roman Empire, where it took hold in some areas for considerable periods, and a number of church fathers, including Augustine temporarily embraced it. It established pockets in what are now France and Spain, emerging later in the teachings of the Cathars and Albigensians (more about them later in the course). Mani taught that the way of salvation was through a special “knowledge” of spiritual truth. He taught that this world is evil and painful and that revelation of truth he espoused was the only way to salvation and true spiritual freedom. Followers were expected to avoid over-involvement in physical or material enjoyment, such as procreation, eating of meat, having possessions, drinking of wine and harvesting or cultivation of crops. What mattered to Mani were prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Communal life was celebrated with confession and singing of hymns.

## **Persecution of the Church Continues**

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” (Tertullian)

Jesus and the New Testament writers taught that Christians would be persecuted:

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“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” (John 15:18-20)

“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” (2 Timothy 3:10-13)

The first wave of persecution of Christians started with the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem and officially continued until 313AD, when Constantine signed the Edict of Milan; continued sporadically at a local level for a number of years. (It might be argued that persecution really started with the crucifixion of Jesus.) After this, the focus shifted to persecution of alleged heretics within the church.



Marcus Aurelius



Commodus



Depiction of Christians in the Colosseum

## *Reasons for Persecution of Christians:*

- spiritual opposition
- Jewish leaders continuing opposition that flowed from the deaths of Stephen, James and others; this continued in Hellenic cities (Acts 7:54-60; 9:23-25; 14:1-7; 18:12-17; 24:27)
- fear of the unknown, of new teachings
  - Roman religion was polytheistic (centred around many gods, ceremonies and sacrifices); many Romans thought that monotheism (without idols) was akin to atheism; the Greek poet Hesiod wrote that there were as many as 30,000 gods, so the absence of images in Christian communities made them curious, or even hostile
  - the Christian message (which was monotheistic) threatened all of that (Jews had been exempted for political reasons);

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- opponents feared they would be punished by their gods for allowing a new religion to compete or to prevail; in 111AD Pliny the Younger, Governor of Bithynia wrote to Trajan asking what to do with local Christians, there were so many of them that pagan temples were being abandoned entirely; Christians were blamed for natural disasters (including disease, famine, military defeats); Trajan confirmed that they were to be executed; some historians believe those who persecuted Christians did so to satisfy offended deities
- persecution of Christians was popular (and often officially encouraged/sanctioned at the highest levels of government, including emperors; they were easy to pick, as the streets of ancient cities were littered with gods and it was impossible for Christians to refuse to offer sacrifices or incense or swear by the gods without being noticed; in addition to personal danger facing individuals, meeting for Christian worship was forbidden and Christian texts were destroyed.
- ethnic divisions; rejection of a “foreign” religion; persecuted as a Jewish sect; the Jews were persecuted because of their rebellions against Rome and the political needs of the Flavian emperors; the Romans did not initially distinguish between Christianity and Judaism; once the two came to be recognised as distinct, Christian was targeted as a “superstition” founded on the teachings of someone the Roman administration regarded as an convicted criminal
- interests protecting religious and economic systems of their own; as Christians penetrated every level of society, in every quarter of the empire, gaining in power, prestige and materially they were bound to attract jealous opponents
- rulers jealous of Christian allegiance to Christ; rulers in Rome were often cult figures in their own right (often at their insistence); refusal to honour Caesar as God amounted to rebellion or treason
- rulers asserting the belief systems of the majority, for political, public security reasons; opposed Christians disturbing the peace; Christians opposed war, violence, common immoral practices
  - In 202 AD Septimus Severus sought to unite Rome under one religion, the worship of the Unconquered Sun (cf Akhenaton, who had done the same in Egypt); Jews and Christians refused to join in and were therefore persecuted
- misunderstanding of Christian teaching, eg allegations of cannibalism in connection with the Lord’s Supper (this continued throughout the Middle Ages)
- negative views about Christian exclusivism, ie Christians would not join in ceremonies/events worshipping pagan gods; this was seen as undermining social unity, attracting the jealousy and anger of the gods who were not being neglected
- fear of Christian prophecies about coming judgement
- the need for scapegoats, eg Nero’s persecution in 64AD because he needed people to blame for the fire of Rome (which many historians believe he started, to enable him to re-design Rome) and it was strategic and easy to blame the Christian community; after all, they talked about a fiery end to the world
- martyrdom was seen by some Christian communities as a sign of their devotion to Christ.

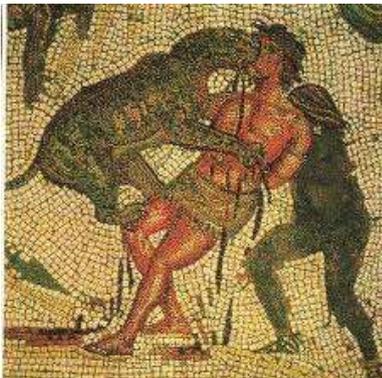
## *What Forms Did Persecution Take?*

Christians (all social classes) were subject to violent suffering/death because of their testimony.

- beheading
- being thrown to wild beasts in places like the Colosseum

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- being skinned alive
- being shot with arrows
- being beaten to death
- being boiled in oil
- being beaten to death with clubs
- being scourged
- being crucified



Diocletian

Many Christians also died during prolonged imprisonment.

Records from the early church tell of Christians who embraced martyrdom because they knew this was the short step to the presence of Christ. The word “witness” comes from the Greek word for martyr. There are many accounts of believers who reported extra strength from the Holy Spirit as they faced persecution. Opposition spurred a generation of apologists who sought to explain Christianity in a way that could be broadly understood. For latter generations it also sparked a cult of Christian ‘saints’, the term being taken to mean “exceptional” Christians, rather than ordinary believers as inferred in the New Testament.

*What about those who renounced their faith?*

The records of early Christianity show that believers facing execution were often called on to renounce their faith, and to prove their return to true religion by sacrificing to the gods, declaring their devotion orally; those who refused died; those who did so were often shunned by the Christian community. Prolonged debates arose as to whether lapsed Christians could ever be forgiven.

*Lessons for us*

Finally, there was always a risk that the growth of the church, the decay in power of the ancient gods and less persecution would ultimately lead to a drop-off in fervent faith on the part of those who had until then been forced to choose for or against Christ in the face of suffering and death, leading to lukewarmness and indifference. Christianity became a religion, not a faith in Jesus Christ. False teaching and practice began to spring up.

One of these was the emergence of clericalism, rigid systems of clergy and hierarchies in the Christian church; traditions from Judaism (eg about the priesthood) and governance of the empire began to take hold in the organised church.

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This led to a separation between ordinary Christians and priests, bishops and other church offices, and the creation of the un-Biblical concept of “laos” (“laity”). The “priesthood of all believers” was ultimately abandoned. Priests assumed roles as mediators between ordinary Christians and God (cf 1 Timothy 2:5). The gifts of the Holy Spirit and ministry gifts described in the epistles began to drop off and be replaced by forms and liturgies, ceremonial dress and titles (eg Bishop, as the supreme authority in the church; less emphasis, if any, on the role of the Holy Spirit). By 245 clergy received salaries as such and were discouraged from working for a living. Bishops created new offices and ecclesiastical provinces that came to be known as dioceses. Public buildings designed and designated for use by Christians (early church buildings) became to emerge from the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century in different parts of the empire. Baptism changed from total immersion to sprinkling or pouring of water over the head. Non-Christians had often wondered why Christians did not have temples or altars, however clerical traditions introduced organisational elements that looked like pagan worship.

By the end of this period, Christianity was starting to be accepted as a legitimate religion. Cyprian (in the West) and Origen (in the East) spoke of the secular spirit that was creeping into the Christian community; of pride, materialism, luxury and covetousness of the clergy. Much of the church history that followed showed the worldliness into which a church not led by Godly men or the Holy Spirit could slip.

- ⇒ The same challenges exist today; Christians facing persecution know where they stand; Christians in the West are often oblivious to the compromises they make and the indifference into which they can easily fall.)

The miracle is that, in the face of this, the Holy Spirit kept alive men and women profoundly committed to Jesus Christ and the Biblical way of salvation.

## Additional Reading

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