

The Patristic Age, Part 3

Church History

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Review

History is...

1. descriptive, not prescriptive
2. history affects theology, theology affects history

Of course, history at this time was dominated by the Roman Empire. The Church's well-being rose and fell in accordance with Roman opinion.

? How have we seen or how might theology be affected by Roman opinion?

I. ROME: 3RD CENTURY CRISIS, AD235-284

For the first 300 years of Christianity, Rome was at best tolerant of the church and at worst a wholesale persecutor of the church. As we learned last week, Decius began the first systematic empire wide persecution of Christians. This led to the lapsi and arguing over church doctrine. The term "traditor" also came from this episode in Church history.

A. FOREIGN INVASION

By the 3rd century, Rome, Rome as a city, had been in existence for 1,000 years. Now, Rome was falling in on itself. Rome had wielded much power over the largest empire up to that time. They had brought civilization, prosperity, relative peace and culture to 2 million square miles of territory and countless people groups.

Imagine the difficulty of obtaining and maintaining such an empire, yet the Romans did it and they did it with a powerful army and shrewd negotiation. The thing that Rome brought more than anything was stability.

By 235AD, it seemed that Rome had grown so big that it was falling in on itself. The stability that was the very hallmark of Rome was beginning to fail. Rome did not fall at this time, but when it eventually did 200 years later, it was for the very reasons for the 3rd century crisis.

Rome had extended its empire through most of Europe to the north and threatening the Sassanid (Persian) Empire in the east. The barbarians in the north and the Persians in the East knew that Rome's breadth was its greatest weakness and began to work together to some degree. Germans would cause trouble in the north requiring Rome to send forces there, then the Sassanids would press Rome from the East.

This required Rome to spend an increasing amount of money on the military. By the 3rd century, the military was 60% of the empire's budget. The Severan Emperors doubled the pay of the legionaries. Rome would also bribe enemies to not attack them. Taxes had to be raised to meet this expenditure, but when taxation wasn't enough, Rome did what many governments have done, they just printed more money as it were. This of course led to inflation.

Because of this instability, there was also a breakdown in trade. Crops had to be transported from the more agrarian parts of the empire to the cities. Soldiers were needed on the borders to quell incursions so that trade routes were more susceptible to thievery. This of course caused more instability.

B. THE SUCCESSION OF EMPERORS

Imperial succession was always a weak spot for the Empire. There were no set rules for who would be the next emperor. An emperor was chosen by a mixture of support of the people, support of the army, recommendation of the previous emperor and approval of the Senate.

During the 3rd century crisis, more and more emperors were chosen by armies who would nominate their favorite general. Whenever the succession appeared uncertain, there was an incentive for any general with support of a sizable army to attempt to seize power, sparking civil war. In a 50 year time span more than 54 usurpers. In 238 alone there were 6 usurpers. The average reign of an emperor was 1 ½ to 2 years.

Severus Alexander was the last emperor of the Severan dynasty. He faced a series of losses to the Sassanids and chose diplomacy over military intervention in the north. Having lost the respect of his army, they assassinated him at the age of 26 years, having reigned 13 years and 6 days.

C. THE ANTONINE PLAGUE, 249-262

As if things weren't bad enough, there was a plague. We don't know exactly what it was, but many speculate smallpox. The Antonine Plague sapped manpower from Roman armies and proved disastrous for the Roman economy. Some cities, such as Alexandria, experienced a 62% decline in population. At one point, Rome was seeing 5,000 people die each day.

This paved the way for the Decian edict

1. Decius

Decius was a politically experienced senator. He thought paganism would unite the empire. He was

a conservative, going back to traditional beliefs. He thought a return to paganism would appease the gods and end the plague. To enforce this, he offered a libellus to any who would sacrifice to Roman gods and persecution for those who wouldn't. The Jews were the only who were exempt. He likely didn't intend to focus on Christians, but he had to know that it would.

Decius' reign was short lived, only 1 year. He was the first emperor to die in battle. His death produced 6 years of peace for Christians, but set a precedent for persecuting Christians.

1. Valerian

Valerian was the first major emperor after Decius (meaning lasting for longer than a year or two). He reigned six years. He specifically targeted Christians. No Christian could own land, be an aristocrat, nor take part in royal court.

In AD257 pastors were forced to sacrifice or be banished. By 258 he prescribed the death penalty for pastors and worshippers who wouldn't sacrifice to pagan gods.

Valerian was the first to be captured in battle. He later died in Persian captivity. His son, Gallienus succeeded and reigned 15 years longest of any in the crisis era by far.

II. THE TEACHERS

A. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA. AD150-215

Clement was born in Athens to non-Christian parents. We don't know when Christ found him, but once he did, Clement had an insatiable desire for knowledge. Eventually, he ended up in

Alexandria and studied under a man named Pantenus. He in turn was the teacher of Origen.

B. IRENAEUS, AD130-202

Irenaeus was born in Smyrna and was disciples by Polycarp. He eventually became a pastor in Lugdunum (Lyons), Gaul. He is known for his defense of Christianity against heresy and helping to define Christian Orthodoxy.

His most important surviving work is *Against Heresy*. He wrote against the Montanist and traced Christian Gnosticism back to Simon Magus.

Irenaeus is the first to mention all the Gospels in writing, which was a major step toward recognizing the canon of Scripture. He also mediated the Date of Easter Controversy.

C. TERTULLIAN, AD155-220

Tertullian was a native of northern Africa, perhaps the son of a Roman centurion. He was well-schooled, probably not a pastor, but he was a writer, some think perhaps a lawyer. He came to Christ in Rome, after spending most of his life in Africa, at the age of 40.

Tertullian condemned all speculation and appealed to Scripture in his defense against heresies. He argued that a heretic (someone who goes against established doctrine) shouldn't even have the right to argue from Scripture. They have lost their right to engage with the church.

? Is Tertullian's method of dealing with heresy a good precedent?

Tertullian eventually became a Montanist, but in so doing, he began to help define our understanding of the Trinity, that would be further defined at the council of Nicaea.

Tertullian was the father of western theology and the theologian to write in Latin. He coined the term sacrament.

C. ORIGEN, AD184-253

Origen was a student of Clement. He engaged in "speculative theology." He was greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Plato. Origen liked to try to answer the tough questions of theology.

However, a biblical scholar, knew Hebrew and Greek which not everyone did at that time. He believed in careful interpretation and even literal interpretation.

? How could he come up with such wild ideas?

Fourfold Interpretation of Scripture

Literal

Moral

Allegorical

Anagogical

Threefold path of life

Ethics

Physics

Enoptics

