

CHAPTER 5 : THE POST-APOSTOLIC, ANTE-NICENE ERA

Just as the ancient Hebrews faced new challenges when they exited Egypt, so the Christian church was tried and tested following its deliverance in 70 AD. As the Hebrews had to be weaned from the material advantages of Egypt, the primitive church had to be weaned of the spiritual advantages of an Apostolate. The primitive church did enjoy, however, the great blessing of a complete inscripturated word of God to guide her. But there would be many errorists around to distort the teachings of that word, and swerve the church off course. And persecution did not cease either. Thus did the Christian church embark on its difficult wilderness journey.

Until the reign of Constantine Christianity had not even a legal existence in the Roman empire, but was first ignored as a Jewish sect, then slandered, proscribed, and persecuted, as a treasonable innovation, and the adoption of it made punishable with confiscation and death. Besides, it offered not the slightest favor, as Mohammedanism afterwards did, to the corrupt inclinations of the heart, but against the current ideas of Jews and heathen it so presented its inexorable demand of repentance and conversion, renunciation of self and the world, that more, according to Tertullian, were kept out of the new sect by love of pleasure than by love of life. The Jewish origin of Christianity also, and the poverty and obscurity of a majority of its professors particularly offended the pride of the Greeks, and Romans. Celsus, exaggerating this fact, and ignoring the many exceptions, scoffingly remarked, that "weavers, cobblers, and fullers, the most illiterate persons" preached the "irrational faith," and knew how to commend it especially "to women and children."

But in spite of these extraordinary difficulties Christianity made a progress which furnished striking evidence of its divine origin and adaptation to the deeper wants of man, and was employed as such by Irenaeus, Justin, Tertullian, and other fathers of that day. Nay, the very hindrances became, in the hands of Providence, means of promotion. Persecution led to martyrdom, and martyrdom had not terrors alone, but also attractions, and stimulated the noblest and most unselfish form of ambition. Every genuine martyr was a living proof of the truth and holiness of the Christian religion. Tertullian could exclaim to the heathen: "All 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. The predilection of the poor and oppressed for the gospel attested its comforting and redeeming power. But others also, though not many, from the higher and educated classes, were from the first attracted to the new religion; such men as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathaea, the Apostle Paul, the proconsul Sergius Paulus, Dionysius of Athens, Erastus of Corinth, and some members of the imperial household. Among the sufferers in Domitian's persecution were his own near kinswoman Flavia Domitilla and her husband Flavius Clemens. In the oldest part of the Catacomb of Callistus, which is named after St. Lucina, members of the illustrious *gens Pomponia*, and perhaps also of the Flavian house, are interred. The senatorial and equestrian orders furnished several converts open or concealed. Pliny laments, that in Asia Minor men of every rank (*omnis ordinis*) go over

to the Christians. Tertullian asserts that the tenth part of Carthage, and among them senators and ladies of the noblest descent and the nearest relatives of the proconsul of Africa professed Christianity. The numerous church fathers from the middle of the second century, a Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, excelled, or at least equaled in talent and culture, their most eminent heathen contemporaries.

Nor was this progress confined to any particular localities. It extended alike over all parts of the empire. "We are a people of yesterday," says Tertullian in his Apology, "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. We can count your armies; our numbers in a single province will be greater." All these facts expose the injustice of the odious charge of Celsus, repeated by a modern skeptic, that the new sect was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace—of peasants and mechanics, of boys and women, of beggars and slaves.

It is a remarkable fact that after the days of the Apostles no names of great missionaries are mentioned. There were no missionary societies, no missionary institutions, no organized efforts in the ante-Nicene age; and yet in less than 300 years from the death of the Apostle John the whole population of the Roman empire which then represented the civilized world was nominally Christianized.

To understand this astonishing fact, we must remember that the foundation was laid strong and deep by the Apostles themselves. The seed scattered by them from Jerusalem to Rome, and fertilized by their blood, sprung up as a bountiful harvest. The word of our Lord was again fulfilled on a larger scale: "One soweth, and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye have not labored: others have labored, and ye are entered into their labor" (John 4:38).

Christianity once established was its own best missionary. It grew naturally from within. It attracted people by its very presence. It was a light shining in darkness and illuminating the darkness. And while there were no professional missionaries devoting their whole life to this specific work, every congregation was a missionary society, and every Christian believer a missionary, inflamed by the love of Christ to convert his fellow-men. The example had been set by Jerusalem and Antioch, and by those brethren who, after the martyrdom of Stephen, "were scattered abroad and went about preaching the Word." Justin Martyr was converted by a venerable old man whom he met "walking on the shore of the sea." Every Christian laborer, says Tertullian, "both finds out God and manifests him, though Plato affirms that it is not easy to discover the Creator, and difficult when he is found to make him known to all."

The gospel was propagated chiefly by living preaching and by personal intercourse; to a considerable extent also through the sacred Scriptures, which were early propagated and translated into various tongues, the Latin (North African and Italian), the Syriac (the Curetonian and the Peshito), and the Egyptian (in three dialects, the Memphitic, the Thebaic, and the Bashmuric). Communication among the different parts of the Roman empire from Damascus to Britain was comparatively easy and safe. The highways built

for commerce and for the Roman legions, served also the messengers of peace and the silent conquests of the cross. Commerce itself at that time, as well as now, was a powerful agency in carrying the gospel and the seeds of Christian civilization to the remotest parts of the Roman empire.

Justin Martyr says, about the middle of the second century: "There is no people, Greek or barbarian, or of any other race, by whatsoever appellation or manners they may be distinguished, however ignorant of arts or agriculture, whether they dwell in tents or wander about in covered wagons—among whom prayers and thanksgivings are not offered in the name of the crucified Jesus to the Father and Creator of all things." Half a century later, Tertullian addresses the heathen defiantly: "We are but of yesterday, and yet we already fill your cities, islands, camps, your palace, senate and forum; we have left to you only your temples." By the end of the third century the name of Christ was known, revered, and persecuted in every province and every city of the empire. Maximian, in one of his edicts, says that almost all had abandoned the worship of their ancestors for the new sect.

In the absence of statistics, the number of the Christians must be purely a matter of conjecture. In all probability it amounted at the close of the third and the beginning of the fourth century to nearly one-tenth or one-twelfth of the subjects of Rome, that is to about ten millions of souls. But the fact that the Christians were a closely united body, fresh, vigorous, hopeful, and daily increasing, while the heathen were for the most part a loose aggregation, daily diminishing, made the true prospective strength of the church much greater.

The propagation of Christianity among the barbarians in the provinces of Asia and the north-west of Europe beyond the Roman empire, was at first, of course, too remote from the current of history to be of any great immediate importance. But it prepared the way for the civilization of those regions, and their subsequent position in the world.

Asia was the cradle of Christianity, as it was of humanity and civilization. The Apostles themselves had spread the new religion over Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor. According to the younger Pliny, under Trajan, the temples of the gods in Asia Minor were almost forsaken, and animals of sacrifice found hardly any purchasers. In the second century Christianity had already penetrated to Edessa in Mesopotamia, and some distance into Persia, Media, Bactria, and Parthia; and in the third, into Armenia and Arabia. Paul himself had, indeed, spent three years in Arabia.

In Africa Christianity gained firm foothold in Egypt, and there as early as the Apostolic age. Mark, the evangelist, according to ancient tradition, had already laid the foundation of the church of Alexandria. Eusebius names, as the first bishops of Alexandria, Annianos (A.D. 62–85), Abilios (to 98), and Kerdon (to 110). As early as the second century a theological school flourished in Alexandria, in which Clement and Origen taught as pioneers in biblical learning and Christian philosophy. From Lower Egypt the gospel spread to Middle and Upper Egypt and the adjacent provinces, as far as Nubia, Ethiopia, and Abyssinia. At a council of Alexandria in the year 235, twenty bishops were present from the different parts of the land of the Nile.

Christianity reached proconsular Africa perhaps already at the close of the first century. There was constant intercourse with Italy. It spread very rapidly over the fertile fields and burning sands of Mauritania and Numidia. Cyprian could assemble in 258 a synod of eighty-seven bishops, and in 308 the schismatical Donatists held a council of two hundred and seventy bishops at Carthage. From what we can ascertain about church organization at this time period, there was for each church a bishop.

The oldest Latin translation of the Bible, miscalled "Itala" (the basis of Jerome's "Vulgata"), was made probably in Africa and for Africa, not in Rome and for Rome, where at that time the Greek language prevailed among Christians. Latin theology, too, was not born in Rome, but in Carthage. Tertullian is its father. Minutius Felix, Arnobius, and Cyprian bear witness to the activity and prosperity of African Christianity and theology in the third century. It reached its apex in Augustine, the greatest among the fathers, but soon after his death (430) it was buried first beneath the Vandal barbarism, and in the seventh century by the Mohammedan conquest. Yet his writings led Christian thought in the Latin church throughout the dark ages, stimulated the Reformers, and are a vital force to this day.

The church at Rome was arguably the most prominent one for all the West. According to Eusebius, it had in the middle of the third century one bishop, forty-six presbyters, seven deacons with as many sub-deacons, forty-two acolyths, fifty readers, exorcists, and door-keepers, and fifteen hundred widows and poor persons under its care. From this we might estimate the number of members at some fifty or sixty thousand, *i.e.* about one-twentieth of the population of the city, which cannot be accurately determined indeed, but must have exceeded one million during the reign of the Antonines. The numeric strength of Christianity in Rome is also confirmed by the enormous extent of the catacombs where the Christians were buried.

From Rome the church spread to all the cities of Italy. The first Roman provincial synod, of which we have information, numbered twelve bishops under the presidency of Telesphorus (142–154). In the middle of the third century (255) Cornelius of Rome held a council of sixty bishops.

The persecution of the year 177 shows the church already planted in the south of Gaul in the second century. Christianity came hither probably from the East; for the churches of Lyons and Vienne were intimately connected with those of Asia Minor, to which they sent a report of the persecution, and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna.

Spain became acquainted with Christianity during the Apostolic era. The council of Elvira in 306 numbered nineteen bishops.

Irenaeus speaks of the preaching of the gospel among the Germans and other barbarians, who, "without paper and ink, have salvation written in their hearts by the Holy Spirit."

Britain also was fully brought under the power of the cross by the end of the second century. The Celtic church existed in England, Ireland, and Scotland, independently of

Rome, long before the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons by the Roman mission of Augustine; it continued for some time after that event and sent offshoots to Germany, France, and the Low Countries, but was ultimately at different dates incorporated within the Romish church. Its founding dates back to the Apostolic era. At the council of Arles, in Gaul (Arelate) in 314, three British bishops, of Eboracum (York), Londinum (London), and Colonia Londinensium (*i.e.* either Lincoln or more probably Colchester), were present.

The conversion of the barbarians of Northern and Western Europe did not bear significant fruit before the fifth and sixth centuries, and will claim our attention in the history of the Middle Ages.

The persecutions of Christianity during the first three centuries appear like a long tragedy: first, foreboding signs; then a succession of bloody assaults of heathenism upon the religion of the cross; amidst the dark scenes of fiendish hatred and cruelty the bright exhibitions of suffering virtue; now and then a short pause; at last a fearful and desperate struggle of the old pagan empire for life and death, ending in the abiding victory of the Christian religion.

Justin, Tertullian, and other confessors traced the persecutions to Satan and the demons, though they did not ignore the human and moral aspects; they viewed them also as a punishment for past sins, and a school of Christian virtue. Some denied that martyrdom was an evil, since it only brought Christians the sooner to God and the glory of heaven. As war brings out the heroic qualities of men, so did the persecutions develop the patience, the gentleness, the endurance of the Christians, and prove the world-conquering power of faith.

From the fifth century it has been customary to reckon ten great persecutions: under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, Maximinus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian.

The long and bloody war of heathen Rome against the church, which is built upon a rock, utterly failed. It began in Rome under Nero, it ended near Rome at the Milvian bridge, under Constantine. Aiming to exterminate, it purified. It called forth the virtues of Christian heroism, and resulted in the consolidation and triumph of the new religion. The philosophy of persecution is best expressed by the terse word of Tertullian, who lived in the midst of them, but did not see the end: "The blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church."

The fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD could break only the national power of the Judaists, not their hatred of Christianity. They caused the death of Symeon, bishop of Jerusalem (107); they were particularly active in the burning of Polycarp of Smyrna; and they inflamed the violence of the Gentiles by eliminating the sect of the Nazarenes.

By severe oppression under Trajan and Hadrian, the prohibition of circumcision, and the desecration of Jerusalem by the idolatry of the pagans, the Jews were provoked to a new and powerful insurrection (A.D. 132–135). A pseudo-Messiah, Bar-Cochba (son of the

stars, Num. 24:17), afterwards called Bar-Cosiba (son of falsehood), put himself at the head of the rebels, and caused all the Christians who would not join him to be most cruelly murdered. But the false prophet was defeated by Hadrian's general in 135, more than half a million of Jews were slaughtered after a desperate resistance, immense numbers sold into slavery, 985 villages and 50 fortresses leveled to the ground, nearly all Palestine laid waste, Jerusalem again destroyed, and a Roman colony, Aelia Capitolina, erected on its ruins, with an image of Jupiter and a temple of Venus. The coins of Aelia Capitolina bear the images of Jupiter Capitolinus, Bacchus, Serapis, Astarte. After this the Jews had no opportunity for any further independent persecution of the Christians. Yet they continued to circulate horrible calumnies on Jesus and his followers.

With all its professed and actual tolerance, the Roman state was thoroughly interwoven with heathen idolatry, and made religion a tool of its policy. Ancient history furnishes no example of a state without some religion and form of worship. (The idea of a secular state is the wicked invention of modern times, in a strategy to undermine reformed Christian establishment. The first national experiment in secularism was the United States of America.) Rome makes no exception to the general rule. "The Romano-Hellenic state religion" (says Mommsen), "and the Stoic state-philosophy inseparably combined with it were not merely a convenient instrument for every government—oligarchy, democracy, or monarchy—but altogether indispensable, because it was just as impossible to construct the state wholly without religious elements as to discover any new state religion adapted to form a substitute for the old."

The piety of Romulus and Numa was believed to have laid the foundation of the power of Rome. To the favor of the deities of the republic, the brilliant success of the Roman arms was attributed. The priests and Vestal virgins were supported out of the public treasury. The emperor was *ex-officio* the *pontifex maximus*, and even an object of divine worship, a title the Papal Man of Sin would later adopt for himself. The gods were national; and the eagle of Jupiter Capitolinus moved as a good genius before the world-conquering legions. (The eagle would be used later in history by those states patterning themselves after Rome, such as the Germanic Holy Roman Empire and the USA.) Cicero lays down as a principle of legislation, that no one should be allowed to worship foreign gods, unless they were recognized by public statute. Maecenas counseled Augustus: "Honor the gods according to the custom of our ancestors, and compel others to worship them. Hate and punish those who bring in strange gods."

It is true, indeed, that *individuals* in Greece and Rome enjoyed an almost unlimited liberty for expressing skeptical and even impious sentiments in conversation, in books and on the stage. We need only refer to the works of Aristophanes, Lucian, Lucretius, Plautus, Terence. But a sharp distinction was made between private thought and public worship, although the latter is only the legitimate consequence of the former.

The senate and emperor, by special edicts, usually allowed conquered nations the free practice of their worship even in Rome; not, however, from regard for the sacred rights of conscience, but merely from policy, and with the express prohibition of making proselytes from the state religion. Hence, severe laws were published from time to time against transition to Judaism.

To Christianity, appearing not as a national religion, but claiming to be the only true universal one making its converts among every people and every sect, attracting Greeks and Romans in much larger numbers than Jews, refusing to compromise with any form of idolatry, and threatening in fact the very existence of the Roman state religion, even this limited toleration could not be granted. The same all-absorbing political interest of Rome dictated here the opposite course. Born under Augustus, and crucified under Tiberius at the sentence of the Roman magistrate, Christ stood as the founder of a universal empire, a rival not to be endured.

Then, too, the conscientious refusal of the Christians to pay divine honors to the emperor and his statue, and to take part in any idolatrous ceremonies at public festivities, their aversion to the pagan Roman imperial military service, their close brotherly union and frequent meetings, drew upon them the suspicion of hostility to the Caesars and the Roman people, and the unpardonable crime of conspiracy against the state.

The common people also, with their polytheistic ideas, abhorred the believers in the one God as atheists and enemies of the gods. They readily gave credit to the slanderous rumors of all sorts of abominations, even incest and cannibalism, practiced by the Christians at their religious assemblies and love-feasts, and regarded the frequent public calamities of that age as punishments justly inflicted by the angry gods for the disregard of their worship. In North Africa arose the proverb: "If God does not send rain, lay it to the Christians." At every inundation, or drought, or famine, or pestilence, the fanatical populace cried: "Away with the atheists! To the lions with the Christians!"

Finally, persecutions were sometimes started by priests, jugglers, artificers, merchants, and others, who derived their support from the idolatrous worship. These, like Demetrius at Ephesus, and the masters of the sorceress at Philippi, kindled the fanaticism and indignation of the mob against the new religion for its interference with their gains.

The imperial persecutions before Domitian belong to the Apostolic age, and have been already described. We allude to them here only for the sake of the connection. Christ was born under the first, and crucified under the second Roman emperor. Tiberius (A.D. 14–37) is reported to have been frightened by Pilate's account of the crucifixion and resurrection, and to have proposed to the senate, without success, the enrollment of Christ among the Roman deities. The edict of Claudius (42–54) in the year 53, which banished the Jews from Rome, fell also upon the Christians, but as Jews with whom they were confounded. The fiendish persecution of Nero (54–68) was intended as a punishment, not for Christianity, but for alleged incendiarism (64). It showed, however, the popular temper, and was a declaration of war against the new religion. It would for years remain an illegal religion. During the rapidly succeeding reigns of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, and Titus, the church, so far as we know, suffered no very serious persecution.

But Domitian (81–96), a suspicious and blasphemous tyrant, accustomed to call himself and to be called "Lord and God," treated the embracing of Christianity a crime against the state, and condemned to death many Christians, even his own cousin, the consul Flavius

Clemens, on the charge of atheism; or confiscated their property, and sent them, as in the case of Domitilia, the wife of the Clemens just mentioned, into exile. His jealousy also led him to destroy the surviving descendants of David; and he brought from Palestine to Rome two kinsmen of Jesus, grandsons of Judas, the "brother of the Lord," but seeing their poverty and rustic simplicity, and hearing their explanation of the kingdom of Christ, he let them go. The Martyrium of Ignatius speaks of "many persecutions under Domitian."

His more humane successor, Nerva (96–98), recalled the banished, and refused to treat the confession of Christianity as a political crime, though he did not recognize the new religion as a *religio licita*.

Trajan, honored as the "father of his country," but, like his friends, Tacitus and Pliny, wholly ignorant of the nature of Christianity, was the first to pronounce it in form a proscribed religion, as it had been all along in fact. Pliny, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor from 109 to 111 during Trajan's reign, came in official contact with the Christians. He himself saw in that religion only a "depraved and immoderate superstition," and could hardly account for its popularity. He reported to the emperor that this superstition was constantly spreading, not only in the cities, but also in the villages of Asia Minor, and captivated people of every age, rank, and sex, so that the temples were almost forsaken, and the sacrificial victims found no sale. To stop this progress, he condemned many Christians to death, and sent others, who were Roman citizens, to the imperial tribunal. But he requested of the emperor further instructions, whether, in these efforts, he should have respect to age; whether he should treat the mere bearing of the Christian name as a crime, if there were no other offence. To these inquiries Trajan replied: "You have adopted the right course, my friend, with regard to the Christians; for no universal rule, to be applied to all cases, can be laid down in this matter. They should not be searched for; but when accused and convicted, they should be punished; yet if any one denies that he has been a Christian, and proves it by action, namely, by worshipping our gods, he is to be pardoned upon his repentance, even though suspicion may still cleave to him from his antecedents. But anonymous accusations must not be admitted in any criminal process; it sets a bad example, and is contrary to our age" (*i.e.* to the spirit of Trajan's government).

Symeon, a bishop of Jerusalem, and, like his predecessor James, a kinsman of Jesus, was accused by fanatical Jews, and crucified A.D. 107, at the age of a hundred and twenty years. In the same year (or probably between 110 and 116) the distinguished bishop Ignatius of Antioch was condemned to death, transported to Rome, and thrown before wild beasts in the Colosseum.

Hadrian, of Spanish descent, a relative of Trajan, and adopted by him on his death-bed, was a man of brilliant talents and careful education, a scholar, an artist, a legislator and administrator, and finally a Roman emperor, but of very doubtful morality, governed by changing moods, attracted in opposite directions, and at last lost in self-contradictions and utter disgust of life. The Christian apologies, which took their rise under this emperor, indicate a very bitter public sentiment against the Christians, and a critical condition of the church. The least encouragement from Hadrian would have brought on a bloody persecution. Quadratus and Aristides addressed their pleas for their fellow-

Christians to him, but we do not know with what effect. Tradition assigns to his reign the martyrdom of Eustachius, Symphorosa and her seven sons, of the Roman bishops Alexander and Telesphorus, and others whose names are scarcely known.

During the reign of emperor Antoninus Pius the venerable presbyter of Smyrna, Polycarp, was martyred. Polycarp had been a personal friend and pupil of the Apostle John. Polycarp steadfastly refused before the proconsul to deny his King and Savior, whom he had served six and eighty years, and from whom he had experienced nothing but love and mercy. He joyfully went up to the stake, and amidst the flames praised God for having deemed him worthy "to be numbered among his martyrs, to drink the cup of Christ's sufferings, unto the eternal resurrection of the soul and the body in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit." He died in 155 AD.

Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher on the Roman throne, was a well-educated emperor, and reached the old Roman ideal of self-reliant Stoic virtue, but for this very reason he had no sympathy with Christianity, and probably regarded it as an absurd and fanatical superstition. He was flooded with apologies of Melito, Miltiades, Athenagoras in behalf of the persecuted Christians, but turned a deaf ear to them. Only once, in his Meditations, does he allude to them, and then with scorn, tracing their noble enthusiasm for martyrdom to "sheer obstinacy" and love for theatrical display. His excuse is ignorance. He probably never read a line of the New Testament, nor of the apologies addressed to him. But despite all excuses, we must assess his reign- like that of all the other pagan Roman emperors- as wicked and corrupted. Marcus Aurelius, like the others, simply refused to bow the knee to Jesus Christ and obey His Ten Commandments. At all events his reign was a stormy time for the church, although the persecutions cannot be directly traced to him. The law of Trajan was sufficient to justify the severest measures against the followers of the "forbidden" religion.

About the year 170 the apologist Melito wrote: "The race of the worshippers of God in Asia is now persecuted by new edicts as it never has been heretofore; shameless, greedy sycophants, finding occasion in the edicts, now plunder the innocent day and night." The empire was visited at that time by a number of conflagrations, a destructive flood of the Tiber, an earthquake, insurrections, and particularly a pestilence, which spread from Ethiopia to Gaul. This gave rise to bloody persecutions, in which government and people united against the enemies of the gods and the supposed authors of these misfortunes. Celsus expressed his joy that "the demon" of the Christians was "not only reviled, but banished from every land and sea," and saw in this judgment the fulfillment of the oracle: "the mills of the gods grind late." But at the same time these persecutions, and the simultaneous literary assaults on Christianity by Celsus and Lucian, show that the new religion was constantly gaining importance in the empire.

In 177, the churches of Lyons and Vienne, in the South of France, underwent a severe trial. Heathen slaves were forced by the rack to declare, that their Christian masters practiced all the unnatural vices which rumor charged them with; and this was made to justify the exquisite tortures to which the Christians were subjected. But the sufferers, "strengthened by the fountain of living water from the heart of Christ," displayed

extraordinary faith and steadfastness, and felt, that "nothing can be fearful, where the love of the Father is, nothing painful, where shines the glory of Christ."

The most distinguished victims of this Gallic persecution were the bishop Pothinus, who, at the age of ninety years, and just recovered from a sickness, was subjected to all sorts of abuse, and then thrown into a dismal dungeon, where he died in two days; the virgin Blandina, a slave, who showed almost superhuman strength and constancy under the most cruel tortures, and was at last thrown to a wild beast in a net; Ponticus, a boy of fifteen years, who could be deterred by no sort of cruelty from confessing his Savior. The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets, were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil. At last the people grew weary of slaughter, and a considerable number of Christians survived. The martyrs of Lyons distinguished themselves by true humility, disclaiming in their prison that title of honor, as due only, they said, to the faithful and true witness, the Firstborn from the dead, the Prince of life (Rev. 1:5), and to those of his followers who had already sealed their fidelity to Christ with their blood.

Of isolated cases of martyrdom in this reign, we notice that of Justin Martyr, at Rome, in the year 166. His death is traced to the machinations of Crescens, a Cynic philosopher.

Marcus Aurelius was succeeded by his cruel and contemptible son, Commodus (180–192), who wallowed in the mire of every sensual debauchery, and displayed at the same time like Nero the most ridiculous vanity as dancer and singer, and in the character of buffoon. But he was accidentally made to favor the Christians by the influence of a concubine, Marcia, and accordingly did not disturb them. Yet under his reign a Roman senator, Apollonius, was put to death for his faith.

With Septimius Severus (193–211), who was of Punic descent and had a Syrian wife, a line of emperors (Caracalla, Heliogabalus, Alexander Severus) came to the throne, who were rather Oriental than Roman in their spirit, and were therefore far less concerned than the Antonines to maintain the old state religion. Yet towards the close of the second century there was no lack of local persecutions; and Clement of Alexandria wrote of those times: "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."

In the beginning of the third century (202) Septimius Severus, turned perhaps by Montanistic excesses, enacted a rigid law against the further spread both of Christianity and of Judaism. This occasioned violent persecutions in Egypt and in North Africa, and produced some of the fairest flowers of martyrdom. In Alexandria, in consequence of this law, Leonides, father of the renowned Origen, was beheaded. Potamiaena, a virgin of rare beauty of body and spirit, was threatened by beastly passion with treatment worse than death, and, after cruel tortures, slowly burned with her mother in boiling pitch. One of the executioners, Basilides, smitten with sympathy, shielded them somewhat from abuse, and soon after their death embraced Christianity, and was beheaded. In what is surely another indicator of the level of superstition which had crept into the church since the Apostolic age, he declared that Potamiaena had appeared to him in the night, interceded with Christ for him, and set upon his head the martyr's crown.

In Carthage some catechumens (i.e., those being catechized in the Christian faith in order to enter the church membership), three young men and two young women, showed remarkable steadfastness and fidelity in the dungeon and at the place of execution. Perpetua, a young woman of noble birth, resisting, not without a violent struggle, both the entreaties of her aged heathen father and the appeal of her helpless babe upon her breast, sacrificed the deep and tender feelings of a daughter and a mother to the Lord who died for her. Felicitas, a slave, when delivered of a child in the same dungeon, answered the jailor, who reminded her of the still keener pains of martyrdom: "Now I suffer, what I suffer; but then another will suffer for me, because I shall suffer for him." All remaining firm, they were cast to wild beasts at the next public festival, having first interchanged the parting kiss in hope of a speedy reunion in heaven.

The same state of things continued through the first years of Caracalla (211–217), though this gloomy misanthrope passed no laws against the Christians.

The abandoned youth, El-Gabal, or Heliogabalus (218–222), who polluted the throne by the blackest vices and follies, tolerated all the religions in the hope of at last merging them in his favorite Syrian worship of the sun with its abominable excesses. He himself was a priest of the god of the sun, and thence took his name.

His cousin and successor, Alexander Severus (222–235), was addicted to a higher kind of religious eclecticism and syncretism, a pantheistic hero-worship. He placed the busts of Abraham and Christ in his domestic chapel with those of Orpheus, Apollonius of Tyana, and the better Roman emperors, and had the gospel rule, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," engraven on the walls of his palace, and on public monuments. His mother, Julia Mamaea, was a patroness of Origen.

His assassin, Maximinus the Thracian (235–238), first a herdsman, afterwards a soldier, resorted again to persecution out of mere opposition to his predecessor, and gave free course to the popular fury against the enemies of the gods, which was at that time excited anew by an earthquake. It is uncertain whether he ordered the entire clergy or only the bishops to be killed. His only redeeming feature is that he also plundered heathen temples.

Gordianus (208–244) left the church undisturbed. Philip the Arabian (244–249) was even supposed by some to be a Christian, and was termed by Jerome "primus omnium ex Romanis imperatoribus Christianus." It is certain that Origen wrote letters to him and to his wife, Severa. This season of repose, however, cooled the moral zeal and brotherly love of the Christians; and the mighty storm under the following reign served well to restore the purity of the church.

Decius Trajan (249–251), an energetic albeit wicked emperor, in whom the old Roman spirit once more awoke, resolved to root out the church as an atheistic and seditious sect, and in the year 250 published an edict to all the governors of the provinces, enjoining return to the pagan state religion under the heaviest penalties. This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it. In truth it was properly the first which covered the whole empire, and accordingly produced a far

greater number of martyrs than any former persecution. In the execution of the imperial decree, confiscation, exile, torture, promises and threats of all kinds were employed to move the Christians to apostasy. Multitudes of nominal Christians, especially at the beginning, sacrificed to the gods (*sacrificati, thurificati*), or procured from the magistrate a false certificate that they had done so (*libellatici*), and were then excommunicated as apostates (*lapsi*); but many others remained faithful to the end. The authorities were especially severe with the bishops and officers of the churches. Fabianus of Rome, Babylas of Antioch, and Alexander of Jerusalem, perished in this persecution. Others withdrew to places of concealment; some from cowardice; some from Christian prudence, in hope of allaying by their absence the fury of the pagans against their flocks, and of saving their own lives for the good of the church in better times. Among the latter was Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, who incurred much censure by his course, but fully vindicated himself by his pastoral industry during his absence, and by his subsequent martyrdom. He says concerning the matter: "Our Lord commanded us in times of persecution to yield and to fly. He taught this, and he practiced it himself. For since the martyr's crown comes by the grace of God, and cannot be gained before the appointed hour, he who retires for a time, and remains true to Christ, does not deny his faith, but only abides his time."

Under Gallus (251–253) the persecution received a fresh impulse thorough the incursions of the Goths, and the prevalence of a pestilence, drought, and famine. Under this reign the Roman bishops Cornelius and Lucius were banished, and then condemned to death.

Valerian (253–260) was at first mild towards the Christians; but in 257 he changed his course, and made an effort to check the progress of their religion without bloodshed, by the banishment of ministers and prominent laymen, the confiscation of their property, and the prohibition of religious assemblies. These measures, however, proving fruitless, he brought the death penalty again into play. The most distinguished martyrs of this persecution under Valerian are the bishops Sixtus II of Rome and Cyprian of Carthage.

Gallienus (260–268) gave peace to the church once more, and even acknowledged Christianity as a *religio licita*. And this calm continued forty years; for the edict of persecution, issued by the energetic and warlike Aurelian (270–275), was rendered void by his assassination; and the six emperors who rapidly followed, from 275 to 284, let the Christians alone.

During this long season of peace the church rose rapidly in numbers and outward prosperity. Large and even splendid houses of worship were erected in the chief cities, and provided with collections of sacred books and vessels of gold and silver for the administration of the sacraments. But in the same proportion discipline relaxed, quarrels, intrigues, and factions increased, heresies multiplied, and worldliness poured in like a flood. Hence, the church was afflicted with more judgments. The forty years' repose was thus followed by the last and most violent persecution, a struggle for life and death.

"The accession of the Emperor Diocletian is the era from which the Coptic Churches of Egypt and Abyssinia still date, under the name of the 'Era of Martyrs.' All former persecutions of the faith were forgotten in the horror with which men looked back upon

the last and greatest: the tenth wave (as men delighted to count it) of that great storm obliterated all the traces that had been left by others. The fiendish cruelty of Nero, the jealous fears of Domitian, the unimpassioned dislike of Marcus, the sweeping purpose of Decius, the clever devices of Valerian, fell into obscurity when compared with the concentrated terrors of that final grapple, which resulted in the destruction of the old pagan Roman Empire and the establishment of at least nominal Christianity as its replacement.

Diocletian (284–305), a very wicked Roman emperor, yet preserved the sinking state from dissolution. He was the son of a slave or of obscure parentage, and worked himself up to supreme power. He converted the Roman republican empire into an Oriental despotism, and prepared the way for Constantine and Constantinople. He associated with himself three subordinate co-regents, Maximian (who committed suicide, 310), Galerius (d. 311), and Constantius Chlorus (d. 306, the father of Constantine the Great), and divided with them the government of the immense empire; thereby quadrupling the personality of the sovereign, and imparting vigor to provincial administration, but also sowing the seed of discord and civil war.

In the first twenty years of his reign Diocletian respected the toleration edict of Gallienus. His own wife Prisca, his daughter Valeria, and most of his eunuchs and court officers, besides many of the most prominent public functionaries, were Christians, or at least favorable to the Christian religion. He himself was a superstitious heathen and an oriental despot. Like Aurelian and Domitian before him, he claimed divine honors, as the vicar of Jupiter Capitolinus. But the chief instigator of the renewal of hostility, according to the account of Lactantius, was Diocletian's co-regent and son-in-law, Galerius, a cruel and fanatical heathen. He prevailed at last on Diocletian in his old age to authorize the persecution which gave to his reign a disgraceful end.

In 303 Diocletian issued in rapid succession three edicts, each more severe than its predecessor. Maximian issued the fourth, the worst of all, April 30, 304. Christian churches were to be destroyed; all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and at last all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death. Pretext for this severity was afforded by the occurrence of fire twice in the palace of Nicomedia in Bithynia, where Diocletian resided. It was strengthened by the tearing down of the first edict by an imprudent Christian (celebrated in the Greek church under the name of John), who vented in that way his abhorrence of such "godless and tyrannical rulers," and was gradually roasted to death with every species of cruelty. But the conjecture that the edicts were occasioned by a conspiracy of the Christians who, feeling their rising power, were for putting the government at once into Christian hands, by a stroke of state, is without any foundation in history. It is inconsistent with the anti-seditionist stance of the church during the first three centuries, which furnish no example of rebellion and revolution. At best such a conspiracy could only have been the work of a few heretical fanatics.

The persecution began on the twenty-third day of February, 303, the feast of the *Terminalia* (as if to make an end of the Christian sect), with the destruction of the magnificent church in Nicomedia, and soon spread over the whole Roman empire, except

Gaul, Britain, and Spain, where the co-regent Constantius Chlorus, and especially his son, Constantine the Great (from 306), were disposed, as far as possible, to spare the Christians. But even here the churches were destroyed, and many martyrs of Spain (Vincentius, Eulalia, and others celebrated by Prudentius), and of Britain (Alban) are assigned by later tradition to this age.

Eusebius was a witness of this persecution in Caesura, Tyre, and Egypt, and saw, with his own eyes, as he tells us, the houses of prayer razed to the ground, the Holy Scriptures committed to the flames on the market places, the pastors hunted, tortured, and torn to pieces in the amphitheatre.

In this, as in former persecutions, the number of apostates who preferred the temporal earthly life to the eternal glory was very great. To these was now added also the new class of the *traditores*, who delivered the holy Scriptures to the heathen authorities, to be burned. But as the persecution raged, the zeal and fidelity of the Christians increased, and martyrdom spread as by contagion. Even boys and girls showed amazing firmness. In many the heroism of faith degenerated to a fanatical courting of death. Confessors were almost worshipped, while yet alive. The hatred towards apostates distracted many congregations, and produced the Meletian and Donatist schisms.

This persecution was the last desperate struggle of Roman heathenism for its life. It was the crisis of utter extinction or absolute supremacy for each of the two religions. At the close of the contest the old Roman state religion was exhausted. Diocletian retired into private life in 305, under the curse of the Christians; he found greater pleasure in planting cabbages at Salona in his native Dalmatia, than in governing a vast empire, but his peace was disturbed by the tragic misfortunes of his wife and daughter, and in 313, when all the achievements of his reign were destroyed, he destroyed himself. God thus judged him for his great cruelty and wickedness.

Galerius, the real author of the persecution, brought to reflection by a terrible disease, put an end to the slaughter shortly before his death, by a remarkable edict of toleration, which he issued from Nicomedia in 311, in connection with Constantine and Licinius. In that document he declared, that the purpose of reclaiming the Christians from their willful innovation and the multitude of their sects to the laws and discipline of the Roman state, was not accomplished; and that he would now grant them permission to hold their religious assemblies provided they disturbed not the order of the state. To this he added in conclusion the significant instruction that the Christians, "after this manifestation of grace, should pray *to their God* for the welfare of the emperors, of the state, and of themselves, that the state might prosper in every respect, and that they might live quietly in their homes."

But as ferocious as the persecution had been in this era, even more dangerous was the gradual rise of heresies which infected the Christian church. Of course, even in the Apostolic era Christ's church had to contend with many errors. In the ante-Nicene era we witness a gradual increase in these errors. Some errors rose to the level of causing division (or schism) in Christ's visible church. These errors were contrary to the articles of the faith which the church must defend in its communion. Most of the schismatic

heresies in this period of history, as well as the rest of history, concern church government or worship. But other errors were so egregious as to constitute apostasy from the Christian faith.

With respect to church organization, the Apostolic organization of the first century – in which bishops (literally meaning ‘overseers’) and presbyters (literally meaning ‘elders’) were one and the same position – gradually gave way to a more hierarchical system in which bishop and presbyter were distinguished. In this system a bishop was elevated above a presbyter. This is sometimes called the old catholic episcopal system of church government. This system, in its turn, gradually gave way into the metropolitan system, in which the bishops of major metropolitan areas had more power than those of smaller towns and villages.

The universal and uncontradicted Sunday observance of the Lord’s Day in the second century bears testimony that it had its roots in Apostolic practice. Such observance is the more to be appreciated as it had no support in civil legislation before the age of Constantine, and must have been connected with many inconveniences, considering the lowly social condition of the majority of Christians and their dependence upon their heathen masters and employers. Sunday thus became, by an easy and natural transformation, the Christian Sabbath or weekly day of rest, at once answering the typical import of the Jewish Sabbath, and itself forming in turn a type of the eternal rest of the people of God in the heavenly Canaan.

Sadly, however, innovations were added over the centuries with respect to holy days. There is no injunction for the observance of annual holy days, direct or indirect, in the Apostolic writings, as there is no basis for them in the Decalogue. Easter seems to have originated towards the close of the first or the beginning of the second century. And since it had not been divinely prescribed, it generated a great controversy as to the time of its celebration. It should not surprise us that it was so quickly adopted, as every Lord’s Day is really a commemoration of Christ’s resurrection, which Easter purports to also commemorate on a Lord’s Day.

Not only is the very name "Easter" the name of an ancient and non-Christian deity; the season itself has also, from time immemorial, been the occasion of rites and observances having to do with the mystery of death and resurrection among peoples differing widely in race and religion. Vernal Mysteries (spring heathen rites) like those of Tammuz, and Osiris and Adonis flourished in the Mediterranean world. And farther north and east there were others. Some of their rites and symbols were carried forward into Easter customs. Many of them have survived into our own day, unchanged yet subtly altered in their new surroundings to bear a "Christian" significance.

Christmas also came in as a syncretistic compromise for a formerly pagan festival day. In ancient Babylon, the feast of the Son of Isis (Goddess of Nature) was celebrated on December 25. Raucous partying, gluttonous eating and drinking, and gift-giving were traditions of this feast. In Rome, the Winter Solstice was celebrated many years before the birth of Christ. The Romans called their winter holiday Saturnalia, honoring Saturn,

the God of Agriculture. In January, they observed the Kalends of January, which represented the triumph of life over death. This whole season was called Dies Natalis Invicti Solis, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. The festival season was marked by much merrymaking. It is in ancient Rome that the tradition of the Mummers was born. The Mummers were groups of costumed singers and dancers who traveled from house to house entertaining their neighbors. From this, the Christmas tradition of caroling was born.

In northern Europe, many other traditions that we now consider part of Christian worship were begun long before the participants had ever heard of Christ. The pagans of northern Europe celebrated their own winter solstice, known as Yule. Yule was symbolic of the pagan Sun God, Mithras, being born, and was observed on the shortest day of the year. As the Sun God grew and matured, the days became longer and warmer. It was customary to light a candle to encourage Mithras, and the sun, to reappear next year.

Huge Yule logs were burned in honor of the sun. The word Yule itself means "wheel," the wheel being a pagan symbol for the sun. Mistletoe was considered a sacred plant, and the custom of kissing under the mistletoe began as a fertility ritual. Hollyberries were thought to be a food of the gods.

The tree is the one symbol that unites almost all the northern European winter solstices. Live evergreen trees were often brought into homes during the harsh winters as a reminder to inhabitants that soon their crops would grow again. Evergreen boughs were sometimes carried as totems of good luck and were often present at weddings, representing fertility. The Druids used the tree as a religious symbol, holding their sacred ceremonies while surrounding and worshipping huge trees.

In 350, Pope Julius I declared that Christ's birth would be celebrated on December 25. There is little doubt that he was trying to make it as painless as possible for pagan Romans (who remained a majority at that time) to convert to Christianity. The new religion went down a bit easier, knowing that their feasts would not be taken away from them.

Of other annual Christian festivals, the New Testament contains not the faintest trace. The festivals of Mary, the Apostles, Saints, and Martyrs, followed gradually, as the worship of saints spread in the ante-Nicene and post-Nicene age, until almost every day was turned first into a holy day and then into a holiday. As the saints overshadowed the Lord, the saints' days overshadowed the Lord's Day.

Even more seriously in error, the church had to contend with the errors of Gnosticism and Ebionism. Ebionism made salvation depend on observance of the law; Gnosticism, on speculative knowledge. Under the influence of the Judaistic legalism of Ebionism, Christianity must stiffen and petrify; under the influence of Gnostic speculation, it must dissolve into empty notions and fancies. Ebionism denied the divinity of Christ, and saw in the gospel only a new law; Gnosticism denied the true humanity of the Redeemer, and made his person and his work a mere phantom, a docetistic illusion.

So the church was oppressed not only by persecution from pagan Rome during the ante-Nicene era, but also these errors which caused such confusion.

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.