

Western Writers of the Third Century

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In this section of our lectures we have been examining Western writers of the third century. In our last lecture, we were looking at the important father of the church, Tertullian. He certainly was an interesting character, and before moving on to other writers of the same time period, I'd like to present to you some brief concluding remarks concerning Tertullian. As you know, he had strong opinions concerning the relationship between Christianity and the culture of his age. He stood for a radical antithesis, that is, that Christianity stood against the pagan Greek culture of his own time period. That antithesis, at least in my opinion, went a little bit too strong at certain time periods as he moved against things that seem to be natural to us as he stood for a radical distinction between Christianity and culture.

The last thing that I would like to mention concerning Tertullian is a famous phrase that is known to many people that is accredited to Tertullian. It's the phrase in Latin *credo quia absurdum*, that we would translate, "I believe because it is absurd." Many books have been written concerning how this phrase of Tertullian should be understood. Did Tertullian really believe that Christianity was absurd, or that belief in Christianity was something which is absurd? I would rather think that instead of maintaining that Christianity was an absurd religion, the point of Tertullian in making this statement was that Christianity itself seemed to be absurd to pagan culture, that is, to the Greek philosophical and intellectual culture of his day. And since he was against that culture, he would pronounce very gladly that "I believe because it's absurd," that is, that it's absurd to you who are outside of the Christian faith. I don't believe that Tertullian thought that Christianity itself was absurd. That statement itself is absurd. No one would believe in an absurd philosophical system, but certainly to those outside of the faith, Tertullian maintained that everything he stood for stood in radical contradistinction or stood in a radical antithesis to the teachings of his own age.

What can we learn from Tertullian? We mentioned some things in our last lecture, but concluding our look at him, we can see that Christianity once again from these early times has addressed its own culture, has addressed the sinfulness of the culture that we find surrounding the church, has made statements to that culture that Christians should be transforming that culture and that Christians should stand against that culture, especially when that culture is standing against the Christians.

Let's move on to four other figures of the Western church during this third century. Our next important church father will be Hippolytus of Rome. We don't know as much about Hippolytus as we do about Tertullian. He was probably raised in the East, perhaps speaking Greek as his mother tongue. Possibly he was born before AD 170, and using the Greek language to express himself he was the last Roman citizen to do that, so I would remind you once again that even at this time period, those who live in Rome could also express themselves in Greek. He too was a martyr, dying for his faith in AD 235.

He was involved in a fight with another pastor in Rome called Callixtus, and Callixtus had a more lax opinion than did Hippolytus concerning those, believe it or not, of the church who were bigamous. There were a number of theological questions surrounding this controversy, and we needn't go into the mire of detail. However, we should remember that Hippolytus had himself elected as the new bishop of Rome, that is, the head pastor of the pastors in the city of Rome, and he represents what has been called in the Roman Catholic Church, the first antipope. Later on in our lectures we'll examine how the church was organized in the first centuries, how we could understand a pope coming into existence at this time, and what the meaning of the word *bishop* is. At this point, we should remind ourselves that in places like the city of Rome where there was more than one pastor, so in that college of pastors, usually one pastor was elected to be the president or the leader of the college of pastors, and eventually that leader is going to retain the title "bishop" exclusively for himself.

The situation in Rome existed before 223 and existed and continued a few months before Hippolytus's death in 235. Poor old Hippolytus had been exiled from Rome to Sardinia, and either there or just before his exile, he had resigned as bishop and a new bishop was elected in 235, thus ending this first church strife.

So why have we studied Hippolytus? Obviously it's not because he's as important as Tertullian in the development of theological doctrine, but Hippolytus and his life give us another glimpse of life in the ancient church during this time period. As you can imagine, we don't have a tremendous amount of literature from these days. It was written a long time ago. It was written during a time when Christianity was illegal, when Christians were persecuted, and so their writings did not have the tendency to survive, just like the Christians themselves. But Hippolytus gives us a glimpse at some of the strife and some of the development in the church at this time period. The church is struggling with how it should be ruled, how leadership should be exercised in the church, and a movement is developing at this time toward what we would call hierarchicalism.

Our third figure from this time period, Western writers of the third century, is Novatian, and we know a lot about him. Novatian is famous for the schism that is named after him. We're not certain of his personal origin, but we do know that he was an extremely talented man. At about the year 250, he was one of the leading pastors of the city of Rome. I just mentioned a minute ago concerning Hippolytus that Novatian was what we would call the secretary of the college of presbyters, the secretary of this group of pastors meeting regularly in the city of Rome, and as is often the case in the history of the church, it seems in the case of Novatian that personal desires, hurt pride, and other very human attributes played an important role in the problem surrounding Novatian's life.

As we try to reconstruct the history of the events surrounding his life, it seems apparent to us that Novatian desired to be elected president or bishop of Rome, but in the year 251, a presbyter or a pastor by the name of Cornelius was chosen instead of him, and Novatian found a way to oppose this new election. Contrary to his earlier opinion, Novatian said that those who lapsed, those who capitulated during times of persecution should be forever excommunicated from the church. Remember the lecture that we had recently on persecution in the ancient church, and I mentioned there, although briefly, that there will be a problem of the lapsed during the time of persecution. Who were the lapsed? Those were the ones who did something to either preserve their own lives or preserve their property or preserve their ability to live in a certain location. They did something, whether it meant buying a certificate that said that someone had burned incense to the gods in their stead without even doing it themselves, or as

I've mentioned in the lectures, turning over their Bibles or even renouncing Christ.

How does the church deal with these type of people who repent of their sin during the time when persecution is over? It's not an easy problem, and it's a problem that we in the Christian church in the twentieth century wrestle with as well. But we'll be talking more about that in later lectures.

So Novatian opposed this Pastor Cornelius in taking a very rigorous view, a very strong view against those who had lapsed, and we know from correspondence of Novatian that he had earlier believed that when a lapsed person was truly penitent, and especially an older Christian who was on the verge of death or even on his or her deathbed, then the church should forgive that person since God alone knew what He was going to do with them for all of eternity, since God alone knew the nature of the heart and could view into those secret recesses, But the church, upon proper penitence, upon saying that they're sorry, upon perhaps weeping, especially as that Christian was facing the portals of death, so he had earlier thought that the church should exercise a measure of forgiveness for that penitent Christian. Cornelius was certainly not willing to exclude from communion those who were truly penitent, and Novatian used this opportunity to oppose him.

A note should be said as well concerning the importance of the sacraments in the early church, and once again, we hope to look at that in more detail in the future, but the Lord's Supper was taken especially with tremendous seriousness in the ancient church. I would dare say much more seriously than most churches do in twentieth-century America. Only those who truly live Christian lives, who truly profess saving faith in Jesus Christ, only those people were permitted to take the Lord's Supper. In the earliest time periods of the church as people were coming to know and understand Christianity, those hearers, those learners, those disciples of the church were escorted out of the church building during the time of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It was in many ways considered a secret, and that secret nature, that wanting to hold to the Lord's Supper as an exclusively Christian rite, also contributed to the misunderstanding in the non-Christian world that led or helped to lead to the persecution that we talked about in an earlier lecture. So being given the Lord's Supper was the sign that that person in the eyes of the church was walking hand in hand in faithfulness for their Lord and Savior. To be denied the Lord's Supper was equivalent to the church saying,

“We do not believe you to be a member of the body of Christ.” And by implication, actually not just by implication, but boldly that says that we as a church do not believe that you are entitled to heaven, or that you are on your way to heaven. So being denied the Lord’s Supper was a truly grievous offense.

How did Novatian handle this situation? How did he oppose Cornelius, and what are the gory details surrounding his ordination of being bishop of the city of Rome? As we think about this history, as we try to reconstruct it, we have to acknowledge that some of the details are perhaps added for embellishment over the centuries and we’re not precisely sure of the exact nature of all of the precise historical details, but the story which we have received is certainly a fascinating one.

Novatian sought out three other bishops, the minimum number necessary for an ordination to be a bishop or presbyter, the head of a group of pastors in one geographical area, and as he sent through Italy, he found three other bishops who would be willing to ordain him as the president of that group of pastors or of bishop of the city of Rome. And we know a little bit about these bishops basically not because they’ve done anything else except that they participated with Novatian in this interesting story. Novatian took them out to supper, and we know that as he took them out to supper that they were eating very freely and drinking just as freely as well. The stories that we have is that they were quite sick from the after-effects of all the wine they had drunk, and as they had terminated their dinner and their plenty of drinking, Novatian forced them, so the story goes, to ordain him a bishop. This was against all proper decorum of the church, this was against the way things were done in the church, and he was opposed immediately from this time period.

He was opposed not only by Cyprian and other North African bishops, of course, by Cornelius, but a general council of the church of sixty different bishops was called in Rome, and at that point Novatian because of his hideous grab for power was declared himself excommunicated. This is a fascinating look at how the church dealt with the important question of discipline, how the church dealt with how it should govern itself, and we see the importance of councils or synods, and they will have different names and different groupings of church leaders coming together. This group of sixty different pastors meeting in Rome declared that this fellow of Rome was no longer a member of the church. But wait a minute, Novatian had himself ordained as a bishop of

Rome. Can a bishop ever be excommunicated? Apparently so, but there were those who wanted to hold on to Novatian and to Novatian's teaching, especially those who had withstood the attacks of the Roman government. Those who had stood firm for Jesus Christ, those who had suffered during times of persecution felt that Novatian was right and that the rest of the church was too lax, that they didn't exercise sufficient discipline, and so a schism, a rend, a tearing of the church occurred. The church was torn from Rome all the way to Spain in the West and Syria in the East, and this schism, this tearing, this split in the church lasted over a century.

There's little known concerning Novatian himself after, what happened to him, what happened to his ministry, where he went, what he did. There is a possibility that he was killed during the persecution of Valerian or one of the other persecutions. At this point, we don't have sufficient historical detail. What can we learn from this sad chapter in the history of the ancient church? There's still a lot that we can take home with us into the twentieth century. Already the church is only in its third century, already the church is still living in the time of persecution, when the church was at least supposedly more pure than it is today, and yet even from this time period the church is rent with schism. Even from this time period, it's at least my opinion that pride and ambition took over in the life of Novatian as he lusted after the power of being the head pastor of the great city of Rome and with him went a sizeable portion of the church.

And it's more than a story of Novatian as we look at the schism connected with his name. It's a story of the struggle between men and women who were normal church attenders, who did not tolerate various opinions concerning the nature of the lapsed. And if we put ourselves in their shoes, we can understand the struggles, the internal struggles inherent in the Novatian schism. Put yourself in the shoes of the man whose wife had died the death of a martyr, whose children had been separated from him, who had been thrown out of his house, who had nearly starved to death, for example, for proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ, and here comes some other pastor and says that those who freely gave over their Bibles, those who paid a small sum and had incense burned in their name, who underwent none of this suffering, he too has the right to be a member of the church. Can you feel with that man who suffered, the struggle that he would have welcoming that other brother sitting next to him in the pew as he would think about his wife and her death, or as he would think of

the depravation of his children.

Or think about, take the other position of those who lapsed. They knew that they had done wrong. They repented of their sin. They felt that they were truly sorry, and they demonstrated that by their weeping, by their public profession, and can you see how they would feel that their brothers should be more accepting of them, that they too sinned and that there are only degrees of sin, but all sin is hideous in the sight of God. How do you reconcile these two Christians? It's not an easy question. It's not vastly different from the questions that we face in the twentieth century. So let's learn from the past. Let's learn to do what the Bible teaches us and in doing that, teaching the Bible to learn to love each other no matter what position is being taken so that we don't have to carry the burden of someone like Novatian in the twentieth century who rends the church apart.

The next person we wish to study is Cyprian, and Cyprian's story is not much more happy. We should note first of all that Cyprian was an African born between AD 200 and 210, probably in the city of Carthage, and probably of a very rich and well-educated pagan family. Let's talk very briefly about geography. The city of Carthage is on the Mediterranean Sea on the shore of North Africa, and this northern part of Africa was an important part of the Roman world, so although we'll be talking extensively about North Africa, in our own minds as Western Christians, as those coming from a European heritage usually, we don't consider northern Africa to be part of the Roman world. But here in these lectures we should be considering northern Africa as a Latin-speaking and a highly educated, highly developed culture of the Roman Empire, and an important, perhaps for the a time, the most important area for the flourishing of Christianity.

Later on in the course we'll be talking about how Christianity was destroyed from the face of North Africa and how, even to this day, Christianity hardly has any glimmers in the place that at one time held a great harvest for Christianity. But Cyprian comes from North Africa. He won great fame as a rhetorician but became disheartened with the morality that surrounded him and the corruption of the Roman government. What's a rhetorician? Is he someone who speaks rhetorically? Well, yes, but that word *rhetoric* is understood in a different way in twentieth-century America from the way it was understood in the third and fourth century AD or even the sixteenth century. A rhetorician was sort of like a news commentator, sort of like an entertainer, sort of like

a politician, sort of like a philosopher, sort of like a great literary writer. He was all of those things. He entertained the population; he was a great preserver of the intellectual heritage of the day. They usually had tremendous intellectual gifts, being able to memorize many, many pages of a document, being able to speak literally for hours in great rhetorical flourish, entertaining people, and yet informing them as well. They truly were the stars of that society.

This great rhetorician Cyprian became converted to Christianity sometime before AD 248, perhaps around 246, and was shortly thereafter elected bishop of the city of Carthage, we note by the voice of the people. In North Africa it appears that the people themselves had very much to say concerning the choosing of their pastors. And we'll later on see as we study the great theologian of Hippo Regius, Augustine, that the people played an important role in choosing of the pastor; however, very shortly after his election, the Decian persecution broke out—remember that's around 250—and that compelled all Christians of the empire to do a sacrifice or burn incense to the Roman gods. Cyprian fled from the city, not out of fear but to keep very close contact with his congregation. At least all of those who were able to flee from the main cities did so to avoid having to do this pagan sacrifice, and they went out and lived in the woods where the Roman soldiers weren't able to find them. So Cyprian flees from the city as well, so as not to suffer persecution and to stay with his congregation, which in the most had fled.

How do you think the church is going to respond to Cyprian? As you can imagine, there will be those in the church who will maintain that it was wrong for Cyprian to flee, but rather it was right for him to stand firm and to stand in the city and to stand for Christ and not make this pagan sacrifice and if necessary to die for his faith, and so another fight is about to break out. A synod is called in the year 251, and that synod debated Cyprian's actions. It was held that Cyprian did what was right; that is, there was biblical justification to flee from your city during the time of persecution, and in that synod, the opponents of Cyprian were all excommunicated, they were all thrown out. At that synod in 251, it was also determined that the lapsed, and remember with the discussion of Novatian, the lapsed could be admitted to penance and were treated eventually, at least, in time to full communion membership. But in this year 251, the church for the first time provides a way in which the lapsed should be properly brought into the church, and it's an interesting story.

What happens to the mature Christian who during this time of persecution lapsed from the Christian faith? He or she repents of that action and wishes to come back into the church. The church in this synod, and a synod is a general meeting of church leaders from a certain geographical location, these people meeting in the synod determined that the lapsed person who repents of his or her sin should be treated as if he or she were, and they use this word, a *catechumen*. That word *catechumen* is not used by many in the Christian church today, but a catechumen is one who is learning about Christianity. Remember, most Christians came into the church at this time by conversion, conversion especially from paganism. And as those who are interested in Christianity learn about Christianity, they entered into catechism classes or classes for those who are being catechized, those who are being taught the basic truths of Christianity. But is a catechumen fully a Christian? Those who had not yet made profession of saving faith in Jesus Christ, or those who had not sufficiently learned what it is to make saving profession of Christ, are they truly Christians? I think the twentieth-century church would agree with the early Christian church in saying, No, they are just seeking after Christianity.

Those who were in this seeker's class or inquirer's class or catechism class were not permitted to take the Lord's Supper, and so the ruling was that those who were lapsed were admitted to this idea of penance which meant that they were treated like catechumens, they were allowed to go to sermons, they were allowed to go to the potluck suppers that the church had (by the way, they didn't have potluck suppers, but that's a twentieth-century equivalent), and at their death bed, they were permitted full fellowship, that is, full communion in the church. This might seem like a very, very hard statement upon first reflection; that is, for example, if a thirty-year-old father lapsed, the general standards which were being set were that that father was never permitted the Lord's Supper until he was old, until he was about the time of his death. That could be a thirty-year time of penance. We don't have that in the twentieth century in any church in the evangelical world, and yet once again we see the church's desire to be a pure and true body of Christ. And so that lapsed person would have to maintain this position of penance, of being sorry, for as long as thirty years. The church is struggling with how to deal with sin, and that struggle probably won't be resolved until the sixteenth century, until men like Martin Luther and John Calvin come on the scene and especially deal with some important theological questions which are not resolved in the ancient church period.

So Cyprian won in this first fight in 251, but life didn't get any easier for Cyprian because a plague immediately breaks out throughout the North African coast, and guess who's blamed for the plague? Not Cyprian himself, but the Christians were blamed by the Roman citizens for this plague; that is, that the Christians were not good Romans, they were not doing what they should in terms of obeying the teaching of the gods. And so Cyprian shows his true colors during the outbreak of the plague. The plague is something quite unfamiliar to us, but it oftentimes wreaked horrible havoc in society. This happened all the way into the seventeenth century, when one-third to one-half of a city's population would be killed by the plague. Half of each family, for example, would die, and so the destruction of the plague was great, and it was a time of great danger, certainly as great as during the time of persecution. But Cyprian, knowing it to be his Christian duty to be a pastor during times of persecution, also showed his true pastoral heart as he ministered for the afflicted both of the church and those without the church during this time of plague. Cyprian stood fast, was ministering the Lord's Supper to those who were dying of the plague, showed great compassion for those Roman citizens who had been persecuting him and his church in the time of the plague. And so his piety in the midst of this trial that was jointly afflicting the church and society, his pastoral piety, his ministering for those outside of the faith was a great testimony for how the church should live and was a great testimony and a was a great impetus for spreading the gospel.

His last years from about 255 on were filled with involvement in the questions surrounding the important issues of baptism and who should be giving baptism, when should baptism be given, and whether or not the baptism of heretics was a lawful baptism. These types of practical Christian questions surrounded his ministry until the end of his life. The view of Tertullian, which was affirmed by Cyprian and reaffirmed by the synod's meeting in Carthage in 255 and 256 was that the baptism done by heretics was invalid. What am I talking about here? We already know that during this time period there was truly an orthodox church or a church that held to the truths of Christianity, and from this early time period, those were those, for example, who followed Novatian and others who were considered to be heretics, who were considered to be excommunicated from the church, and if someone from another church comes into your church already being baptized, but being baptized by someone like Novatian, how do we as pastors deal with that baptism? Does that person need to be rebaptized? These were hot questions then and certainly

no less hot than the question we face today, and those synods maintained that a heretical baptism was no baptism.

There was no time for opposition to this opinion because the edict of Valerian against the Christians, which first of all had Cyprian vanished, and then in September of 258 had him beheaded near Carthage, that certainly was the end of church strife and struggle for Cyprian and he went to his eternal home at that time. Certainly this is an interesting time period, and Cyprian is an interesting character. He is fascinating to examine. Here was a man who stood for proper teaching, who stood as a pious pastor, and stood in the heat of battle, both within the church and without the church, and in 258, his time with struggle ended as his head and his body are separated by order of the emperor.

The last person that we'll look at in terms of Western writers of the third century is Lactantius. Lactantius's story is certainly not as exciting as Cyprian's. We don't know very much about him. He was probably also trained in Africa as a rhetorician and was summoned by the emperor Diocletian, you know his name certainly, to a place called Bithynia, the new Eastern capital, to teach Latin rhetoric there. Apparently poor old Lactantius wasn't very popular and had to support himself by writing, even though he retained his chair of rhetoric in this town. But in 303 the persecution of this same Diocletian forced him to resign his chair since he had apparently become a Christian, and he had to eventually flee the city sometime between the years 305 and 306. The date of his death is not very well known to us, but we do know that at about the year 317, Constantine, an emperor whose name I think has not been introduced yet to us, but who was known as the Christian emperor, in 317 Constantine called him to a city called Trier in Gaul, which is modern-day France, to tutor his oldest son, named Crispus. We know that at this time, poor old Lactantius was very old and very poor, and that's all we know about him. We don't know many of his writings, we don't know about his pastoral abilities, but once again we get a glimpse into the life of this Western church during this third century of Christianity.

Perhaps more important for us theologically than the Western writers of the third century is our move to the Eastern writers of the third century. West and East is a nomenclature that we make up to help us to understand and to categorize these various figures during this time period. We understand as Western writers those who write in the Latin language and Eastern writers are those who continue to write in the Greek language. And so come

with me, once again, back in time to another place, this time the East instead of the West, come with me and examine a number of the important leaders of the church, and we'll begin with Clement of Alexandria.

Where's Alexandria? Of course, it's in Virginia, but Alexandria in Virginia was not the first place. Alexandria is in Egypt. Egypt, being in Africa, and Alexandria was in many ways the intellectual hotbed of Christianity. It was the great place of great theological education, and Clement was a great teacher. Although we don't know much about his biography, we know about him as theologian. Remember, we're going backwards in time again as we turn our attention to the Eastern church. He was born approximately AD 150, also the son of non-Christian parents. Perhaps he was born in the city of Athens, because he received much of his training there. We don't know when, where, or why he was converted, but that when he did become a Christian, he searched the empire seeking the best tutors in Christianity.

A flashback in time again, and remember AD 150, Christianity is a young religion, it is an illegal religion, but Clement goes about looking for the best teachers of Christianity, and that's how we think that he was probably born of relatively well-to-do parents. He settled finally in this famous city of Alexandria, and he studied at the feet of the best teacher there, whose name happens to be Pantanus, but Pantanus is not nearly as important as his pupil, Clement. Clement ended up heading up the school of Christianity, the first seminary we could call it, in Alexandria somewhere near the year 200. A few years later, under the persecution of Septimius Severus, he too had to flee that city and to leave all of Egypt. He found refuge in Cappadocia, that's in present-day Asia Minor. There he died in the year 215 without being able to return to Egypt.

We don't know much about his life, so why is he important? As I just mentioned a minute ago, he's important because he gave us important insights into the development of theology itself. What I would like to say about Clement is not systematic, and I would once again like to . . . refer you to the textbooks that we suggest for this course, and concerning Clement himself, the verdict of historians is that he wasn't a brilliant thinker. He enjoyed reading many works, and in his works he cites more than 360 different profane writers, that is, writers not of the Christian camp.

We know that he had a very good knowledge of the Scriptures, but once again he doesn't demonstrate the type of brilliance that we see in later Eastern writers.

However, Clement implemented, he used a method that was very important in the development of theology itself. He is the opponent of whom he called the Orthodoxists, those who were too rigid in their thinking, and these Orthodoxists, again as Clement calls them, rejected all philosophical thinking; they were anti-intellectual. Perhaps today we still have some of those Orthodoxists in American Christianity, but Clement thought that philosophy itself was an aid to the Christian faith. He doesn't say that it can lead you to faith, but that philosophy can make Christianity attractive to those outside of the faith. Faith and philosophy are the subjects of very, very important questions throughout all of the history of Christianity, and perhaps you've noticed already how important the interaction between Christianity and philosophy is. Clement provides certain answers that the church is going to hold on to, certain answers that the church found to be helpful. And in the next lecture, we'll investigate the answers that Clement gave to the perplexing relationship between faith and philosophy.