

Tertullian, Origen & Cyprian

The third-century church — Latin theology born in Carthage, biblical scholarship forged in Alexandria, and the doctrine of the church hammered out under persecution • c. AD 200–260

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 6 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — the generation after **Lesson 5 (Justin and Irenaeus)** and before Constantine and Nicaea (AD 325). The theological vocabulary of Nicaea — *persona, substantia, Trinitas* — was forged in this century, by these men. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

The third century is often skipped in church-history classes — bracketed between the drama of the apostolic age and the glamour of Constantine — and that is a mistake. In this hundred years the church acquired its **Latin theological vocabulary** (Tertullian), its **first great biblical scholar** (Origen), its **first sustained ecclesiology** (Cyprian), its **first handbook of worship** (Hippolytus), and its **first empire-wide persecution** (Decius, 250). Every doctrine settled at Nicaea in 325 was first being rough-cut in Carthage, Alexandria, and Rome during these years. This is the century in which the church learns to *think systematically*.

Greek NT (2 Tim 2:15): σπούδασον σεαυτοῦ ἵνα δόκιμον παραστήσῃς τῷ θεῷ, ἐργάτην ἀνεπαίσχυντον, ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸ ἴδιον λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας.

2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV): “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

Paul’s word to Timothy — *orthotomounta*, “rightly cutting” the word of truth — becomes a third-century vocation.

PART 1 — THREE CITIES, THREE SCHOOLS

Third-century Christianity organizes itself around three intellectual centres. Each city develops its own voice — its own instinct about what theology is and how it should be done. These three voices will argue with each other for the next thousand years and, in many ways, still do.

CARTHAGE — LATIN & LEGAL

The Roman province of Africa Proconsularis (modern Tunisia). The native language is Latin. The theological instinct is *juridical*: Christianity as a covenant with obligations; sin as debt; salvation as satisfaction; the church as a disciplined body. **Tertullian** is its father, **Cyprian** its crown, and

ALEXANDRIA — GREEK & PHILOSOPHICAL

Egypt’s capital — the largest library in the ancient world, the centre of Platonic philosophy, the home of the Septuagint translation. The theological instinct is *mystical and speculative*: Christianity as the true philosophy; Scripture read on multiple levels; salvation as participation in the divine. **Clement** opens the tradition and **Origen** defines it.

ROME — ORGANIZATIONAL

The imperial capital, polyglot but increasingly Latin-speaking. The theological instinct is *pastoral and organizational*: the church as the ark of salvation; bishops as guardians of tradition; the Apostle Peter’s own see. Rome produces fewer theological treatises and more decisions, liturgies, canons, and lists. **Hippolytus** is its most important third-century voice.

Augustine a century
later its glory.

PART 2 — TERTULLIAN (C. AD 155–220)

Tertullian of Carthage — the Father of Latin Theology

BORN IN CARTHAGE C. 155 • CONVERTED C. 197 • THE FIRST GREAT
CHRISTIAN WRITER IN LATIN • LATER JOINED THE MONTANISTS

Latin

Trinity vocabulary

Apologist

Anti-Gnostic

Tertullian was a legally trained Roman citizen from North Africa who converted to Christianity as an adult. His pen is unlike any other in the early church: sardonic, compressed, quotable, a lawyer's punch behind every sentence. Of the roughly thirty surviving works, three groups matter most:

- **Apologetic:** the *Apology* (c. 197), written to Roman provincial governors. A defense of the faith against the slanders of the empire and a demand for due process.

- **Anti-heretical:** *Prescription Against Heretics*, *Against Marcion* (five books), *Against Praxeas*, *Against the Valentinians*. He extends **Irenaeus' strategy** into Latin.

- **Moral and disciplinary:** *On Baptism* (the earliest treatise on the rite), *On Prayer*, *On Patience*, *On the Soul*, *On the Flesh of Christ*, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*.

What Tertullian gave the church. Because he was the first serious theologian writing in Latin, Tertullian had to *invent* Latin theological vocabulary. The words are still his:

Tertullian's coinages (or earliest attested uses) in theological Latin:

- *Trinitas* — “Trinity” — first appears in his *Against Praxeas* (c. 213).
- *Persona* — “person” — used in its theological sense of each member of the Godhead.
- *Substantia* — “substance” — what the three Persons share.
- *Sacramentum* — “sacrament” — a Latin word meaning an oath of allegiance (a soldier's oath), applied by Tertullian to baptism.
- *Vetus Testamentum* / *Novum Testamentum* — “Old Testament / New Testament” — the pair enters Christian Latin through him.

His *Against Praxeas* gives the classic early formulation of Trinitarian doctrine:

“We believe in one only God... but under this dispensation, which we call oikonomia, that the one only God has also a Son, his Word, who proceeded from himself... All are one (unum), by unity of substance (substantiae); while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the unity into a Trinity (Trinitatem), placing in their order the three Persons (tres personas) — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance (unius substantiae), and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God.”

— **Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2 (c. AD 213)**

That is the exact grammar Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451) will stand on, a century and two centuries later respectively. **Without Tertullian, the language of the creeds is unthinkable.**

Memorable Tertullian. He is the most quotable father of the early church:

*“Plures effricimur, quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum.
— The more we are mown down by you, the more we multiply: the blood of the Christians is seed.”*

— **Tertullian, *Apology* 50 (c. AD 197) — often paraphrased “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”**

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?”

— Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 7 (c. AD 200)

A complication. Around 207 Tertullian broke with the mainstream Catholic church at Carthage and joined the *Montanists* — a rigorist prophetic movement from Phrygia led by one Montanus and two prophetesses (Priscilla and Maximilla). He remained orthodox on doctrine but rejected what he saw as the laxity of the wider church’s discipline. This is why Tertullian, despite his towering contribution, never received the title “Saint.” His theology shaped the tradition; his ecclesiastical choices did not.

PART 3 — CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (C. AD 150–215)

Titus Flavius Clemens — Clement of Alexandria

GREEK CONVERT • HEAD OF THE ALEXANDRIAN CATECHETICAL SCHOOL
C. 190–202 • ORIGEN’S TEACHER

Alexandria

Philosophy

Allegory

Before Origen there is Clement. A convert from Greek philosophy who became head of Alexandria’s Catechetical School, Clement deliberately engaged the educated pagan world on its own ground. His three major works form a trilogy:

• ***Protrepticus* (“Exhortation”)** — an evangelistic appeal to Greeks to abandon paganism for Christ.

• ***Paedagogus* (“The Instructor”)** — a handbook of Christian ethics and daily life.

• ***Stromata* (“Miscellanies”)** — eight books of theological reflection, arguing that the true *gnôsis* is Christ’s, not the Gnostics’.

Clement’s central insight: Greek philosophy was to the Gentiles what the Law was to the Jews — a *paidagogos* leading them to Christ (Gal 3:24). He fled Alexandria during the persecution of 202, and we lose track of him around 215. He is the bridge between Justin’s *Logos Spermatikos* and Origen’s full-blown Christian Platonism.

PART 4 — ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA (C. AD 185–254)

Origenes Adamantius — the Greatest Scholar of the Early Church

BORN AT ALEXANDRIA C. 185 • HEAD OF THE CATECHETICAL SCHOOL AT 18 • MOVED TO CAESAREA IN PALESTINE C. 234 • TORTURED IN THE DECIAN PERSECUTION, DIED FROM HIS INJURIES C. 254

Hexapla

First systematic theology

Allegorical exegesis

Contested legacy

Origen is the most learned man of the early Christian centuries. By his late teens he was teaching theology to adults; by his thirties he had established a pattern of scholarship that would not be equaled in the church for a thousand years. His father Leonides was martyred in the persecution of Septimius Severus in 202; the young Origen — according to Eusebius — would have surrendered himself to die alongside his father had his mother not hidden his clothes.

The scale of the work. Jerome reports that Origen wrote “as much as no man could read” — an estimated 2,000 works, of which perhaps 800 were substantial. Most are lost. What survives still fills twelve Migne volumes.

• **The *Hexapla*** (“Six-fold”) — a parallel edition of the Old Testament in six columns: the Hebrew, the Hebrew transliterated into Greek, and four Greek translations (Aquila, Symmachus, the Septuagint, and Theodotion). Occupied

most of Origen's middle years. Intended as a tool for apologetic dialogue with Jews. A textual-critical achievement the church would not match until modern times.

- ***De Principiis* (“On First Principles”, c. 229)** — the first attempt at systematic theology in church history. Four books: God and the heavenly world, the creation and the fall, freedom of will and the nature of evil, the interpretation of Scripture.

- ***Contra Celsum* (“Against Celsus”, c. 248)** — an eight-book refutation of a lost anti-Christian treatise by the pagan philosopher Celsus. One of the best Christian apologetic works of antiquity and our main source for Celsus' own arguments.

- **Commentaries and homilies** — on nearly every book of the Bible. He is our earliest continuous exegete of Scripture.

Origen's reading of Scripture. He famously held that the Bible, like a person, has *three senses* (echoing 1 Thess 5:23's body-soul-spirit):

1. **Literal (body)** — the plain historical sense.
2. **Moral (soul)** — the ethical application to the believer.
3. **Spiritual / Allegorical (spirit)** — the Christological and mystical meaning.

This “three senses” (later expanded in the medieval West to four) is how nearly every Christian read the Bible from Origen to the Reformation. The Reformers pruned it back to a single intended sense; modern evangelicals have moved further still toward grammatical-historical reading alone. Reading Origen reminds us how recent our reading habits are.

The later controversy. Three of Origen's speculative positions became deeply controversial and were condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople II, AD 553):

- **The pre-existence of souls** — that rational souls existed with God before their embodiment in this world, and fell into bodies as a consequence of cooling love.

- **The *apokatastasis*** — the ultimate restoration of all rational creatures, possibly including the devil, to the love of God. (He raises this as a *possibility* in *De Principiis*, not as a doctrine.)

- **Subordinationist tendencies** — language about the Son that a later generation, reading through the lens of Arius, could hear as teaching the Son's ontological inferiority. Most scholars today think Origen is better read as a pre-Nicene Trinitarian who simply lacked the later vocabulary.

His martyrdom. In the Decian persecution of 250–251, Origen was arrested, tortured on the rack, weighted with iron collars, and confined in a narrow dungeon in an effort to force him to deny Christ. He never did. His captors finally released him, broken; he died a few years later at Tyre. Eusebius preserves the account in *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39.

“What sort of faith is it that persecution pursues but does not conquer? Origen endured chains, torments, fire applied to his limbs, all kinds of bodily suffering — and all of it, he said, that he might not deny Christ.”

— Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39 (paraphrased from the Greek)

How to read Origen today. Origen is *not* universally received as a saint; the Eastern Orthodox church condemns some of his speculations; the Catholic church is cautious; Protestants often ignore him entirely. And yet — no theologian before Augustine matches his range, his love of Scripture, or his willingness to be wrong in public for the sake of thinking out loud about God. Read him like Calvin or Augustine read him: carefully, critically, gratefully.

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus — Cyprian of Carthage

WEALTHY RHETORICIAN • CONVERTED C. 246 • BISHOP OF CARTHAGE
248 • MARTYRED UNDER VALERIAN, 14 SEPTEMBER 258

Ecclesiology

Church unity

Martyr

Carthage

Cyprian was a converted pagan rhetorician — rich, educated, ordained deacon within a year of his baptism and elected Bishop of Carthage within two. Deeply shaped by Tertullian (whose works he read daily, calling him simply “the master”), Cyprian extended Tertullian’s juridical instincts into a full doctrine of the church.

The Decian crisis (250–251). In 250 the Emperor Decius required every citizen of the empire to sacrifice to the gods and receive a certificate (*libellus*) as proof. Thousands of Christians — the *lapsi* (the lapsed) — either sacrificed outright or bought certificates falsely. When the persecution ended, the question consumed the church: *could the lapsed be readmitted to communion, and if so, how?*

Cyprian (who had himself fled Carthage during the persecution to continue directing the church by letter — a choice his critics never let him forget) argued for a middle course against two extremes: the *Novatianist* rigorists in Rome who refused all readmission of the lapsed, and the laxists in Carthage who wanted instant restoration. The lapsed should be readmitted, Cyprian argued — but only after a real period of penance, through the bishop, not by the certificates of martyrs (a practice that had sprung up).

On the Unity of the Catholic Church (c. 251). His masterpiece. The church is one, the episcopate is one, and there is no salvation for anyone who breaks communion with the bishop. Cyprian’s language is unforgettable:

“There is one God, and one Christ, and one church, and one chair, founded, by the Lord’s voice, upon Peter... The church is one, though by her fruitfulness she is extended into a multitude... You cannot have God as your father if you have not the church as your mother (non potest habere Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem).”

— Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 4, 5, 6 (c. AD 251)

Cyprian develops Ignatius' monarchical episcopate into a full theology of the *one episcopate held in common* (*episcopatus unus est, cuius a singulis in solidum pars tenetur*) — each bishop holding the whole pastoral office, each diocese a local instantiation of the one church.

The rebaptism controversy. Cyprian and **Stephen of Rome** clashed sharply over whether converts from heretical sects (e.g. Novatianism) needed to be re-baptized when received into the Catholic church. Cyprian insisted yes; Stephen insisted no — baptism once given in the triune name was valid regardless of the minister. Rome's position eventually prevailed (confirmed at a North African council in 314, in the next century). But the controversy is the first time two bishops of major sees argue openly about who has the authority to decide.

His martyrdom. Under the Emperor Valerian's renewed persecution, Cyprian was exiled in 257, then recalled and tried at Carthage on 13 September 258. His trial record survives and reads like a Roman court document — because it is one.

Proconsul Galerius Maximus: "You are Thascius, surnamed Cyprian?" — Cyprian: "I am." —Proconsul: "The most sacred emperors have commanded you to perform the religious rites." —Cyprian: "I will not." —Proconsul: "Take heed." —Cyprian: "Do what is enjoined you. In so just a cause there is no need of deliberation."

— Acts of the Proconsul Galerius Maximus, 14 September 258

He was beheaded that morning. His writings — the *Unity of the Catholic Church*, *On the Lapsed*, the *Epistles*, and the *Treatises* — remain the fullest early Latin statement of the church's self-understanding.

PART 6 — HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME (C. AD 170–235)

Hippolytus of Rome — the Roman Polymath

PRESBYTER AT ROME • BRIEFLY AN ANTIPOPE • EXILED TO SARDINIA AND MARTYRED THERE C. 235

Roman liturgy

Anti-heretical

Apostolic Tradition

Hippolytus wrote voluminously in Greek in the Latin-speaking capital — a last Greek voice in what was becoming a Latin church. He clashed with popes Zephyrinus and Callistus over lax discipline and a (perceived) Sabellian Christology, and was for a brief period the first antipope. Under persecution he was reconciled to Bishop Pontian and martyred with him on Sardinia around 235.

The *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 215), traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, is our earliest detailed liturgical manual: baptismal liturgy, ordination prayers, a Eucharistic prayer (the anaphora traditionally named after Hippolytus is used in some modern rites to this day), and a church order. If accurately dated, it is the most valuable single source we have for how the Roman church actually worshipped in the early third century.

His *Refutation of All Heresies* (also called *Philosophumena*) extends Irenaeus' project in Greek, tracing every Christian heresy back to a Greek philosophical source. Book 1 is one of our best surveys of Greek philosophy from the Christian side.

PART 7 — THE DECIAN CRISIS (AD 250–251)

Before 250, Roman persecution of Christians had been local and sporadic — a mob in Lyon, a governor in Bithynia. In January 250 the Emperor Decius issued an edict requiring every inhabitant of the empire to sacrifice to the gods in the presence of a state-appointed commission and to receive a *libellus* (certificate) as proof.

This was the first empire-wide persecution specifically aimed at Christians. Its effects on the church were profound:

- **Many Christians fell.** Some sacrificed; others bribed officials for certificates; others sent slaves to sacrifice in their place. The *lapsi* problem became the defining ecclesiological crisis of the generation.

• **Many stood firm.** Pope Fabian of Rome was executed on 20 January 250. Origen was tortured but did not deny. The Bishop of Antioch, Babylas, died in prison. Christian communities across the empire produced their first great generation of named martyrs.

• **The church had to work out its doctrine of forgiveness and discipline under fire.** Cyprian's *On the Lapsed* and *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* are the theological fruit of this crisis. The same question — *how does the church receive back those who have failed under pressure?* — will return with Donatism in the fourth century and with every later wave of persecution.

Decius himself died in battle against the Goths in June 251, and the immediate pressure eased. A worse persecution — Valerian's, 257–260 — followed shortly after. The final and worst, the Great Persecution under Diocletian, would come in 303.

PART 8 — WHAT THE THIRD CENTURY GAVE US

1. A Latin theological vocabulary. *Trinitas, persona, substantia, sacramentum, Vetus / Novum Testamentum* — the operating vocabulary of Western Christianity for the next two thousand years, handed down from Tertullian.

2. The first systematic theology. Origen's *De Principiis* is the first attempt to present the whole content of the Christian faith in a single ordered treatise. Every *Summa*, every Calvin's *Institutes*, every systematic theology since stands in his lineage.

3. The first serious biblical scholarship. Origen's *Hexapla* is the ancient world's most ambitious work of textual criticism. His commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible set the pattern of Christian biblical learning until the Reformation.

4. The first doctrine of the church under pressure. Cyprian's *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* produced the image of the church as the mother of believers, the one

sacramentum unitatis, from which no one may be separated without peril.

5. The first liturgical handbook. Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* preserved the Roman rite for us — the prayers, the ordinations, the catechetical forms — at a depth no earlier source provides.

6. The first empire-wide martyrs. Decius and Valerian produced a generation of public witnesses whose names — Fabian, Babylas, Cyprian, Lawrence, Sixtus II — the church still remembers.

7. The first developed argument about authority. The Cyprian / Stephen dispute over rebaptism foreshadows every later argument about the limits of episcopal and papal authority. (See [Lesson 2 Part 6](#).)

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

Three disciplines come out of the third century for disciples today:

• **Hard thinking is part of faithfulness.** The gospel is not anti-intellectual. Origen spent fifty years with his eye on the Greek text of Scripture; Tertullian invented half the vocabulary we still use; Cyprian thought his way through a pastoral crisis most of us could not survive. The instinct that serious theology somehow betrays simple faith would have baffled every one of them.

• **The church's unity is never automatic.** Cyprian's *On the Unity* was written because Christian brothers in the *same city* were tearing the church apart over how to receive back those who had failed in persecution. A church that thinks it has outgrown the danger has forgotten the lesson. Unity is pastoral work, not a starting condition.

• **Faithful theology is willing to be wrong in public.** Origen proposed things (pre-existence of souls, possible universal restoration) that the later church rejected. He also gave us the *Hexapla*. Would we rather have a theologian who never risks a bad idea and never gives us anything, or one who thinks out loud and bequeaths us a library? The church has needed both kinds of saint in every century.

Greek NT (Eph 4:4–6): ἐν σῶμα καὶ ἓν πνεῦμα... εἷς κύριος, μία πίστις, ἐν βάπτισμα· εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων.

Ephesians 4:4–6 (ESV): “There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tertullian coined *Trinitas* around AD 213 — more than a century before Nicaea. What does that tell us about the relationship between lived Christian experience and the formal creeds that describe it?

2. Origen read Scripture on three levels (literal, moral, spiritual). Most of us read Scripture on one level, often grammatical-historical. What might we be missing — and what might we be guarding against — by that narrower approach?

3. Cyprian: “You cannot have God as your father if you have not the church as your mother.” Is that overstatement, or is there something we have lost by making Christianity primarily individual?

4. The *lapsi* crisis asked: how should the church receive back those who have failed under real pressure? Where is that question alive in our own community today?

5. Origen's speculative errors did not disqualify his whole work; his good work remains. How do we handle teachers whose thinking we have found some of, but not all of, faithful?

6. Tertullian famously asked: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Clement and Origen answered: a great deal. Who is right — or are they both right in different ways?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank you for the third century — for Tertullian's precision, Clement's generosity, Origen's love of your Word, Hippolytus' order, and Cyprian's steel. Thank you for fathers who wrote in libraries and in dungeons, who gave their minds in peace and their heads in persecution. Give our congregation some of each: careful theology, warm scholarship, pastoral courage, unity that is more than sentiment. Forgive us for thinking that serious thought is the enemy of simple faith. Your gospel was preached to peasants by men who had rewritten Greek philosophy. Make us that kind of people: simple, learned, unbreakable — and one. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources (all public domain; standard translations in Ante-Nicene Fathers):

- Tertullian, *Apology, Against Praxeas, Prescription Against Heretics, Against Marcion, On Baptism*.
- Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus, Paedagogus, Stromata*.

- Origen, *On First Principles (De Principiis), Contra Celsum, Commentary on John, Homilies*.
- Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church, On the Lapsed, Epistles, and the Acts of the Martyrdom of Cyprian*.
- Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition, Refutation of All Heresies*.
- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Books 6–7 (our main historical source for the third century).

Modern studies:

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 2 continues his treatment of the run-up to Nicaea.
- Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (1966) — on Clement, Origen, and the Greek tradition.
- Robert L. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (2003).
- Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (1988) — on Tertullian, Origen, and the moral culture of the third century.
- J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (2002).
- Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* (2010).
- Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (1997).

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