

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
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“THY KINGDOM COME: THE WITNESS OF CHURCH HISTORY”

“The Catholic Age (1): Persecution, Heresy & Orthodoxy

II. The Church Comes into Its Own (70 - 300AD)

A. The First Generation After the Apostles (70-110 AD)

1. The “silent years” (70-95 AD) – there is not much known about the condition or growth of the Church during these years outside of the fact that the four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters (including Hebrews) and those of Peter, James and John were circulated and used by churches in worship throughout the Empire. The traumatic events of persecution by Nero in Rome as well as the Jewish War of 66-70 and subsequent destruction of the Temple undoubtedly caused a disruption in communication between churches. Regardless, the Church continued to grow through the witness of countless traders, slaves, common folk, and even those in positions of power.

However, persecution and heresy would be constant threats. How fitting that the Apostle Peter addressed both problems a few years prior to his martyrdom at the hands of Nero. First, concerning persecution he writes in **1 Peter 4:12-19**, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. 17For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? 19Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”*

Second, concerning heresy Peter says in **2 Pet. 2:1-2**, *“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”*

Recall also Jesus’ words, *“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16You will know them by their fruits.”* Mt. 7:15-16

And in **Jn 15:18, 20**: *“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”*

2. Domitian’s persecution (96-98 AD) – came to power in 81 AD following the untimely death of his older brother Titus by fever. Domitian had some unusual traits including spending long periods of isolation. According to ancient Roman historian Suetonius, *“At the beginning of his reign he used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catch flies and stab them with a keenly sharpened stylus.”* He took a harsh approach to the Jews in light of the recent war requiring that they now send the religious tax normally given to Jerusalem back to Rome. He also was the first Emperor to declare himself a god while living. He wanted to strengthen Roman

society and he believed strengthening worship in the Roman gods (which he now declared to be one!) would do so. As a result, he saw both Jews and Christians as impediments to his goal and unless they obeyed the demands of the state, were guilty of treason, and then either banished to slave work or killed for their faith. Domitian even had his cousin, Flavius Clemens, who was consul (highest elected office in Rome) executed for “atheism” – a clear reference to his Christian faith and then sent his wife, Flavia Domitilla, who was also Domitian’s niece, Flavia Domitilla, to the island of Pontia. She may have been later executed. We can see the inference to the severity of this persecution in the Book of Revelation when Rome (Babylon) is likened to a harlot that is **“drunk with the blood of the witnesses (martyrs) of Jesus (Rev. 17:1,6).** Suetonius writes that by the end of his reign *“he had become an object of terror and hatred to all.”* Thankfully, Domitian’s reign was cut short, his enemies conspiring against him and murdering him in the palace!

3. The Apostle John –with his brother James and Peter closest of Jesus’ disciples. His gospel and first epistle were universally accepted by the early church. Some doubted 2 and 3 John as well as Revelation being composed by the Apostle, though most accepted his authorship. There was another John (the elder) who was also a leader in the church who may have composed the book of Revelation. Regardless, during Domitian’s persecution, John the apostle, who was bishop over many churches in Asia Minor, was exiled to the small island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey to work in the salt mines before being released after Domitian’s death. According to Irenaeus in Book 2 of his *“Against Heresies”* he writes, *“All the elders in Asia associated with John, the Lord’s disciple, testify that John taught them the truth, for he remained with them until the time of Trajan (Emperor).”*

4. Clement of Rome – a church leader in Rome (probably the Clement referred to by Paul in **Philippians 4:3**) who is considered to be the third “pope” by the Roman Catholic Church - a title retroactively used centuries later. There is a surviving letter (dated 96 AD) that he wrote to the Corinthian Church. This letter was eventually circulated and read in many churches but never became part of the New Testament. Its contents are helpful for understanding the conditions and beliefs of the early church. He writes of *“the continuous and unexpected evils that have come upon us,”* an undoubted reference to Domitian’s persecution. He addresses a leadership crisis where younger leaders were expelling older leaders from their positions in the church. He gives rules on the administration of the eucharist and preaching. He says, *“the apostles were made evangelists to us by the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent by God. Thus, Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ...the church is built on them as a foundation (1 Clement 4:20).*

Finally, Clement quotes from many books in both the Old (Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah) and New Testaments (1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Hebrews) thereby showing that the Church held to the theological continuity between the Old and New Testaments and already considered much of what we call the New Testament as authoritative on matters of faith, doctrine, and practice. Clement goes on to write, *“By all means be pugnacious and hot-headed, my brothers, but about things that will lead to salvation. Just take a look at the sacred scriptures; they are the authentic voice of the Holy Spirit, and you know they are the authentic voice of the Holy Spirit, and you know that they contain nothing contrary to justice, nor nothing in them falsified. You are not going to find men of piety evicting the righteous there.”* Clement died sometime during the reign of the Emperor Trajan. Tradition says he was martyred.

B. Persecution – a clear and present danger.

1. Ignatius of Antioch – a disciple of John the Apostle, and appointed by Peter to be bishop of Antioch. In 107 AD Ignatius wrote a series of letters to the churches on a journey to Rome to receive his death sentence. While we don’t know the reason why he was condemned to death, tradition holds that he somehow offended the emperor Trajan by sharing the gospel with him during the Emperor’s visit to Antioch. It clearly was not the result of an empire-wide persecution as Christians were able to visit and communicate with him on the way. In fact, when Ignatius received word that believers in Rome were making inroads for his possible acquittal, he told them to stop! He writes, *“I fear your kindness, which may harm me. You may be able to achieve what you plan. But if you pay no heed to my request it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God...If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh,*

I shall again be no more than a human voice...When I suffer, I shall be free in Jesus Christ, and with him shall rise again in freedom...I am God's wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts, so that I may be offered as pure bread of Christ." In those letters we also see how the church functioned as well as its core beliefs. Some noteworthy quotes by Ignatius to the churches include, *"I entreat you... not to nourish yourselves on anything but Christian fare, and have no truck with the alien herbs of heresy."* Concerning heresy he wrote, *"You must keep away from these men as you would from a pack of savage animals; they are rabid curs who snap at peoples unawares, and you need to be on guard against their bites, because they are by no means easy to heal."* He called the Holy Eucharist the *"medicine of immortality."* He also wrote affirming the line of apostolic succession and church order when he said, *"Nobody's conscience can be clean if he is acting without the authority of his bishop, clergy and deacons."* In his letter to the Church in Smyrna, the first recorded usage of *katholikos* (catholic, universal) is used of the church. He writes, *"Where the bishop is to be seen, there let his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present, we have the worldwide (katholikos) church."* When Ignatius arrived in Rome, he was found guilty of treason and fed to the lions in the Flavian amphitheater.

2. Correspondence between Pliny and Trajan (112 AD) - Pliny, a Roman governor of the province of Bithynia (northern shore of Turkey) wrote to the emperor Trajan (98-117 AD) concerning the question of how to deal with the many Christians in his region. The correspondence between the two is below. This is the earliest discovered document describing the issues of the Christian faith faced by the Roman authorities and their policy toward Christians.

Governor Pliny: *It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never before participated in trials of Christians, so I do not know what offenses are to be punished or investigated, or to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age, or no difference recognized between the very young and the more mature. Is pardon to be granted for repentance, or if a man has once been a Christian is it irrelevant whether he has ceased to be one? Is the name itself to be punished, even without offenses, or only the offenses perpetrated in connection with the name?*

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have followed the following procedure: I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread because of these proceedings, as usually happens, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and also cursed Christ – none of which those who are really Christians can, it is said, be forced to do — these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ. They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to do some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food — but ordinary and innocent food.

Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by

torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition. I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it.

It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

The Emperor Trajan's response: *You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it — that is, by worshipping our gods — even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.*

Even though Trajan is not taking a hardline stance, he still approves punishment for those who are challenged for their faith and do not also worship the Roman gods. Several bishops are known to have been martyred during this time (Phocas, bishop of Sinope, Simeon, bishop of Jerusalem and of course, Ignatius of Antioch)

3. The martyrdom of Polycarp – 155 AD – believed to have known the Apostle John and also the younger friend Ignatius (see above), Polycarp served as bishop of Smyrna. After a group of believers were brought before a magistrate and called to recant their faith, the elderly bishop was caught up in this localized persecution. He hid to avoid capture but eventually was found and brought before the authorities. Encouraged by the proconsul to renounce Christ due to his old age, Polycarp refused. He was told to say “*Out with the atheists*” a reference to Christians, but he looked at the crowd around him and said, “*Yes, out with the atheists!*” The judge assured him if he only swore by the emperor and curse Christ, he would be free. Polycarp replied, “*For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?*” The judge threatened him with being burned alive. But Polycarp said to the judge that the fire he lit would only last a moment, whereas the eternal fire would last forever. As he was attached to the post to be burned, he looked up and prayed outloud, “*Lord Sovereign God. I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that jointly with the martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ...For this...I bless and glorify you. Amen*”

Note: Sometimes believers would purposely seek after martyrdom. The Church overall discouraged this zeal for the faith although such examples were still often commended. Polycarp served as an example of one who did not seek after martyrdom but when confronted with the choice of remaining faithful or renouncing Christ, he stood firm. Therefore, true martyrdom was viewed as something chosen by God, rather than chosen by the individual.

C. The Challenge of Heresy

1. The Gnostic evil- Gnosticism was a vast and unorganized movement whose belief system infiltrated the church and even Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. What we knew of this movement was mainly from Christian leaders (apologists) who wrote against such a belief system and defended the truth of God's Word against such falsehood. That changed in 1945 when a large collection of Gnostic writings were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, which included the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Truth*, and the *Gospel of Judas*. These discoveries confirmed what was known about Gnosticism as well as added some new insights. Gnosticism is

derived from the word *gnosis*, or knowledge. They believed they were given “secret knowledge” and this secret knowledge was necessary for salvation. They believed all matter was evil and the spirit was good. Therefore, the goal in life was to be set free from body and the material world. They also believed in a long genealogy of spirit beings who would confer this knowledge. Women also played a prominent role since the body was considered not essential. Thus, Gnosticism infiltrated the church and took the ideas and truths of God’s Word and twisted the original understandings and meanings. They would use the same terms and ideas as Jews and Christians but redefine and reinterpret those terms. So, there were Christian Gnostics, Jewish Gnostics and non-Christian Gnostics! For Christian Gnostics, Jesus really didn’t die on the cross physically, He only appeared to do so. He wasn’t born either as that would mean he was of the material world. Such a belief system was later called *Docetism* (from the Greek verb, “to seem”). This then would mean there was no resurrection. As a means of justifying their beliefs, Gnostics would claim that they received “secret knowledge” from Jesus Himself. Outside of their writings they did not leave much evidence of their social composition, worship, or community life. After several centuries they fizzled out. However, they were a major threat to the Christian faith because they claimed Christ to be “their own” and then denied all the major truths of the Christian faith. One can see parallels, however, of Gnostic thought and tendencies in Eastern religion, modern day cults, and even Islam.

2. Marcion – son of the bishop of Sinope on the southern coast of the Black Sea was brought up in the Church but later developed an animosity toward Judaism and the material world. So, he developed an understanding of the Christian faith that was both anti-Jewish and anti-material. In 144 AD, he went to Rome and was able to gather a large following. He formed his own church in which he denounced the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and claimed that only Paul and his letters and the Gospel of Luke (Paul’s companion) could be trusted while eliminating any references to Judaism or the OT in them! He believed that the other books used by the Church (what would become the New Testament) were corrupted by Jewish views. According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament (Yahweh) was an evil imposter God. The true Supreme God was the Father of Jesus. Jesus did not become man because this would mean he would be subject to Yahweh. He only appeared to be of the flesh. Jesus came to set us free from the evil god – Yahweh. His Father, on the other hand is a God of love. There is no judgment, as we can all be forgiven in Jesus. Marcion not only had a large following but he organized his own church with its own bishops and Holy Scriptures (Luke’s Gospel and Paul’s letters). His “church” lasted for several centuries before dying out. NOTE: The significance of this heresy is that it moved the greater Church to affirm its dependance on and understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures as the Word of God as they not only provide the foundation for understanding Jesus as the Messiah but also for understanding God’s plan of redemption for mankind in history. It also moved the Church to form a standard list of writings by the Apostles and their close companions to be used as Holy Scripture. This eventually became our New Testament. Marcion in attempting to defend his erroneous beliefs formed his own list. But it was incomplete and lacked the fullness of God’s revelation!

3. Montanism – another heresy developed a decade after Marcion. In 155 AD, a pagan priest in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) by the name of Montanus became a Christian. He began prophesying and speaking in tongues. He was joined by two women “prophetesses,” Priscilla and Maximilla, who also did the same. They claimed they were part of a movement of a new age in the Holy Spirit. They called for moral purity and some even called for celibacy to be the mark of true faith. They believed they were marking the beginning of the final age of humanity before Christ’s return. Of course, those who disagreed with their new pronouncements were considered blasphemers against the Holy Spirit! There were a number of problems this new movement. First, it was the coming of Jesus, His death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that inaugurated the final age of history. In Christ and in the Apostles with have the fulfillment of the Old Testament and fullness of God’s revelation for humanity. As **Hebrews 1:8** states almost one hundred years *before* Montanus, “***in these last days God has spoken to us in His son.***” Second, Montanus viewed his and his movements’ words from the Lord to have the same authority as Holy Scripture. Anyone who contradicted them were seen as unbelievers. This sets in motion a dangerous pattern where a church can literally make things up as they go forward in the faith as well as make new rules and revelations. Third, this enabled Montanus to “control” his followers as a cult leader. Jesus and the Holy Scriptures no longer are front and center of the faith, but relegated to the background. This same tendency has been seen in many “Christian” cults that have developed since.

D. The Refutation of Heresy and Ignorance

“*Apologia*” means “defense” in Greek. So, today, the term, “apologetics,” refers to the defense one makes for the faith. The faith had to be defended against not only heresy, but the cultural assumptions of the time – polytheism, class system/slavery, Greek philosophy, and loyalty to the emperor. In addition, there were several misunderstandings and rumors that developed from the terms used by Christians in their worship like “*love feast*,” “*unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood*,” “*brother and sister*” and so on. This led to accusations that Christians engaged in orgies, incest, and cannibalism – even of young babies since Jesus was also referred to as a babe! While the latter misunderstandings were easier to clear up, the other challengers required thoughtful and articulate responses. There were many early Church leaders (some now called “Church Fathers”) who eloquently defended the Christian faith against heresies as well as against the criticism of the leading Roman philosophers and thinkers of their day. They also proved to be great teachers and theologians who were able to articulate the faith of the Old and New Testaments in enlightening ways. The Church also developed what became known as the “Canon” (literally “rule”) of Holy Scripture to establish those writings understood to be “*inspired by the Holy Spirit*” or “*revealed by God*.” Third, the Church established a basic “creed” that set forth its most basic beliefs to be held by all believers. This creed was further developed and elaborated upon in future years. Finally, the Church developed the principle of Apostolic Succession that understood that the authority and leadership of the Church had been transferred from Jesus Himself to His first apostles, and then to other leaders who passed down this same authority and teaching to others in successive generations.

1. Defenders and teachers of the faith

a. Justin Martyr (100-165 AD)– at first a Greek philosopher, Justin became a believer after reading and studying the Holy Scriptures! He defended the Christian faith as the source of all truth by unpacking the doctrine of Christ as the *Logos* (Word of God) in **Jn. 1:1-18**. He argued that all that is good and true in Greek philosophy is found in the *Logos*. This opened the door for showing those who enamored with Greek philosophy to see the relevance of the gospel to life and their world. He was martyred for the faith during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. One of his most important surviving writings, *First Apology*, includes this passage that gives us an overview of early Christian worship.

He writes, “*And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the overseer verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.*”

Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the overseer in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the overseer, who provides for the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.”

b. Irenaeus of Lyons (130 – 202 AD) - born and raised in Smyrna, he had seen and heard the preaching of Polycarp, who in turn was said to have heard the Apostle John. Thus, he was the last-known living connection with the Apostles. As bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus was noted for his role in guiding and expanding Christian communities in the southern regions of present-day France and, more widely, for the development of Christian theology by combating Gnostic interpretations of Scripture as heresy and speaking of the two “hands of God” – the Word and the Holy Spirit as moving throughout history and how God has used the people of Israel in His plan of redemption. His best-known work is *Against Heresies*, a refutation of gnosticism, in particular that of Valentinus. To counter the doctrines of the gnostic sects claiming secret wisdom, he offered three pillars of orthodoxy (right teaching): the scriptures, the tradition handed down from the apostles, and the teaching of the apostles' successors. the Church of Rome, and he is the earliest surviving witness to regard all four of the now-canonical gospels as essential

c. Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) - as a Christian theologian and philosopher who taught at the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Among his pupils were Origen and Alexander of Jerusalem. A convert to Christianity, he was familiar with classical Greek philosophy and literature and argued that all truth comes from God in Christ and in Holy Scripture. In his work, He contended that the Law was given to Jews, and philosophy was given to Greeks, to lead both to the ultimate truth, Jesus Christ. In his *Exhortation to Pagans*, he shows how some of the truths of God’s Word are supported by Greek philosophy. He showed how reason and faith are not inseparable and that the gospel is not merely based on superstition and conjecture. He is the author of the earliest Christian hymn whose author is known. It begins with the words, “*Shepherd of tender youth, guiding in love and truth.*”

d. Tertullian of Carthage (160-220 AD) - called "the father of Latin Christianity" and "the founder of Western theology" Tertullian was a prolific early Christian writer from Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. An early Christian apologist who defended the gospel and Word of God against heresy, including Christian Gnosticism. He is perhaps most famous for being the first writer in Latin known to use the term *trinity*. However, because he taught that the Son and Spirit were subordinate to the Father, forbid the remarriage of widows and was harsh on those who fled persecution, as well as supporting some aspects of Montanism, he is not considered a “Church Father” in the traditional sense. Regardless, his writings and theological insight were instrumental in helping the Church grow in respect, understanding, and influence.

e. Origen of Alexandria (185 – 254 AD) - an early Christian scholar, ascetic, and theologian from Alexandria. Origen sought martyrdom with his father at a young age but was prevented from turning himself in to the authorities by his mother. His father was killed. When he was eighteen years old, Origen became a catechist at the Catechetical School of Alexandria. He devoted himself to his studies and adopted an ascetic lifestyle. He came into conflict with Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, in 231 after he was ordained as a presbyter by his friend, the bishop of Caesarea, while on a journey to Athens through the Holy Land. Demetrius condemned Origen for insubordination and accused him of having castrated himself. (Eusebius of the 4th century claims that he did after taking Jesus’ words literally in Mt. 19:12), and of having taught that even Satan would eventually attain salvation, an accusation which Origen vehemently denied. Origen founded the Christian School of Caesarea, where he taught logic, cosmology, natural history, and theology, and became regarded by the churches as the ultimate authority on all matters of theology. He was tortured for his faith during the Decian persecution in 250 and died three to four years later from his injuries.

Origen was able to produce a massive quantity of writings because of the patronage of his close friend Ambrose of Alexandria, who provided him with a team of secretaries to copy his works, making him one of the most prolific writers in all of antiquity. His treatise *On the First Principles* systematically laid out the principles of Christian theology and became the foundation for later theological writings. He also authored *Contra Celsum*, the

most influential work of early Christian apologetics, in which he defended Christianity against the pagan philosopher Celsus, one of its foremost early critics. Origen produced the Hexapla, the first critical edition of the Hebrew Bible, which contained the original Hebrew text as well as four different Greek translations of it, and one Greek transliteration of the Hebrew, all written in columns, side by side. He wrote hundreds of homilies covering almost the entire Bible, interpreting many passages as allegorical. Origen taught that, before the creation of the material universe, God had created the souls of all the intelligent beings. These souls, at first fully devoted to God, fell away from him and were given physical bodies. Origen was the first to propose the ransom theory of atonement in its fully developed form, and he also significantly contributed to the development of the concept of the Trinity. Origen hoped that all people might eventually attain salvation, but was always careful to maintain that this was only speculation. He defended free will and advocated Christian pacifism.

2. The Canon – literally taken from the Greek word meaning “*measuring rod*,” this term was used to describe the rule or standard for those Holy Scriptures inspired by God. Jesus affirmed the validity of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) by referring to them as authoritative “*Scripture cannot be set aside*,” He said, “*Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.*” (Jn. 10:35; Lk. 24:14). Josephus also attests to those Scriptures accepted by the Jews as inspired by God. Both he and Jesus do not affirm the Apocryphal Jewish writings as having the same authority. As noted before, the Hebrew Scriptures, served as the “Bible” of the early church. The New Testament came into being with the four Gospels (called “memoirs”) by many of the later early church leaders, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul’s letters, Hebrews, the letters of James, Peter and John, and the book of Revelation. The basis for acceptance was whether or not they were written by an apostle or a close companion of an apostle, had the traditional marks of authentic wisdom and authority (in other words not outlandish or sensational), were commonly used in worship, were in continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures, and were used by most churches. In other words, those books became accepted as Holy Scripture by virtue of their use and universal appeal, not by mandatory fiat (decree). There are not only thousands of ancient manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures that can be compared, but the early Church Fathers and others quote extensively from these writings and treat them as authoritative. The earliest known example of a “complete New Testament” is the Muratorian Canon dated 190 AD and includes all of our NT books except for James, 1 & 2 Peter, and Hebrews. It also included the books of the *Apocalypse of Peter* (which actually might be a reference to 1 Peter) and the *Wisdom of Solomon*, both of which were eventually dropped from the Canon. The New Testament Canon in its present form was well established by the middle of the 4th century. The earliest complete list is found in a letter from Alexandria in 367 AD by Bishop Athanasius.

3. The Creed – in addition to having an official list of Holy Scriptures that could be trusted, the early church developed simple creeds (belief statements) that were affirmed at one’s baptism. The Apostles’ Creed is based on these earlier creedal statements which were broken down in question-and-answer form.. These were meant to affirm the Christian faith, and based on the baptismal formula given by Jesus in Mt. 28:19 where one is to be baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the creed composed three questions: *Do you believe in God the Father almighty? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the Virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?* The earliest known creed in this format is dated about 150 AD and is in response to the Marcion and Gnostic heresies. Later in 325 AD the Nicene Creed was adopted that further articulated the understanding of the Triune nature of God and deity of Christ.

4. Apostolic Succession- as the Church grew in numbers and churches and was confronted by false teaching, especially that of the Gnostics, it was important to maintain the authority and legitimacy of the message. The early Church understood that the Christian faith is one grounded in history and specifically in the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. His authority and teaching, in the tradition of the prophets of Yahweh before Him, had

been entrusted to the Apostles as set forth succinctly in **Mt. 28:18-20**. The apostles passed this authority and teaching on to other faithful men who in turn continued the transmission of the faith in this manner. This became known as the principle of Apostolic Succession. As churches expanded in every region, it became necessary to have one main overseer (*episcopas* – bishop) as chief shepherd or “father” over the other overseers (*prebyteros*) and local churches. These bishops stood in the line of the apostles and were called to represent and uphold the unity, fidelity, and propagation of the faith. This effectively counted the numerous false teachers and prophets who claim that they have the better way or “secret knowledge” for salvation. Thus, for the Church to be catholic and orthodox meant that it would have a common Canon, a universal Creed, and the reliability of Apostolic Succession.

E. Persecution Continues (on and off) in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries

1. Marcus Aurelius (161 AD 180 AD) - considered to be enlightened and idealistic, he is known for his book *Meditations*, considered to be a literary masterpiece of that era. In a nod to Christians, he praises those souls who are ready to abandon their bodies when the time comes, rather than cling to life. But he then goes on to say that this attitude is praiseworthy only when it is the outcome of reason, “*and not of obstinacy, as is the case with Christians.*” But such an enlightened man was also superstitious, and it seems that in consulting seers concerning a number of disasters including invasions, floods, and epidemics that befell the Empire, the explanation was that Christians were to blame. As a result, there were a number of notable martyrdoms during his reign including Felicitas and her seven sons, Justin Martyr, and a large number of believers first beset by a mob before being killed in Lyons and Vienne, Gaul (modern day France). A letter from the church in said that the place where Christians were being held was so full that some died of suffocation before the executioners could get to them.

2. Septimius Severus (193-211AD) – during the reign of Commodus (previous emperor) there was less persecution but after Severus came to power, he reignited the flames of hostility toward believers a few years into his reign. Again, the issue was the supposed “threat” Christians posed to the stability and ethos of the empire. His desire was to see the empire unified in its worship of Sol Invictus (the “Unconquered Sun”) and to bring all religions and philosophies under that worship. The belief was that the Sun represented the chief god of the universe. All gods were to be accepted as long as one acknowledge the Sun that reigned above all. This policy of course, was most resisted by Christians and Jews. In 202 AD, Severus forbade under penalty of death all conversions to either faith. The result was an increase in local persecutions especially of new believers. Irenaeus is believed to have been martyred in that year. Later, Origen’s father along with others in Alexandria, Egypt lost their lives to the purge. One of the most famous martyrdoms of that time was that of Perpetua and her companions, slaves Felicitas and Revocatus, and two other young men, Saturninus and Secudnulus. All five were preparing to be baptized and because they had disobeyed royal edict against conversion that were all condemned to die and were then killed by wild beasts in the arena. It is interesting to note that after this now famous martyrdom, the persecution died down.

3. Elagabalus (218-222 AD) and Alexander Severus (222-235 AD) - pursued a similar policy of empire religious unity but did not persecute Christians or Jews. It was said that Severus even had images of Christ and Abraham along with various gods on his personal altar.

4. Philip the Arabian (244-249 AD) – sympathetic and even supportive of the Church to the point that it was even rumored that he was a Christian though there is no definite basis of fact for such a conclusion. Christians grew in number to the point that there were even many present in the aristocracy and upper echelons of Roman society. Then things changed once again with a new emperor.

5. Decius (249-251 AD) – with the threat of barbarian tribes in some areas and an economic in all areas of the empire, upon coming to the throne, Decius wanted to return Rome to her ancient glory. The ancient religion had fallen by the wayside so the gods needed to be revered again! Decius wanted all in the empire to worship the gods by offering sacrifice and burning incense. Once you did this, you would receive a certificate of

compliance (*labellum*). If you did not have the certificate, you would be guilty of treason. Since the Church had not suffered any major persecution for almost fifty years, it caught many believers by surprise. Some were able to bribe officials to get false certificates, others caved once pressured by the authorities while still others stood their ground. While a good number of Christians were executed, most were imprisoned and/or tortured including the famous Origen. It was a universal empire-wide policy. Thankfully Decius' reign was short lived as he died in battle in 251!

6. Valerian (253-260 AD) – in 257 while fighting the Persians, Valerian sent two letters to the Senate. The first required Christian clergy to perform sacrifices to the Roman gods or face banishment. The second, the following year, ordered the execution of Christian leaders. It also required Christian senators and equites to perform acts of worship to the Roman gods or lose their titles and property, and directed that they be executed if they continued to refuse. It also decreed that Roman matrons who would not recant their Christian faith should lose their property and be banished, and that civil servants and members of the Imperial household who would not worship the Roman gods should be reduced to slavery and sent to work on the Imperial estates. This indicates that Christians were well-established at that time, some in very high positions. Valerian was captured by the Persians never to be heard of again and his orders against Christians were rescinded.

In previous persecutions, most Christians who refused to obey the emperor's edicts had been martyred. The Greek word, "*martyr*," literally means "witness" and was applied to those who bore witness to Christ unto death. A new word was added and that was "confessor." This referred to those who had confessed Christ and as a result suffered incarceration, loss of property, and/or torture for their faith. A third category of believe, the lapsed, became the term for those who gave in to Rome's demands. What to do with believers who returned to the faith became issue in the Church going forward. We will look at this issue and how Christianity became the official faith of the Roman Empire next study.