



## SESSION 8: DECIUS, ORIGEN, ARIANISM & MONASTICISM – CONTENT

1. Around 220 the heresy of millennialism appeared, based upon Revelation 20:1-6. Its main proponent was Commodian, and it said that a one thousand year period of paradise was imminent. It was condemned at the Synod of Iconium in 230. The Council of Nicea (325) included “whose kingdom shall have no end” in the Creed to condemn it, and it was condemned again at the Council of Constantinople in 381.
2. By 230 Christianity was spreading widely in the Roman Empire; even a few emperors declared themselves Christians. So it was with Emperor Alexander Severus. But he was succeeded by Emperor Maximinius in 235, who hated Alexander and thus ordered that the leaders of the Church be destroyed.
3. In 244 Maximinius was succeeded by Emperor Philip, who was a Christian.
4. In 249 the soldier Decius became Emperor. He tried to restore Rome to its old glory, thus requiring return to Roman ancestral religion. His means was to arrest, threaten and torture ‘infidels’ into submission. From 249 until his death in 251, persecution of Christians was the second worst in Roman history. In June of 250 Decius decreed that all of the empire must call on the gods by sacrificing to them, and that all must obtain official certificates attesting they had done so. But the Church grew significantly during this.
5. In 250 Cyprian was bishop of Carthage, in North Africa, where Decius’ persecutions were the most intense. For his faith he was martyred.
6. In Rome in 250 the heresy of Novatianism appeared as a reaction to the intense persecution under Decius, and towards those who had apostasized. The priest Novatian, who opposed the newly elected head of the Roman church, declared himself the head, saying that: 1) baptized Christians who had denied their faith or performed ritual sacrifices to pagan gods cannot be readmitted to the Church, 2) second marriages are unlawful, 3) the Church is corrupted. The Roman church quickly excommunicated Novatian and condemned his heresy.
7. Around 250 the heresy of Manichaeism appeared. Its founder, Mani, was from Persia. Mani created his own Syriac script in which he claimed to be the Holy Spirit. This form of Iranian gnosticism was a synthesis of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism; it said that: 1) creation is from the kings of light and darkness (Zoroastrianism), 2) Christ represents light; Satan dark, 3) the Apostles modified Christ’s teaching; Mani revealed in correctly, 4) Christ’s body is an illusion. They were extreme ascetics. In 296 Diocletian proscribed death by fire for Mani. In 381 Patriarch Theodosius I stripped Manichaeans of their rights. In 387 Augustine converted from Manichaeism to Christianity.

8. Origen (185-254) was from a Christian family in Alexandria. When Christians were persecuted under Septimus Severus (202) Origen encouraged his father to embrace martyrdom. He hoped to follow his father in this, but was prevented by his mother, who hid his clothes. He was trained as a lawyer, became a disciple of Clement of Alexandria, and in 204 Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria appointed him head of the catechetical school of the Alexandrian church. He became well-known as a teacher, the greatest theologian of the Alexandrian catechetical school, and one of the most influential pre-Constantine Church Fathers. But this school soon outgrew its original task; it was open to all who were interested and became a forum for genuine encounter between Christian and pagan wisdom. It was not a matter of Christian wisdom simply overthrowing the pagan. Here was the first acceptance of Hellenistic values by Christianity in order to convert them to the service of Christ.

Matthew 19:12 says, “For there are eunuchs who are born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”, To fulfill this Origen castrated himself. Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria refused to ordain Origen, saying that his self-mutilation made him ineligible for the priesthood.

Origen began to travel and preach and address disputes within the Church. In Rome he was asked to expound on Christianity at the imperial court. In 230, while in Caesarea, he convinced Bishop Alexander of Jerusalem to ordain him. Bishop Demetrius (Alexandria) took offense at this, saying it flouted the authority of the Alexandrian church. He excommunicated Origen, who then fled to Caesarea and started his own school.

He was a prolific writer (~2,000 documents) and lecturer, bringing back to the Church many who had fallen into heresies. He said that frequent prayer sanctifies believers, unifies them to God, and helps avoid sin. Historian and Archpriest John Morris says, “**Origen’s definition of salvation as growth into unity with God, or deification, has become standard in the Orthodox Church**”. He was a complex, learned thinker, fully acquainted with the traditions of Jews and Christians, and fully educated in ancient rhetoric and philosophy. He was prone to complicate and then chew on subtle problems. He used Hellenistic philosophers to express the biblical contents of the faith; he was called a Christian Platonist. He used the New Testament as it now exists, without Hebrews. He believed that the only way to wisdom is through prayerful and exacting study of Scripture, and thus introduced the concept of *sola Scriptura*, which ultimately became a fundamental of Protestant theology. He said the fleshly existence of God’s Son enables us to rise through faith to a knowledge of the eternal truth, which is always the same, yet always **adapting** to the varying needs of its recipients.

He said: 1) In His relation to God, the Word is God in the same way no real difference can be made between a thought and its thinker, 2) The Word gives life and knowledge to rational beings, 3) Christ is the Mediator and High Priest, who represents humanity to God and God to humanity, 4) Ultimately God’s providence will be able to draw everyone to Him so that we may all exercise perfect freedom by choosing Him. It is an education of souls. The pupil always retains the freedom, but God the Word is so powerful a teacher that His lessons will eventually be learned by all. **This doctrine of apokatastasis is that ultimately all will receive salvation**, even satan. 5) Our souls exist in heaven before our bodies are created, and our earthly bodies will not resurrect. Much of what Origen said was harmonious with Church doctrine; some of what he said was certainly not. Four and five are examples of the latter.

To his pupil Gregory Thaumaturgos, he wrote, “I would wish you to use all the strength of your mind for the advantage of Christianity, which should be your highest goal. To achieve this I desire you to take from the Greek philosophy those spheres of knowledge which are potentially an introduction to Christianity, and whatever information from geometry and astronomy may serve to explain the sacred books.” Note that Gregory Thaumaturgos was ultimately the teacher of Macrina the Elder, grandmother of the Cappadocian fathers Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great.)

Origen also said that the Son was generated by the Father. “He so emphasized the unique oneness of God that he left little place for the equality of the Son with the Father. This laid a foundation for the development of the heresy of **Arianism**.” (Archpriest John Morris)

In the late 200’s, Methodius of Olympus became a leading opponent of Origenism, rejecting his beliefs on the preexistence of souls. Origen’s theological speculations provoked a reaction in Antioch in 312 – the creation of the Antiochian catechetical school by Bishop Lucian. This school emphasized the literal meaning of Biblical texts and the human nature of Christ. Differences in emphasis and rivalry between the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools laid a foundation for conflict over the relation between the divine and human nature of Christ. In 375 there began a general attack on Origen’s subordinating Trinitarian thought. Origenist theology became especially strong in monastic communities in Egypt and Palestine. In 400 Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, condemned Origenist views. In 543 a synod in Constantinople condemned Origenist views; this was ratified ten years later by the fifth Ecumenical Council. The charges against Origen boil down to the accusation that his theology was adulterated by his philosophy. Hans Urs von Balthasar, who published a book on the life of Origen and some of his works, said, “While the theological edifice he had constructed fell into ruins after his death, it supplied the stones from which new theological structures were built. It was not only the Arians who mined his writings; the orthodoxy of the fourth century articulated by Athanasius and the Cappadocians was deeply dependent upon Origen. In this way Origen’s theology represents one of the foundations of traditional Christian doctrine.”

As Decius persecuted Christians, Origen was arrested, tortured and released. He died shortly thereafter.

Recall that some of Tertullian’s teaching was also rejected by the early Church. Neither Tertullian nor Origen were canonized. Their examples show that early Fathers were not infallible, and that the Holy Spirit and concensus guided the “mind of the Church” away from doctrinal perversions. [“Because of their role in the foundation of Christian theology, early Christian writers are called the Fathers of the Church. The Orthodox Church does not consider any Father infallible. Some of them, Origen for example, combined great insights with ideas that would evolve into heresies... When studying the Fathers, Orthodox Christians look for concensus of the Fathers to discern the mind of the Church.” (Archpriest John Morris)]

9. In 260 Emperor Valerian was defeated by the Persians. His successor son, Gallienus, revoked the edict of persecution, bringing 44 years of peace for Christians. Persians overran Syria and captured Antioch. Goths crossed the Danube and ravaged the Balkans, Greece and Asia Minor. Franks crossed the Rhine into Spain and North Africa.
10. By 275 the heresy of Arianism was growing. It was started by Arius (250-336), a priest in Alexandria, and said that Christ is the first created being, that He was created by the Father and

therefore distinct from and inferior to the Father. Since the Son was begotten, He had a beginning. Thus there was a time when he was not. Since God had no beginning, and the Son had a beginning, the Son could not be fully God, but a creature and a work. Arians based their claim on John 14:28 and upon Origen's teaching. It was the first, great doctrinal dispute in the Church and persisted for over a hundred years. Fathers who preached against it included Athanasios, Hilary, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Arianism was repeatedly in favor and out of favor with various emperors and was deemed an heresy at the Council of Nicea in 325. It was exonerated at the Synod of Tyre in 335, and then re-deemed an heresy at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

11. In 275 Emperor Aurelian dedicated a great temple to *Sol Invictus* on December 25. Christians responded by choosing that day to celebrate the birth of Christ.
12. By 280 monasticism was beginning to grow, first in the Nitrian desert of Egypt. Monastics felt that rapid Church growth left no time for proper discipling, that 'tares are growing so rapidly they are choking out the wheat' (e.g. redemption of the apostasized), and that security and comfortable living are enemies of the Church. Many took to the deserts as basket weavers, shunning books and teaching each other orally. Desire for ascetic life and Tertullian's thoughts on reconciliation, penitence and mortification stimulated this. Initially monasticism was mostly hermetic (i.e. living alone).