

Church History

***Early Church:
the First Three Centuries***
(RVS Notes)

National Presbyterian Church
Adult Nurture
Fall, 2024

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Welcome

Welcome to this Adult Nurture survey class on Church History. Adult nurture is a ministry of National Presbyterian Church (NPC) designed to help you grow in your knowledge of the Christian faith and in your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We desire to engage your mind and enrich your spirit: from foundational issues of belief and doctrine to complex questions of faith and practice; from basic biblical studies to examination of other world religions; from faith and the arts to stewardship of wealth and the environment. We hope and trust that you will find these classes interesting and stimulating.

This class is one of a series of classes designed to give our fellow pilgrims at NPC a helpful overview of the history of Christianity after the apostolic age. These classes seek to glean the significant events and trends in Church history and to discern what import they had for Christians at the time and for us today. We will attempt to follow Oliver Cromwell's advice to his portrait artist: "Paint me warts and all." If we err, we will err on the side of generosity to those who have gone on ahead of us.

Taking This Class

This class can be taken in at least three different ways:

1. As a regular Sunday School class where advance preparation by class members is not expected. The class notebook provides the content for each lesson with maps, timelines, and a glossary to supply supporting material. While advance preparation would be helpful to understand the content of each lesson, it is not necessary.
2. As a class with some advance preparation. The syllabus that follows enables you to prepare for each class by reading the class notes and referring to the supporting materials as appropriate. This preparation is not burdensome.
3. As a class akin to our Guided Tour of the Bible classes. The syllabus details assignments in the notebook as well as a related texts: Donald Fairbairn, *The Global Church, The First Eight Centuries*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021 and Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language (Fourth Edition)*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013. These texts are available on Amazon.com, through a book distributor, or may be ordered through a local bookstore. In addition, we will be referencing Cyril C. Richardson, Ed., *Early Church Fathers*.

Syllabus

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22—	Formation; Growth	RVS Notes 13-16 Shelley 27-93
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Early Church: The First Three Centuries

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Early Church:

The First Three Centuries

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7)

The church of Christ in every age, beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.
Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be
A partner in Christ’s sacrifice and clothed with Christ’s humility. (Wareham)

I. Church in Pagan Society

A. Roman Empire—Historical Milieu

§1-101. In general—The study of the Church in the early centuries of our era provides a wonderful opportunity for considering the Church in the midst of an unbelieving culture. As we in the American church move ever more into a postmodern, post-Christian culture, there are valuable lessons to be learned from our forebears.

We will start our story with Roman Empire since that was the scene of most of the Christian growth and movement in the early centuries. Rome’s relations with Christians were troubled due to suspicions that Christians were not loyal—to the state, its rulers, and its gods. The Christian obligation of complete allegiance to Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:10-11) implied that Christians must necessarily have a tenuous and complicated relationship with the Roman state and with the realms around them that made overreaching claims for loyalty. As the early Christians moved outward from Jerusalem into pagan environments, their allegiance marked them as different. They did not take part fully in civic life. In separating themselves from the world and worldly influences, they were deemed aloof and somewhat peculiar. The result was suspicion which eventually became persecution which gave rise to the martyrs and the apologists. Out of these persecutions arose a debate about the nature of the Church because some believers recanted. Is the Church a society of saints or sinners? In addition to internal discipline, there were doctrinal and organizational issues to work through. Finally, this early period was formative for the development of Christian worship patterns and community norms.

§1-102. Jewish context—Roman practices toward the religion and customs of conquered peoples were generally tolerant. Roman law recognized various religions as legitimate and Judaism was one of those. Initially, the early Christians fell under the Jewish umbrella and therefore were seen as a sect of a legitimate faith. However, Rome’s tolerance was sorely tried by the perceived obstinacy of the Jews, who insisted on worshiping only their God and who threatened rebellion at what the Romans regarded as insignificant challenges to their faith.

Two events caused a disassociation of Christianity with Judaism:

- Great fire of Rome in 64 where Nero accused the Christians of starting the fire. This led to a cruel local persecution in which Peter and Paul may have lost their lives.
- Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66. That revolt accentuated the emerging divide between Jews and Christians. Jewish rebelliousness continued with revolts against Rome in 115 and 132-135 (the Bar Kochba revolt) which grew out of messianic fervor. Christians believed that the Messiah had already come, which marked them as clearly different.

Diaspora Judaism—The period under consideration postdates the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70. The Jewish presence in Palestine was receding and would virtually vanish after the Bar Kochba revolt in 135. Nevertheless, there were sizeable Jewish communities in every major city of the Roman Empire. Many Jews, though scattered far and wide, had strong emotional connections with the land of their ancestors. They are described as the Diaspora Judaism. Diaspora Judaism reflected the two fundamental tenets of all Jews: ethical monotheism and eschatological hope. Ethical monotheism meant that there is only one God, and that this God requires proper worship and proper relationships between people. Eschatological hope was the messianic hope, the firm belief that the day would come when God would intervene to restore Israel and fulfill the promise of a kingdom of peace and justice.

Avenue of Christian expansion—Diaspora Judaism was one of the main avenues through which Christianity expanded throughout the Empire. Diaspora Judaism also unwittingly provided the Church with one of its most useful tools of missionary expansion, the Greek translation of the Jewish Old Testament. This translation, originating in Alexandria, is called the Septuagint, or the version of the seventy. It was so named because of the ancient legend that seventy Jewish scholars were commissioned to translate the Scriptures. The Septuagint is the version of the Old Testament quoted by most New Testament authors.

Hellenism—In addition, Diaspora Judaism had to come to grips with Hellenism in a manner that had been avoided in Palestine. Many early believers followed their Jewish forebears in this endeavor. Particularly in Alexandria, there was a movement that sought to show the compatibility between the ancient Jewish faith and the best of Hellenistic culture. The high point of this tradition was the work of Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus who sought to show that the best of pagan philosophy agreed with the Hebrew Scriptures. He claimed that the Hebrew prophets preceded the Greek philosophers and that the latter drew from the wisdom of the former. He used an allegorical interpretation of Scripture to harmonize Old Testament teaching with Greek philosophy. Several early Christian writers (e.g. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen) would follow in his train.

§1-103. Greco-Roman context—Roman law and Hellenistic culture comprised the context in which the early Church took shape. Roman political unity allowed Christians to travel without excessive fear of local bandits or wars. Well-paved roads ran throughout the Empire and the seas were free of pirates and brigands. Trade flourished and travel was constant, circumstances which favored the spread of Christianity.

Syncretism and emperor worship—However, other aspects of this context constituted threats to the faith. To achieve greater unity, imperial policy sought religious conformity through two routes: syncretism and emperor worship. To the Roman pantheon of gods, numerous gods of other lands were added. Traditions and beliefs mingled to the point where their original forms were almost unrecognizable. Syncretism was the fashion of the age, and Jews and Christians were seen as

unbending fanatics insisting on the sole worship of the one, true God. The second element, emperor worship, eventually became the reason for persecution of the faith. Emperor worship was seen as a means of unity and a test of loyalty. To refuse to burn a pinch of incense before the emperor's image was understood, at the very least, as a disrespectful lack of gratitude and loyalty, or at worst, as treasonous.

Platonism and Stoicism—To communicate their faith amid a dominant Hellenistic culture, Christians found the philosophical traditions of Platonism and Stoicism as particularly attractive and helpful. Socrates, Plato, and other philosophers had criticized the ancient gods and spoke of a supreme being, perfect and immutable. Furthermore, both Socrates and Plato believed in the immortality of the soul and affirmed that, beyond this world of fleeting things, was a world of abiding truth. Christians found this backdrop useful in communicating their faith to the culture at large.

Stoicism held to high moral standards. The early Stoics were materialists and determinists, believing that reality was material and convinced that the best they could do was to live by the laws that ruled the natural world. However, by the time Christianity appeared on the scene, Stoicism had developed religious overtones. Some of their philosophers spoke of the possibility of using their wisdom proactively in framing public policy.

All Stoics believed that the purpose of philosophy was to understand the laws of nature and to obey and adjust to them. They were to attune themselves to the universal law of reason and to live into the ideal of *apatheia*, life without passions. The virtues to be cultivated were moral insight, courage, self-control, and justice. The Stoics were critical of pagan religions because the gods seemed to justify the desires of their worshipers rather than calling them to virtue. The Stoic idea of natural law as a guide to wisdom was soon taken up by Christian apologists. In response to prejudice, ridicule, and even martyrdom, the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* called believers to steadfastness.

§1-104. Rome through the early centuries—

First century—Some describe this as the Golden Age of Rome. Augustus Caesar created the Principate and inaugurated the Pax Romana. He and his descendants, the Julio-Claudians (Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero), ruled from 31 BC until Nero's death in 68 AD. Vespasian prevailed in the civil war that followed, and the Flavian dynasty (Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, 69-96) succeeded to power. Despite the intrigues that plagued imperial politics and succession, the Roman world enjoyed a large measure of peace and prosperity during these years. Local persecutions of Christians occurred in the reigns of Nero (54-68) and Domitian (81-96).

Second century—Nerva (96-98) was selected by the Senate to succeed to the imperial purple after the assassination of Domitian and this began the era of the adoptive emperors (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius, also known as the Antonines, 96-180), so called because of their practice of adopting their successor and heir. This was a long and prosperous period for the Roman world. This series of good rulers was broken when Marcus Aurelius chose his own son, Commodus (180-192), a completely worthless ruler, to succeed him. Commodus' cruel and unstable reign ended with his assassination and the sale of the throne to the highest bidder.

Third century—Severan dynasty (193-235) restored order to Rome but the Principate, with its benevolent notions of a shared rule between the emperor and the Senate, was waning. The new emperor, Septimius Severus (193-211) was clearly a military dictator and depended on the army for his power, as would his successors. When the last of his successors, Alexander Severus, was assassinated

(235), Rome entered a fifty-year period of chaos, presided over by a series of “barracks emperors”. From 235 to 284, the Empire experienced a full storm crisis -- economic collapse, depopulation, civil wars (there were 27 emperors in less than 50 years), unstable borders, and the emergence of powerful rivals. Amid these trials, a terrible general persecution of Christians was launched by Decius (249-251) and continued by Valerian (253-260).

Early fourth century—Diocletian (284-305) stabilized the frontiers and put down numerous revolts. He initiated the tetrarchy—dividing the Empire into four parts for security purposes, each with its own Caesar. At the end of his reign, he launched the most violent and extensive of all the Roman persecutions of Christians. After his retirement in 305, civil war brought Constantine (306-337) to the throne, first in the West (312) and then over the entire Empire (324). Constantine converted to Christianity, arguably around 312. He promptly promulgated the Edict of Milan in 313, which granted official toleration to the Christian faith and practice.

§1-105. Roman chronology in the early centuries

<u>Emperors</u>	<u>Bishops of Rome</u>	<u>Authors/documents</u>	<u>Events</u>
Augustus (27 BC-14 AD)		(Philo)	Jesus
Tiberius (14-37)			Jesus
Caligula (37-41)			
Claudius (54-68)			
4 emperors (68-69)			Civil war
Vespasian (69-79)			
Titus (79-81)			
Domitian (81-96)			
Nerva (96-98)			
Trajan (98-117)	Evaristus Alexander Sixtus	Ignatius	Persecution; Trajan-Pliny correspondence- Rome’s early policy (111-112)

<u>Hadrian (117-138)</u>	Telesphorus	Quadratus	Persecution
	<u>Hyginus</u>	Aristides	Gnosticism grows
		Papias	<u>Marcion in Rome</u>
		(Epictetus)	
		Didache (?)	
		Hebrews-Gospel	
		<u>Pseudo-Barnabas</u>	
<u>Antoninus Pius (138-161)</u>	Pius	Basilides	<u>Montanism</u>
	<u>Ancietus</u>	Hermas (150)	
		Martyrdom of Polycarp	
		Valentinus	
		Peter-Gospel	
		Muratorian fragment (160)	
		Ascension of Isaiah (?)	
		<u>Odes of Solomon (?)</u>	
Marcus Aurelius (161-180);	Justin (165)	Hegesippus (154-166)	<u>Martyrs in Gaul (177)</u>
<u>Lucius Varus (161-169)</u>	Soter	Lucian of Samosata	
	<u>Eleuterus (189)</u>	Tatian	
		2 Enoch (?)	
		<u>Athenagorus</u>	
<u>Commodus (180-192)</u>	Theophilus of Antioch	Irenaeus (180)	Scillitan martyrs
		Pantenus	<u>Date of Easter debate</u>
	<u>Victor (189-199)</u>		

Melito of Sardis (189)

<u>193- several emperors</u>		Civil war
<u>Septimius Severus (193-Zephyrinus 211)</u>	<u>(199-217)</u>	Tertullian (195-220) Minucius Felix Perpetua & Felicitas Clement of Alexandria (200-215) Syncretistic policy--Roman state's policy hardens Persecution <u>Tertullian as Montanist (207)</u>
<u>Caracalla (211-217)</u>	<u>Origen (215-253)</u>	
<u>Macrinus (217-218)</u>	<u>Calixtus (217-222)</u>	<u>(Plotinus)</u>
<u>Elagabalus (218-222)</u>		
<u>Alexander Severus (222-235)</u>	<u>Urban (222-230)</u> <u>Hippolytus (222-235)</u> <u>Pontian (230-235)</u>	<u>Two bishops in Rome</u> <u>Origen in Palestine</u>
<u>Maximi (235-238)</u>	<u>Anterus (235-236)</u> <u>Fabian (236-250)</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>238-multiple emperors</u>	<u>Sextus Julius Africanus</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>

<u>Gordian III (238-244)</u>	<u>Methodius</u>	<u>Thomas-Gospel</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
		<u>Manicheism founded</u>	
<u>Philip the Arabian (244-249)</u>	<u>Heraclas</u>		<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Decius (249-251)</u>		<u>Cyprian</u>	<u>Intense persecution</u>
			<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Hostilian (251)</u>			<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Gallus (251-253)</u>	<u>Cornelius (251-253)</u>		<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
	<u>Novatian (251-258)</u>		
<u>Aemilian (253)</u>	<u>Lucius (253-254)</u>	<u>Didascalia (?)</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Valerian (253-259)</u>	<u>Stephen (254-257)</u>		<u>Persecution</u>
	<u>Sixtus II (257-258)</u>		<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Gallienus (259-268)</u>	<u>Dionysius (260-268)</u>	<u>Dionysius of Alexandria</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
		<u>Lucian of Antioch</u>	<u>Paul of Samosata,</u>
	<u>Felix (269-274)</u>	<u>Gregory the Wonderworker</u>	<u>bishop of Antioch</u>
<u>Claudius II (268-270)</u>		<u>Gnostic papyri</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Quintillus (270)</u>			
<u>Aurelian (270-275)</u>		<u>Bartholomew-Gospel</u>	<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>
<u>Tacitus (275-276)</u>	<u>Eutychian (275-283)</u>		<u>Civil war; Foreign invasions</u>

Phobus (276-282)		Civil war; Foreign invasions
Carus (early 280s)	Caius (283-296)	Civil war; Foreign invasions
Numerian (early 280s)		
Carinus (early 280s)		
Tetrarachs:	Marcellinus (296-304)	Great persecution
Diocletian (284-305)		
Maximian (285-305)		
Constantine Chlorus		
Galerius (292-311)		
Tetrarachs:	Marcellus (308-309)	Edict of Toleration (311)
Galerius (292-311)		Milvian Bridge (312)
Maximinus (305-13)	Eusebius (309-310)	Edict of Milan (313)
Maxentius (306-312)	Miltiades (311-314)	
Constantine (306-37)		
Licinius (307-323)	Sylvester (314-335)	

§1-106. Historical context beyond the Roman Empire—Persia and India

Church in Persian society—In Parthian Persia in the early centuries, there was essentially no state action taken against Christians. The quiet years of the Parthian rule provided a setting for Christianity to flourish for a variety of reasons—

- Parthian regime was benign and decentralized;
- Roman suspicion of the Christians bolstered the faith in the eyes of the Parthians. A type of reasoning that an enemy of my enemy is a friend;
- The official religion of Parthia, Zoroastrianism, was closer to Christian faith than the polytheism of Rome.

In 113-117, the Roman Emperor Trajan led an expedition against Parthia and encountered little resistance as he marched along the Euphrates all the way to the Persian Gulf. The military emergency and the poor Parthian response to it paved the way for a much more authoritarian and aggressive

regime, the Sassanids, to gain popularity and eventually seize power in the third century. They would rule Persia from 224 to the arrival of the Arabs in 636.

Sassanid Persia—Three significant events bore on the Church in Persia from the third century on—

- Roman conquest of Edessa and the continual conflict between Rome and Parthia in the third and fourth centuries greatly affected believers in Persia. It caused the Persian Christians to move their center deeper into Persia to Nisibis between Edessa and Arbela and believers were suspected to be disloyal after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as the official faith.
- As the Romans doubled down on the polytheism in the mid-third century, the Sassanids sought to nationalize Zoroastrianism religion as their official faith.
- The rise of Manichaeism, another form of dualism that directly competed with Zoroastrianism. Its alleged prophet, Mani, combined many features of Zoroastrianism with Christian lingo. Manichaeism spread like wildfire in the third century. Christians may have been lumped with Manichaean archenemies of the state.

India—India was relatively independent of the struggle between Rome and Persia that so affected the church in those regions. From the time of the ancient Vedic religions (prior to 1000 BC), Indian society was severely stratified. The two main people groups were the Dravidians and the Sanskriti. The Sanskriti gained ascendancy in most parts of India. There were four castes with Brahmans as the highest. Christians would have been viewed as foreigners and outsiders in the culture and probably subject to hostile attitudes.

§1-107. —Aksum (Nubia) and Ethiopia—In the early centuries of the Christian era, Aksum was an advanced kingdom that included modern Ethiopia and Nubia in Africa and Yemen in Arabia. It dominated eastern Africa for most of the first millennium AD and traded widely with the Mediterranean and Asian worlds. Ancient Aksum had a strong Jewish presence, and an interesting legend has it that the Aksumites were descendants of Solomon and the queen of Sheba, long before Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts.

B. Formation; Numerical and Geographical Growth

§1-111. In general; Numerical growth—In the early centuries, Christianity experienced steady numerical growth and quickly expanded geographically beyond its Palestinian heartland. Numbers are largely estimates in the early centuries. There is limited evidence for mass conversions based on public preaching or wonder working. Growth was probably largely by social networking, converts coming primarily among family members and friends. Another cause of growth was childbirth. Christians had sizable and solidly stable families to whom to pass on the faith. Early believers were staunch opponents of abortion and child exposure.

Our precise understanding of Christianity's growth is veiled. Some estimates are that the Church grew by approximately 40% per decade in the second and third centuries. Others think those numbers are inflated but grant that growth was significant and steady. Numerical growth gathered momentum in the third century as the Roman Empire experienced a sustained political, military, economic, and demographic crisis. This crisis spawned a new openness to faith in the general populace particularly the Christian faith. At the end of the third century, Christians may have numbered anywhere from 3 to 6 million, approximately 5-10% of the Empire's total population. In this era, the main centers of the faith

were in the eastern portions of the Mediterranean.

Explosive numerical growth occurred in the 4th century, following the conversion and official favor of the Emperor Constantine. By that century's end, perhaps 50% of the residents of the Empire were at least nominally Christian.

§1-112. Geographical spread of the faith—By the end of the first century, the church extended as far north as the southern edge of the Black Sea, as far west as Rome and perhaps farther, and as far south as Egypt and Libya. In the east, the gospel reached Parthian Persia. By 200, Christianity had grown out from the centers described in the New Testament, with its greatest strength in Asia Minor, in Achaia and Thessalonica in Greece, in Palestine, and in areas around Rome and Ravenna in Italy. By the beginning of the third century, the church reached Gaul, Spain, and Britain in the west, present day Tunisia and Algeria in Africa, and deeper into Persia in the east. By 311, Christianity had established itself in regions throughout the Empire, with its greatest strength in the East. The geographical spread was accompanied by the production of Christian literature in languages other than Greek and Latin.

Pause and ponder—Two things about stories of Christianity's geographical growth are troubling to moderns:

- The prevalence of miracle stories. The miracles recorded in the Bible are soberly recounted. The post-biblical accounts are greatly exaggerated. But because they are exaggerated does not mean that none of them should be taken seriously. In both biblical and post-biblical writings, miracles served to authenticate the truthfulness of the Christian message, especially when the apostles or others were preaching to new audiences.
- There seemed to be an advocacy for Christian virginity rather than marriage in the accounts of Christian growth. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Acts of Thomas* record examples of newly converted Christian women leaving their intended husbands at the altar out of supposed dedication to Christ. There are many other similar accounts. Paul himself seems to argue for the superiority of celibacy over marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. In this it is important for us to realize that Jesus lived in a culture that valued marriage highly and did not value singleness very much at all. Indeed, many unflattering assumptions were made about single people. The Lord's followers had to come to terms with His celibacy and to fit that seemingly embarrassing fact into their view of societal structure. They did so in many respects by exalting celibacy as a model mode of life for believers.

Let's delineate this geographical movement in more particular terms.

§1-113. Northward movement in Asia—Initially, the church remained in Jerusalem and preached to Jewish audiences. To outsiders, Christianity appeared to be another sect in Judaism, devoted to a well-known rabble-rouser, Jesus, about whom spectacular claims were made. Acts 8 records the dispersing of the Jerusalem church due to a persecution seemingly led by Saul. Philip takes the gospel to Samaria, preaching, performing miracles, and winning a reception among the Samaritans. Acts 10 records the beginning of the Gentile mission and Acts 11 the gospel reaching Antioch in Syria. That church would be the supporting and sending church for the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 13 and 14, the record of those journeys begins with the first missionary journey through Cyprus and central Anatolia. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch and then traveled to Jerusalem to testify before the apostles about the Gentile mission in Acts 15. Extrabiblical sources place other apostles in Anatolia in

the first century as well, notably John, who had a long ministry in the city of Ephesus, and Philip and Bartholomew who also ministered in the area.

Other traditions record the early spread of the gospel into Scythia (Ukraine and southern Russia). A third century work has Matthias ministering in the Crimean Peninsula with Andrew rescuing him from cannibals. Eusebius, the fourth century church historian, claims that Andrew ministered in the Ukraine, a story long attested to by Ukrainian Christians. The Black Sea area was probably the northern terminus of early church growth to the north and probably remained so for several centuries beyond that.

In Palestine, churches were scattered throughout Galilee and Samaria. After 70 AD, Christian bishops were found in Jerusalem as well. In Syria, Antioch continued as a key center of the faith. Christians moved eastward from Antioch toward Edessa. Christians appear east of the Tigris River in Adiabene and some Syrian Christians made their way to Persia.

In Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Christianity made substantial progress in penetrating the major urban centers of Hellenistic culture. There were numerous churches in Asia Minor from the mid-first century and these were added to—in cities such as Nicaea and Byzantium. The rural areas and those areas less affected by Hellenistic culture were slower in adopting Christianity. Christian churches also appear on the islands of Cyprus and Crete.

§1-114. Westward movement into Europe—Acts 16-18 records the gospel entering Greece and Macedonia. These chapters record Paul's second missionary journey, perhaps dating to 49-52 AD. The third missionary journey from 53-57 AD records Paul's journey revisiting most of the places he had ministered to in Anatolia and Greece. Acts 21 and following records Paul's journey to Jerusalem on a relief mission, his arrest, and his subsequent imprisonment and trials. Acts concludes with Paul in Rome awaiting his trial before Nero. Both Paul and Peter lost their lives in a local persecution by Nero sometime between 64 and 68 AD. Jerome, the scholar/monk and translator of the Latin Vulgate, reports that Peter was first in Rome during the second year of the reign of the Emperor Claudius (circa 42 AD) to confront the teaching of Simon Magnus, who had plagued the church in Acts 8. Whether true or embellished (there is much uncertainty as to Peter's movements between the 30s and 60s AD), there seemed to have been Christian communities in Rome by the 40s AD.

Rome seems to have been the farthest west Christianity spread in the first century. Details of Christian growth beyond the church at Rome are sparse. However, by the time of the Decian persecution in the middle of the third century, there were approximately 100 bishoprics on the Italian peninsula.

In Greece, Christian congregations were found in numerous Greek cities, especially cosmopolitan communities like Corinth. However, Greece delayed in becoming predominantly Christian. Athens, in particular, remained defiant in its philosophical paganism.

Tradition has it that the faith was taken to Spain in the days of the apostles. In Romans 15, Paul shares his desire and plans to take the gospel to Spain, but there is no evidence that he got there before he was martyred. However, the church was well established in southern Spain by the third century. Likewise, Gallic church grew steadily. Irenaeus, a bishop of Lyon in the late second century, was the first churchman from Gaul to achieve prominence. There is early evidence of Christian communities even as far as Britain.

§1-115. Southward movement into Africa—Acts 8 records Philip's ministry to an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official to Queen Candace of Ethiopia (at the time, Ethiopia referred to the kingdom of Nubia, modern Sudan, rather than to Aksum (northern Ethiopia)). The eunuch was converted and baptized and presumably returned to his native land. He was one of several converted Jews returning to Africa. Egypt is mentioned as one of the countries represented at Pentecost in Acts 2. Believers from Cyrene (modern Libya) are mentioned as present in Syrian Antioch in Acts 11. One of them, Lucius, played a leading role in the Antioch church (see Acts 13:1). In addition, Eusebius affirms that Mark carried the gospel to Alexandria in Egypt before the death of the noted Jewish scholar, Philo, in 50 AD. Mark's alleged mission work would have come in the 40s AD. There are accounts of martyrdoms of African believers (in the *Acts of the Sicilian Martyrs*) early as the late second century. Tertullian would be active in the early third century and his ministry seemed to confirm the robust presence of Christianity in Latin North Africa.

§1-116. Eastward movement into Persia and India—While stories of a first century presence of Christianity in the border kingdom of Edessa (in eastern Turkey), involving a correspondence between the Lord Jesus and King Abgar of Osroene seem far-fetched, the second century presence of the church in the region seems certain. Two events stand out—

- The emergence of significant Christian centers in Edessa and in Arbela. The Christian scholar Tatian, author of the *Diatessaron*, a very early version of a harmony of the gospels as the work would be categorized today, was active in Arbela.
- The adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the tiny Persian kingdom of Osroene. This means there was a Christian state a century prior Armenia, Georgia, and Aksum (Ethiopia and Nubia).

India—Few take accounts of the early entry of Christianity in India (*Acts of Thomas* and some claims by Eusebius and Jerome) at face value. Those claims relate that the apostle Thomas came to northwestern India by land and southern India by sea, spending more than two decades there. The apostle Bartholomew also allegedly worked in the area. A century later, the Alexandrian scholar, Pantaenus ministered among the upper classes in southern India, preaching Christ to the Brahmins and philosophers.

What is more certain is that Christianity was present in India by 345. In that year, delegation of some 400 Jewish Christians from Persia arrived on the Malabar coast of India. They may have been fleeing Shapur's persecution in Persia. These believers seemed to have considerable business acumen and prospered greatly in Malabar and increased the prosperity of the society around them. Whether Christianity was present in India before this time or not, it certainly was established by the mid-4th century.

§1-117. Reasons for growth—The reason for growth was the power of the gospel energized by the Holy Spirit operative in the lives of dedicated Christians. God was drawing many to himself in a wide variety of circumstances and with a wide-ranging geographical reach. Some natural factors worked positively in this growth curve—

- Early Christian vitality—Christianity was the most inclusive and strongest of the voluntary associations in the Empire.
- The Gospel met the felt needs in the hearts of people—for worth and dignity, for meaning, for hope,

for forgiveness, for acceptance.

- Practical expression of Christian love was recognized by pagans (e.g. Christian practice of caring for their own poor, widows, orphans; burial of the less fortunate as practice of protecting human dignity; adoptions of exposed infants).
- Examples of moral transformation in members—such as that of Tertullian and Augustine,
- Powerful examples of the martyrs and confessors.
- Familiarity of Christian teaching—there was some kinship of Christian instruction with aspects of Judaism, Platonism, and Stoicism.
- Early believers adapted to Greco-Roman culture—they spoke/and wrote in the vernacular (Greek and Latin), made use of Greek philosophy and Roman law in apologetics, and early Christian art reflected classical themes.
- Effective leadership supplied by bishops.
- Social habits won respect and made community sense—Christians avoided birth control, abortion, child euthanasia, and practiced charity.
- With the disintegration of the Empire and society, particularly, in the chaotic third century, insecurity drove many to seek refuge in the faith.
- Conversion and endorsement of Constantine (4th century on).

§1-118. Early Christian demographics—By tradition, most of the early Christian converts came from the poorer and underprivileged elements of Roman society, largely from the urban underclass. A quote from Celsus, a second century pagan critic, highlights this reality: “Far from us, say the Christians, be any man possessed of any culture, or wisdom, or judgment; their aim is to convince only the worthless and contemptible people, idiots, slaves, poor women, and children ... These are the only ones whom they manage to turn into believers.” The quote above speaks of a hard society where the common person could easily be grounded down. To a substantial measure, it was the early Christians’ ability to live out their faith with wide arms to those who would join them that accounted for their early growth. There were no worthless people to them. Their demeanor was an affront to Roman arrogance but balm to the souls of countless converts.

While the underclass may have initially populated the ranks of the early believers, Christian congregations soon represented a rather broad spectrum of society. We know that there were converts among the most respected noble families of Rome. A close relative of the Emperor Domitian (81-96) was reputed to be one of these converts and paid for it with his life. By 270, Porphyry, another philosophical critic of the faith, spoke of noble women becoming Christians and this began to have serious civic consequences. According to the governing law of the day, the status of a couple was determined by the status of the husband. If prominent women were to marry men from a lower social class in a civil ceremony, there were adverse civil and social consequences. The solution that was increasingly adopted was to perform church marriages that had no official or civil sanction.

By 300, there were Christians among magistrates, provincial governors, and chamberlains in the imperial court. With the ascension of Constantine in the early fourth century, Christians began to populate the so-called elites. In fact, many counted imperial favor as no boon to the faith and

questioned the sincerity of many so-called Christian social climbers.

C. Organizational Growth and Need for Doctrinal Formulation

§1-121. In general—Two of the most striking features of the history of Christianity in the early centuries were the development of its organization and the intellectual formulation of its system of belief. The organization that emerged bore the impression of the highly stratified political framework in which it arose. In addition, while the doctrinal disputes were not always pretty and the participants did not always live up to Christian ideals, they certainly displayed the great vitality and energy of the Christian faith in these centuries.

Expecting Christ's imminent return, the early believers felt little need to play the long game. As Christ's promised coming was delayed, the church needed to settle down into a longer-term obedience. This led to structural questions, namely how should the church be organized and conduct itself. This unfolded in the development of three structures:

- the episcopacy (the office of the bishop);
- the creeds (Christian professions of faith in God);
- the canon (the list of books considered authoritative Scripture).

1. Development of Christian Leadership and Organization

§1-122. In general; Growth in administration—In the apostolic Church, there seemed to be a wonderful liberty for every Christian to pray, teach, or exhort as gifted and led. Christ was the sole High Priest and there was no special group of priests. The apostles were deeply respected, as were local leaders, but there was a ready embrace of the ministry of all believers.

Growth in numbers led to the need for greater organization. There was a need to coordinate tasks and administration at the local level, including organizing the house assemblies (their meeting places and times), establishing an order of worship, providing hospitality to delegates from other house assemblies, and carrying out the tasks of oversight. As the number of congregations grew and the geographical reach of the faith was extended so did the need for regular communication, sharing of resources, and larger level meetings. At the local level, tasks grew in number and complexity and leadership positions became infused with more religious significance. Elders had a supervisor (*episkopos* or bishop) at their head and others (deacons/deaconesses etc.) to do the practical chores. In terms of numbers, visibility, social standing, and ideological and institutional development, the Christian church was, by the beginning of the 4th century, no longer an insignificant sect.

§1-123. Rise of the monarchical bishop—The apparatus of episcopal governance and the words describing it are derived from the Greek *episcopos*, meaning overseer. Scripture mentions *episkopos*, *presbuteros*, and *diakonos* – our elders (teaching and ruling) and deacons. The New Testament seems to use *episkopos* and *prebuteros* interchangeably. However, by the early to mid-2nd century, bishop, priest or presbyter, and deacon were three separate offices.

There were a plurality of elders in a local house churches but one bishop or general overseer who became central to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. At first, this was largely a liturgical leadership role. Then the role progressed from being a bishop of a local group to one who represented the

churches of a particular city or community. In the late third century, large Roman provinces were divided into smaller units called dioceses (derived from the Greek word meaning “administration”). The church followed suit by giving its bishops jurisdiction over the churches in given Roman dioceses. The church's episcopal structure followed that of the Empire's administrative structure.

Also, during the second and third centuries, the role of bishop expanded to include primacy in teaching and preaching as well as in liturgical leadership. The church had to deal with various inadequate understandings of Christian faith. One way to do this was to counter false claims by insisting that accurate Christian teaching came through the bishops.

Why this strong preference for hierarchy? The early Christians followed the direction of Jewish religious establishment and Roman governmental system, both hierarchical in structure. The more egalitarian form of Church leadership was not conducive to the growth of a unified institution, particularly in the culture of the day. The bishop was seen as the source of unity and, by custom, there was no true celebration of the sacraments without his participation or delegation. A series of compositions in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, known as the *Church Orders* (including the *Didache*, the *Apostolic Tradition*, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*) devoted themselves to the regulation of the common life of Christians and reveal that the roles of the clergy grew more specialized. The authority of the bishop became supreme within the churches of his region, and he was at the center of every activity, especially worship.

Male leadership—By the end of the second century, official leadership of the Church was entirely masculine. There are indications that in earlier times women occupied positions of leadership in local churches. Philip had four daughters that prophesied (preached). Phoebe was a deaconess in Cenchraea. Junia is described as an *apostolos*. The early Church also had an extensive ministry to the widows in their midst and this ministry was often combined with service functions performed by the widows.

Episcopacy in Persia—The hierarchical episcopal system grew more slowly in Persia and the regions east of the Roman Empire. At first, the city of Edessa was the hub for preachers/teachers and missionaries. It served as an ecclesial center from which the church grew. However, by the fourth century, the episcopal system centered on bishops in particular areas took root in the east as well.

§1-124. Development of the idea of apostolic succession—The idea of the authority of the episcopate began to develop in the late second century in response to the doctrinal challenges facing the Church at large. Certain Gnostic groups claimed secret traditions handed down to them by the apostles. This was an era when the last links with the apostles were dying out and an emphasis on apostolic teaching and practice was coming to fore. In response, the Church began to claim each bishop as a true successor to the apostle who founded the episcopal see and therefore the conservator of the truth the apostles taught. The bishops were authoritative teachers who preserved the apostolic teaching and were also the guardians of the apostolic Scriptures and the creed developed from them.

The idea was ably articulated by Irenaeus (circa 185) and was widely accepted by the time of Cyprian (circa 250). By the time of Cyprian, the emphasis changed from an open succession of teachers of the truth to bishops as personal successors of the apostles themselves. This theory of the basis of the authority of the bishops gained momentum through the late second and third centuries as synods and regional councils gathered to settle governance issues and to encourage cooperation among the bishops.

§1-125. Patriarchal or metropolitan sees—The bishops were increasingly coordinated in their efforts by bishops in major metropolitan sees (called patriarchs). Rome, as the imperial city, was the church which exercised the most influence, but that authority was far from absolute. However, Rome’s influence was very real, not only as the imperial city, but as a congregation seen as founded by the apostles Peter and Paul. In addition, tradition has Rome as the scene of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul.

By the fourth century, the great metropolitan sees were understood as primary bishops—Rome, Constantinople (the new imperial city), Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Rome and Constantinople were the most prestigious and vied for preeminence.

§1-126. Specialization and professionalization of the ministry—Distinctions between clergy and laity deepened into divisions over time. There was a professionalization of the ministry. Clergy was set apart from secular roles to focus on church order, life, worship, and leadership. By 3rd century, there were increasing numbers of full-time ministers and a growing consensus that they should be celibate. The clergy was a separate class by function and expectation.

Lower clerical positions—A variety of lower clerical orders and groups emerge. Numerous minor offices or quasi-offices arose in the Church, including the following:

- Subdeacons (ordained) served as helpers to deacons;
- Readers read Scripture and maintained books;
- Acolytes assisted the bishops with their duties;
- Exorcists exorcized demons and often assisted with baptism;
- Precentors led music in worship;
- Janitors (sextons) maintained the articles used in worship and later cared for church property;
- Catechists served as teaching assistants in larger assemblies;
- Qualifying widows supported by the churches were customarily given various responsibilities. Eventually, the term “widow” broadened in its scope to include single women generally and responsibilities were usually tied to support. This practice was one of the precursors to female monasticism.

There were voices of protest to this trend. Tertullian railed against clericalism and called the Church to return to the implications of the priesthood of all believers and stop being “respecters of persons” with an increasing emphasis on institutional leadership.

The specialization and multiplication of functions grew as Christians increasingly disposed of property in this era. There was a need for elaboration in the items and places of worship requiring attention by dedicated personnel. By 180, there are signs of Christian art in the form of biblical themes on sarcophagi and in the catacombs around Rome. By the 3rd century, communities were beginning to meet in houses that were clearly intended to be churches from the time they were first constructed and not just residences adapted for worship. An example is the house-church as *Dura-Europos*, equipped with a separate baptistry and ornamented with frescoes, dating from around 250.

2. Early Doctrinal Challenges

§1-131. In general—Christianity began as a movement with scattered, diverse, and household groups, held together by certain convictions, practices, and experiences. It faced challenges from multiple directions as it grew in number and extent. Many converts came into the early Church from a wide variety of backgrounds. That testified to the faith’s universal appeal, but it also led to widely differing interpretations of the message. When does diversity become deviance? When are more definite creedal and behavioral boundaries required?

Challenges arose from the Greco-Roman culture and Judaism, but perhaps the strongest challenge came from within. The experience of spiritual power had always been a distinguishing feature of the faith, but now many were making extreme claims. In addition, with their growth in number and expanse, Christianity needed to secure a framework that would thrive and adapt to changing circumstances and cultures. It needed to figure out how to be a widespread, coherent faith community and not just a quirky movement.

Self-definition—Christianity was ill-defined and that was particularly dangerous because of the syncretism of the age. In response, Christians began the process of defining orthodoxy (from the Greek word meaning “right opinion”) using a trio of filters as its instruments—canon of Scripture, and councils of bishops, certified interpreters though apostolic succession, and creeds. These early centuries were perhaps the most important stage of self-definition of Christianity in its history.

§1-132. Immediate challenges—The formulation of a rule of faith out of which the later creeds sprung was spurred on by early challenges to the faith from Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism. Orthodoxy was largely determined by the Christian community responding to what was deemed to be error or at least dangerous dissenting opinion.

Dualistic vision of faith—Several powerful teachers in the 2nd century advocated strongly dualistic visions of Christian existence that posed a challenge to societal conventions and order. The geographical distribution of these teachers and their followers suggests some popularity of this dualistic ideology among early believers. This dualistic ideology was exacerbated by the tendencies of the philosophical thought of the day. The Church at large primarily encountered this dualistic tendency in what we know as Gnosticism.

Need for a measuring rod and a regulatory rule—In addition, the challenges presented by Marcionism and Montanism lead to the recognition of the need for a measuring rod for faith’s sources (canon). Marcionism pressed the Church in the need to determine the authoritative New Testament books and in coming to an understanding of the position of the Old Testament in the Christian canon. Montanism underlined the need to do this as a regulatory rule of faith—a base line from which to judge “the winds of the Spirit” claimed to be authoritative by flamboyant and charismatic preachers.

§1-133. Gnosticism—Gnosticism is a catch-all term for sects that were based on a sharp distinction between the spiritual and the physical realms. The spiritual was good, the physical evil and unredeemable. There might have been some Gnostic tendencies in the first century, but it was in the second and third centuries that Gnosticism reached its greatest influence. Gnostic sects of particular influence were Valentinism and Marcionism.

Secret knowledge—Gnosticism was a vast and amorphous movement existing within and without Christianity. Its name is derived from the Greek *gnosis*, which means knowledge. Gnostics asserted that they possessed a special, mystical knowledge, which was the secret key to salvation. Gnostics believed that all matter was evil, or at best unreal. Humans were part of eternal spirit that had somehow been imprisoned in bodies. The Gnostics' goal was to escape from the body and this material world to which we have been exiled. This world is not our true home, but rather an obstacle to the salvation of the spirit.

Cosmology—Gnosticism believed that the world was an abortion of the spirit. The Supreme Being had no intention of creating a material world, only a spiritual one. Numerous spiritual beings were created, standing before ultimate reality. One of these realities fell into error and created this material world. However, since this world was made by a spiritual being, there are still “sparks of the spirit” in it. These have been imprisoned in bodies and must be liberated by *gnosis* or knowledge. To achieve that liberation, a spiritual messenger must come to this world to awaken us from our spiritual confusion. This messenger brings knowledge and inspiration necessary for salvation. Beyond us are heavenly spheres, ruled by evil powers, aiming to impede our spiritual progress. To reach spiritual fullness (*pleroma*) we must break through these spheres by having secret knowledge that opens the way.

In so-called Christian Gnosticism, Christ is the teacher of this secret knowledge. Since body is evil, Gnostics denied that Christ had a body. Some said that he only appeared to have body. Others distinguished the heavenly Christ from the earthly Jesus. Some said Jesus had a spiritual body, fundamentally different than the evil prisons we call bodies. These ideas are variations on a theme of denying Jesus' physicality called docetism (from the Greek *dokeo* = to seem, to appear).

The enlightenment necessary for the salvation of the spirit came by imparting esoteric knowledge of secret initiation ceremonies known only to the Gnostics. Gnostics divided humanity into three categories: the hylic (those lost in materiality), the pneumatic (those who are self-aware), and the psychic (those who can choose either way). The spiritual Gnostics saw themselves as superior to regular members of the Christian community, who were enmeshed in materiality (hylic). Gnostics emphasized the destiny of the individual over the survival of the community. Their literature also exhibited hostility towards the institutional Church, which cultivated community but was lost in ignorance and materiality.

Ethics—The Gnostic attitude towards the physical body led to two very different ethical responses. Most Gnostics declared that we must control our bodies and not surrender to their evil urges. However, there were others who taught that since the spirit is good and cannot ultimately be destroyed then we can leave the body to its own devices and let it follow the guidance of its own passions. Since matter doesn't matter, why not enjoy your matter. The mindset led to deplorable conduct and the complete disregard for Christian ethics in certain circles. Nevertheless, the spiritual ones claimed to be righteous, irrespective of their behavior.

Inroads—The discovery of a collection of Coptic compositions at Nag Hammadi in Egypt confirmed reports of ecclesiastical writers referring to Gnostic teachers such as Valentinus in Rome (circa 135) and Basilides in Egypt (circa 135). Gnostics made inroads among the intellectual elites and among women. Women had the prominence in Gnostic circles that they lacked in society at large. This may have contributed to women's shrinking role in the second century Church compared to that of the first century.

Christian leaders vigorously opposed Gnosticism for they saw it denying crucial Christian tenets such as creation, the incarnation, the death of Jesus by crucifixion, and the resurrection to name just a few.

The Creedal formulations of the 4th and 5th centuries took direct aim at Gnosticism. Those drawn to Gnosticism tended to find their way into Manichaeism. Versions of Gnosticism endured into the medieval period, most notably in the 13th century Albigensians.

Key elements of the system include:

- Dualistic—Good/evil antagonism fundamentally played out between spirit and matter.
- The soul is a fragment of the divine that has tragically been separated from its source and trapped in the darkness of the body where it forgets its origins and destiny and falls into the stupor of ignorance.
- Jesus is the revealer who comes from the light and announces to the soul its origins and identity. Saving knowledge (*gnosis*) is a form of self-realization—where one is from, who one truly is, and where one is destined to return.
- Secret wisdom was needed, which suggested that preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the normal functioning of the Church was inadequate.
- The way back to the light is through liberation from the body and its physical entanglements.

§1-134—Valentinian Gnosticism—Valentinism was a school founded by Valentinus, an Egyptian who came to Rome in the 130s. According to Tertullian, he was a candidate to be bishop of Rome and founded the Gnostic sect named for him after he was defeated.

All forms of Gnosticism start with a false cosmology. In the Valentinian sect, spiritual reality (*pleroma*=Greek for “fullness”) emanates from the supreme God in various levels (eons), each becoming less and less spiritual the farther they get from the source, the supreme God. Valentinian sect affirmed thirty such eons, whereas others affirmed as many as 365 such eons. The lowest eon (*sophia*) fell away from source altogether and gave birth to an evil god, the Demiurge, who created the physical world. The Demiurge, the god of the Old Testament and of the physical world, is evil. The supreme God, the god of the New Testament and the spiritual world, is good. This cosmology precedes the biblical data. All sects of Gnosticism replace the one supreme God with a plethora of spiritual levels. The downward movement in this conception of things moved in the physical direction (Incarnation); the upper movement toward the supreme God was achieved through secret knowledge (*gnosis*). Salvation was gained through secret knowledge and was self-actualizing. Humanity was divided into rigid categories—*pneumatics, psychics, and hylies*. The Church fathers Irenaeus (second century) and Tertullian (third century) wrote primarily against the Valentinian form of Gnosticism.

§1-135. Marcionism—This “ism” is named after Marcion, a presbyter at Rome circa 140. He was the son of the bishop of Sinope, a town on the southern coast of the Black Sea. He grew up in the faith but developed an understanding of it that was both anti-Jewish and anti-material. He went to Rome and gathered a following before he was excommunicated in 144 because his teaching contradicted fundamental points of Christian faith. He returned to the Anatolia region in Turkey and developed a network of churches that lasted for several centuries.

Marcion believed that God and father of Jesus was not the same as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. It was Yahweh that made this evil world and placed us in it. The Father’s purpose was only a spiritual world. The Hebrew Scriptures are inspired by Yahweh, not the Supreme Father. Yahweh is an arbitrary god, choosing a particular people above all the rest. He is also vindictive and cruel in

punishing those who disobey him and his arbitrary rules. The Father of Jesus and of true believers is not vindictive but loving. He is not a God of arbitrary rules that seeks slavish obedience, but one of love and compassion.

Marcion was vehemently anti-Semitic, rejected the Old Testament, and affirmed only a rump of the New Testament, consisting of the gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles with most of the Old Testament references expunged. Jesus was an emissary of the true God (the Father) and only seemed to be a man (a form of Docetism). He was the revelation of the God of love and redemption, not the predicted Messiah of the Old Testament. Jesus was not really born of Mary, since that would have made him subject to Yahweh. Rather, he appeared a grown man during the reign of Tiberius and his body was not made of material flesh. He only seemed to be material, suffer and die, and be raised from the dead. The good heavenly Father will not judge us since he is supremely loving and forgiving.

The original disciples had Judaized the message, so the God of love called Paul to restore the true gospel. However, Paul's epistles were interpolated by the Judaizing element, so Marcion had to restore the true Pauline message. Marcion rejected the Old Testament and issued his own version of the New Testament. That consisted of ten of Paul's letters, excluding the Pastorals, and an edited version of Luke's Gospel.

Marcion shared many similarities to Gnostics. However, he rejected their speculative wisdom, emphasized the organizational Church, and focused on accepted written revelation (his own) rather than secret ceremonies. In some ways, Marcion was a greater threat than Gnosticism because of his organizational abilities. He organized a church with its own bishops and its own scriptures. For many years, particularly in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, the Marcionite churches achieved a measure of success. His communities were strongly ascetical in behavior. Virginitiy and strict fasting regiments were deemed essential to the freedom of the spirit.

Key elements include:

- Marcion rejected God of the Old Testament. He taught there were two gods—one arbitrary, unjust, angry, barbaric, the god of the Old Testament, and the other good, kind, and loving—revealed by Christ.
- He was docetic, meaning that he believed Christ only appeared to have a human body.
- He believed in the material world and that humans are part of the material of it and not just spiritual strangers imprisoned in it. While he was certainly dualistic, it was a dualism somewhat different from other Gnostics.
- Marcion's canon, basically ten of Paul's letters and an edited version of Luke's gospel, was the impetus for the gradual development of the canon of Scripture.

§1-136. Montanism—The “New Prophecy” or Montanist movement was a version of radical Christianity that emphasized the manifest evidence of the Holy Spirit. It was part of the “signs and wonders” movement of the age. It began in either 156-157 or 172 and claimed the outpouring of the Spirit on its founder, Montanus, and his two assistants, Prisca and Maximilla, in the region of Phrygia in modern day Turkey. They claimed to be the mediums of a new era of divine revelation, which was delivered through their ecstatic prophesies.

They insisted that all Christian life should be focused and organized around the expectation of Christ's return. Their prophecies did not deviate from the church's teaching on God or salvation but were

fundamentally ethical, focusing on how Christians should live as they awaited the near return of Christ. They attracted many zealous believers (including Tertullian in 206-207) because of their strong morality, their dedication to prayer and fasting, and their fervent spirituality.

There were some very real concerns in the manner of their prophesying—

- They prophesied in the first person, blurring the line between the Holy Spirit and themselves.
- They exercised authority because of their charisma without corresponding position in church structures. In places where the office of bishop was growing central, the Montanists were roundly condemned. In places, where the bishop's authority was not so central (North Africa), they were regarded more like a renewal grouping in the greater church.
- Their followers looked exclusively to them for guidance and circulated their prophecies widely. Members of the movement deemed themselves “pneumatics” (spiritual people) while outsiders were “psychics” (only natural people). The impulse towards ecstatic utterance extended a theme seen in Acts and in the epistles.

Conventions challenged—The movement explicitly challenged conventional societal order by focusing on the prophetic power of celibate women that provided a radical alternative to the domestic roles expected of them at that time. Montanism was strongly ascetical. It forbade second marriages, imposed strict fasting rules, opposed lenient treatment (i.e. forgiveness) for moral failure of those within the Church, and advocated the willing acceptance of martyrdom rather than avoidance of it by flight. It was drawn to apocalyptic visions of the end times. The movement’s prediction that the “New Jerusalem” would appear in a village in modern day Turkey at a particular time hastened its decline when the prediction wasn’t realized.

Tertullian was the movement’s most famous convert. He was drawn by the group’s moral rigor. Tertullian justified the New Prophecy as an example of John 16:12-13: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” The Holy Spirit had further truth to bestow.

The Montanist movement was condemned by various Asian synods before 200 and by Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome, in 217. Medieval mystics (Joachim of Fiore and several female mystics) would make appeals to a new age of the Spirit akin to the Montanists.

Key elements include:

- Flamboyant preaching style appealed to age’s emphasis on rhetoric.
- Imminent eschatology—Christ would soon return (Montanus even picked the area—Phrygia in modern-day Turkey).
- Advocated moral rigor for the purity of the Church, which turned harshly judgmental.
- New personal revelation in addition to the Scripture. The movement’s emphasis on flamboyant prophecy implied a persistent addition to the truth with new prophecy.

D. Early Faith and Practice

§1-141. In general; Ways of “being religious”—The faith and practice of the early believers did not

arise in a cultural void. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, there were four ways of “being religious” in the Greco-Roman and surrounding cultures which found equivalent expression in early Christianity: (1) way of participating in divine benefits; (2) way of stabilizing the world; (3) way of transcending the world; and (4) the way of moral transformation.

The way of participating in divine benefits was by far the most common way of being religious among pagans. Christians who followed in this mode emphasized the presence of divine power in the empirical realm. These were the ancient “signs and wonders” people, emphasizing healings, prophecies, and even martyrdom.

The way of stabilizing the world expressed itself in festivals, feasts, and other ritual practices. Among the pagans, there were those like the philosopher Plutarch who insisted on a link between authentic religion and true civilization, a link between city “of gods and men”. Orthodoxy champions like Irenaeus and Tertullian, who patrolled the boundaries of right belief and emphasized community and institutional practice, were Christian equivalents.

The way of transcending the world was found in the dualistic spiritual literature of the Greco-Roman world. Forms of dualism appear among such so-called Christian groups as Marcionism and Gnosticism, emphasizing individual enlightenment and despising material expressions of religion.

The way of moral transformation was exemplified by Greco-Roman moralists like the Stoics and the writer Epictetus. Epictetus did not despise manifestations of divine power in the material world but was more interested in how divine power transformed the dispositions and behavior of individuals. In early Christian circles, this way of being spiritual emphasized the connection between right thinking and right acting.

The early Church developed in this societal backdrop. The early Christians did not merely follow the cultural practice of the day. To the contrary, they displayed many counter-cultural tendencies. However, their cultural background affected their developing idea of what “being spiritual” meant.

1. Worship of the Early Church

§1-142. In general; Lord’s day—The early church saw itself as forming a new kind of society within society in keeping with a complete allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jewish worship patterns based on the weekly Sabbath observance and the sacred calendar through the year were altered. The event that drove these alterations in worship was the resurrection of Jesus Christ, driving new concepts of sacred time, actions, words, and space.

The second century writing, the *Didache*, stressed the centrality of Sunday worship. Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 strongly suggest that this was the common practice and that the practice developed very early on. Christians shifted the day of worship, refocusing the weekly rhythm or worship on the resurrection rather than on God’s provision in creation and the Exodus that framed Jewish practice. The *Didache* also enjoined regular weekly fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays and thrice daily prayer citing the Lord’s prayer.

According to Pliny the Younger in his correspondence to the Emperor Trajan, the early believers regularly met early in the morning to worship Christ and then assembled again later in the day to share a meal. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 indicates that the believers at Corinth regularly met for a communal meal which included the observance of the Lord’s Supper. It wasn’t until the second century, that the common meal was set aside, perhaps out of fear of persecution, to quell rumors of “love feasts” with

immoral overtones, or simply for logistical reasons.

§1-143. Elements of weekly worship—The purpose of worship was not so much to repent or be made aware of the magnitude of their sins, albeit that need was there, but to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of redemption, of which that resurrection was a seal. Easter, not Good Friday, was the focus. The dominant influences were the synagogue experience and the model of the Upper Room when Christ celebrated the Passover with his disciples. The Word preached, sacraments administered, and voices lifted in prayer and song were the focal elements of Christian worship from the beginning.

Order of worship services evolved over time. The following elements were typical:

- Entrance rites with singing of psalms. The early Christians sang from the Psalter and New Testament hymns relating to Christ's birth and life. One of the oldest composed hymns of which we know dates to Clement of Alexandria (202).
- Lessons from Scripture were interspersed with the singing of psalms. These readings were a primary source of hearing God's Word for the early believers. Set readings for a given Sunday date to the 4th century.
- Homilies or sermons were usually short expositions on the reading. At first, preaching was open to all who could speak. Then it gradually became restricted to the clergy. Only after the Protestant Reformation did the sermon become the centerpiece of worship for many believers.
- Confession of sin was a regular element of early worship.
- The Eucharist was celebrated regularly, possible at every service. Throughout its history, the Church has seen communion as its highest act of worship. The tone of the early Eucharistic observation was celebratory.
- Offerings were taken to cover expenses and to assist orphans, widows, and the poor.
- Prayers of offertory and doxology arose very early. The typical public posture for prayer was standing with outstretched arms.
- The service concluded with a benediction and the kiss of peace.

Fast days—By the early fourth century, believers prepared for weekly worship by observing regular days of fasting and prayer. For many, Wednesdays and Fridays were common days set aside to remember Christ's suffering.

§1-144. Sacramental practice—Over time, the sacraments came to be understood as special means by which grace became available to people. The early Church focused on two sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist. These ancient rituals were celebrated from the earliest days of the Christian community and were connected to entry into the community.

Baptism—For the early Christians, Baptism was understood as the participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. In the early going (first to the third centuries), the most common mode of baptism was full immersion and was usually performed on adult converts. Infant baptism seemed to be practiced by the third century, for Tertullian of North Africa argued against it, while Cyprian, bishop of

Carthage, described it in terms that seemed to suggest that it was growing relatively common.

A third century document, the *On the Apostolic Tradition* (ascribed to Hippolytus, bishop of Rome) described several questions that would be put to the converts being baptized. Following baptism, the new baptized member would be anointed with oil, symbolic of the reception of the Holy Spirit, and clothed in white garments. Baptism was to be a clear statement of identity with Christ in the life of the person baptized. However, as the centuries continued, many believers understood baptism as washing away prior, but not subsequent sin. This belief caused numerous believers, including the Emperor Constantine, to delay baptism until late in life.

In the earliest days, many were baptized as soon as they were converted. One certainly observes that pattern in the book of Acts. This facilitated participation in the community's life since early Christians seem to have required a person to be baptized to receive communion. As the Church became increasingly Gentile, the early Church required a period of preparation and instruction before Baptism. By the fourth and fifth centuries, baptismal candidates received extended periods of pre-baptismal instruction. This was the "catechumenate", which in Augustine's case, lasted three years.

The baptismal service itself included the candidates being asked to renounce all sin and confess their faith. The rite was normally done by immersion, typically three immersions, or by having the new Christian kneel in water and pour water over his or her head. After the candidates were baptized, they went in procession to the place of meeting and joined the rest of the congregation and partook in communion for the first time. The service closed with thanksgiving, a benediction, and the kiss of peace. Baptism was usually observed at Easter, Pentecost, and other major feast days.

Eucharist—The Eucharist was the other great sacred action of the early church. The Greek word means "thanksgiving" and the ceremony drew on the Old Testament Passover deliverance of the Jewish people. Jesus celebrated this meal with His disciples the night He was betrayed. The church followed this pattern, following his command to "do this in remembrance of me".

In the early Eucharistic celebrations, the emphasis was on drawing people into a deeper and more spiritually nourishing union with Christ. The Eucharist was reserved for baptized believers and seems to have been celebrated every Sunday. The service itself included the kiss of peace, an offering, and the celebration of communion with singing of psalms, thanksgiving, and a benediction.

In the second and even into the third century, the Eucharist was a celebratory meal. Various early documents (the *Didache*, Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, and *On Apostolic Tradition*) chronicle Eucharistic patterns in the early centuries, often requiring that only baptized believers be allowed to participate, emphasizing the need to confess sin prior to the celebration, and envisioning the ceremonial offering of bread and cup as a distinct part of the celebratory meal. The celebratory meal fell away as part of the tradition, possibly for the sorts of abuses Paul described in 1 Corinthians 10. The Eucharist became a part of Sunday morning worship, rather than a celebratory evening meal.

The early believers seem to emphasize what later Protestants described as the "real presence" of Christ in the elements of the Eucharist. That the elements did not merely symbolize Christ's body and blood but were His body and blood. No attempt was made to spell out the meaning of this. Roman Catholics assert that their doctrine of transubstantiation, that at the epiclesis pronounced by the priest, the elements become the body and blood of Christ, was implied in the teachings of the early church. Protestants see a significant shift in the early church's ambiguous affirmation of the "real presence" and the medieval church's far more doctrinaire articulation of transubstantiation.

Pause and ponder—Protestants regard the preaching of the Word as the centerpiece of Christian worship for good reason. However, by the second century, the early church came to regard the Eucharist as a central aspect of worship, celebrated almost every time they gathered. That centrality was unchallenged for over a millennium until the time of the Reformation. Protestants reacted against the medieval sacramental system as celebrated and symbolized by the Catholic Mass centered on an understanding of the Eucharist in transubstantiation which buttressed unquestioned ecclesiastical deference. Should we reflect again on the place of sacred action in modern worship? Have we unduly marginalized the celebration of the Lord's Supper? Further, in the increasing non-liturgical patterns of modern worship, can we grant that more formal worship and prayer may indeed be more than just going through the motions? May liturgical reflection enrich rather than enervate?

Later developments—In discussions of early Church sacramental practice, Roman Catholic commentators will speak of the idea of the sanctification of time and suggest that the lives of individual Christians were marked by the beginnings of a cradle to grave sacramental system. In this discussion, the most ancient rituals, Baptism and the Eucharist, were connected to entry into the Christian community. Confirmation marked a growth in maturity. Penance addressed the problem of sin during adult life. Ordination marked those serving in the priesthood and the lesser orders—porter, lector, acolyte, exorcist and the two major subordinate—deacon and subdeacon. The last sacraments to come into the scene of the sacramental system were Matrimony and Extreme Unction.

However, there is little or no evidence of an early development of this elaborate sacramental system. The early Church practice was much simpler. The elaboration of sacramental practice was a medieval phenomenon.

§1-145. Divided worship—With the development of the sacramental practice described above, the practice of divided services became common from the mid-2nd century until the end of the 5th century. The service began with all worshipping together. At a certain point before communion, catechumens and others not baptized and those under some penitential discipline were required to depart from the service. The worship continued with the celebration of communion and the benediction. The divided service was gradually phased out and was abandoned by the 5th century with the ascendancy of the practice of infant baptism.

§1-146. Space, movement, and garb—Private homes were the common places of worship in the first two centuries. Later, as congregations grew, some houses were devoted exclusively to worship. Excavations at *Dura-Europos* in Syria, built around 250, indicate that this was a private dwelling that was converted into a church. It wasn't until Constantine's day that the Church regularly met outside private homes for services. In the fourth century, church building exploded.

In addition, a custom developed early on to gather at the tombs of believers. This was largely the function of the catacombs in the environs of Rome. Churches could not own property, but funeral societies were allowed. As churches grew, these societal holdings served as a venue of worship for the larger community. In addition, often the heroes of the faith were buried in these graves. The Christians were inspired by their lives and even more, seeing themselves as joining together with Jesus in their midst but also with their ancestors in the faith.

Worship was fitted to these smaller spaces. With the establishment of the Christian religion by Constantine and his successors, imperial sponsorship and state construction of great basilicas for Christian worship profoundly affected how Christians worshiped. Christian liturgy in these large public spaces began to resemble Greco-Roman civic religion functions previously sponsored by wealthy patrons in the cities of the Empire.

Movement in worship became a prominent feature of imperial Christian worship. Processing in the large basilicas became common as did worship involving processions in stages (e.g. the stations of the cross). In Rome, “station churches” became stopping places for liturgical processions through the city. Pilgrimages to the tombs of the martyrs, to places of the desert fathers, and to the Holy Land became common.

Garments and adornment—An emphasis on the sacrificial aspects of the Eucharist came to the fore (with a corresponding loss of its sense as a fellowship meal) as well as the use of festivals, richly ornamented garments, open air processions, elaborate service rituals (bowing, genuflecting, kneeling, and various arm gestures), and the use of musical chants and formal prayers. Art and adornment began to populate Christian buildings focused on Christian themes. Statuary portraying biblical figures replaced that of pagan art portraying the gods and frescoes, mosaics, and funeral art displaying Christian themes replaced that portraying pagan mythological themes.

§1-147. Liturgical calendar—In the beginning, the Church calendar was simple, basically a weekly calendar. Sunday was the day of worship; Wednesday and Fridays were common days of fasting. Sunday was recognized as an imperial holiday in 321. The early church focused on weekly and to a lesser extent daily rhythms celebrating Christ's life and death around His first coming.

Seasonal rhythms through the year were slow to emerge. Christians celebrated the Jewish festival of Pentecost from early days because it coincided what many regarded as the birth of the church. The Council of Nicaea in the fourth century (325) standardized the date for celebrating Easter which enhanced its celebration in the annual calendar along with times of reflection and repentance in the weeks leading up to it that we call “Lent” today. The earliest feast day in connection with Jesus’ birth was January 6, Epiphany, the day of his manifestation. Later, particularly in the Latin West, December 25 began to take its place. That day was originally the pagan solstice, a popular pagan holiday established by the Emperor Aurelian in 274. After Constantine, this pagan holiday was preempted by the celebration of Christmas, the preparatory period of Advent, as well as the Christmas season extending to the feast of the Epiphany.

The liturgical calendar grew ever more elaborate, serving to bring the biblical past into the present by celebrating moments in salvation history as well as the life of Christ. In addition to Sunday, Easter and Lent, Christmas and Advent, the Church began to celebrate other significant occasions, including the lives of saints. “Saint” took on a very different meaning than in the New Testament and was applied first the martyrs and then the confessors of the faith. A rhythm of “holy days” and “ordinary time” began to develop in the life of the Church.

§1-148. Marian devotion—Commonly held teachings of Mariology began with her function as the mother of God (*theotokos*) and have grown progressively more exalted through the centuries. Since she enabled the Savior to be born, she was seen as having a position more exalted than any other creature.

Mariologists commonly refer to her as the Queen of Heaven. They also see her as essential to the final spiritual perfection of all creation and thus Mother of God's creatures. Her involvement in salvation makes her co-redemptrix with her Son. While Jesus offered his sinless person to atone for humanity's transgressions, Mary, whose will was harmonious with her Son's, offered her prayers. Her mediatorial intercession was involved in the atonement, even though Christ's sacrifice was primary and sufficient. Her mediatorial role continues with her present intercession for sinners.

Mary's exalted role has implications according to Mariologists. If she had ever been stained by sin, she would have been unfit to bear the Lord. Thus, she must have been "immaculate" from the instance she was conceived by her mother. In addition, she was immune from sin throughout her life and was perpetually a virgin. Finally, Mariologists teach that at her death, Mary was assumed bodily into heaven.

Critique—Evangelical Protestants demur at almost all of this. Scripture does not mention her immaculate conception or her bodily assumption. The Gospel accounts do not present Mary as sinless and as continuously in accord with Christ's will. Her perpetual virginity is challenged by references to Jesus' siblings (Mark 3:31; 6:3; Jn. 2:12; 7:1-10; Acts 1:14; Gal. 1:19). Protestants argue that the excesses of Marian devotion—her roles as Mother of God's creatures, co-redemptrix, intercessor for the people of God, her immaculate conception, her sinless "fullness of grace", and her Assumption, arise from an overestimation of the human role in redemption.

Historicity—History becomes something of a battleground in recounting the rise of Marian devotion. Mariological extrapolations have occurred over a number of centuries, and it is difficult to understand precisely the degree of devotion accorded to Mary by the early Church. However, aspects of Marian devotion did begin early in the Church's history. The term mother of God (*theotokos*) was first used in reference to her in 320, shortly after Constantine's ascension to the throne, and was formally approved by the Council of Ephesus in 431. Irenaeus, a second century Church father, seems to imply a role for Mary in redemption when he contrasted Eve's disobedience, which brought humanity's downfall, with Mary's obedience which "became the cause of salvation both for herself and the human race". Her perpetual virginity was generally accepted by Augustine's time in the fifth century.

§1-149. Veneration of the saints—Veneration of the saints began as recognition of early martyrs at whose graves Christians conducted memorial services to honor the deceased. By the fourth century, Christians similarly honored those who suffered persecution short of death, called confessors. Gradually, the term "saint" moved from referring to any believer to references to martyrs, confessors, and others regarded as particularly holy people. The honor accorded these people grew from respectful memory and imitation of their virtues to a devotion which included the use of images and relics, the belief that relics connected with saints could perform miracles, processions and pilgrimages in their honor, dedication of certain days to individual saints, and the belief that these saints could intercede for living believers. Later, the idea that the saints contributed to a treasury of surplus merit that could be drawn on for those coming after them became commonly believed. That served as the conceptual basis for several penitential practices that prompted the Reformation.

This veneration grew over time and is difficult to date with any certainty. The earliest Christians honored their dead based on general repute. After the third century, bishops began to supervise the cult of the saints within their dioceses. It wasn't until the Middle Ages, that central ecclesiastical authorities (the papacy in Roman Catholicism and synods in Orthodoxy) assumed the power to designate particular people as saints. That process also grew more elaborate over time and evolved into two

general stages: (1) beatification, which confirms the deceased person reigns with Christ and merits local devotion, and (2) canonization, which confers “sainthood” and prescribes veneration by all the faithful.

Critique and response—Evangelicals criticize this practice as biblically unwarranted, as mimicking pagan practices, and as potentially blasphemous, extending the worship due solely to God to human beings. Defenders have distinguished between veneration of the saints and worship of God, following Augustine’s original distinction between *dulia* and *latria*. *Latria* (worship) belongs to deity alone (Mt. 4:10). *Dulia* (honor or veneration) may be merited by people due to their piety and deeds. In venerating the pious, so the argument goes, one is glorifying God’s grace on display in the person’s life and work.

2. Other Practices

§1-151. In general—The early Christians were mostly composed of humble folk for whom the fact of their adoption as heirs of the King of kings was a source of great joy. Their daily life was a grind and a drab routine common to the poor in every society. However, they rejoiced in the hope of a new light which would destroy the dark injustice and idolatry of their society. Their instruction and community practices highlighted this hope and were intended to solidify their faith.

§1-152. Instruction in the faith—In the early Church, most of what was written addressed concrete problems or specific issues or needs. This was true of early teaching. In the late first and early second centuries, Christian leaders, in letters very much akin to Paul’s epistles, addressed issues and concerns of the day to Christian communities. Examples include the *First Letter of Clement* (of Rome, circa 95) and Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* (circa 130). *The Shepherd of Hermas*, written by a brother of the bishop of Rome in the middle of the second century, deals with the issue of the forgiveness of sins after Baptism.

Instructional manuals—Soon instruction began to be more systematic, albeit geared to practical concerns. There appeared several Church manuals designed for the instruction of Church members in common practices and beliefs. One of the earliest works is the *Didache* or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, a teaching manual in use in Syria in the early 2nd century. This was not actually written by the apostles but by an anonymous author or authors and provides guidelines for Christian living and worship, including baptismal and Eucharistic practice, fasting and prayer, and general instruction in the faith (see Richardson, 174-176).

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, which dates to the 3rd century, provided more elaborate instruction. There are guidelines for the laity concerning the comportment of spouses in terms of clothing and ornamentation and general direction about books to read or to avoid. There are sections instructing the clergy concerning education, money and worldliness, and food and clothing. Throughout there is counsel urging simplicity of lifestyle. There is instruction to those baptizing and being baptized, guidance for life in community, for the treatment of orphans, for parental responsibilities and the discipline of children. Ordination rites are addressed with instructions and prayers to be used in the ceremonies.

Practical emphasis—These early writings didn’t seek to expound on the totality of Christian doctrine but addressed pressing and practical needs. However, as the second century ended and the third century opened, the speculations of heresy required the Church to respond more systematically. This response

can be representatively seen in the works of apologists and early Christian writers (see §1-191 et seq.).

§1-153. Discipline and penitential practices—Discipline matters were taken very seriously and passages such as Matthew 18 were rigorously applied. Purposes were twofold: preservation of Church unity and the restoration to spiritual health of fallen Christians. The ultimate sanction was excommunication from the Church and that was understood as dire indeed. Cyprian, an influential 3rd century bishop of Carthage, echoed the sentiments of many when he said that there was no salvation outside of the Church.

Penance—Means of restoration was the practice of penance, a practice that over time evolved into a sacrament. The early stages in the process included weepers, hearers, kneelers, and standers. These stages were quite formal. The service of reconciliation involved a public confession after suitable penitential sorrow and satisfaction followed by a reception back into the Church and the celebration of the Eucharist.

There were clashing perspectives about this in the early Church. The Montanists, Novatians, and Donatists were the hard-liners, and they initiated heated controversies over disciplinary matters. Most believers were moderates and a more forgiving culture became the emerging mainstream.

§1-154. Evangelism and missions—There was significant growth in the first centuries of the early Church. Evangelism did not take place in church services. The early Church knew nothing of evangelistic outreach and revival meetings. Their worship met in smaller places (individual homes) and was centered on communion, and only baptized believers were admitted to this celebration. Evangelism took place in the kitchens of homes and in the shops and markets of communities. There were some famous teachers, like Justin Martyr and Origen, who attracted and converted some members of the pagan intelligentsia, but most converts were won by ordinary, anonymous Christians who led others to the faith.

Miracle workers—Some early Christians were reputed to be “miracle workers”, who won some converts attracted by their notoriety. The most famous of these was *Gregory Thaumaturgus*. He was bishop of Neo-Caesarea in the Pontus, who substituted Christian festivals for old pagan ones and made sure Christian celebrations outdid the others. Miracle-working was a major part of this.

Urban growth—It is noteworthy that Christian witness in these early centuries spread mainly in the cities. The faith penetrated the rural areas of the Empire slowly and with considerable difficulty. By 100, some estimate that two-thirds of the port cities of the Empire had a church, as did a quarter of inland cities. By 180, those numbers increased to almost ninety percent and two-thirds, respectively.

§1-155. Architecture, music, and art—Christian art began to develop as soon as the Christians had their own cemeteries (the catacombs) and their own church buildings. The earliest art was simple frescoes on walls of buildings and carved sarcophagi (stone coffins) where some wealthier Christians were buried. Communion was the central act of worship and scenes and symbols referring to communion are most common. The shepherd and sheep are favorite symbols. Fish appear both in reference to one of Jesus’ most famous miracles and because the Greek word for fish (*ichthus*--ἰχθύς) was used as an acrostic for the faith:

- Ἰ σόύς = Jesus

- χ ρῑστός = Christ
- φ έός = God
- ύ ἱός = Son
- [ς] ατήρ = Savior

Christian art in the early centuries also referred to various biblical episodes. Generally, the art was very simple, alluding to symbols and themes more than realistically portraying them.

With the advent of Constantine and imperial favor, church building exploded and churches grew much larger and much more ornate. Most church buildings followed the basic rectangular plan of the basilica. These were public buildings whose main part was a great room divided lengthwise into naves by two or more rows of columns. Christian basilicas had three main parts: the atrium or entryway usually with a fountain in the middle, the naves which constituted the main part of the building, and the sanctuary at the end of the main nave. In the middle of the sanctuary was an altar and near it was space reserved for choirs or other singers. The back wall of the sanctuary was often semi-circular forming the apse, a concave space behind the altar.

The most characteristic form of Christian art in this period was the mosaic. Walls were covered with pictures made of small pieces of glass, stone, or porcelain. Near the basilica was the baptistery, a separate building large enough to accommodate several dozen people. The main feature was at the center, a baptismal pool, into which one descending by a series of steps. It was here that baptisms, normally by immersion, were celebrated.

§1-156. Signs and wonders—In the early centuries, there were martyrs, confessors, apologists, and more. The deeply experiential character of the Christian faith manifested itself in extreme forms, which resembled Greco-Roman religion and threatened the good order within Christianity itself. Many of the early Christians were drawn to apocryphal gospels and acts of outstanding believers focusing on miracles and even miracle contests. These phenomena emphasized an element found in the Gospels and in Acts—divine power working in visible ways. A number of these pseudo-gospel narratives and pseudonymous acts of various apostles appear which highlight this tendency. The infancy gospels of Thomas and James focus exclusively on the birth and childhood of Jesus and emphasize wonder-working and the physical purity of the body. James emphasizes Mary’s perpetual virginity while Thomas records how the child Jesus was the source of cure and blessing to family and neighbors. The Acts of Paul, Andrew, John, Peter, and Thomas (all composed in the 2nd and 3rd centuries) focus almost exclusively on miracles performed by the apostles.

These narratives convey a sense of Christianity as a movement that exercises supernatural power and poses a radical threat to conventional mores. Household order is threatened by demands of purity focused on virginity and singleness. The Empire’s order seemed threatened by aggressive assertions of God’s sovereignty. Many of these people were assured that there was an unavoidable clash between the goals of the Roman Empire and the divine purpose, regardless of the arguments of the apologists. More cultured and philosophical believers tended to spiritualize Christian hope, but the radical element held to a vision of the Kingdom that would supplant this present order and would do it soon.

The radical phenomena continued to insist on a key element of early Christianity, personal religious experience of various kinds. They also challenged the unity of the Church. The Church would eventually act, exposing some radical manifestations (Gnosticism) and domesticating others (miracle-

working and glorying in martyrdom).

E. Rise of Opposition and Persecution

§1-161. In general; Antecedents to persecution—There were social, political, and religious issues involved in the development of a persecuting mindset. The Roman Empire was concerned above all with good order upon which the stability and prosperity of the Empire depended. The worship of the gods was understood as an inherent and necessary part of such world maintenance. Everyone's participation in the "city of gods and men" was a fundamental premise of ancient politics. A denial of the gods and a withdrawal from political involvement represented a challenge to good order and a threat to society. Participation in the Empire's benefits required at least the tacit recognition of the Empire's gods.

Subversive—Cults that refused to do this most rudimentary obligation were seen as dangerously subversive. Even cults which enjoyed the Empire's official recognition could be the target of local resentment and harassment. Ancients, like moderns, were prone to fear and resent that which to them was strange. Two common examples of this were the Jews and the philosophers. Although Judaism was initially granted imperial recognition—and reciprocated by offering sacrifices and prayers for the emperor—there were instances of local persecution. Philo reports of instances of anti-Semitic riots in Alexandria requiring appeals to the emperor for assistance. Likewise, pagan philosophers who withdrew from religious practices, such as the Epicureans, were suspected of subversion.

Latent dangers—From the perspective of Christianity's eventual triumph, it is difficult for moderns to assess how problematic and dangerous life was for the early believers. They were an intentional community that drew members from both Jews and Gentiles while at odds with the customs of both larger groups and without any institutional source of support. Christians withdrew from participation in the cultic practices (festivals, processions, meals) which were regarded as essential for citizenship. After the Jewish revolt (66-70), Christian community could no longer claim the protective umbrella of being a Jewish sect. Christians lacked legitimacy, approval, or any status. Although formal state persecutions were sporadic and interspersed with long periods of neglect, there were direct attempts to suppress the Christian movement. The uncertainty of these sporadic outbreaks was a factor in the tensions Christians felt in these early centuries. Martyrdoms were not the whole story. Oppression included social ostracism, the taking of property, economic marginalization, and exile.

§1-162. Reasons for persecution

Tertullian: "If the Tiber floods, or if the Nile refuses to rise, or if the sky withholds its rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a pestilence, at once the city is raised: 'Christians to the lion!'"

Rome was largely tolerant of the religions of the peoples under her rule. The governing concern was for loyalty to the state and the avoidance of disorder of any kind. From the composition of book of Acts and following, Christian writers and apologists underlined that the faith was no danger to the functioning of the Roman state and that the believers were peaceable and orderly members of society.

Opponents—Earnest Jews were the earliest opponents of Christianity as reflected in the book of Acts. The Judaizers dogged Paul's steps throughout his missionary journeys. However, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, the chief opposition to the faith shifted to cultivated pagans. The cultured pagans claimed that Christianity was intellectually wanting, a foolish and self-contradictory faith. Celsus,

during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), wrote a refutation of the faith called *The True Word*, in which he claimed only the naïve and ignorant people of the time were becoming Christians. Cornelius Fronto joined him in describing the Christians as lacking in education and culture and as crude and ignorant. Clearly there was class prejudice here. The cultured pagan could not conceive of the possibility that this Christian rabble could know truth that was hidden from them.

More than cultured prejudice—The persecutions arose over time were due to more than just cultured prejudice. Times of adversity prompted fear among the general populace and this, combined with misperceptions of Christian behavior and beliefs, led to accusations. Early Christians were particularly vulnerable to ancient suspicions. Christian understanding of holiness demanded opposition to many pagan practices. Its more egalitarian ideals threatened the stratified system of pagan patronage. The typical lines of attack included:

Disloyalty—At the heart of Roman-Christian relations was the question of religious exclusivity. The Romans, with their polytheistic and pragmatic bent, saw allegiance to the emperor as a just requirement. People could worship in any way they wanted if they went along with the sacrifices and rites prescribed by the state. Pinch an inch of incense and offer it to the emperor was hardly an overwhelming requirement in their eyes. It was a test of loyalty, that's all.

The Christians' refusal to worship the emperor's genius was the straw that broke the camel's back. Christians saw it as a matter of loyalty to Christ and the avoidance of idolatry. The Christians' refusal to comply with what the pagans saw as easy conditions drew their ire at what they characterized as Christian obstinacy. The earliest Roman sources (Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger) considered them superstitious and unusually stubborn. Emperor Marcus Aurelius found this galling.

Religious and social threats—Christians were perceived as religious and social threats. Their distinctive lifestyle rejected pagan gods and all that was routinely associated with them—temple feasts, idol meats, games, and practices that devalued human life—gladiator contests, slavery, and exposing infants. Christians remained aloof and many pagans escalated this to the charge that they were “haters of mankind”. The claim was that the worship of the Christian God destroyed the very fiber of society because those following the Christian faith abstained from most social activities, claiming that participation in them was tantamount to worshipping false gods. As for Jesus himself, it was claimed that he was a common criminal (after all he was crucified on a cross) and that he was illegitimate. He was not the Son of God, but the bastard son of a Roman soldier. Finally, to the Greek and Roman mind, the claims of the Resurrection and Christians themselves being resurrected on judgment day was the epitome of silly nonsense. Pointed and mocking questions of how this was to come about was standard pagan ridicule.

Atheism—Christians were accused of atheism because they didn't worship state gods and, at this point in their history, largely avoided images in worship. This misunderstanding opened believers to the accusation that they were bringing the displeasure of the gods on society at large. Their lack of concern with placating the vengeful loyal deities angered their pagan neighbors.

Slanderous charges—They were commonly accused of cannibalism because of wild rumors about the Eucharist. “Eating Christ's body” and “drinking his blood” gave rise to gruesome tales. Incest and sexual debauchery were rumored to be linked with their gatherings. Christians gathered weekly for “love feasts”, called one another “brother” and “sister”, and welcomed each other with the “kiss of peace”. Pagans gossiped about orgiastic celebrations with Christians eating and drinking to excess and then engaging in debauchery.

Economic threat—They were occasionally perceived as economic threats to the system of pagan

idolatry and its underpinning of local economies. This accusation was first recorded in Acts 19 with the riots at Ephesus and the arguments of Demetrius and his fellow silversmiths.

Proselytizing put-off—The proselytizing activities of the Christians put the pagan society off. Christians saw themselves as bearers of the true message and the faith tended to obliterate pagan practice. Paganism was seen as false, not just another way to worship. This mindset put a syncretistic pagan society on the defensive.

§1-163. Number and extent of persecutions—Precise details of persecution between the 1st and 4th centuries are difficult to nail down. First, all the sources are Christian, which tend to maximize state opposition and oppression. It is also difficult to sort out local or regional opposition and persecution from systemic state efforts. However, the pattern that emerges is that Christians were persecuted by state authority when some larger political concern for the security of the imperial order was at stake. Official fear was commonly behind official savagery.

Local and sporadic—Most persecutions of these were not general persecutions but scattered and sporadic ones. Local leaders and mobs took out their frustrations and imagined grievances on believers. While loss of life in these persecutions was not great by our modern experience, there were significant legal impediments to believers in various areas of life. Specifically, the emperors' edicts tended to hound Christian clergy and handicapped Christians in government and in regulated occupations.

Of the local actions taken against Christians prior to 249, four are particularly worthy of note—

- Nero's scapegoating of Christians in the aftermath of the great fire of Rome in 64;
- A local persecution by the Emperor Domitian in Anatolia in modern-day Turkey in the 90s;
- A significant and brutal persecution in Gaul by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 177;
- A persecution in north Africa by the Emperor Septimius Severus in 202-203

Severe persecutions—Severe and Empire-wide persecutions occurred in the third century under Decius in 249-251 and continued by Valerian (253-260). The most severe general persecution occurred in the fourth century under Diocletian and Galerius (303-311). Both Decius and Galerius were from Thrace (in the Balkans), as was Maximinus Thrax, a notable Christian opponent in the 230s. This was one of the most rural and thoroughly pagan areas of the Empire. Decius was acclaimed for his embodiment of the virtues of the old Roman stock and may have believed, as many did in that turbulent century, that the abandonment of the old Greco-Roman gods, as evidenced by the growth of Christianity, was responsible for the sad decline of the Empire.

§1-164. First century—Early persecutions of Christians were local and connected to emperors Nero (54-68) and Domitian (81-96). In 64, there was a great fire in Rome and local gossip laid the blame for the blaze at the emperor's doorstep. Nero blamed the Christians as a way of deflecting blame from himself. The persecution was particularly intense and savage but local and short-lived. Domitian took the claims of the emperor cult very seriously and, over the course of his reign, grew increasingly paranoid for his own safety and thus open to all sorts of accusations and suspicions. Persecutions were limited to the environs of Rome and halted with Domitian's assassination by members of his own household in 96.

§1-165. Second century—The second century affords us a clearer view of the issues involved in the persecution of Christians, the attitudes of Christians to martyrdom, and the attitudes of Roman authorities toward the new faith. This last point is particularly well illustrated by the correspondence between Emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger.

Pliny the Younger was governor of Bithynia on the northern shore of modern-day Turkey. Pagan temple business was down, and the governor received a list of names of Christians, at this point an illegal religion in the Empire. Pliny released the Christians who offered incense before the image of the emperor. He offered the recalcitrant ones three opportunities to recant and if still unyielding, threatened them with execution. Considering himself a just man, he inquired into the crimes of individual Christians other than obstinacy and not offering incense to the emperor's image. He didn't find anything of substance. The question he posed to Emperor Trajan was whether Christians should only be punished for concrete crimes or whether being Christian was itself a crime.

Trajan waffled and the initial imperial policy towards Christians reflected that. In essence, the imperial policy was not to seek out Christians, but to punish them if they were accused by known witnesses and brought before the authorities and refused to worship the emperor.

Marcus Aurelius (161-180) was one of the most enlightened men of his day with lofty ideals and yet ordered persecutions of believers. He saw them as clinging to their faith not as an outcome of reason, but of obstinacy. Early in Aurelius' reign there arose a long string of invasions, floods, epidemics, and other disasters. Among the pagans, the Christians were blamed for bringing the wrath of the gods upon the Empire. Whether Aurelius was of this mind is hard to say, but he did support the persecutions and favored the revival of the old pagan faith.

The most famous incident occurred in Lyons in Gaul. Christians were initially denied the right to visit public sites. One day a mob followed some Christians about their business, shouting and pelting them with objects. The Christians were arrested, tried, and those who refused to recant the faith, were tortured and executed.

In summary—Christians were in a precarious position throughout the second century. The general policy of the Empire was outlined by Trajan—Christians were not to be sought out, but if brought before the authorities, they must recant or be punished. This put believers at the mercy of the good will of their pagan neighbors. The task of the apologists of the age (see §1-191 et seq.) became ever more important in maintaining the good opinion of the pagan masses.

§1-166. Third century—The chief reason for Roman wariness of Christians was the perceived need to defend the integrity of the state which became increasingly fragile in the third century. Trajan's policy that Christians were to be punished only if accused and they refused to worship the emperor and the gods, in practice meant that persecutions were local and sporadic. That ended in the third century, first during the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211), but most intensely in the reigns of Decius Trajan (249-251), and Valerian (253-260).

Under Septimius Severus—Severus came to the throne after a lengthy civil war that weakened the Empire. The barbarians beyond the borders were a constant threat as were the dissident groups within the Empire. In addition, the possibility of yet more civil strife between Romans and new challengers to the throne was ever present. Severus felt the need for religious harmony within his territories. He proposed a plan to unite his subjects together in the worship of the "all conquering Sun". All gods were

to be accepted if the Sun reigned above all. The Christians and the Jews refused to yield to this syncretism. Severus decided to stop the spread of these two faiths by outlawing conversions to them, legislation in addition to Trajan's old principle. The edict went out in 202 and numerous local persecutions ensued.

Under Decius and Valerian—The rise of the Goths on the northern border of the Empire along the Danube in the 230s and beyond threatened Rome's safety. The Goths were to be a menace through the third and fourth centuries and would sack Rome itself in 410. The neglect of the gods was often assigned as the reason for the crisis. There came a new claim of loyalty from the old pantheon of classical paganism. The Emperor Decius (249-251) initiated a persecution that was intense and Empire-wide, but short-lived. Decius died in battle just two years into his reign in 251. A subsequent emperor, Valerian, picked up the persecution baton in 257, requiring Christian leaders to offer sacrifice to Roman gods and forbidding Christians to assemble in buildings or in cemeteries. In 258, the death penalty was added to the prescribed consequences of not obeying. Many bishops, including Cyprian of Carthage and Sixtus of Rome, lost their lives.

Confessors—Decius' persecution was very different than the earlier ones. His purpose was to create apostates, not martyrs. The exemplary deaths of Christians in the earlier years drew people to the faith. Decius wanted to force Christians to recant while depriving them of the opportunity for heroic witness as martyrs. He issued a decree that everyone had to offer sacrifice to the gods and burn incense before a statue of the emperor. Christians had a period of relative calm since the time of Severus some 40 years earlier and were unprepared for this new tact. This systematic oppression resulted in relatively few deaths but caused many to recant the faith through a mixture of torture, physical and economic threats and punishments, and bogus promises. Out of this, a new title of honor appeared within the Church, that of "confessor".

§1-167. Early fourth century—Diocletian (284-305) reorganized the Empire and brought a new sense of security and prosperity. The cycle of civil war ceased as did large scale incursions of the barbarians into the Empire. Diocletian's wife (Prisca) and daughter (Valeria) were supposedly Christians. It seemed that the peace of the Church was assured.

The first difficulties arose in the army. Most Church leaders and believers at the time thought that Christians should not be soldiers. In 295, a numerous Christians were condemned for refusing to join the army and others for trying to leave it. Galerius convinced Diocletian that all Christians should be expelled from the army on suspicion of disloyalty. In some places, there were attempts to force Christian soldiers to deny their faith. There were many executions, all of them in the army of the Danube under Galerius.

Diocletian, urged on by Galerius, decided to make traditional Greco-Roman religion secure and uniform throughout the Empire to help establish political unity and stability. He began in 297, by issuing decrees against the dualistic sect of the Manichaeans. In 303 and 304, he issued four decrees against Christians, attacking Christian worship, banning Christian literature, arresting Christian leaders, and requiring sacrifice offerings to the Greco-Roman gods upon pain of deportation or death. There were many executions and many attempts to encourage Christians to abandon their faith.

Imperial successors—In 305, Diocletian and his fellow Augustus, Maximilian, abdicated, and Galerius and Constantius Chlorus took the title of Augustus. Two of Galerius' underlings, Severus and Maximianus Daia, were appointed Caesars. However, the sons of the former Augusti, Constantine and Maxentius, were very popular among the legions. When Constantius died, his troops declared

Constantine as their Augustus. Meanwhile, Maxentius took Rome from Severus and Galerius was unable to quell the revolt. Diocletian refused to return as Augustus but did lead the negotiations for a new arrangement among the rivals. The final arrangement was unstable and included the appointment of a new Augustus, Licinius.

Amid this political chaos new persecutions ensued. Generally, Constantine and Maxentius in the west did not enforce the imperial decrees against the Christians and Galerius and Maximian in the east did. Finally, Galerius fell ill in 311 and, convinced that the illness was punishment from God for persecuting Christians, he grudgingly decided to change his policy.

Edict of Milan—When Galerius died, the Empire was divided between Licinius, Maximian, Constantine, and Maxentius. Constantine defeated Maxentius at the battle of Milvian Bridge outside Rome and became sole emperor of the West. On the eve of the battle, Constantine, in a dream, received a command to place a Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers and a vision appeared in the sky “in this you shall conquer”. After the battle, Constantine met Licinius in Milan, concluded an alliance with him part of which was the agreement that the persecution of Christians would stop, and their buildings, cemeteries, and other property would be returned to them. This agreement, commonly known as the Edict of Milan (313), marks the end of the early centuries of the Church and the beginning of what many describe as the Imperial Church.

§1-168. Responses to and effects of persecution—Persecution generated a variety of short-term responses from Christians—

- The celebration of martyrdom as perfect discipleship.
- The writing of apologetic literature in defense of the faith.
- Some sought secrecy and avoidance of trouble by withdrawing from society. That secrecy had a downside. It helped fuel popular rumors.
- Some probably offered the prescribed worship the Roman officials demanded, justifying this in their minds as an expression of loyalty to both Caesar and Christ.

The long-term effects were problematic. Like an abused child where early trauma continues to define later behavior, Christians tended to bear a sense of being aggrieved and to become abusive towards pagans when they later came to power. Imperial Christianity turned state instruments of persecution toward Jews, pagans, and those considered to be heretical in their teaching.

§1-169. Martyrs and confessors

Tertullian: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”

The term “martyr” means witness. The ideal of witnessing to one’s convictions even to the point of death found its perfect realization in the innocent suffering and death of Jesus. The tradition of martyrdom began with the apostles, especially Peter and Paul dying in Nero’s persecution, and Stephen who was put to death by stoning in Acts 7. In the second century, several highly visible Christian leaders bore witness in a way that glorified martyrdom. Martyrdom came to be regarded by many believers as the perfect form of discipleship. It was conforming to the pattern of suffering for others in witness to God’s truth that was established by Jesus. Those who confessed Christ in the face of persecution, torture, and the threat of death but didn’t die were accorded a second rank of honor as

witnesses and came to be known as “confessors”.

§1-170. Outstanding examples

Polycarp: “For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?”

Ignatius of Antioch (107) was condemned as a recalcitrant Christian and sentenced to death in Rome. On his way to the capital, he wrote seven letters to various churches. There was no general persecution of Christians at this time, but those accused by known witnesses and refusing to worship the emperor were subject to punishment, including capital punishment. In his letters to the churches (particularly to Smyrna), Ignatius wrote of his upcoming martyrdom. His goal was to be with his Lord and Savior and his purpose was to be an imitator of the passion of his Lord. A death met with divinely sustained courage would be a witness to the Lord of glory.

Polycarp (155)—While little is known of the actual martyrdom of Ignatius, much is known of his younger colleague, Polycarp, martyred in 155. Again, Trajan’s policy was still in effect. Christians were not to be sought out, but if accused and they refused to worship the emperor and the gods, they must be punished (by death). Again and again, the Roman proconsul attempted to persuade Polycarp to avoid martyrdom by worshipping the gods. Polycarp made a reply for the ages: “For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?” Those early Christians did not think that martyrdom was something one chose, but something for which one was chosen by God. Those so chosen were strengthened by Christ who suffered with them and for that reason they were able to stand firm.

Justin Martyr (circa 165)—Justin was perhaps the best-known Christian scholar of the time and a founder of a school at Rome. He was martyred during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

Felicitas (203)—Felicitas was a consecrated widow who devoted all her time to Church work and was supported by the Church. She and her seven sons were accused by pagan priests of being Christians. They stood firm and were executed in the persecution of Septimius Severus.

Origen’s father (early 200s)—The death of the father of Origen, was part of a persecution under Septimius Severus, which was particularly severe in North Africa and Egypt. Origen, the famous Alexandrian theologian and writer, then in his teens, was only prevented from identifying himself as an earnest Christian to the searching authorities by his resourceful mother, who hid all his clothes. Origen decided that mooning everyone for Jesus was less than an optimal testimony. Many years later, Origen wrote *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, which made the case that the death of the martyr is the closest possible conformity to the witness of Christ.

Cyprian (258)—The influential bishop of Carthage was beheaded in 258 during the persecution under Valerian.

§1-171. Legacy of martyrs and confessors—Martyrs and confessors were the heroes of the age of persecution. Their memory was honored, and believers treasured the stories of their heroism. The courage of the martyrs and confessors was noted by friend and foe alike. A theology of martyrdom and a cult practice of venerating martyrs arose. There was the sense of a special grace involved and that martyrs participated in the suffering of Christ (Rom 8:17; Phil 3:10).

Pause and Ponder—The example of the martyrs causes us to rethink our notions of discipleship. Faithful service is wonderful, but faithful unto death? Would I follow Him then? Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words in *The Cost of Discipleship* are apropos: “Jesus Christ invites His disciple to come and die.” That statement may play out metaphorically or literally in the lives of disciples. Several thousands died physically in the Roman persecutions. Today, hundreds of thousands die each year for their faith.

F. Problem of the Lapsed

§1-181. In general—It must be remembered that this was a time when Christians were under the persistent threat of persecution. The focus of the early Montanists on advocating the willing acceptance of martyrdom rather than avoidance of it by flight and on opposing the lenient treatment (i.e. forgiveness) for moral failure of those within the Church, highlights one of the great questions before the Church in that day. What was the Church to do with those who had weakened in one way or another during the persecution? In what manner should they be readmitted to the Church, or should they be readmitted at all? Should the purity of the body be the primary concern or should forgiving love be the characteristic note of the body of Christ? If you do forgive, how do you know that repentance is genuine and who forgives on behalf of the Church?

Key corollaries—There were key doctrinal corollaries that arose out of persecution and how to handle the question of the lapsed:

- The essential nature of the Church—is it a society of saints or one of sinners?
- The unity of the Church became an issue as well as the essential nature of that unity. Was unity to be understood organizationally or organically? It was in the context of divisions growing out of the question of the lapsed that Cyprian, the influential third century bishop of Carthage, asserted that the unity of the Church was essentially ecclesiastical (organizational) and not theological (organic or doctrinal). The true oneness of the Church was to be found in the unity of the college of bishops. It was in this backdrop that Stephen, bishop of Rome at the time, first made the claim of Roman primacy.
- It was in dealing with the lapsed without expelling them that penance arose as the option for those desiring a mixture of discipline and compassion.

§1-182. Montanists as forerunners—The Montanists were the forerunners of the advocates for moral rigor of the Church in the third and fourth centuries. In the late second century, they took the Church to task for slipping morally. This group had high standards but grew harshly judgmental. They opposed the lenient treatment (i.e. forgiveness) for moral failure of those within the Church and advocated the willing acceptance of martyrdom rather than avoidance of it by flight.

Montanism flourished in an era before the general persecutions of the Church. What to do with those who recanted during times of oppression was largely a local matter rather than a more general concern of the Church. However, the attitudes of this group foreshadowed those of the Novatians and Donatists.

§1-183. Cyprian and Novatian—The Decian persecution began in 250. Fabian, bishop of Rome, was one of the first arrested and died in prison. The loss of his firm hand at the helm, led to many believers giving in to the emperor's demands to make sacrifice to the pagan gods and to other aspects of the official edicts. After Decius' death, the church was confronted with how to handle the lapsed who

sought forgiveness and readmission into the church. The new Roman bishop allowed readmission with lenient conditions, seeing the church as a hospital and a school for sinners. Novatian and a group of like-minded presbyters viewed the church as a society of saints and thought that the lapsed should be treated sternly. Indeed, they thought the lapsed should remain in a lifelong state of repentance without reinstatement to the assembly. The acrimony was intense. Novatian was excommunicated and his followers installed him as a rival bishop of Rome.

Key roles—During the debate on this question, Cyprian and Novatian played key roles. Cyprian had become a Christian around the age of 40 and shortly thereafter was elected bishop of Carthage. He was an accomplished author and speaker. Decius' persecution arose shortly after he became a bishop. Cyprian fled to a secure location with other leaders of the church at Carthage and continued his ministry with an extensive correspondence. Many viewed this as an act of cowardice. Cyprian insisted that he did this for the good of the Church and not out of cowardice. He would prove his courage within the decade with his martyrdom in the persecution of Valerian. However, at the start of the controversy, his authority was undermined and many thought that the martyrs and confessors of the church at Carthage had more authority than he.

Cyprian's maturing views—Cyprian published a work *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, arguing that splitting the church was far worse a sin than lapsing in a period of persecution. In his mind, the church was a visible, united body and was essential for salvation. His famous quote came to represent this position: "He cannot have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his mother."

However, Cyprian argued that the lapsed should be reinstated only after suitable evidence of repentance was produced. Many confessors and others wanted to readmit the lapsed directly without further disciplinary measures in proof of repentance. Cyprian did not want to treat restoration lightly. A community of flawed saints, the Church undoubtedly was, but not one of unrepentant idolaters and apostates. The sacramental idea of Penance arose in this context.

The Emperor Valerian doubled down on persecution in the period between 257 and his death in 260, Cyprian, Novatian, and others lost their lives. The followers of Novatian remained unreconciled with the larger church and became even more rigorist. In their minds other sins warranted being separated from the church, including murder, adultery, idolatry, and even divorce. They described themselves as *katharoi*, the pure ones. They continued as a separate group until the 5th century, at which time many were absorbed into the Donatists, another schismatic group.

Synod at Carthage—Cyprian called a synod to determine the question of readmission of the lapsed into the communion of the Church. This met at Carthage in 251 adopted a compromise position between the hard-liners and those who saw ready forgiveness as more in line with the faith. This position led to a more formal penitential practice in connection with the remission of serious sin after Baptism. It was around this time, Tertullian and others began to distinguish between mortal and venial sin to determine when, and to what degree, penance would be required of those who committed serious sin prior to readmission to full communion with the Church.

Church as institution promoted—In addition to the question of penitential practice, this controversy raised the issue of who should administer this practice. Cyprian insisted that the institutional Church, namely the communion of bishops, should regulate this in attending to the unity of the body. He was a strong advocate of the primacy of the bishop. The question of the lapsed had caused schism in the church at Rome and Cyprian took a dim view of counter-churches who announced themselves as the "true" Church when they disagreed on an issue. It was in this context, that Cyprian famously said, "there is only one Church and there is no salvation outside the Church".

This tension between purity and forgiving love repeatedly divided the western Church in the upcoming centuries. It was out of this concern that the penitential practice of western Catholicism arose. Many centuries later, the Protestants would protest this penitential practice and its many extrapolations.

Pause and ponder—Let's reflect on the problematic legacy of the Novatian schism. In the West, structural church authority, in and of itself, as reflected by Cyprian's famous quote, was becoming the norm. This represented a significant move to seeing the church in institutional terms rather than in organic or ontological terms. It was viewed more as a building, built of certain people (Christ as the cornerstone and the bishops as building stones) than as an organic body. The concept of the church as structure carried with it the idea that one could only be saved if one was within the structure. In addition, the church moved away from the idea of purity as a defining mark of the church and replaced it with unity. It welcomed the whole of society with minimum requirements for admission. When Constantine changed the dynamic between church and state, it meant that the church was soon to be awash with nominal, opportunistic members. Furthermore, in the west, the church became more and more occupied with itself as an institution. The Novatian controversy of the third century and the Donatist controversy of the fourth and fifth centuries led directly to medieval Roman Catholicism.

§1-184. Donatus and the Donatist schism—The Donatist controversy was another instance in which people disagreed on how to treat those who lapsed in a time of persecution. The Novatian controversy had wrangled over this issue in the third century. Donatists were a fourth century version of it. What changed was the context of the Church in the respective eras. In the third century, the Church was still suspect and always in danger of oppression. Being a Christian was far from fashionable. After Constantine's ascension as sole emperor in 324, the Church was favored and being a Christian was increasingly a ticket to climb the institutional ladders of the day.

Episcopal succession—During the final great persecution under Diocletian and Galerius (303-311), many recanted under extreme pressure. The Donatist dispute arose over the election of the bishop of Carthage in 311, which occurred in this contextual backdrop. The candidate advocating the purity of the Church claimed that his rival was “unworthy” of the office of bishop. The majority party elected the rival as bishop. The minority elected a counter-bishop who had a vigorous advocate in Donatus. Donatus later succeeded this man. The minority position was an extreme sectarian one—the Church and its decisions are authentic only when uncompromised. The validity of the Church's sacraments and ordination of its priests and bishops depended on the personal holiness of the minister. Constantine summoned a council at Arles in Gaul in 314, which decided for the majority's position. Donatus rejected the council's decision and started his own church in North Africa.

The theological issue was how to deal with the lapsed and the corollary concern of whether acts performed by an “unworthy” bishop were valid. Believing the sanctity of the Church depended on the loyalty and morality of its members, the Donatists opposed leniency to those who had fallen away in persecutions. Donatus went on to claim that his followers were the true, pure Church and that the sacraments performed by fallen bishops were not valid.

Others, whose primary spokesman was Augustine, thought the Donatists were morally unrealistic and outwardly proud. Augustine pointed to the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:24-30) and insisted that the judgment of worthiness should be left to the Lord. He saw the Church as a mixed multitude and believed that the sacraments worked despite the moral stance of the bishop or cleric administering them. The issue is whether the Church is made up of sinners or not. Are the sacraments valid only when performed by those who are personally holy (*ex opera operantis*) or are they valid

when performed by any legitimate minister no matter how holy (*ex opera operato*)?

Constantine and the Donatists—Constantine decided against the schismatic church (the Donatists) and criticized the accusations against the bishop selected by the majority. The Donatists saw these actions as reinforcing their perception that the larger church wasn't the church at all. It was impure and bastardized. There were about 250 Donatist bishops in North Africa alone and the two entities, the larger church and the Donatists, settled into a long period of suspicious and unneighborly co-existence. By the end of the fourth century, the Donatists may have outnumbered the “larger” church in North Africa.

§1-185. Additional twists to the Donatist controversy—The Donatist controversy also reflected economic, social, and geographical divides in the North African Church. In many respects, it was at its core a class conflict. The Donatists represented elements of the native Punic population of North Africa who lived in the countryside and saw Rome as a foreign and oppressive force. The more urban and Romanized faction was wealthier and latinized.

Circumcellions revolt—With the ascension of Constantine, elements which the lower classes had always hated seemed to have taken control of the Church. Around 340, there appeared among the Donatists a militant faction called the *circumcellions*, a name probably taken from their practice of locating their headquarters in the tombs of the martyrs. The *circumcellions* led an armed revolt or guerilla war against the Romanized elite. The Romans felt they had no recourse but to use force.

In 403, the Emperor Honorius demanded that the Donatists rejoin the larger church, forbade rebaptism, and excluded Manichaeans and Donatists from holding positions at court. Augustine joined in on this stance using Luke 14:23 to legitimize using governmental coercion to enforce religious conformity. This proved to be a most unfortunate precedent for Western Christianity. A regional council in 411 sided with the larger church and spurred Honorius on to using ever harsher measures against the Donatists.

The measures of the larger church to eradicate the Donatists were largely ineffective because of the great political changes occurring at the time. Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410. The Vandals occupied North Africa in 429, besieging Hippo as Augustine lay dying in 430. They captured Carthage in 439. Augustine composed his famous *City of God* in this time interval. The Donatists steadfastly refused to join the larger church and generally maintain an active presence in North Africa until around 700 when Carthage was taken by the Muslim armies.

Pause and ponder—

- Augustine strengthened the tie between being in the right church and the efficacy of the sacraments and loosened the bond between the sacraments and the worthiness of the priests that performed them. This gave rise to the impression that the sacrament in and of itself possessed spiritual power. The western church began moving in a direction the Reformers wanted to reverse—an excessive focus on the church as institution, an unhealthy view of the sacraments focused on outward performance by proper authorities, and too much attention to the formal authority of priests.
- We (Protestants) strongly disagree with the idea that to be saved one has to be in the “right” institutional church. We see the church in organic terms, the universal, invisible church. For Protestants generally, “heresy” is a mistake or inadequacy of doctrine/belief on an issue so central to the faith that if the heretic was right, salvation would be impossible. Thus, heresy is a major misunderstanding concerning God, or Christ, or our state of being before almighty God. Schism is a church split that may

or may not be heretical. If it's over some issue not central to salvation, the group is understood as schismatic but still orthodox.

- Roman Catholics think differently on this. They do not make a definite distinction between schism and heresy. Prior to Vatican II, being saved depended as much on being in the right group (the Roman Catholic Church) as affirming the central truths about the true God who saves. Even after that Council, the legacy of prior history lives on.
- Modern Protestants often find themselves on the horns of this schismatic debate, thinking of the church as a society of saints, pure people bearing witness to the redeeming power of the gospel, yet valuing being a welcoming church and decrying rigorous standards as often judgmental and unworthy of the name of Christ.
- Modern Protestants don't view schism as seriously as the early believers. We've learned to live with church splits for both large and small reasons. Perhaps we need to be less accepting of them.

G. Apologists and Early Christian Writers

§1-191. In general—With the rise of persecution, Christians felt the need to refute rumors and misconceptions regarding their beliefs and practices. A group of writers arose to respond to pagan criticism and slander in defense of the faith. History knows them as the apologists, from the Greek *apologia*, meaning the making of a defense. Jewish authors, such as Philo and Josephus, foreshadowed this apologetic. They responded to anti-Semitic charges with histories and philosophic treatises that demonstrated that the Jewish law and manner of life were philanthropic and beneficial. In the New Testament, the book of Acts has many elements of apologetic literature. “The Way” is portrayed as benevolent and non-threatening to the social order.

Most of the early apologists in the second and third century wrote in Greek. Their writing shared certain features, including being addressed to the emperor, attacking idolatry, and making the case for the legal innocence of Christians and the injustice of persecuting them. Many wrote in response to specific attacks by pagan writers like Celsus, Galen, Epictetus, Porphyry, and Marcus Aurelius.

The earliest apologists were Quadratus, *Letter to Diognetus*, and Aristides who wrote an apology about 138. Justin Martyr was the most famous second century apologist. He wrote an apology and a *Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jewish rabbi. Justin’s student Tatian wrote an *Address to the Greeks* and Athenagoras composed *A Plea for the Christians* and a treatise entitled *On the Resurrection of the Dead*. Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, wrote three books entitled *To Autolytus*, which dealt with the doctrine of God, the interpretation of Scripture, and the practical Christian life. Origen wrote a masterful refutation *Against Celsus* in the early part of the third century. The Latin writers included Minucius Felix (*Octavius*) and Tertullian (*Apology*).

§1-192. Arguments of the apologists—The apologists labored to refute some basic claims made by the pagans:

Atheism—Christians were accused of being atheists because they had no visible gods. Christian apologists replied that the greatest pagan philosophers and poets were atheists in a like manner. They quoted from pagan sources that asserted the pagan gods were human inventions. Some, like Athenagoras, claimed that many such invented gods gave full rein to human vice. They asked how a god made by human hands could be above humans.

Resurrection of the body—This was anathema to Greek thought in the day. The apologists responded to their mockery by recourse to divine omnipotence. If God made bodies out of nothing, why is it so unthinkable that the same God can create them anew, even after they are dead and scattered?

Immorality—To the claim that the Christians were immoral, the apologists bluntly denied it and charged the pagans of the day with rank immorality.

Subversive—To the charge that the Christians were subversive and destroying the very fabric of society in refusing to worship the emperor and the gods and to withdraw from many social functions, the apologists replied by affirming that the Christians refused to worship false gods and any other creature, but that despite this they were loyal subjects of the Empire. Christians were obedient subjects and faithfully lifted the emperor and the Empire up to the one true God in prayer.

Christian faith and pagan culture—Accused of being uncultured barbarians and “haters of mankind” because they absented themselves from various social functions, Christians needed to take up the issue of the relationship of their faith with pagan culture. Pagan civil ceremonies frequently included sacrifices and vows made to the pagan gods. Christians saw participation in these as tantamount of idolatry. Likewise, many Christians adopted a pacifist stance concluding that they could not be soldiers not only from Jesus’ teaching about treatment of enemies but also because soldiers were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor and the gods. Many believers argued against the study of classical literature because the gods played an important part in these works and all sorts of immorality was ascribed to them.

Disagreements—There was general agreement that Christians must abstain from idolatry, but not about abstaining from the pagan classics. Many argued that to reject Plato, Aristotle, and various Stoic thinkers was to reject some of the highest achievements of human wisdom. The Alexandrian circle was particularly of this mind. Others went in the opposite direction. Tertullian insisted on a radical opposition between Christian faith and pagan culture. “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does the Academy have to do with the Church?” he asked. He was convinced that many of the heresies that circulated in his time were the result of attempts to combine pagan philosophy with Christian doctrine. Others gloried in the “barbaric” origins of Christianity over against the “cultured pagans”. Tatian’s *Address to the Greeks* was a frontal attack on what the Greeks considered valuable.

Those interested in reading some samples of early Christian writings should consider:

- Ignatius—Richardson 100
- 2 Clement—Richardson 193
- Justin Martyr—Richardson 248 et seq.
- Athenagoras—Richardson 308-309
- Irenaeus—Richardson 370, 374-375

§1-193. Beginnings of Christian philosophy—Apologetic literature contributed to the development of a sense within Christianity of having a place in the wider world and created a reasoned case for the Christian religious movement. It marked the emergence of Christian intellectual self-consciousness. With the apologists of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christianity took its first steps toward claiming a place within the Greco-Roman culture on its own terms.

Self-definition—The second century has been designated “the century of Christian self-definition”. The apologists drew the basic line regarding the Greco-Roman culture, accepting its rhetoric and philosophy (especially Plato), but rejecting all pagan religion (deemed as fictional, fraudulent, confused, and even demonic). The ancient philosophical conviction that right morals derived from right opinion reinforced the emphasis on doctrine within the Christian tradition. Equally, the heritage of philosophy as a “way of being religious as moral transformation” found expression in later forms of monasticism. There was considerable difference toward the use of Greek philosophy in defining the Christian tradition. Some believers wished to wed philosophy and Christianity, others to divorce the two. Those in the East were inclined to seek accommodation; those in the West to point out distinctions.

§1-194. Justin Martyr—The birth of Christian philosophy is marked by Justin Martyr (100-165). Justin was an apologist to Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161). His *Apology* expanded upon a defense of the faith from a negative assessment of pagan religion to a positive one of Platonism. He represented Christianity as the best of all the philosophies, summing up the best aspects of Gentile and Jewish wisdom. He used Greek philosophy extensively and pictured Christ as the divine *Logos*. His writing marked the beginning of a cultural dialogue with Hellenism and a semi-alliance with philosophy.

Background—Justin was born a pagan in Samaria and wandered through several philosophical schools before his conversion. He lived through a long spiritual journey, going from school to school, until he found in Christianity what he called the “true philosophy”. When he came to faith, he took upon himself the task of doing Christian philosophy. A major part of this task was to explain the connection between Christianity and classical wisdom. He claimed that there were several points of contact between Christianity and classical pagan philosophy. The best pagan philosophers spoke of a supreme being from which other beings derive their existence. Socrates and Plato both affirmed life after physical death. Plato posited a reality beyond the present world, a world of eternal realities, which was the basis for knowing things in this present world. Justin may not have agreed with all the details of their claims, but he insisted that the philosophers had glimpses of truth and that could not be explained as mere coincidence.

Logos—Justin found the reason for this coincidence in the doctrine of the *Logos*. Greek philosophy asserted that the human mind could understand reality because it shared in the *Logos* or universal reason that undergirded all reality. Justin noted that John’s gospel affirms that in Jesus, the *Logos* or Word was made flesh. According to Justin, what happened in the Incarnation was that the underlying reason behind the universe had become flesh. This *Logos* was the true light enlightening everyone. Pagan philosophers knew this remotely. In a way, Plato and other sages of the ages were “Christians” to the extent that the *Logos* had enlightened them in their thinking. The philosophers of old knew the *Logos* in part, while Christians who had seen him in his incarnation knew him fully. Thus, Justin opened the way for Christians to claim whatever good they found in classical culture, despite its paganism.

Jewish dialogue—Justin attempted to dialogue with Judaism and to keep that dialogue civil in tone. His *Dialogue with Typhro* reports a fictional conversation between Jewish and Christian philosophers centering on which version of the Scripture was accurate (Hebrew or Greek Septuagint) and on whether Christ fulfilled biblical prophecy. Justin developed the standard Christian reply to Jewish charges. Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies concerning his suffering in his first coming and will fulfill the triumphal Messianic prophecies in his second coming.

§1-195. Clement of Alexandria—Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was the first significant representative of the Alexandrian theological tradition. Born to pagan parents in Athens, the citadel of philosophical speculation in the Roman Empire, Clement came to faith as a young man and undertook a search for a teacher who could give him deeper instruction in the Christian faith. He found that teacher in Pantaenus of Alexandria, of whom we know little. He succeeded his teacher as head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria. He and his student and successor, Origen, tried to blend into Christianity all that was best of the Hellenistic world, especially Platonic and Stoic philosophies.

Pagan intelligentsia—Clement desired to be an apostle (a sent one) to the Hellenistic intellectual world. Clement was not so much a pastor, but a thinker and a searcher of truth. His goal was not so much to expound the traditional faith of the Church as a shepherd but to convince pagan intellectuals that Christianity was not an absurd superstition. Clement's project proceeded in three stages:

- The *Protrepticus* (Exhortator) was a classic call to conversion. He attacked pagan errors and argued for the truth of Christianity.
- The *Paidogogos* (Instructor) offered an extensive instructive catalogue of Christian moral behavior.
- The *Didaskalos* (Teacher) was a learned treatise on Christianity's use of Scripture and its relation to philosophy.

Clement attempted to demonstrate to pagan readers that a good part of Christian doctrine was supported by Plato's philosophy. Clement was convinced that there is only one truth, and that therefore any truth to be found in Plato could be none other than the truth that has been revealed in Jesus Christ and in the Scripture. Philosophy was given to the Greeks in the same manner as the Law was given to the Hebrews. The philosophers were to the Greeks, what the prophets were to the Hebrews.

Use of allegory—How could Clement arrive at such a conclusion? How did he harmonize Scripture and the philosophers? Essentially, Clement believed that the scriptures were written allegorically. The sacred text has more than one meaning. The literal sense ought not be set aside. But there was deeper truth beyond the literal sense. He found five possible meanings to a given passage of Scripture:

- Literal or historical sense (e.g. taking the story at its face value);
- Doctrinal sense (e.g. mining the obvious moral, religious, and theological teachings of the passage);
- Prophetic sense (including predictive prophecy and typology);
- Philosophical sense (which allowed for believers to follow Platonic and Stoical cosmic and psychological meanings); and
- Mystical sense (e.g. "deeper" spiritual and religious truth symbolized by otherwise mundane events and persons).

Although Clement saw himself as an interpreter of Scripture, his allegorical exegesis allowed him to find in the sacred text ideas and doctrines that were Platonic in inspiration.

Logos—Clement identifies the Word or *Logos* with the Ineffable One of Neoplatonic thought. This Ineffable One, about which one could only speak in metaphors or in negative assertions, had become incarnate in Jesus. He follows the direction earlier set by Justin Martyr in making the *Logos* the linchpin of Christian-pagan dialogue. For Clement, Christianity is the true and final philosophy. Jesus was the *Logos*, the source of all wisdom and truth, and a teacher, one way or another, of all peoples

everywhere. In this he went beyond Justin Martyr. Justin used the *Logos* to show pagans the truth of Christianity. Clement uses the *Logos* to call Christians to be open to the truth in pagan philosophy. Clement's enduring importance was that his thought became characteristic of the atmosphere and tradition that developed in Alexandria. That reality would be of great significance for the subsequent course of theology.

§1-196. Origen—Origen (185-254) was the greatest theologian of the early Greek Church, famous for his fusion of Greek thought and biblical exposition. The son of Christian parents, he was a student of Clement of Alexandria at the famed Catechetical School. He became the head of that academy at a very young age (18) when Clement was forced to flee Alexandria because of the persecution in which Origen's own father died.

After training catechumens for several years, Origen entrusted that task to some of his best disciples and devoted himself to running a school of Christian philosophy (very similar to the great classical schools of philosophy). Enlightened pagans were drawn due to Origen's increasing fame, including the mother of the emperor and the governor of Arabia. Origen stayed at Alexandria from 202 to 230 until a conflict with Bishop Demetrius (for several reasons, not the least of which was jealousy) grew to the point that he left Alexandria and settled in Caesarea. He continued to write and lecture there for the next twenty years. In the persecution of Decius, Origen was severely tortured and, shortly after his release, died at age 70.

Literary works—Origen's output was enormous. He compiled the *Hexapla*, an edition of the Old Testament in six columns: a Hebrew text, a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew, and four different Greek translations of the text. This came complete with an entire system of symbols indicating variants, omissions, and additions. He wrote commentaries on many books of the Bible, an apologetic work entitled *Against Celsus*, and the first truly systematic theology text entitled *De Principiis* (On First Principles). This was Bible-focused work but made extensive use of allegory in interpretation. These works were just the tip of the iceberg. He kept numerous secretaries very busy taking down his dictation.

Origen linked philosophy and faith—Origen's work was Christian thought worked out in response to Platonism and Gnosticism. He thought there could be no genuine piety in one who despised philosophy, and that true philosophy focused eventually on revelation—attracted to its beauty and wisdom. Origen saw philosophy as more than a collection of ideas, but a way to forge the character of a person. Origen's work was very important in its day—it appealed to intellectual people to believe the Bible to be a worthwhile standard and guide.

Origen's theology was like his teacher, Clement, and very representative of the Alexandrian school. He attempted to relate Christian faith to the Platonic philosophical tradition current in the Alexandria of his day. Aware of the danger of favoring the teachings of the philosophers he declared that “nothing which is at variance with the tradition of the apostles and of the Church is to be accepted as true.” That tradition included:

- There was only one God, creator, and ruler of the universe, and Gnostic speculations regarding the origin of the world were to be rejected;
- Jesus is the Son of God, begotten before all creation, and that his incarnation is such that, while becoming human, he remained divine;
- The Holy Spirit's glory is no less than that of the Father and the Son;

- At a future time, the soul will be rewarded or punished according to life in this world

Speculation—Beyond these points, Origen felt free to rise in great speculative flights. For example, he took the accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 as accounts of two creations, the first purely spiritual devoted to the contemplation of the divine. When some strayed from this, God made a second creation of material, and it serves as a shelter or temporary home for fallen spirits. This implies that human souls existed as “pure spirits or intellects before being born into the world and the reason we’re here is because we sinned in that prior purely spiritual existence.” Although Origen claims this is based on the Bible, it is clearly derived from the Platonic traditions of the day.

Origen understood that in this present world, Satan and his demons have us captive and that Jesus Christ came to break the power of Satan and to show us the path to our spiritual home. Moreover, since the devil is a spirit and since God is love, in the end, even Satan will be saved and the entire creation will return to its original state, where everything is pure spirit. However, since spirits will still be free, there is nothing to guarantee that there will not be a new fall, a new material world, a new history, and that the cycle of fall, restoration, and fall will not go on forever.

Origen proposed this, not as truth to be generally accepted or as superseding Church doctrine, but as his own tentative speculations. Nevertheless, on many points, Origen is more Platonist than Christian. While he rejects Marcion and the Gnostics in seeing the created world as inferior, he concludes that the physical world and all history is the result of sin. When it comes to the pre-existence of the soul and the eternal cycle of fall and restoration, Origen strays from Christianity as normally taught.

Second Constantinople (553)—He was later attacked for lack of a literal exegesis, for denying the reality of hell, and for holding that the *Logos* was eternally generated by the Father. Origen was declared a heretic at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, almost three hundred years after his death, for supposedly being out of step with the decisions of the Council of Nicaea, decided almost seventy-five years after his death.

§1-197. Irenaeus—Irenaeus (130-202) was a native of Asia Minor and a disciple of Polycarp. He migrated to Lyons in Gaul and became a presbyter in the Church. He was on a mission to Rome when persecution under Marcus Aurelius broke out in Lyons and Vienne. When he returned to Lyons, he was elected bishop and served faithfully until he himself was martyred in 202.

Irenaeus was a pastor and not particularly interested in philosophical speculation. Only two of his works survive: *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* and *Against Heresies*. The first is instruction on points of doctrine and the second is a refutation of Gnosticism. His writings are not grand flights of thought, but feet on the ground instruction of believers. Christian truth is not a matter of personal or individual experience but of communal teaching (orthodoxy) and moral behavior (orthopraxy). Christianity is inherently social and institutional in nature.

History is purposeful—Irenaeus saw himself as a shepherd and saw God as a shepherd as well. The entirety of history is a process whereby the divine shepherd leads his good creation to its final goal. Human beings are not a mistake or an accident but free and responsible beings who can grow in communion with the divine. Humanity is instructed by the “two hands of God: the Word and the Spirit”. The purpose of this instruction is an increasingly close communion with God. The goal is what Irenaeus called “divinization”—God’s purpose is making us ever more like Himself. This vision does not mean that humans are lost in the divine or that we will ever be the same as God. No matter how much we grow in divine likeness we shall always have a long way to go.

The incarnation of God in Christ is not merely a response to sin. God's initial purpose included being united with humanity. The future incarnate Word was the model that God followed in creating humanity in his own image. The great drama of redemption was no afterthought. Israel had an important role in that drama—the Old Testament is not the revelation of a God alien to Christian faith. At the proper time, the Word was incarnate in Jesus Christ, and in his life, death, and resurrection a new humanity has been created. Jesus has corrected what was twisted because of sin. He has defeated the enemy and enabled us to live in renewed freedom. The Kingdom grows in his body the Church, but even at the end when the Kingdom is fully unveiled, God's task as a shepherd will continue. Redeemed humanity will continue growing into greater communion with the divine. The process of "divinization" will go on eternally, taking us ever closer to God.

What we find in Irenaeus is a grand vision of history. The focal point of history is the incarnation, not only because through it God's word straightened the twisted history of humanity, but because from the very beginning the union of the divine with humanity was the goal. God's purpose is to be joined to humanity, and this has taken place in a unique way in Jesus Christ.

Heresy warrior—Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, deployed the basic approaches the Church would adopt in defining Christian orthodoxy:

- Canon of Scripture—the texts and traditions to be relied upon;
- Creed as the rule of faith; and
- Council—that is, the authority of the bishops properly assembled to address matters of doctrine and practice.

Because of the proliferation of so-called "revealed" literature, it was necessary to establish a canon (true measure) of the compositions that could be used to define Christian teaching and practice. In rebutting Gnostics, Irenaeus named his sources from the Old and New Testament, indicating which were deemed authoritative. To provide a doctrinal framework for Christian faith, Irenaeus drew on the developing tradition of the rule of faith (or creed). His rule of faith was like the so-called Apostle's Creed. In addition, to canon and creed, Irenaeus asserts the historical priority of apostolic succession of bishops.

With Irenaeus, we see the definitive emergence of what constitutes Christian orthodoxy. Christianity is not first a matter of private experience, but of public and communal identity. It is emphatically material, with a positive view of body, time, and institution in contrast with Gnosticism and the wonder-working exponents. In facing future challenges to Christian identity and faith, the path forward would be for bishops to meet in councils and, based on canonical texts, interpret the meaning of the creed or rule of faith.

§1-198. Tertullian—As a young man, Tertullian (160-225) went to Rome to study law and fell into a licentious lifestyle. He converted to Christianity in 197, returned to Carthage in North Africa, and gave himself to the defense of the gospel. He spoke to the educated pagans of his day by emphasizing the difference between Christian faith and current philosophies. He was particularly apt at pithy sayings ("The blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church") and the concise formulation of ideas.

He was a moral rigorist (perhaps because of his own libertine past) and later in life became a Montanist. He emphasized practical application over speculative thought and separation from the world over cultural adaptation. His ideas on the emerging practice of penance (just one time after baptism)

seem stark and severe. He placed great emphasis on the purity of the Church and was not particularly tactful as an apologetic writer. His polemic *Against the Jews* lacked the civility that characterized Justin Martyr's earlier dialogues with Jewish writers. Tertullian stressed that the Church completely superseded Israel. Because the Jews rejected the son of God, they have lost their status as God's people.

Apologist—Tertullian wrote several apologies in defense of the faith. They make a plea for Christianity's legal recognition because of its fundamentally philanthropic character. However, his call for freedom of religion and toleration was just for Christians. In this, he mirrored attitudes that prevailed in later centuries.

In his other writings, he argued vigorously against heretics, including Marcion and Valentinus. In his *Prescription Against the Heretics*, his aim is to show that not only are the heretics wrong but that they do not even have the right to dispute with the Church. He claimed that the Scriptures belong to the Church and the heretics had no right to use the Bible. The Scriptures are the writings of the apostles to the apostolic Churches who agree on their use and interpretation. The rightful owner of the Scripture (the Church) is the only one with the right to interpret it. This argument against heretics has been used against various dissidents throughout the ages. It was one of the main arguments made by apologists against Protestants in the 16th century and has been used by Catholic authorities to buttress the magisterial claims of the Roman Church.

Tertullian's rigidity goes beyond the contours of an argument like the one above. He thought that once a person found the truth of Christianity, they should abandon any further search for truth. The accepted body of Christian doctrine should suffice, and any quest for truth that goes beyond this body of doctrine is dangerous. Tertullian, in essence, condemned all speculation. It was just risky curiosity.

Doctrinal works—Tertullian made numerous theological contributions. Among these include first clear formula for the Trinity, clarification on the God-man Jesus and the Incarnation, and a vigorous refutation of monarchialism and Gnosticism. In his battle against doctrinal error, Tertullian coined formulas that were to be of great importance in later Trinitarian and Christological debates. In *Against Praxeas* (probably another name for Calixtus, then bishop of Rome), Tertullian framed an argument against the understanding of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as simply three modes in which God appeared. History knows this understanding as *patripassianism* (the Father suffered the passion) or *monarchical modalism* (various persons of the Trinity are simply modes in which God appears). The correct understanding according to Tertullian was "one substance in three persons". Likewise, when he discussed the God-man Jesus he spoke of "one person" and "two substances" or "two natures". In this, Tertullian anticipated the formulas that would eventually become the hallmarks of orthodoxy.

Ironic career—In 207, this untiring advocate of Church authority joined the Montanist movement. Tertullian was probably drawn to the Montanists by their moral rigor. He was disenchanted by the continuing sin of Christians, and it helped his exacting mind to see it as an intermediate stage that was superseded by the age of the Spirit that Montanus foretold. Tertullian later became disappointed with Montanism and toward the end of his life founded his own sect.

Tertullian's career is ironic. A fiery champion of orthodoxy against every sort of heresy and yet, in the end, he joined a movement that the Church at large considered heretical, or at best, dangerously out of the mainstream. However, even after this move, he produced writings and theological formulas that were very influential in the future course of theology. He wrote in Latin and his formulations became part of the theological lexicon of Latin Christendom in the following centuries. Many regard him as the first western theologian.