



Early Christianity

Session 8

April 29, 2024

Opening Prayer:

- I. Let us pray: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for bringing us together to learn, discuss, and reflect on how our faith tradition evolved over the centuries. Help us to remain humble as we learn how human development, social and political volatility, and technology has used and abused the message of Jesus, struggled to reform the Church, and discern divine Truth. Inspire us to accept the past, acknowledge the present, and have hope in the future. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

- II. **Reflection: We have talked about this before, but it is worth revisiting. Let's look at this from the perspective of Evangelical Christianity influencing our modern policies. When government gets involved in religion, and uses it in its governing decisions, what are the benefits, and what are the pitfalls of this?**

- III. **New Rounds of Persecution:**
 - a. Second century persecution was a reality, but with political turmoil and civil wars, Emperor Trajan was preoccupied with the survival of the Roman Empire than a bunch of troublesome Jews.
 - b. Unless someone brought charges against a Jew, their offenses were overlooked.
 - c. **Septimius Severus**
 - i. Beginning of third century.
 - ii. Was able to end the civil wars, and was left with a weakened and unruly empire.
 - iii. "Barbarian" uprisings were a constant threat.
 - iv. Dissident groups were inside threats to the government. Rebellions would raise the possibility of new civil wars breaking out.
 - v. Severus introduced the mandate that all people must worship "The Unconquered Sun." All other gods were to be accepted, as long as worshipers understood that the Sun reigned above all other gods.
 - vi. This encouraged syncretism – the blending of traditions.
 - vii. Jews and Christians refused to obey the new policy.
 - viii. In 202 C.E., Severus then outlawed Christianity and Judaism. Converts and their teachers would suffer the death penalty.
 - ix. The Origen's father was executed, and Clement had to go into hiding.
 - x. Perpetua and Felicitas were two women who were executed – not because they were Christian, but rather because they were converting to Christianity. Felicitas was pregnant when she was martyred.



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- x. Perpetua and Felicitas were to die by being attacked by a ferocious cow. Perpetua asked to be able to retie her hair. Loose hair was for those in mourning. For her, this was a joyful day. After being tossed around by the animal, they stood together in the center of the arena, gave each other the kiss of peace, and died by the sword.
- xii. There were three other male martyrs that were put in the arena to be mauled by lions. Two died quickly, the animal would not approach the third. He declared that he would die by a leopard – and so it was.
- d. **Reflection: What are the benefits and pitfalls of syncretism? How do we see this today?**
- e. **Sun or Son?**
 - i. After Septimius Severus, the edict was not enforced.
 - ii. In 211 C.E. Caracalla persecuted Christians to some degree. Most persecution occurred in North Africa.
 - iii. Emperors Elagabalus and Alexander Severus tried to reinstate the edict, but did not pursue violators. It is said that Alexander had a private altar with carved gods, as well as Jesus and Abraham. His mother attended lectures by Origen.
 - iv. Maximin was next. There was limited persecution due to a divided city. Once the issues were resolved, the persecution ended. It is rumored that Maximin was Christian.
 - v. For 50 years, there was little persecution.
- f. **End of persecution? I think not! Welcome Decius**
 - i. In 249 C.E. Decius took the throne.
 - ii. Considered a heartless and cruel leader.
 - iii. Fact: Likely an Emperor of golden age of the empire, Decius was an ‘old-time’ leader who wanted to restore the empire to its glory.
 - iv. The barbarians were getting more and more bold in their attacks.
 - v. The economy was in trouble.
 - vi. Decius blamed the decline of the empire on the civilians who abandoned their gods.
 - vii. He issued an edict that one must worship the gods and offer sacrifices to the god Decius. Failure to do so was considered treason.
 - viii. The goal was not to execute offenders, but to encourage them to abandon any other tradition, and ‘convert’ to sacrificing to Decius. A declaration of



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allegiance to sacrificing to Decius would be rewarded with a certificate that was a ticket to freedom.

- ix. Some Christians quickly embraced the edict.
- x. Some Christians made the declaration, received their certificate, but never offered sacrifices.
- xi. Some Christians purchased fraudulent certificates, and did not sacrifice to Decius.
- xii. Some Christians stood steadfast, and would not concede. Unlike the emperors of the past, Decius was not out to create martyrs, but converts. Those who refused to convert were tortured, depriving them of the medal of honor – martyrdom. Rather, they were labeled as “confessors.”
- g. **Reflection: How should Christianity handle those who have left the Church and returned, or those that disowned Christianity? How should those who renounce their faith be readmitted? What is your perspective?**
- h. **Cyprian and Novatian**
 - i. During the reign of Decius, many Christians ‘fell away’ from the Church. The questions became, how to readmit them back into the fold.
 - ii. Some abandoned Christianity.
 - iii. Some obtained fraudulent certificates.
 - iv. Some recanted Christianity, and then reaffirmed their faith in Christianity.
 - v. Confessors would readmit some of these, much to the distain of bishops who felt there needed to be a ‘system’ to follow. Confessors were considered too lenient.
 - vi. Cyprian became a Christian at age 40, was well-trained in rhetoric, and became a bishop. He became a bishop shortly before the persecutions. He fled during the persecution and guided his flock through correspondence. This was considered cowardice.
 - vii. He felt that leading the flock from afar was far more productive than being executed. However, years later, he was martyred.
 - viii. Cyprian took the position that anyone who fell outside of the communion of the church was excluded from salvation.
 - ix. Novatian was much more rigorous in readmittance.
 - x. There was a conflict between Hippolytus, a noted theologian, and Calixtus. Calixtus was willing to forgive those guilty of fornication who repented. Hippolytus did not agree. This disagreement resulted in having two bishops of Rome.



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- xii. In the case of Novatian's protest, as in so many other cases, the issue was whether purity or forgiving love should be the characteristic of the church.
- xiii. The schism of Hippolytus was short. Novatian's schism lasted for generations.
- xiv. The significance here is that they show the restoration of the lapsed was one of the main concerns of the Western church from a very early time.
- xv. The question about those baptized Christians who sinned divided the Western church repeatedly. It was out of the concern that the entire penitential system developed. Much later, the Protestant Reformation was in large measure a protest against that system.
- xvi. **Reflection: How important is it to have systems in place to reinstate lapsed Christians?**

IV. Christian Life

- a. First three centuries
 - i. Christians were typically considered to be ignorant, powerless, and of obscure birth.
 - ii. They were not educated in schools or synagogues. Rather, Christianity was spread in kitchen, shops, or tanneries.
 - iii. Out of this group rose legends and writings that resulted in magnificent miracles and actions. Stories about Jesus' childhood came out of this rank-and-file group (breaking water jars and restoring them, having trees bend down rather than climbing them).
 - iv. The more sophisticated writing, such as Paul, Origen, or Justin were products of a higher-class group, and catered to the elite.
 - v. The writings of the lower class should not be underestimated. Their vision of God as sovereign, mighty, and active in the world often reflected the message of the gospel better than the theological writing from the elite.
 - vi. When confronted by the Empire, the dedicated group would resist allegiance to the emperor in favor of Jesus being their only king.
 - vii. For this group, they awaited the restoration of Jerusalem to its grandeur as ushered in by Jesus, and liberation from imperial control.
 - viii. **Reflection: How does modern world resemble/reject this theology?**
- b. Christian worship
 - i. **Reflection: How do you think worship impacts one's faith, one's demeanor, one's sense of purpose?**



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- ii. Contrary to the diversity of theology between classes and groups, worship was consistent.
- iii. The Book of Acts served as the resource on what worship should look like.
- iv. Worship was done in a common place.
- v. It took place on the first day of the week because that was the day that the resurrection occurred, and was a time of celebration.
- vi. Worship did not focus on repentance, the depth of sin, etc. Rather it celebrated, over a meal, the promise of the future sealed by Jesus' resurrection. It was a time of joy.
- vii. Did not focus on Good Friday, but rather Easter. Communion was more important than preaching.
- viii. **Reflection: Are the rituals within worship important? Why, why not?**
- ix. By the second century, scripture was read, a commentary on it, prayers, and singing. It would then have the kiss of peace, and a prayer that recounted the saving acts of God – then invoking the Holy Spirit over the bread and wine. The bread would be broken and the cup passed. It would end with a benediction.
- x. At this time in history, only baptized Christians could attend. Those in the process of converting could attend only part of the service.
- xi. Catacombs
 - 1. Contrary to popular belief, the services were held in the catacomb because that is where the heroes of the faith were buried, rather than to hide from the authorities.
 - 2. By worshiping in the graveyard with the martyrs, they felt in communion with these heroes. They did hide in the catacombs, at times.
- xii. Normally, they would gather in private homes. As congregations grew, some homes were dedicated for worship only.
- xiii. It was customary to attempt to have all Christians in a city gather in the same place at the same time. But as they became too large, they split into separate geographic congregations.
- xiv. Unity was preserved by each congregation having 'diptychs' which are tablets connected listing bishops from near and far. Deleting a name would break the bond.
- xv. Unity was also preserved by having bread from the church of the bishop sent to other churches in the same city – called 'fragmentum.'



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- xvi. **Reflection: How do Christian churches today practice unity? Or is unity unimportant?**
- c. Christian calendar
 - i. **Reflection: Is the Christian calendar important? Why, why not?**
 - ii. Deciding on the day of the year in which Easter should be celebrated was filled with disagreement. Some thought Passover was appropriate. Others thought it should be celebrated on a Sunday.
 - iii. Epiphany (Jan 6) was the original “Christmas Day.” The Western Church, after the time of Constantine, decided to move it to December 25 as a response to a pagan holiday celebrated on the same day.
- d. **Final questions or comments**

V. Closing Prayer

Let us pray: Loving and Eternal God: We praise You for Your love and goodness. You have guided Your Church throughout history, and we rely upon Your providence to sustain it. Thank you for giving us a glimpse into the past to help us understand how Your Church has evolved. We give glory to You through Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note: The information above is taken, whether in part or in whole, from *The Story of Christianity* by Justo Gonzales – Volume 1.