

Church History
Lesson 10 - Third Century Persecutions and Their Effects

1. Introduction - A Time of Growth, Structure, and Persecution

- 1.1. The third century was a time of real transition for the early church.
- 1.2. The church has spread geographically, grown quite large, and had begun attracting great thinkers and writers to her numbers.
 - 1.2.1. Every day there were more Christians among the aristocracy, and the ancient rumors about Christian immorality had little credence among the masses. Persecution was a past memory, both painful and glorious. (Gonzales, location 1957)
 - 1.2.2. Nevertheless, the early third century brought a period of peace that began to weaken these sectarian sentiments, as the church grew in numbers and began to attract favorable attention in the highest government circles (see chapter 9). (Ferguson, location 2875)
- 1.3. The final years of the second century and the early years of the third century were also marked by a period of relative peace for most believers. The early persecutions began to recede further from memory, and many believers had never suffered for their faith.
 - 1.3.1. In the last years of the second century, the church had enjoyed relative peace. (Gonzales, location 1901)
 - 1.3.2. In short, during almost half a century, persecution was rare, while the number of converts to Christianity was large. For this entire generation of Christians, the martyrs were worthy of great admiration, but they had lived in times past, and those evil times were not likely to be repeated. (Gonzales, location 1955)
- 1.4. In this period of peace the church became more structured in belief and practice. There was a growing centralization of power in the hands of a single leader - the bishop - and a growth in liturgy and art.
- 1.5. Eventually, however, the fires of persecution returned. Inevitably, some stood firm during the persecution, but some failed. This led to the question of how to handle those who compromised to one level or another. Could they be received back into the fold of the church - or were they banished forever? How did the church balance a message of grace and forgiveness with a call to holiness and non-compromise? And who made the decisions on if, when, and how those who failed under fire would be allowed to return?

2. New Waves of Persecution and the Question of the Lapsed

- 2.1. The fact of persecution in the early church
 - 2.1.1. As we have seen in previous sessions, persecution was an ever present danger in the early church. Although it was not a constant practice, local persecutions were always a grave danger, and several times persecutions had broken out under the auspices of the Roman emperor.
 - 2.1.2. The church had thus grown up under a baptism of fire in persecution.

- 2.2.** At the end of the second century there was a persecution under the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus.
- 2.2.1.** Severus was trying to unite the empire. To do this, he wanted to see religious harmony within the empire. Accordingly he proposed the worship of Sol Invictus - the Unconquered Sun - as the overarching worship for all people in the empire. Other worship was still allowed - but everyone had to worship Sol Invictus as well. When Christians refused, this led to trouble. Conversion to Christianity (or Judaism which had also refused this policy) became illegal. A fresh wave of persecution broke out.
- 2.2.1.1.** Faced by such difficulties, the emperor felt the need for religious harmony within his territories, and thus settled on a policy of promoting syncretism. He proposed to bring all his subjects together under the worship of Sol invictus—the Unconquered Sun—and to subsume under that worship all the various religions and philosophies then current. All gods were to be accepted, as long as one acknowledged the Sun that reigned above all. This policy soon clashed with the seeming obstinacy of two groups that refused to yield to syncretism: Jews and Christians. Septimius Severus then decided to stop the spread of those two religions, and thus outlawed, under penalty of death, all conversions to Christianity or to Judaism. (Gonzales, location 1912).
- 2.2.1.2.** Therefore, the year 202, when the edict of Septimius Severus was issued, is a landmark in the history of persecutions. One tradition affirms that Irenaeus suffered martyrdom in that year. It was also at that time that a group of Christians, including Origen's father, were killed in Alexandria. Since Clement was a famous Christian teacher in that city, and since the imperial edict was particularly directed against those who sought new converts, he had to seek refuge in areas where he was less known. (Gonzales, location 1920).
- 2.2.2.** Two of the most famous martyrs of this persecution were Perpetua and Felicitas. They and three other companions were charged with being recent converts to Christianity. Although their parents tried to persuade them to recant of the faith, they refused and were martyred. Their story became well known and fired the Christian imagination for centuries to come.
- 2.2.2.1.** The most famous martyrdom of that time is that of Perpetua and Felicitas, which probably took place in 203. It is possible that Perpetua and her companions were Montanists, and that the account of their martyrdom comes from the pen of Tertullian. (Gonzales, location 1923).
- 2.2.2.2.** These five people—some of whom were in their teens—were charged, not with being Christians, but with having

been converted recently, and thus disobeying the imperial edict. (Gonzales, location 1926).

2.2.2.3. The heroine of the Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas is Perpetua, a young and well-to-do woman who was nursing her infant child. Her companions were the slaves Felicitas and Revocatus, and two other young men whose names were Saturninus and Secundulus. (Gonzales, location 1928).

2.2.2.4. Her father tried to persuade her to save her life by abandoning her faith. She answered that, just as everything has a name and it is useless to try to give it a different name, she had the name of Christian, and this could not be changed. (Gonzales, location 1931).

2.2.3. Shortly after these martyrdoms, the persecution abated for unknown reasons.

2.2.4. Although there were sporadic, local persecutions after this, the church generally enjoyed a time of peace in the following decades.

2.2.4.1. In short, during almost half a century, persecution was rare, while the number of converts to Christianity was large. For this entire generation of Christians, the martyrs were worthy of great admiration, but they had lived in times past, and those evil times were not likely to be repeated. (Gonzales, location 1955).

2.3. The persecution under Decius (249-251)

2.3.1. Decius marks the turn from local, sporadic persecution to a firm empire policy to exterminate Christianity.

2.3.1.1. Under Decius (249–51) and Valerian (253–60), the empire declared war on the church with an effort at systematic oppression. (Ferguson, location 3134).

2.3.1.2. The reign of Decius marked the turning point from local, sporadic persecution to an empire-wide assault on Christianity. (Ferguson, location 3137).

2.3.2. The situational reasons for Decius' persecution

2.3.2.1. The persecution under Decius did not arise in a vacuum. Several factors contributed to it. It had recently been the 1,000 anniversary of Rome's founding in 753 BC, which sparked a return to ancient customs - including religion. There was increasing pressure from barbarians, and there were economic problems in the empire.

2.3.2.1.1. There were several factors contributing to the eclipse of that glory. The barbarians beyond the borders were increasingly restless, and their incursions into the Empire were growing more and more daring. There was a serious economic crisis. And the ancient traditions associated with the classical times of Roman

civilization were generally forgotten. To a traditional Roman such as Decius, it seemed obvious that one of the reasons for all this was that the people had abandoned the ancient gods. (Gonzales, location 1965).

2.3.2.1.2. The situation in the empire provides the setting for Decius's policies. There was a continuing barbarian threat on the frontiers, made more perilous by economic difficulties within the empire. (Ferguson, location 3138).

2.3.2.1.3. The celebration of the one-thousandth anniversary of the traditional founding of Rome (753 BC) sparked a revival of ancient customs. (Ferguson, location 3141).

2.3.2.1.4. This was the basis of Decius' religious policy. It was no longer a matter of rumors about Christian immorality, nor of punishing the obstinacy of those who refused to worship the emperor. It was rather an entire religious campaign for the restoration of ancestral religion. What was at stake, as Decius saw it, was the survival of Rome itself. Those who refused to worship the gods were practically guilty of high treason. (Gonzales, location 1972).

2.3.3. The Decian policy and practice regarding persecution and Christians

2.3.3.1. Decius' policy included the mandatory worship of the gods throughout the whole empire. Everyone was required to offer sacrifice to the gods and burn incense before a statue of Decius. Those who complied were given a certificate attesting that they had done so. Those who refused and did not have the certificate were considered outlaws and were to be punished. He apparently also arrested high ranking clergy.

2.3.3.1.1. Although Decius' edict has been lost, it is clear that what he ordered was not that Christians as such ought to be persecuted, but rather that the worship of the gods was now mandatory throughout the Empire. Following the imperial decree, everyone had to offer sacrifice to the gods and to burn incense before a statue of Decius. Those who complied would be given a certificate attesting to that fact. Those who did not have such a certificate would then be considered outlaws who had disobeyed the imperial command. (Gonzales, location 1980)

2.3.4.4.4. Decius commanded all citizens of the empire to sacrifice to the traditional Roman gods. Those who did so were given certificates (libelli, in Latin) as evidence that they had obeyed the order. Those who refused to obey and were unable (or unwilling) to obtain false libelli from sympathetic or corrupt officials faced death. To save their lives many Christians complied. (Shelley, location 1488).

2.3.4.4.5. One of the results of this persecution was that a new title of honor appeared within the church, that of the “confessors.” Until that time, practically all who were taken before the authorities and remained firm had become martyrs.... Due to the policies established by Decius, there were now those who remained firm in their faith, even in the midst of cruel torture, but who never received the crown of martyrdom. Those who had confessed the faith in such circumstances were then given the title of “confessors,” and were highly respected by other Christians. (Gonzales, location 1996,1998).

2.3.5. The end of the persecution

2.3.5.1. This persecution only lasted a couple years. Decius was killed in 251 and the policy was dropped.

2.3.5.1.1. Decius’ persecution was brief. In A.D. 251, Gallus succeeded him, and his policies were set aside. (Gonzales, location 2001).

2.3.5.1.2. The effects on the church might have been even greater if the persecution had lasted longer. Decius was killed in 251, and the outbreak of an epidemic in 251/2 turned people’s attention to other concerns. (Ferguson, location 3145).

2.4. The persecution under Valeiran

2.4.1. Valerian became emperor in 257, and resumed the persecution of Christians. He sent bishops into exile, forbade Christian meetings, demoted Christians of high position, and seized the property of Christians and the church.

2.4.1.1. Valerian resumed the persecution in 257 by sending bishops into exile and forbidding Christian assemblies. In 258 the clergy were recalled and many were executed. Christians of high rank were degraded and their property seized, and Christians in the imperial service were sent in chains to work

the imperial estates. The church's corporate property and funds were also seized. (Ferguson, location 3147).

- 2.4.2. However Valerius' son reversed this policy, returned property to churches. Thus this persecution, while severe, was also fairly short lived.
 - 2.4.2.1. Valerian's son, Gallienus (253–68), reversed the policy of persecution and returned property to the churches. (Ferguson, location 3153).
- 2.5. The effect of these persecutions upon the church
 - 2.5.1. The church was not prepared for these persecutions. As a result, a large number of believers compromised their faith. Still a large number became martyrs, and the acclaim accorded martyrs grew. Furthermore, there was some who held firm to their faith, were horribly tortured, yet lived. These became known as "confessors" and were held in great esteem in the church.
 - 2.5.1.1. More church members compromised their faith than became martyrs. Nonetheless, the number of martyrs was considerable and gave impetus to the martyr cult (activities associated with worship). (Ferguson, location 3157).
 - 2.5.1.2. One of the results of this persecution was that a new title of honor appeared within the church, that of the "confessors." Until that time, practically all who were taken before the authorities and remained firm had become martyrs. (Gonzales, location 1996).
 - 2.5.2. This wave of persecutions led to a major question for the church and her leaders - how do we deal with those who compromised under persecution? This is the question of the "lapsed" and it became a major controversy at this time.

3. The Question of the Lapsed

- 3.1. The new situation - large numbers who lapsed and then tried to return to the faith
 - 3.1.1. The persecution under Decian presented a unique situation for the church - both because of its intensity, its short duration, and the large number of purported believers who denied the faith and gave into the demands to sacrifice to other gods.
 - 3.1.2. When the persecution ended so quickly, many of the believers wanted to return to the church.
 - 3.1.2.1. In spite of its brief duration, the persecution under Decius was a harsh trial for the church. This was due, not only to the fact itself of persecution, but also to the problems that had to be faced after it. (Gonzales, location 2004).
- 3.2. The categories of believers arising from the persecution
 - 3.2.1. Depending on the response one had when faced when the persecution arising from the demand to sacrifice to the gods, there arose three categories of believers. Those who died rather than making sacrifice

were martyrs; those who were tortured for refusing to comply but lived were now known as “confessors”; those who gave in to pressure, whether by actually making sacrifice or by acquiring a fake certificate, were known as the “lapsed.”

3.2.1.1. Those who were killed were called “martyrs,” that is, “witnesses.” Decius, however, was not out to make heroes. He wanted to discredit Christianity, so many Christians were tortured until they denied Christ by saying “Caesar is Lord.” If a Christian endured this persecution without denying Christ he was called a “confessor.” If a believer under torture did what the Romans demanded, he was classed among the “lapsed,” the fallen ones. (Shelley, location 1492).

3.3. The great question - what to do with the lapsed

3.3.1. After the persecution, many of the “lapsed” began to try and return to the church. This created a great problem for the church for two reasons. First, there were differing answers as to whether they should be received back into the fellowship of the church (and under what conditions). Second, there arose a controversy over who had authority to receive the lapsed back into fellowship - did the confessors have such authority, or was it only bishops who could do so?

3.3.1.1. In short, the great question before the church was what to do about the “lapsed”—those who, in one way or another, had weakened during the persecution. (Gonzales, location 2007).

3.3.1.2. Then the question of readmission to the church arose with striking intensity. Many believers were guilty of apostasy, sometimes as many as three-quarters of a congregation. (Shelley, location 1497).

3.3.1.3. Given the great prestige of the confessors, some thought that they were the ones with authority to determine who among the lapsed ought to be restored to the communion of the church, and how. Some confessors, particularly in North Africa, claimed that authority, and began restoring some of the lapsed. This met with the opposition of many bishops who claimed that only the hierarchy had the authority to restore the lapsed, and that only it could do so in a uniform and just manner. Still others were convinced that both the confessors and the bishops were showing too much leniency, and that the lapsed ought to be treated with greater rigor. (Gonzales, location 2012).

3.4. The two great figures in the debate: Cyprian and Novatian

3.4.1. Cyprian

3.4.1.1. Caecilius Cyprianus Thascius was born in the first decade of the third century, probably in Carthage, to a rich and cultured pagan family. (Ferguson, location 3189).

- 3.4.1.2.** Cyprian became a convert in 246, when he was about 40 years old. Due to his great abilities he was almost immediately made a presbyter (elder) in the church at Carthage.
- 3.4.1.3.** He was elected bishop in 248 - just two years after his conversion. This was done by popular acclaim, although it was opposed by some of the older presbyters who argued that Paul said a recent convert should not be made into an elder/bishop.
 - 3.4.1.3.1.** He was elected bishop in 248 “by the voice of the people” against the opposition of some of the elderly presbyters who remembered Paul saying something about a bishop not being a new convert (1 Timothy 3:6). (Ferguson, location 3192).
- 3.4.1.4.** When the Decian persecution broke out in 250, Cyprian fled Carthage. He claimed that he did this not out of fear but rather for the good of his flock who needed his continued instruction and encouragement, and in fact he maintained close contact with the church leaders by letter throughout this time. However, many questioned him over this, especially after Fabian, the bishop of Rome died in the persecution. (But it should be noted that Cyprian answered this question when he willingly died in the persecution under Valerius in 258).
 - 3.4.1.4.1.** The Decian persecution of 250 caused his flight from the city. The persecution took the life of Fabian, bishop of Rome, and Cyprian had to defend his flight. He kept in touch with the church by letters. (Ferguson, location 3193).
 - 3.4.1.4.2.** Cyprian, who had become a bishop shortly before the persecution, thought that his duty was to flee to a secure place with other leaders of the church, and continue guiding the flock through an extensive correspondence. As was to be expected, many interpreted this decision as an act of cowardice. (Gonzales, location 2021).
 - 3.4.1.4.3.** He insisted that he had fled for the good of his flock, and not out of cowardice. As a matter of fact, his valor and conviction were amply proven a few years later, when he offered his life as a martyr. But meanwhile his own authority was questioned, and there were many who claimed that the confessors of Carthage, who had suffered for their faith, had

more authority than he did, particularly when it came to the question of the restoration of the lapsed. (Gonzales, location 2024).

3.4.1.5. During Cyprian's absence some of the "confessors" gave letters of pardon to the lapsed, thus receiving them back into the church. Due to the high esteem in which they were held, and especially in light of the questions about Cyprian's own actions when he had gone into hiding, they carried great weight with some.

3.4.1.5.1. During Cyprian's absence, some confessors gave letters of pardon to the lapsi, those who had fallen away during the persecution, and demanded their immediate reconciliation to the church. (Ferguson, location 3195).

3.4.1.6. Cyprian rejected the action of the confessors on two grounds.

3.4.1.6.1. First, the confessors had no authority to forgive and readmit anyone. That was an action reserved to the bishops. Furthermore, he thought that rather than a single bishop making the decision, a synod should be called to set up guidelines for how the lapsed could return.

3.4.1.6.1.1. Cyprian objected, saying that such action should await a return of peace when the bishops could meet and the whole church could agree on a unified policy toward the apostates who wanted forgiveness and a return to the church. (Ferguson, location 3198).

3.4.1.6.1.2. The main reason why Cyprian insisted on the need to regulate the readmission of the lapsed into the communion of the church was his own understanding of the church. The church is the body of Christ, and will share in the victory of its Head. Therefore, "outside the church there is no salvation," and "no one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother. (Gonzales, location 2034).

3.4.1.6.2. Second, as a devoted disciple of Tertullian (who was also from Carthage), Cyprian had a

strong sense of rigorous morality and standards. Therefore, the lapsed should not be forgiven and restored to quickly or it would undermine the holiness and rigor of the church.

3.4.1.6.2.1. Besides this, Cyprian was an admirer of Tertullian, whose writings he studied assiduously. Tertullian's rigorism had an influence on Cyprian, and he revolted against the idea of restoring the lapsed too easily. The church was to be a community of saints, and the idolaters and apostates had no place in it. (Gonzales, location 2040).

3.4.1.7. During his absence some sided with the confessors created a schism within the church at Carthage, rejecting Cyprian as bishop. In light of this, when returned to Carthage in 251, a synod of bishops was called. This synod confirmed that Cyprian was still the bishop of Carthage, and excommunicated those who had created the schism.

3.4.1.7.1. A deacon, Felicissimus, led a schism, joined by five presbyters who had opposed Cyprian's election, in support of the actions of the confessors. (Ferguson, location 3200).

3.4.1.7.2. Cyprian returned to Carthage in 251 on the death of Decius, and a synod of bishops confirmed his position and ex-communicated his antagonists. At this same time there occurred a schism in Rome, this time by the rigorists, led by Novatian, who opposed any reconciliation of apostates to full communion in the church. (Ferguson, location 3201).

3.4.1.7.3. Since the actions of the confessors threatened that unity, Cyprian felt that he had to reject those actions and to insist on the need for a synod to decide what was to be done with the lapsed. (Gonzales, location 2038).

3.4.2. Novatian

3.4.2.1. At the same time as Cyprian was facing controversy in Carthage over how to handle the lapsed, controversy broke out at Rome.

3.4.2.2. After the death of the Roman bishop in the Decian persecution, a presbyter named Cornelius was made bishop.

Cornelius favored a more moderate approach towards the lapsed, very similar to Cyprian.

3.4.2.3. Novatian was a leading theologian in Rome at the time. He thought the lapsed were being readmitted to the church far too easily. He believed that the church had no power to forgive the most serious sins: murder, adultery, and apostasy. In such cases the church only pray for the lapsed members and ask God to have mercy at the Last Judgment.

3.4.2.3.1. Novatian was more rigorous than Cyprian. He clashed with the bishop of Rome, Cornelius, because in his opinion the lapsed were being readmitted too easily. (Gonzales, location 2043).

3.4.2.3.2. The most prominent voice for the traditional strict policy came from Rome. A presbyter and highly respected theologian, Novatian, argued that the church had no power to grant forgiveness to those guilty of murder, adultery, and apostasy. It could only intercede for God's mercy at the Last Judgment. (Shelley, location 1520).

3.4.2.3.3. The primitive concept defended by Novatian considered the church as a society of saints; the new view advocated by Cornelius saw the church as a school for sinners. (Shelley, location 1524).

3.4.2.4. He was then elected as a rival bishop, leading to a schism in Rome. Apparently, he also worked to have a third rival bishop set up in Carthage to oppose both Cyprian, who Novatian though was too lax in his acceptance of the lapsed, and those who were even more lenient than Cyprian.

3.4.2.4.1. Soon the Novatianists built up a network of small congregations and considered the Catholic churches polluted as a result of their lenient attitude toward sinners. (Shelley, location 1526).

3.4.2.5. Cyprian supported Cornelius as the rightful bishop in Rome.

3.5. The resolution of the debate - how the lapsed were to be restored

3.5.1. As can be seen above, there were three basic positions on how to restore the lapsed. On the one hand, there was a lenient position, that said the lapsed simply needed to confess and repent, and then be restored. On the other extreme was Novation and others who argued that the lapsed could not be restored at all. In the middle was Cyprian, who argued that the lapsed should be received, but that since the degrees to which people lapsed had differed, so should the requirements for readmission differ.

- 3.6.1. This solution indicated that the bishops had the true power in the church - even more than the confessors. They were the ones who exercised discipline and forgave and received people back into fellowship.
 - 3.6.1.1. Cyprian's policy established discipline as a prerogative of the bishop and clergy (acting in concert with the congregation) and brought the martyrs under the authority of the bishops (a step that may have inspired the idea that a true bishop has the worth of a martyr). (Ferguson, location 3239).
- 3.6.2. This solution set the church on a path towards the idea of gradations of sin and the required penance. This would eventually grow into the full blown system of venial and mortal sins and penance that in part prompted the Reformation during the time of Luther and Calvin.
 - 3.6.2.1. The significance of these episodes is that they show that the restoration of the lapsed was one of the main concerns of the Western church from a very early date. The question of what should be done about those baptized Christians who sinned divided the Western church repeatedly. It was out of that concern that the entire penitential system developed. Much later, the Protestant Reformation was in large measure a protest against that system. (Gonzales, location 2048).
 - 3.6.2.2. His argument won general approval, so to deal with these degrees of guilt, the church created a graded system of penance. (Shelley, location 1514).

4. Cyprian's Controversy With Rome Over Baptism

- 4.1. Stephen bishop of Rome received those who had been baptized by heretical groups, as long as it had been done in the name of the Trinity. He said this was the received tradition of the church. (see Ferguson, location 3249).
- 4.2. Cyprian disagreed, stating that if the one administering the baptism was a heretic or schismatic the baptism was invalid, and the person had to receive a valid baptism in order to enter the church. He argued that "a person cannot have God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother." (See Ferguson, location 3255).
- 4.3. The subject of heretical and schismatic baptism was discussed by other church leaders. Cyprian's view made the validity of baptism dependent on the administrator of baptism, and that always introduced an element of uncertainty into one's salvation. The affirmation of the objective validity of a baptism properly performed had a greater appeal. The position of Stephen, therefore, came to prevail, although Cyprian's view lived on in North Africa, being powerfully revived by the Donatists in the next century. (Ferguson, location 3265).