**Maranatha Bible Church 2020**

**Equipping Hour: Church History II (Early 4th – 590 AD)**

**Week 2: The Church, Government, Compromise and Heresy Part 1**

**Introduction:**

We are going to start by looking at the church and what she did and did not do under intense persecution. As I stated last week, there were two heavy times of not only persecution but where the Emperor decided to make laws which directly contradicted the faith of these believers. If they were not to participate in what the Emperor had decreed, they would not only have the potential to lose their life, but they would certainly lose their livelihood.

It is important to remember that until 313 AD, the church was anything but stable. In in regions where they were not persecuted, it was still illegal to be a Christian. So the first 300 years of Christianity’s history is a tale of persecution and multiple attempts to stop the church and its spread.

There was also another pandemic (perhaps Ebola) which broke out around the Empire. The Church, once again, had the opportunity to respond when others simply left for safety and peace. We will see what impact that had on the church and her standing before the onlooking world.

**Emperor Decius (249-251):**

1. Before Decius’s reign, persecution of the Christians in the empire had been sporadic and local, but about the beginning of January 250 he issued an edict ordering all citizens to perform a religious sacrifice in the presence of commissioners.
2. He did this to solidify the empire’s loyalty to him, as he had just come into power. The heathen temples were literally falling apart because so many had converted to Christianity and Decius was afraid that they were going to actually take over and rule the Roman Empire.
   1. Emperor Decius declared Christians to be “enemies of Rome.” There are stories of Roman officials ordering Christians thrown to wild beasts for refusing to renounce their faith. Despite the efforts by Roman authorities at suppressing it, Christianity continued to grow.[[1]](#footnote-1)
   2. Upon his edict, this is really the first time that Christians had to face a great dilemma…should they follow the law and sacrifice to Decius or maintain their monotheistic belief.
   3. There were three ways in which people in the church handled this law:
      1. **Refuse to pay and suffer the consequences.** 
         1. A large number of Christians defied the government, for which the bishops of Rome, Jerusalem, and Antioch lost their lives and many others were arrested.[[2]](#footnote-2)
            1. Fabian, the bishop of Rome, was the first person of eminence who felt the severity of this persecution. He was accordingly seized; and on January 20, A.D. 250, he suffered decapitation.
            2. Julian, a native of Cilicia, was seized upon for being a Christian. He was put into a leather bag, together with a number of serpents and scorpions, and in that condition thrown into the sea.
            3. Peter, a young man, said, "I am astonished you should sacrifice to an infamous woman, whose debaucheries even your own historians record, and whose life consisted of such actions as your laws would punish. No, I shall offer the true God the acceptable sacrifice of praises and prayers." On hearing this, he was ordered to be stretched upon a wheel, by which all his bones were broken, and then he was sent to be beheaded.
            4. Nichomachus, being brought before the proconsul as a Christian, was ordered to sacrifice to the pagan idols. He replied, "I cannot pay that respect to devils, which is only due to the Almighty." He was put to the rack.
            5. Denisa, a young woman of only sixteen years of age, said "O unhappy wretch, why would you buy a moment's ease at the expense of a miserable eternity!" she was beheaded.
            6. Andrew and Paul, two companions of Nichomachus, suffered martyrdom by stoning.
            7. Alexander and Epimachus, of Alexandria, were apprehended for being Christians: and, confessing the accusation, were beat with staves, torn with hooks, and at length burnt in the fire; and we are informed, in a fragment preserved by Eusebius, that four female martyrs suffered on the same day, and at the same place, but not in the same manner; for these were beheaded.[[3]](#footnote-3)
      2. **Pay a bribe to the official so that they could get the certificate needed to keep away persecution.**
      3. **Give in, throw Christ out and sacrifice to the pagan gods and idols or simply run away.**
   4. The final two options proved by be quite a point of dissension within the church.
      1. If you think about it, for 18 months under Decius (he died in 251 and the edict lapsed), thousands upon thousands of Christians had given their life for Christ. They had stood in the face of evil, were horribly tortured and maintained their testimony.
         1. Unknowingly, they became the hero’s and models of the faith and the church. Once this persecution was over, though peace was very short lived, the church had a massive decision…what do you do with those who apostatized?
      2. In 251 when the persecution subsided, it was time to “re-elect” a new bishop to be over the church in Rome. A man named Novatian was the obvious choice, but a very moderate Roman aristocrat named Cornelius was elected instead.
         1. Even though Cornelius was elected, the rigorous theologian Novatian had a much larger following in the Christian community. So he too was consecrated as bishop and openly denied Cornelius’ place as the head of the church.
      3. For the first time in church history, there was a real split in the church as both men sought to gain control over the universal church. Both men sent out letters to gain the respect and following of area churches.
3. Because of all the unrest, in 251 AD, the bishop of Carthage (modern day Tunisia, N. Africa) Cyprian, called together a council, which was the first of 3 Councils of Carthage.
   1. This whole thing hinged on one point, *what do we do with those who denied Christ, the church and/or the Scriptures during the Decius persecution?* 
      1. Novatian said that if you did not live through it or die, you could not come back into the church.
      2. Bishop Cyprian, who had called the council together, had left Carthage during the persecution in order that he would be safe. This obviously upset Novatian and his followers and they deemed him unsaved.
   2. Here was the outcome:
      1. In May 251 a synod, assembled under the presidency of Cyprian to consider the treatment of the lapsi, excommunicated Felicissimus and five other Novatian bishops (Rigorists), and declared that the lapsi should be dealt with, not with indiscriminate severity, but according to the degree of individual guilt. These decisions were confirmed by a synod of Rome in the autumn of the same year. Other Carthaginian synods concerning the lapsi were held in 252 and 254.[[4]](#footnote-4)
         1. There were five categories in which those who had received the lapsi (certificate for denouncing Christ and sacrificing to the gods of Rome):
            1. **Sacrificati**: Those who had actually offered a sacrifice to the idols. Christians that made sacrifices, especially to Roman gods, were only offered absolution on their deathbeds.
            2. **Thurificati**: Those who had burnt incense on the altar before the statues of the gods. From Latin thurificare – "burn incense"
            3. **Libellatici**: Those who had drawn up attestation (libellus), or had, by bribing the authorities, caused such certificates to be drawn up for them, representing them as having offered sacrifice, without, however, having actually done so. A two-year sanction was imposed as penance. From Latin libellus – "little book; letter; certificate"
            4. **Acta facientes**: Those that made false statements or other acts to save their lives. From Latin – "those doing the acts"
            5. **Traditores**: Those who gave up sacred scriptures, artifacts and/or revealed names of fellow Christians. From Latin tradere - "hand over; deliver; betray" (source of the English "traitor”).
         2. Essentially, the council said “The decision of the council was that, though no one should be totally excluded from penance, those who truly had sacrificed their faith (the sacrificati) should be readmitted only on their deathbeds, and those who had merely accepted certificates (the libellatici) were to be readmitted after varying periods of penance. Three important principles of church discipline were thus established. First, the right and power to remit deadly sins, even that of apostasy, lay in the hands of the church; second, the final authority in disciplinary matters rested with the bishops in council as repositories of the Holy Spirit; and, third, unworthy members among the laity must be accepted in the New Israel of Christianity just as in the Old Israel of Judaism.”[[5]](#footnote-5)
      2. With taking the middle ground and having the support of the council, Cyprian was able to keep off a major church split.
4. As all of this is going on, from 249 – 252 AD the ***great Plague of Cyprian*** pandemic broke out around the Roman Empire.
   1. The reason it is called the Plague of Cyprian is because it was the bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, who was able to identity and describe it as what we call Ebola or perhaps pandemic influenza.
   2. From 250 – 262, the outbreak was at its peak and over 5000 people were dying daily in Rome.
   3. So, not only were they being persecuted from Emperor Decius, but they had the worst pandemic on record going on around them.
   4. So here is bishop Cyprian…he ran and hid during the 18 month persecution just to come back and find out that not only was there dissension in the church, but there were two bishops of Rome. He had to fight to keep the church together, pastor his own church in Carthage and deal with one of the deadliest pandemics in history.
      1. ***What did he do? He preached***. In fact, during the pandemic and as some 5000 people were dying daily in Rome, he would use “colorful accounts of the disease in his sermons.”[[6]](#footnote-6)
      2. In fact, because of his preaching during this time, it sparked the explosive growth of Christianity. Cyprian’s sermons told Christians not to grieve for plague victims, but to increase efforts to care for the living. His fellow bishop Dionysius described how Christians acted during this deadly pandemic,

“Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains..”

1. It was during this time that Christians gave a message of hope in Christ and so the church grew and grew. They demonstrated compassion and love to those who were suffering around them.

**Emperor Valerian (253 – 260 AD):**

1. Just when the church thought they had been through the worst of it all, Emperor Valerian took over.
2. Valerian sent two letters to the Senate ordering that firm steps be taken against Christians. The first, sent in 257, commanded Christian clergy to perform sacrifices to the Roman gods or face banishment. The second, the following year, ordered the execution of Christian leaders. [[7]](#footnote-7)
   1. It also required Christian senators and equites [equestrian order] to perform acts of worship to the Roman gods or lose their titles and property, and they be executed if they continued to refuse.
   2. It also decreed that Roman matrons who would not apostatize 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.
      1. This indicates that Christians were well-established at that time, some in very high positions.
3. As Emperor Valerian was getting ready to rain hell down upon the Christians, a new bishop took over in Rome, Stephen (254-257). There were two Spanish churches who appealed to Cyprian that Stephen was not allowing their bishops to be restored because they had lapsed under the Decius persecution.
   1. Cyprian brought together a council and the decided that the congregations not only had a right but a duty to separate themselves from a cleric who had committed a deadly sin such as apostasy.
      1. Cyprian wrote (Letter 67) that the Holy Spirit was no longer in such a priest and that his sacraments would lead to perdition and not salvation. The church as the “pure Bride of Christ” might be obliged to absorb a sinful laity, but a sinful priest making offerings on behalf of the people was unthinkable.[[8]](#footnote-8)
   2. Now, in Rome, bishop Stephen decided that all baptisms in the name of the Trinity were valid and those who received them could be (re)admitted to the church.
      1. Cyprian, on the other hand, held a third council and came to the conclusion that there could be no baptism outside of the church ***and for the first time, clearly articulated that there is no faith, hope or salvation for those outside the church***.
      2. The nature of the church was now being defined two ways, in Rome it was about the church’s universal and inevitably mixed character on earth. In Carthage (N. Africa) the church stressed its integrity under all circumstances.
4. The church stayed united, for now, but was set to suffer great persecution again under Valerian.
   1. In 258 AD, a much more mature Cyprian was brought before the Roman government in Carthage. He was tried as a Christian, maintained his confession and was martyred.
   2. Cyprian was a very important figure in church history, not only for his very keen theological insight but for his ceaseless love for the church.
   3. He wrote a book *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* and wrote “He no longer has God for his Father, who does not have the church for his mother.”
      1. He believed the highest expression of unity was a consensus of bishops (pastors), all possessing the Holy Spirit, all sovereign over their own churches.
      2. For someone to go against the bishop was the worst of sins.
5. Cyprian suffered under two persecutions from Rome, one of the deadliest plagues on record, fought to keep the unity of the church and lead many councils to refine and define doctrines.

Valerian is captured in battle by the Persians in 260 AD and Christians have a relative amount of peace. While there were no formal orders to persecute believers, because they lived so counter to the culture, at any given time persecution would break out. This would change when Diocletian takes over in 284 AD

**Emperor Diocletian (284 – 305 AD)**

1. He saw the Roman Empire declining and thought that it was the Christians who were causing it because they were not sacrificing to the Roman gods nor were they living a licentious lifestyle.
   1. Something that is important to keep in mind, it was not so much that the Roman Empire was against Christianity or even Jesus for that matter.
   2. Roman cohesion was based upon societies obedience to their authority and pledging their allegiance to the State above all else.
      1. This was epitomized by their continual sacrifices to Emperor. Christians would not have any issues had they simply gone with the flow of the government or the culture.
2. The Diocletian persecution was the last but the most severe persecution in all of church history up to this point in time.
   1. In the first fifteen years of his rule, Diocletian purged the army of Christians and surrounded himself with public opponents of Christianity.
   2. His preference was for activist government, combined with his self-image as a restorer of past Roman glory, predicted the most pervasive persecution in Roman history.
   3. In the winter of 302, Galerius (**Emperor from 305 – 311 AD**) urged Diocletian to begin a general persecution of the Christians. Diocletian was wary, and asked the oracle of Apollo for guidance. The oracle's reply was read as support of Galerius's position, and a general persecution was called on February 24, 303.
3. Diocletian’s first edict was that Christian churches be destroyed and all Scriptures be burned. He also declared that anything of value be taken as Roman property.
   1. He also declared that Christians could not meet or assemble for worship. They could not petition the courts for their rights and anyone in government lost their rank and became a target for slavery.
4. His second edict came later in 303 AD and called for a general arrest of all church leaders. Because he believed the Christians were not following his previous orders, he declared them enemies of the State and had them arrested.
   1. History records that the prisons were so full of Christians that they had to release the actual criminals to make room for them.
5. A few months after arresting hundreds and hundreds of Christian leaders, he signed a third edict which gave amnesty to all imprisoned Christians…if they would sacrifice to Rome’s gods.
   1. There were some that did so freely, some who were tortured and then gave in and because of the overcrowding in prisons.
      1. Many were set free and the public told they had sacrificed, but in reality they did not.
   2. The third edict was to fracture the Christian community and once again bring unity to the Roman Empire.
6. His fourth and final edict came in 304 AD when he ordered all people to gather in the public square and offer a collective sacrifice to the gods. Anyone who refused was to be killed on the spot.
   1. This was applied across most of the Empire, including Thessalonica in April 304 and then Palestine shortly thereafter.
      1. This edict would remain in place for 9 years until the Edict of Milan was signed.
7. At this time there were 4 Roman Emperors, Diocletian, Maximian, Constantius and Galerius. Both Diocletian and Maximian resigned in 305 AD so that left Constantius and Galerius as the sole senior Emperors over Rome.
   1. You can only imagine the power struggle these men had ruling their separate parts of the Empire.
8. After they resigned, the church was in shambles. Churches were no more, Scriptures had been burned, leaders were killed and the whole infrastructure was decimated.
9. In 306 AD, through a series of events which were contrary to Roman tradition, Constantine, the son of Constantius, became Emperor when his father stepped down. Constantine would rule from 306 – 337.
   1. When he was appointed, he immediately ended all persecution and restored to them what they had lost during the past years of persecution.
   2. This was an interesting move by Constantine. It gave him the opportunity to become the liberator of the Christians and have them look favorably upon him.
   3. Soon after Constantine’s declaration of peace, the other Emperor’s followed suit.

**Edict of Milan (313 AD)**

1. This was the proclamation that permanently established religious toleration for Christianity within the Roman Empire. It was the outcome of a political agreement concluded in Mediolanum (modern Milan) between the Roman emperors Constantine I and Licinius in February 313. The proclamation, made for the East by Licinius in June 313, granted all persons freedom to worship whatever deity they pleased, assured Christians of legal rights (including the right to organize churches), and directed the prompt return to Christians of confiscated property. Previous edicts of toleration had been as short-lived as the regimes that sanctioned them, but this time the edict effectively established religious toleration. The extant copies of the decree are those posted by Licinius in the eastern parts of the empire.[[9]](#footnote-9)
2. Despite their treaty in Milan in 313, Licinius and Constantine battled for full control of the Roman Empire off and on for a decade until Constantine finally became sole emperor in 324.
   1. Throughout this time, Constantine continued to publicly favor Christianity. Under his leadership, destroyed churches were rebuilt and Christian clergy were exempted from paying taxes.
   2. In 330, Constantine relocated his throne to the newly built city of Constantinople, which was meant to be both the new Rome and an explicitly Christian city.
   3. However, despite his partiality toward Christianity, Constantine maintained strong ties to traditional paganism. For example, he retained the title of Pontifex Maximus, which made him the official high priest of the state pagan religion.
      1. The first coins he issued contained images of pagan gods and not Christian iconography.
      2. When he declared the first day of the week a public holiday in 321, he named it in honor of the sun rather than the Christian God. The sun was the sign of Apollo, one of the most important gods in the Roman pantheon—many scholars speculate that perhaps Constantine conflated the Christian God with Apollo, assuming they were two names for the same deity.[[10]](#footnote-10)
3. According to one account, in a dream before the battle at the Mulvian Bridge, Constantine saw a vision of a monogram composed of the first two Greek letters of the name of “Christ.” The next day he had his soldiers inscribe that monogram on their shields.
   1. He paid for the Bishop of Carthage in 312/313 enough money to take care of all the clergy there.
4. Constantine laid the groundwork for the next several hundred years of the Roman Empire. At the turn of the second millennium, almost all Europeans were either Christians, Jew or Muslim, with Christian being by far the majority religion.
5. Constantine took an active role in church controversies. When Caecilian was challenged as bishop of Carthage (313) by the Donatists (separatists in the African church), Constantine instructed the bishops of Rome to summon a commission to hear the case.
   1. Since the Donatists were not content with the results of that commission, Constantine himself eventually heard the case, and in 316 he declared Caecilian to be the rightful bishop.

**Council of Nicea (325 AD)**

1. Constantine also summoned this counsel, which ruled against Arianism (a heresy that denied that Christ as the Son of God was coeternal with the Father).
   1. It was the emperor’s edict which gave legal force to the Nicean decision.
2. This is massive, this would be the government showing rule and reign over the church. Not only did he call the council together, but he also ruled for it.
3. Previous council’s:
   1. Jerusalem Council or Synod (Acts 15)
   2. Council of Ephesus (193 AD)
   3. Council of Carthage (251, 255, 256 AD)
      1. All these Council’s were called by church leaders…
4. The Council of Nicea set a new precedent that the Emperor has power over the church.
   1. Not only that, it was the first “ecumenical” or worldwide council of the church.
5. There were some 230 bishops from around the world who came to Bithynia to discuss how to define the nature of Christ and the character of His work.
   1. Arius, a man from Alexandria, Egypt, who said that “If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence; hence it is clear that there was when the Son was not. It follows then of necessity that he had his existence from the non-existent.”[[11]](#footnote-11)
   2. While it is clear that Arius had much reverence and awe for God the Father and Jesus, he held that Jesus, taking some traits from the Father, was less than Him.
6. The council would declare him a heretic and conclusively decide on what we confess even today.

Next week we are going to focus on some of the men who shaped history and some of the public debates which were crucial to our belief systems in the church today.

1. https://mrdowling.com/documents/703-christendom.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decius> 07/15/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/foxs-book-of-martyrs/the-seventh-persecution-under-decius-a-d-249.html 07/16/2020](https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/foxs-book-of-martyrs/the-seventh-persecution-under-decius-a-d-249.html%2007/16/2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [http://www.self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Councils\_of\_Carthage 07/16/2020](http://www.self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Councils_of_Carthage%2007/16/2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Cyprian-Christian-bishop 07/16/2020](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Cyprian-Christian-bishop%2007/16/2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus/#:~:text=Historians%20have%20suggested%20that%20the,capricious%20deities%20but%20the%20product> 07/16/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_(emperor)#Persecution_of_Christians> 07/16/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Cyprian-Christian-bishop> 07/17/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edict-of-Milan> 07/23/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.fbcdurham.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Introduction-to-Church-History-3-The-Imperial-Church.pdf> 07/23/2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Noll, Mark *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* Logos ed. P. 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)