

## LESSON SIX – Hippolytus/Callistus and 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Persecution

### Hippolytus and Callistus

- Sources give contradictory information about Hippolytus. Was he a presbyter or bishop, at Rome or Porto, a churchman or a schismatic?
- Modern scholars have complicated the situation by suggesting that the works attributed to Hippolytus come from at least two different authors.
- A possible interpretation is that Hippolytus was a presbyter in Rome who went into schism when Callistus was elected bishop.
- In this lesson the question of authorship will be passed over to focus on one work that has been attributed to Hippolytus, *The Refutation of all Heresies*, and one episode described in that work, the conflict of that author with two bishops of Rome, Zephyrinus and Callistus.
- No passage in Christian literature gives such a vivid impression of the social realities of the early church.
- The conflict between Hippolytus and Callistus illustrates the difficulty within the church of Rome in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in becoming truly inclusive.
- Although both were victims of persecution, their similarities ended there. Hippolytus was an educated Greek speaker; Callistus a former slave who rose to prominence by his wits. They became personal rivals within the Roman church.
- The two differed on some theological issues but the disagreement that broke fellowship concerned church discipline.
- Hippolytus took the position that certain sinners, such as murderers and adulterers could not be reconciled to the church. Some sins only God could forgive. Callistus insisted they should be forgiven and readmitted to fellowship.
- According to Roman law, marriage of a free woman with a slave was not recognized. The greater number of Christian women than men in the free classes led some to choose a Christian slave as a spouse.
- Hippolytus considered such unions adulterous, but Callistus took the more compassionate step in social ethics in recognizing marriages not sanctioned by the law.
- When some of these women sought abortions rather than had their children considered illegitimate, Callistus was willing to extend forgiveness while Hippolytus saw this as murder and unforgivable.
- Both men defended valid principles, Hippolytus the ideal of the church as a pure community and Callistus the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Both men made mistakes. Hippolytus, a personal vindictiveness and lack of love for sinners, and Callistus being too quick to forgive and condone abuses accompanying his measures.
- Callistus's position represented the course the Roman church was going to take in understanding the church as an inclusive church, a saving society. Hippolytus, on the other hand, wanted a church that was completely pure.

## Persecution in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century

- In the last years of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the church enjoyed relative peace but in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that all changed.
- Trajan's policy was still in effect and the threat of local persecution was constant. Beyond that there were new policies that deeply affected the life of the church.
- Early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the reigning emperor, Septimius Severus, had managed to put an end to a series of civil wars that had weakened the empire.
- Faced with these difficulties, the emperor felt he needed to have religious harmony in his territories. He settled on a policy of promoting syncretism.
- He planned to bring all his subjects together under the worship of Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun and to incorporate under that worship all the various current religions and philosophies.
- This policy soon clashed with what seemed to be the obstinacy of two groups who refused to yield to syncretism: Jews and Christians. Septimius Severus decided to stop the spread of these two religions and outlawed conversion to Christianity and Judaism.
- The result was an increase in local persecution like that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, to which now was added a more intensive persecution aimed directly at new converts and their teachers.
- The year 202, when Septimius Severus issued his edict, is a landmark year in the history of persecution.
- The most famous martyrdom of that time is that of Perpetua and Felicitas, which probably took place in 203. It is possible Perpetua and her companions were Montanists, and that the account of their martyrdom comes from the pen of Tertullian.
- The martyrs were five catechumen and these five people, some of whom were teens, were not charged for being Christians, but with recently converting and disobeying an imperial edict.
- Shortly after the martyrdom of Perpetua, Felicitas and the other catechumen, for reasons that are unclear, the persecution abated.
- In 211, Caracalla succeeded Septimius Severus and there was brief persecution; but it did not last long and was limited mostly to North Africa.
- The next two emperors, Elagabalus and Alexander Severus, pursued syncretism but they did not force Jews and Christians to accept it or to stop seeking converts.
- Under emperor Maximin there was very brief persecution in Rome. At that time the church in the city was divided, and two rival bishops, Pontianus and Hippolytus were sent to work in the mines.
- But again, the storm abated and it was even rumored, with little fact, that Philip of Arabian, who ruled the empire from 244 to 249 was a Christian.
- In 249, Decius took the imperial seat. Decius was a Roman of the old style, whose main goal was to restore Rome to her ancient glory.
- To someone like Decius, a traditional Roman, it seemed that the reason for Rome's fall from its ancient glory was that the people had abandoned the ancient gods. If Rome was to return to her ancient glory, it was necessary to restore the ancient religion.

- This was the basis for Decius's religious policy. He believed the survival of Rome itself was at stake. Those who refused to worship the gods were practically guilty of high treason.
- Decius's persecution was very different from earlier ones. His purpose was not to create martyrs but to create apostates.
- According to imperial decree, everyone had to sacrifice to the gods and to burn incense before the statue of Decius. Those who complied would be given a certificate attesting to the fact. Those who did not would be considered outlaws who had disobeyed an imperial command.
- The imperial decree found Christians unprepared for the new challenge.
- Since Decius's goal was to promote worship of the gods, rather than kill Christians, the authorities arrested them and under threat of torture tried to get them to abandon their faith.
- One of the results of this persecution was that a new title of honor appeared within the church, that of the "confessor." Those who confessed faith in such circumstances were called "confessors," and were highly respected by other Christians.
- Decius's persecution was brief. In 251 Gallus succeeded him, and his policies were set aside. Six years later Valerian, a former companion of Decius, began a new persecution, but he was captured by the Persians, who took him prisoner, and the church enjoyed another forty years of relative peace.
- Even though the persecution under Decius was brief, it was a harsh trial for the church. This was due, not only to the persecution itself, but also to the problems the church would face after it.
- The church now had to figure out how to deal with the "lapsed." Those, who in one way or another, had weakened under the persecution.
- Given the prestige of the confessors, some believed they were the ones who should have the authority to determine who among the lapsed ought to be restored to the church community.
- This angered many of the bishops who believed only the hierarchy of the church had the authority to restore the lapsed.
- In the debate surrounding this question, two people played crucial roles: Cyprian and Novatian.
- Cyprian had become a Christian when he was around 40 years old, and shortly after he was elected bishop of Carthage.
- Cyprian had been installed as a bishop shortly before the persecution started and he thought that his duty was to flee to a secure place with other leaders of the church and continue guiding the flock through regular correspondence.
- Some of the confessors thought the lapsed should be readmitted directly, with no other requirement than their own declaration of repentance.
- Cyprian called a synod, which is a gathering of bishops of the region, who decided that those who had purchased fake certificates without actually sacrificing would immediately be readmitted to the church community. Those who sacrificed would only be readmitted on their death beds or when a new persecution gave them the opportunity to prove the

sincerity of their faith. Those who had sacrificed and shown no repentance would never be readmitted.

- The main reason why Cyprian insisted on the need to regulate the readmission of the lapsed into the church community was his own understanding of the church. The church is the body of Christ and will share in the victory of the head. Therefore, “outside the church there is no salvation,” and “no one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother.”
- Novation was more rigorous than Cyprian. He clashed with the bishop of Rome, Cornelius, because in his opinion the lapsed were being readmitted too easily.

**The significance of these episodes is they show how, due to its concern for its own purity, and to its understanding of sin as a debt owed to God, the Western church was repeatedly embroiled in debates regarding how that purity should be sustained while still having the church be a community of love. As a result, the restoration of the lapsed was one of the main concerns of the Western church from a very early date. The question of what should be done about those baptized Christians who sinned divided the Western church repeatedly. It was out of that concern that the entire penitential system developed. Much later, the Protestant Reformation was in large measure a protest against that system. <sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo, L., page 104