

## THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD PART 6

### THE EARLY CHURCH: A "PATIENT FERMENT"

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## THE ROMAN EMPIRE: A CULTURE IN CRISIS

- The Antonine Plague (166-172 AD)
- The Plague of Cyprian (251-270 AD)
- Killed between 2% and 25% of population
- "It distresses the entire land of the enclosed city, cutting down animals, making an end of an entire generation; oppressing with defilement, it forces mortals out." - Oracle at Claros, 160s
- How should people respond to a "pervasive, unyielding plague?"
- Pagans and Christians had different answers



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## THE PAGAN RESPONSE

- Cities sent delegations to Oracle shrines at Claros, Didyma, and Delphi
- Prophet entered a sacred space under the earth, returned with an allusive and ambiguous word
- Delegates paid extravagant fees to receive this word
- General belief that the gods were angry for some reason
- Many attributed the reason to the presence of Christians
- Appeasement of gods through ritual (not ethics - not purview of the gods)



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**"Many are complaining and are blaming us because wars are arising more frequently, because the plague [and] famine are raging."**

*-Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, 250s AD*

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## **THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

- A persecuted minority - an outbreak of plague (250s)
- Pagan activists blamed Christians for the outbreak
- Some Christians faltering under pressure
- Cyprian drew Christians together and urged courage and patience - "the difference between us and others who know not God."

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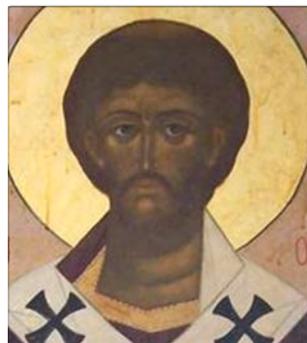
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## **THE SERMON OF CYPRIAN**

- Did not attempt to explain the plague
- Reminder of the Sermon on the Mount - that rain falls on the just and the unjust without distinction
- Question for Cyprian was not why the plague happened but how Church should respond to it



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## THE SERMON OF CYPRIAN

- Reminded people of the blessings of mercy and tradition of caring for the sick
- Urged people to respond to the time of danger by imitating God - overcoming evil with good, loving enemies, praying for the salvation of their persecutors
- Urged visiting pagan neighbors, providing bread and water for them, encouraging them, "pray for their salvation"
- "Prove the imitation of [God's] goodness."

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"No occasion should be given to the pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living with God, as if entirely destroyed and lost...It profits us nothing to show forth virtue in words and destroy truth in deeds."

*-Cyprian*

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## THE CHRISTIAN "HABITUS"

- Cyprian urged people to live lives that had been cultivated by Christian habits found in the Sermon on the Mount
- Habits enabled them to trust God and live without being able to control the outcome
- Habits enabled them to live unconventionally, loving their enemies

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## THE RESULTS

- Letter of Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria - 260 AD (two years after Cyprian's death)
- Historian Rodney Stark: The "elementary nursing" that Christians provided to plague victims contributed to markedly increased Christian numbers
- It was Christian behavior more than Christian preaching or evangelism that fueled the growth of the early church before Constantine
- It was their character, their patience in the face of persecution, plague, and other cultural upheaval, that attracted outsiders

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**"Beloved brethren, [we] are philosophers not in words but in deeds; we exhibit our wisdom not by our dress, but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them; we do not speak great things but we live them."**

*-Cyprian*

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## THE KEY: CHURCH EXPANSION WAS NOT ABOUT PROGRAMS

- Expansion was not organized
- Not the product of a mission program
- Wrote treatises on patience and church order, but not one on evangelism
- Worship services not designed to attract new people—closed to outsiders
- So, how did the church grow in numbers in such a difficult situation?

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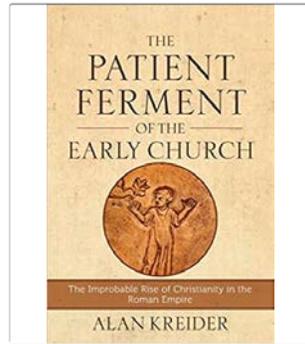
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## THE PATIENT FERMENT OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Christians “proliferated because the faith that these fishers and hunters embodied was attractive to people who were dissatisfied with their old cultural and religious habits, who felt pushed to explore new possibilities, and who then encountered Christians who embodied a new manner of life that pulled them toward what Christians called ‘rebirth’ into a new life. Surprisingly, this happened in a patient manner.”



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## PATIENCE VS. PRACTICALITY

- “If [early Christians] had advocated a holy impatience—a *just* impatience—might their churches have grown even more rapidly?”
- “On the other hand, is it possible that the early Christians considered patience to be crucial to their churches’ life and growth?”

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## JUSTIN’S APOLOGY (150 AD)

- Written to the Emperor Antoninus Pius
- Christians were growing in numbers because their lives embodied “the fair commands of Christ”
- The teachings of Jesus were indispensable guides for Christian living; people not true Christians if they don’t live those teachings
- Baptized only those who lived the things Christ taught and participation in Eucharist was reserved only for those who “live as Christ handed down to us”
- When people see Christians acting like Jesus, they are drawn to the Church
- “By our patience and meekness, [Christians will] draw all men from shame and evil desires”

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## **CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (160-215)**

- Patience reflects the character of God
- Christian models are Daniel and Jonah
- "A mature Christian forms the habit of doing good."

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## **ORIGEN (MID-3RD CENTURY)**

- Christ as the exemplar of patience
- "He manifested a courage and patience superior to that of any of the Greeks."
- Christ expresses the way God acts in mission—he is never in a hurry in dealing with Israel across the centuries
- When people follow Christ, God forms them into a people who embody this patience
- Believers could survive persecution only if they have been formed to embody Christ-like patience
- The world as a great theatre, watching how Christians respond to persecution

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## **TERTULLIAN (LATE 2ND-EARLY 3RD CENTURY)**

- Greco-Roman society - patience applied to subordinates and victims who had no choice
- Tertullian saw patience as a Christian virtue that cut across culture
- God is patient, does not compel people to believe but "by his patience he hopes to draw them to himself."
- The fall of Adam was the result of human impatience
- Jesus "the Lord and teacher of patience" changed things

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## TERTULLIAN ON PATIENCE

- How can Christians live this patience?
- Hopeful expectation of resurrection enables this - the Christian lifestyle is rooted in hope
- By contrast, impatience is hopeless - makes things worse

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**"Now, nothing undertaken through impatience can be transacted without violence, and everything done with violence has either met with no success or has collapsed or has plunged to its own destruction."**

*-Tertullian*

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## TERTULLIAN: THE EFFECTS OF PATIENCE

- Patience is the source of "practices of peace"
- Brings Christians the life of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) and the life of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13
- Patience is the "highest sacrament of faith"

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"In poverty, patience supplies consolation; upon wealth it imposes moderation; the sick it does not destroy, nor does it, for the man in health, prolong his life; for the man of faith it is a source of delight. It attracts the heathen... It adorns a woman, perfects a man. It is loved in a child, praised in a youth, esteemed in the aged. In both man and woman, at every age of life, it is exceedingly attractive."

-Tertullian

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## SUMMARY: PATIENCE AS VIRTUE AND STRATEGY

- Patience is rooted in God's character
- The heart of patience is revealed in the incarnation of Christ
- Patience is not in human control
- Patience is not in a hurry
- Patience is unconventional
- Patience is not violent
- Patience is not coercive
- Patience is hopeful

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## HOW WAS THIS PATIENCE CULTIVATED?

- Catechesis - more ethical than doctrinal
- Developing a new culture, based in large part on The Sermon on the Mount
- A three-year process of catechesis with a sponsor before admittance to worship and Eucharist - focused on character and habit formation
- Catechesis was patient, unhurried, and careful

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**“It was not Christian worship that attracted outsiders; it was Christians who attracted them, and outsiders found the Christians attractive because of their Christian habitus, which catechesis and worship had formed.”**

-Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*,  
p. 135

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## **JUSTIN: HABITS AS A COUNTER TO THE ROMAN WORLD**

- Justin saw Roman life as a habitus of unfreedom, characterized by addictive practices in four areas:
  - Sexual ethics (fornication)
  - The occult
  - Wealth and possessions
  - Violence and xenophobia
- New Christians had to unlearn these practices - move from addiction to freedom

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## **THE MODEL FOR BECOMING A CHRISTIAN IN THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION**

1. Evangelism	2. Catechumenate	3. Baptismal Preparation	4. Baptism
Encountering Christians, finding a sponsor	Hearing the Word	Hearing the gospel	Singing a new song*
Years or months	Until "character" is formed	Weeks or months	For life
	First Scrutiny: Relationships & Jobs	Second Scrutiny: Habitus & Character	Third Scrutiny: Exorcism

\*The phrase "singing a new song" comes not from the *Apostolic Tradition* but from Origen, *Hom. Exod. 5.3*.

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## A FOCUS ON CHRISTIAN LIVING

- **Teachability** - Early Christians believed that the surest indication of what people thought was the way they lived - a candidate's behavior was most reliable predictor of whether they would be able to learn Christian habits
- **The Church's Witness** - Would the candidate's behavior represent the Church well or let the Church down?

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## THE CONTENT OF CATECHESIS

- Transforming habits
- Avoiding idolatry
- Learning the master narrative
- Learning the teachings of Jesus
- Memorizing biblical passages
- Imitating role models (apprenticeship)
- Fostering a culture of peace
- Kinesthetics - practicing habitual signs (sign of the cross)
- Practical issues - dress, how to act, how to respond to interrogation,

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## CONTRAST TO 21ST CENTURY

- Early church believed that people *live their way into a new kind of thinking*
- Post-Enlightenment rationalism - people *think their way into a new kind of living*
- Sponsors of candidates in early church focused on character and lifestyle more than information

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## EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS HABIT FORMATION

- First three centuries: Table fellowship was the heart of worship - a full meal, later replaced by a symbolic meal
- Words (readings and sermon) came before the meal - originally spoken by anyone who was inspired by the Spirit, later by "clergy"
- Public preaching was downplayed

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"Unlike many churches today, the third-century churches described by *The Apostolic Tradition* did not try to grow by making people feel welcome and included. Civic paganism did that. In contrast, the churches were hard to enter. They didn't grow because of their cultural accessibility; they grew because they required commitment to an unpopular God who didn't require people to perform cultic acts correctly but instead equipped them to live in a way that was richly unconventional."

-Kreider, p. 149

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## CHANGES AFTER CONSTANTINE

- Control - planning missionary efforts and having control over them
- Power of the state - promote conversion to Christianity
- Religious coercion - crush disapproved groups
- Speed - catechists moved from teaching about behavior to focus on orthodox doctrine
- Conversion - Emperor's allure attracted adherents to convert to his religion—even though he had not fully committed to it himself! Changes in acceptance of violence, wealth, etc.

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## WHAT DOES THE EARLY CHURCH HAVE TO SAY TO US TODAY?

- Time of plague, a time of social upheaval
- Constantine's Christendom is dead
- We live in a hurried culture, even in the church
- Might we take this opportunity to return to patience, forming disciples who attract others to a life-changing faith?

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## THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD PART 6

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