



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 7 – Third Century Persecution

In the third century few Roman emperors had long reigns. One followed the other in quick succession. None of them were Christians, and all of them were opposed to Christianity to one degree or another. Two of them became particularly vicious in their policies or persecution that resulted in the torture and deaths of many Christian martyrs.

Septimius Severus ruled from 193-211 AD. For the sake of the empire, he tried to bring about religious harmony throughout all his vast domains. His aim was to cause all his subjects to worship one main god called the Unconquered Sun. His people could worship other gods as well, but all were to worship this one god.

The only ones who refused to worship this Sun God were the Jews and the Christians. Septimius Severus therefore outlawed all conversions to Christianity or Judaism. Those who disobeyed his decree were to be put to death. Among the martyrs of that time was a young woman named Perpetua who was nursing her infant. Her father tried to convince her to abandon her faith in order to save her own life and the life of her child. Four companions joined Perpetua. One was a servant girl named Felicitas, who was pregnant. Both young women were thrown into an arena and tossed about by a cow. Since the bleeding women were still alive, they were killed by the sword. The story of these five martyrs was called the *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, and this story was copied and recopied many times to encourage endangered Christians throughout the empire.

Some of the emperors who came after Septimius Severus followed the same persecution policy, but others were more lenient. In fact, some Christians began to believe that the age of persecution was over. The numbers of Christians continued to increase, and even some of the more prominent officials became Christians.

But in 249 AD Decius became emperor, and he believed that the only hope for the Roman Empire was to return to their ancient beliefs and their ancient gods. He was convinced that the troubles in the empire were caused by the anger of the ancient gods who were being neglected by the people. Decius therefore decreed that those who refused to worship the traditional ancient gods were guilty of treason and must be forced to participate in such worship by means of torture. Decius did not want to create martyrs; he wanted to cause people to renounce their unpatriotic devotion to the Christian God and worship the false ancient gods of Rome.

Since this was an imperial decree, it was enforced throughout the huge empire of Rome. All the Christians were asked to do was offer a sacrifice to the Roman gods and burn incense

before a statue of Decius. All those who complied were given a certificate that indicated that they had obeyed the decree. Many Christians were unable to withstand the threat of torture, and they either offered the sacrifice or paid money to obtain the certificate that said they had offered the sacrifice. Those who gave in or purchased false certificates were called the “lapsed”. Those who remained firm in their refusal to obey Decius’ orders were called the “confessors” and were highly honored by other Christians. Some were put to death, but not all of them.

Decius was emperor for only a few years, and the following emperors did not continue his harsh policy. But now the Christian congregations were faced with the problem of how to deal with all those who had denied Christ under the threat of torture and death, as well as all those who had bought their freedom by obtaining fake certificates. Should these still be considered Christians, or should they be excommunicated? Some thought that the only ones who could answer this question were the faithful confessors. Others believed that the pastors and bishops should lead the decision. Others felt that all the lapsed must be considered as unbelievers until they went through a lengthy program of penance.

Cyprian was bishop in Carthage at this time. He himself had been able to escape the persecution by finding a secure place in which to hide. He did this so that he could continue to guide his flock by means of letters. Some thought that this disqualified him as a judge in the matter because he did not have to make the same choice and that the loyal confessors should resolve this problem. Some of the confessors were happy to readmit the lapsed as soon as they repented, but not all. The Christians were divided.

Cyprian arranged for a meeting of all the bishops in the region to determine what they should do. The bishops decided that those who had obtained certificates without sacrificing to the gods were to be readmitted to the church, but those who had sacrificed but were sorry were to be readmitted only on their deathbeds. Those who refused to repent, however, were declared forever outside the Church.

The same problem had occurred in Rome at an earlier time. The bishop Calixtus had been willing to forgive those guilty of fornication who had repented, but Hippolytus opposed this view; the result was a schism (split) in the Roman congregation.

In the case of those who sacrificed to the gods in the time of Emperor Decius the result was the same: a split between the Roman bishop Cornelius, who readmitted the lapsed, and Novatian, who believed that Cornelius was too lenient. This split lasted for several generations.

These debates among the Christian congregations led to the establishment of a severe penitential system that went beyond the Scriptures. It is right that truly impenitent sinners should be admonished and removed from the congregation if they do not repent. We learn this from Jesus (Matthew 18) and the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 5). But repentant sinners should be readmitted at once, as was the case with King David in the Old Testament (2

Samuel 12) and the man excommunicated by the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 2). They should not have to go through a process of readmittance. Consider Jesus' parable of the father's acceptance of the prodigal son (Luke 15). The wayward son was immediately welcomed home by the father.

Questions:

1. Why did Septimius Severus persecute Christians?
2. Why was the story of Perpetua and Felicitas written?
3. When is it necessary for a Christian to put God above family and friends?
4. Why was Decius so fierce in his treatment of Christians?
5. How could one satisfy the requirements of Emperor Decius?
6. How did Bishop Cyprian of Carthage evade the command of the Emperor Decius?
7. What debate arose among the Christians after Decius was no longer emperor?
8. How did one get to be considered a confessor?
9. What was the decision of the synod that Cyprian called together?
10. In what way was this decision contrary to Scripture?
11. What position did Bishops Calixtus and Cornelius take?
12. In your opinion, is the stance of Christians in your area too lenient or too rigorous?
Why do you say this?