Berean Bible Institute
Fall Semester 2026
Church History I
Pastor Phil Erickson, Instructor

Lecture Three – *The Third and Fourth Centuries*

Memory Verse – Psalm 12:6 & 7

The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever.

The Apostles Creed as commonly written and recited before A.D. 325:

The Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
The Creator of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus Christ,
His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy church,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And life everlasting.
Amen

Introduction

The histories of true New Testament churches since the time of the Bible is difficult to ascertain since much of it has been lost, and what we do have has likely been altered by apostate writers who slant history in favor of their particular perspective. In this lesson, we will continue to trace the history of the Christian churches through the third and fourth centuries. We will see the churches begin to organize, unite, and corrupt; but we will also see that many of the churches and Christians would split from the apostate churches (or never be associated with them at all). These separating churches stayed true to New Testament doctrines and, as a result, suffered intense persecution; first at the hands of the pagans, but later at the hands of other "Christian" churches. However, even through the intense persecution, Christianity continued to flourish:

John Christian offers these quotes from the writings of Tertullian:

> In spite of these extraordinary difficulties Christianity made progress. The hindrances became helps in the providence of God. Persecution led to martyrdom, and martyrdom had attractions. Tertullian exclaimed to

> the heathen: "All of your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing; they are only a lure to this sect. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the Christians is their seed." The moral earnestness of the Christians contrasted powerfully with the prevailing corruption of the age, and while it repelled the frivolous and voluptuous, it could not fail to impress most strongly the deepest and noblest minds. This progress extended to every part of the empire. "We are a people of yesterday," says Tertullian, "and yet we have filled every place belonging to you - cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your very camp, your tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum. We leave you your temples only. You can count your armies; our number in a single province will be greater."[1]

Note – Tertullian was a Christian lawyer and author from northern Africa who was fluent in both Greek and Latin. The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics states this regarding him:

> Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (160/70–215/20) was an early Christian apologist from Carthage, North Africa. He was educated in law and converted to Christianity in about 190. He devoted himself to the study of the Scriptures. He broke from the mainline church and became head of a small Montanist group. His interaction with the unbelievers of his day is illustrative of an early Christian interaction view of faith and reason.[2]

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*:

> Tertullian was the author of a long list of apologetic, theological, controversial, and ascetic works in Latin, as well as of a few writings in Greek. In the 'Apologeticum' (*c.* 197) and other early apologetic writings he appeals for the toleration of Christianity, attacking pagan superstition, rebutting charges against Christian morality, and, to him the chief point, claiming that Christians were no danger to the state but good and useful citizens.[3]

I The Word of God in the Third and Fourth Century

By the end of the second century the Word of God existed in the following forms:

A The Original New Testament Scriptures

B The Syrian Peshito (A.D. 150) – This translation was used widely in the churches of Syria including the Church at Antioch.

C The Old Latin *Itala Biblia* (A.D. 150)

This Bible was used in northern Italy and northward to Central Europe.

D Corrupt Bibles (Jerome's Latin Vulgate)

Earlier we discovered that in the first century Satan's main weapon against Christians was martyrdom. In the second century, he added to his arsenal the destruction of the Scriptures. However, beginning in the third century, Satan would implement his latest attack on God's people which was the distortion of the Scriptures. This has been an effective weapon for him since that time. Beginning in Alexandria in Egypt, a corrupt set of manuscripts were compiled and were eventually used by Jerome to supply an official text for Emperor Constantine in his new state religion based in Rome, which was to become the Roman Catholic Church.

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[1] Christian, John T.. *A History Of The Baptists: Together With Some Account Of Their Principles And Practices* (Kindle Locations 497-504). www.Delmarvapublications.Com. Kindle Edition.

[2] Geisler, N. L. (1999). Tertullian. In *Baker encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (p. 721). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

[3] Cross, F. L., & Livingstone, E. A. (Eds.). (2005). In *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed. rev., p. 1602). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Here are the men who were influential in producing this corrupt stream of manuscripts:

1 **Philo** – lived at the time of Christ and founded the religious school that was a part of the college at Alexandria. He was a Jew that combined some of the Jewish doctrines with that of Greek philosophy.

2 **Clement of Alexandria** – (not the same Clement as Lecture 2). He took over the college at Alexandria late in the second century combining the philosophies of Plato and Philo with Christian doctrine.

3 **Origen** – took over the college in 202 A.D. but eventually moved it to Caesarea after being ex-communicated from the church at Alexandria. He compiled a set of manuscripts and apparently changed whatever he didn't like. He denied the inspiration of Revelation and believed in Purgatory. These are just a couple of his errors. This collection has come to be known as the Alexandrian Text.

4 **Pamphilus** – took over the college from Origen.

5 **Eusebius** – was the Bishop of Caesarea and took over the college from Pamphilus.

6 **Jerome** – received copy of Alexandrian text from Eusebius and copied it for Constantine.

II The Churches of the Third and Fourth Century

A The Novatianists

Novatian was a presbyter in the church of Rome around 250 A.D. During this time period the Roman emperor Decius demanded that all Roman citizens conform to pagan worship practices.

Because of the persecution, many of the members of the church at Rome denied the Lord. They were called ***Traditores***. Later, when the persecution subsided, some of these ex-members sought to be re-instated in the church. Novatian was bitterly opposed to this and eventually left the church because the church desired that they be allowed back in. It is important to understand that the motive behind this reconciliation was not compassion but compensation. The synod of Rome was a large organization with many mouths to feed. After Novatian left, several of the other bishops associated with the synod at Rome also broke away and became independent churches. These Novatian congregations, also known as "the Cathari" (the pure) existed until the fifth century. Novatian was officially ex-communicated in 251 A.D.

The Novatianist insisted on the re-baptizing of those that converted to them from Catholicism. This may be the first reference to Anabaptism.

It was during this time period that two important corruptions appeared to have their beginning. The Traditores were given letters of mercy from those that suffered in the persecution. It seems that this was the beginning of praying to the saints. Also, in order for the Traditores to be re-instated, they had to come and confess their sin to the Bishop/priests; and he decided if the candidate was worthy of re-instatement.

B The Donatists

According to *The Complete Book of When and Where in the Bible and Throughout History*:

The Donatists took their name from Donatus (d. 355) who was bishop of Carthage from 313 to 355. Beginning in 312, Donatus led a protest against the practices of the Catholic Church. In particular, he and his followers charged that certain Catholic bishops had handed over Bibles to the civil authorities to be burned during Emperor Diocletian's (245–313) persecution, an act they viewed as apostasy. Since these apostate bishops were ordaining Catholic pastors, the Donatists claimed themselves, not the Catholics, to be the true church. They also argued that the validity of the

sacraments depended upon the morality of the pastor administering them. Donatists became a majority in many areas of North Africa but were vigorously opposed by Augustine (354–430), the bishop of Hippo.[4]

The Donatists came from Numidia in northern Africa early in the fourth century. Like the Novatians, they were opposed to the admission of Traditores into the church; and they also were adamant that the bishops be without spot. They were against infant baptism and held staunchly to liberty of conscience, opposing the persecuting power of the "state church". Much of what we know about the Donatists must be discerned from what was written about them by their enemies:

> All these writings are lost except the portions which have been preserved by Augustine; and as these portions consist of extracts quoted for the purpose of refuting their sentiments which conflicted with his own, the said extracts thus providentially preserved are now valuable for information of the real sentiments of the Donatists.[5]

The Donatists split from the Catholic church early in the fourth century. Constantine at first tried to lure them back into the fold using alms (money). However, when that did not work, they were severely persecuted by the Catholic Church in 347 A.D. in what was known as the Macarian War. They continued until the ninth century. The Macarian War marked the unofficial start of the Dark Ages. Macarius was the Bishop of Jerusalem from 313 to 334. He was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and became the staunch enemy of anybody that opposed the approved doctrines of the "Church". At first, he attempted to bribe Donatist church members away from their bishops, but when this failed, he resorted to more extreme measures. Church leaders defended Macarius' extreme tactics:

> If, said Augustine, Macarius was unduly severe on the Donatists, and went beyond the Christian law for dealing with heretics, he had recourse to the law of the king, that he should fight for the Catholic union. I do not say, said he, that Macarius did nothing wrong, but your doings were much worse than his, against the Catholics through all Africa; say no more, brethren, of Macarian times; so far as our men were cruel, their acts were highly displeasing to us.
>
> Du Pin repeats a long list of the apologies by Optatus for Macarius's treatment of the Donatists, some of which, in his opinion, were not very solid. Optatus argued that the killing of the Donatists by Macarius in his war against them for heresy, was sanctioned by Moses killing three thousand for worshipping the golden calf, and Phinehas and Elijah for those they killed. Macarius, said Optatus, did not persecute like the heathen emperors, whose policy was to drive the Christians out of their churches, while that of Macarius was to drive the Donatists into the Catholic churches, where they might worship God together in the spirit of peace and unity.[6]

According to Christian:

> The Donatist Bishop Petilian, in Africa, against whom Augustine wrote, appealed to Christ and the apostles who never persecuted. "Think you," says he, "to serve God by killing us with your hand? Ye err, if ye, poor mortals, think this; God has not hangmen for priests. Christ teaches us to bear wrong, not to revenge it," The Donatist bishop Gaudentius says: "God appointed prophets and fishermen, not princes and soldiers, to spread the faith."[7]

III Corruptions of the Third and Fourth Centuries

[4] Rusten, S. with E. Michael. (2005). The complete book of when & where in the Bible and throughout history (p. 116). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
[5] Benedict, David. The History of The Donatists (with Notes) (p. 125). www.Delmarvapublications.Com. Kindle Edition.
[6] Ibid, pp. 25-26.
[7] Christian, John T. (Kindle Locations 877 – 881)

As was emphasized in the previous lesson, it must be remembered that the departure from sound doctrine was not immediate but took place gradually over centuries. John Christian states:

> It is not to be understood that all, or even most of the doctrinal errors, which are found in later Roman Catholic history are to be found in this period. This is not the case. For example, the worship of Mary and of images, transubstantiation, the infallibility of the pope, and the immaculate conception are all of later date. The tendency was rather to lessen the demand for repentance and faith, the experimental in religion, and rather to emphasize external signs and symbols. It was imagined that the outward symbol could take the place of the inward grace. The point of departure probably had its largest expression in baptismal salvation, and the tendency of some churches toward episcopacy, and away from democratic simplicity.[8]

A Sacraments

The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin word sacramentum, which was a badge received by Roman soldiers for service in the military. Tertullian was the first to use this word in reference to baptism, but he meant it only as an illustration. Eventually this word was used in reference to both baptism and the Lord's Supper, but it now took on a deeper meaning. These sacraments were seen as a way of conveying grace or a means by which one receives grace. So, eventually salvation was not through faith alone, but through faith plus the sacraments. True New Testament churches never had sacraments, only ordinances. Ordinances do not convey grace; they simply remind us of the grace already given.

B Church Government

John Christian emphasizes the slow but steady movement in the first four centuries from independent churches to a universal church:

> There was, however, a constant tendency towards centralization. As the pastor assumed rights which were not granted to him by the Scriptures, some of the metropolitan pastors exercised an undue authority over some of the smaller churches. Then the churches in some of the cities sought the patronage and protection of the pastors of the larger cities. Finally, Rome, the political center of the world, became the religious center as well. In time the pastor in Rome became the universal pope. All of this was of slow growth and required centuries for its consummation.[9]

The papal system as is seen today in Catholicism did not fully develop until the time of Gregory the Great (590 A.D.) According to Schaff, he is "the first of the proper popes" and with him was the development of absolute papacy" [10] Nevertheless, in the centuries leading up to "absolute papacy", the synods began to usurp more and more power over the churches with metropolitans ruling over many churches. The church at Rome became very powerful during these years and eventually became the state church of the Roman Empire.

1 Constantine

In 312 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine was fighting a battle when he supposedly saw what looked like a cross in the sky, with the words, "By this conquer". He declared that he owed his victory to this sign. Though it is not recorded that he ever truly converted to Christianity, he was baptized just prior to his death. He published the *Edict of Constantine* in 313 which guaranteed religious liberty to the Christians. Though this obviously brought some relief to the persecuted, it also united the state with the church.

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[8] Ibid. (Kindle Locations 508-514).
[9] Ibid, (Kindle Locations 530-534).
[6] Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). History of the Christian church (Vol. 1, p. 15). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

The Complete Book of When and Where in the Bible and Throughout History gives the following account of Constantine:

> Constantine was the son of Constantius Chlorus, the western emperor of the Roman Empire, and his concubine, Helena. When his father died in 306, Constantine was proclaimed emperor by his father's troops. Meanwhile, back in Rome the Praetorian Guard proclaimed Maxentius as Western emperor.
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> On October 26, 312, Constantine and his troops reached a point about five miles north of Rome, prepared to do battle with Maxentius the following day. That evening he saw a flaming cross in the sky with the Greek words "In this Sign Conquer." Then that night he had a dream in which Christ commanded him to have his soldiers mark their shields with the letters *chi* and *rho,* the first and second letters of the Greek word for Christ. The many Christians in his army were greatly encouraged the next morning when he ordered his troops to put the inscription on their shields.
>
> In Rome, Maxentius spent the night before the battle performing sacrifices and divinations. The impending battle was shaping up to be between the army of Christ and the army of the Roman gods.
>
> Maxentius decided to do battle directly in front of the Tiber River with the Milvian Bridge behind him, approximately a mile from the gates of Rome. According to Eusebius, a church historian who lived during the fourth century, the outnumbered forces of Constantine advanced "invoking the God of heaven and his son and word our Lord Jesus Christ, the saviour of all." Maxentius was thrown into the Tiber along with many of his troops, and Constantine entered Rome as the undisputed emperor of the western empire.
>
> The following year Constantine met with Licinius, emperor of the eastern empire, and issued the Edict of Milan (Constantine), granting Christians freedom of worship along with compensation and return of confiscated church property.
>
> An uneasy peace existed between Constantine and Licinius until 323, when Constantine defeated Licinius in battle, becoming the sole emperor. He then founded the city of Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) as capital of his empire.
>
> Constantine is most remembered for his church policies. In addition to the Edict of Milan, he allowed bishops to settle civil lawsuits, he closed courts of law and workshops on Sundays, and he banned gladiatorial games. He also took an active role in church affairs, summoning the Council of Nicea in 325.
>
> But there was a darker side to Constantine. In 326, he had his wife, the sister of Maxentius, and one son executed under suspicious circumstances. He also never relinquished his position as chief priest of the pagan state religion, and his coins proclaimed his allegiance to the sun god. He delayed Christian baptism until shortly before his death. Yet whatever his personal spiritual state, it was because of Constantine that Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire.[11]

2 Nicene Council and Creed

In 325, Constantine called the *First General Council at Nicene,* mainly for the purpose of putting down a false doctrine called Arianism which denied the deity of Christ. However, in this council the Apostles Creed, which was an unofficial statement of faith for many of the churches, was re-written and became the official document of the Catholic Church. Among the many changes, the new version stated, "I believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church"; and, "I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins".

Note – Arius was trained in Antioch and became a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt:

[11] Rusten, S. with E. Michael. (p. 117).

In about 318, he entered a dispute with Alexander (d. 328), the bishop of Alexandria, over whether Jesus Christ was co-eternal with God. Alexander taught, "God is always, the Son is always" and that the Son is "the unbegotten begotten." Arius's view regarding the Son was, "There was when He was not." At a church council in Alexandria, Arius and his followers were deposed and excommunicated. However, Arius refused to accept this judgment and appealed directly to the citizens of Alexandria and to bishops who had been his fellow students in Antioch. The resulting public demonstrations and letter-writing campaign by the sympathetic bishops challenged the unity of the church. As a result, Emperor Constantine (285–337) intervened and called the Council of Nicea (325).[12]

C Baptism

The ordinance of baptism eventually became the sacrament of baptism. This false doctrine of baptismal regeneration became more widespread. Also, the concept of infant baptism, though not widespread at this time, began to take root. The earliest reference to infant baptism was by Tertullian who wrote against it. The earliest advocate for infant baptism was Cyprian:

> The first direct evidence in favor of it is found in the writings of Cyprian, in the Council of Carthage, in Africa, A. D. 253. In writing to one Fidus, Cyprian takes the ground that infants should be baptized as soon as they are born.[13]

To be fair, however, it is to be noted that all the formal councils of the fourth century condemned infant baptism:

> The Council of Elvira or Grenada, A. D. 305, required the delay of baptism for two years (Hefele, History of the Councils, 1.155. Edinburgh, 1871). The Council of Laodicaea held A. D. 360, demanded that those who are "to be baptized must learn the creed by heart and recite it" (Hefele, II.319). The Council of Constantinople decreed that persons should "remain a long time under Scriptural instruction before they receive baptism" (Ibid, II.368). And the Council of Carthage, A. D. 398, decreed that "catechumens shall give their names, and be prepared for baptism" (DuPin, Bibliotheque universelle, c. 4.282).[14]

Also, mostly all notable Christians from the third and fourth century, though reared in devout Christian homes, were not baptized until after they were saved. Basil the Great, born in 329 A. D. came from a devout mother and grandmother, and 9 siblings who were Christians, was not baptized until he was 26. Basil is considered by some to be the father of communal monasticism in Eastern Christianity, which emphasized prayer and manual labor.

It wasn't until early in the fifth century that infant baptism would become the rule of the Catholic Church:

> Augustine, Bishop of Hippo-Regius, North Africa (A. D. 353-430) was not the first to practice it; but he was, though not himself baptized in infancy, its first and ablest defender. He developed the theological argument in its favor. The Council of Mela, in Numidia, A. D. 416, composed of fifteen persons, and presided over by Augustine, decreed: Also, it is the pleasure of the bishops in order that whoever denies that infants newly born of their mothers, are to be baptized or says that baptism is administered for the remission of their own sins, but not on account of original sin, delivered from Adam, and to be expiated by the laver of regeneration, be accursed (Wall, The History of Infant Baptism, I. 265).[15]

Note – Augustine came on the scene late in the fourth century and was the first theologian for the Catholic Church. It appears that Augustine had a genuine conversion to Christianity, being reared by a devout mother. At first, he wanted

[12] Ibid, (p. 118).
[13] Christian, John T. (Kindle Locations 588-590).
[14] Ibid, (Kindle Locations 592 – 597)
[15] Ibid, (Kindle Locations 609 – 615)

nothing to do with Christianity and was known to be a thief and liar and was even openly promiscuous. After the conversion of some friends, he became convicted of his sin:

> Then came a day in 386 that changed Augustine forever. He was at his villa in Milan with his mother when Pontitian, an African Christian and an officer in the imperial household, stopped by for a visit. As they talked, Pontitian casually picked up a book lying on the table and was surprised to see that it was the epistles of Paul. That discovery prompted Pontitian to relate how he had come to put his faith in Christ. He also told how two friends of his had decided to join a monastery, their fiancees also becoming Christians and dedicating themselves to virginity. Hearing the story of the two young women committing themselves to chastity pierced Augustine to the core, and he realized his addiction to sex.
>
> After Pontitian left, Augustine ran out of the house, overcome by his sin. In despair, he flung himself on the ground underneath a fig tree. There he babbled, "How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why should there not be an end to my uncleanness now?"
>
> Suddenly Augustine heard the plaintive voice of an unknown little girl singing a song with the simple words, "Take up and read." To Augustine these words came as the voice of God himself. Augustine jumped up and ran to get the book containing Paul's epistles. Opening its pages, his eyes fell on Romans 13:13–14: "We should be decent and true in everything we do, so that everyone can approve of our behavior. Don't participate in wild parties and getting drunk, or in adultery and immoral living, or in fighting and jealousy. But let the Lord Jesus Christ take control of you, and don't think of ways to indulge your evil desires."
>
> Augustine later wrote, "Instantly as I reached the end of this sentence, it was as if the light of peace was poured into my heart, and all the shades of doubt faded away." He immediately went into the house and told his mother that her prayers had been answered.[16]

Augustine taught several doctrinal heresies, however, including infant baptism and sacraments. He was influential in implementing the Theodosian Law, which imposed fines of ten pounds of gold against all "heretical clergy". He also approved the use of physical persecution against those that were considered heretics. He once stated:

"It is, indeed, better," says he, "that men should be brought to serve God by instruction than by fear of punishment or by pain. But because the former means are better, the latter must not therefore be neglected.… Many must often be brought back to their Lord, like wicked servants, by the rod of temporal suffering, before they attain the highest grade of religious development.…[17]

[16] Rusten, S. with E. Michael, (p. 121).
[17] Schaff, P., & Schaff, Vol. 3, pp. 144–145.