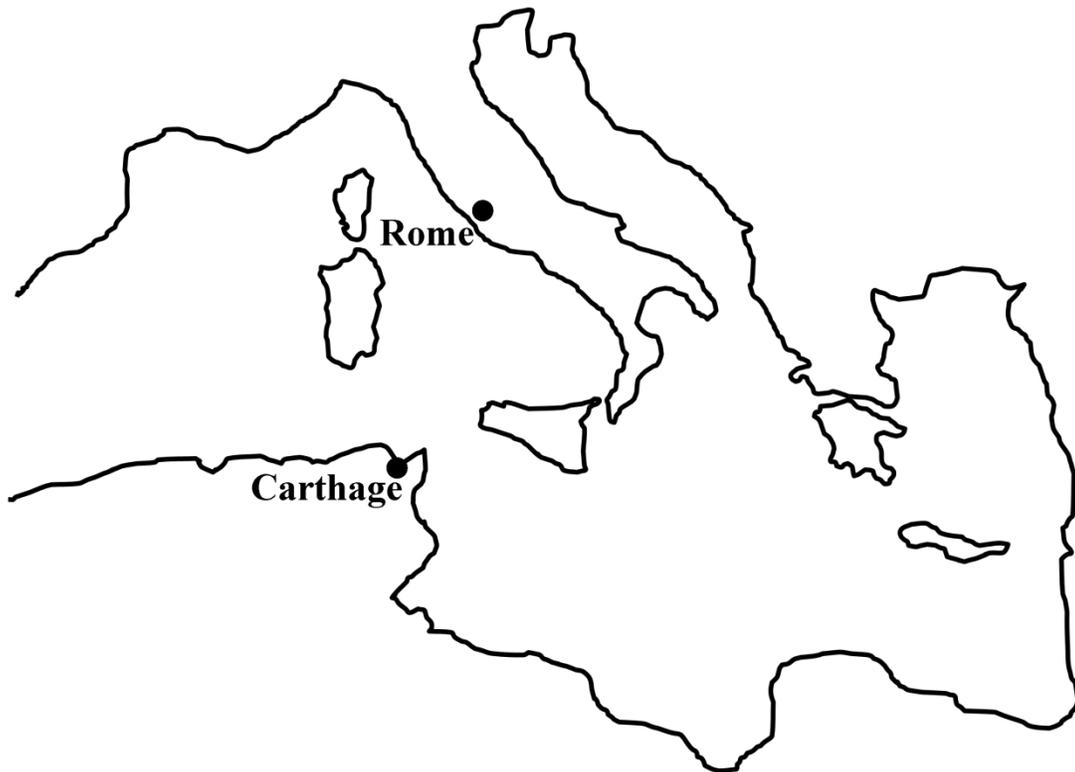


MODERN MANIFESTATIONS OF ANCIENT HERESIES: NOVATIAN

With Special Reference to Persecution, Repentance and Legalism



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Jesus didn't say a word. He simply bent down and started to write in the ground with his finger. The Spirit doesn't inspire John to tell us what Jesus wrote, which has led to wide speculation and to this question: why was Jesus quietly inscribing the dirt at such an intense moment?

Intense, indeed. Jesus was teaching in the temple courts with a large crowd gathered around him. A commotion erupted. A group of religious leaders pushed a woman in front of Jesus. She had been caught red-handed in the act of adultery, they charged. Abruptly pulled from private passion and now pushed into public humiliation, the woman was in serious trouble. According to Old Testament law¹ the red-faced adulteress was facing a possible death sentence. But she's also facing Jesus, the Forgiving One. "When [the religious leaders] kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground" (John 8:7-8).²

He does it again. What is he writing? Whatever it was, it accompanied--if not effected-- a momentous shift in direction. "At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there" (John 8:9). The boiling courtroom quickly chilled into one of those "you could have heard a pin drop" moments... except the woman's racing heartbeat pounded in her ears. Then the Teacher broke the still suspense.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

What...did...Jesus... just... do? Even a child can answer that question, but that's not why the question gets asked. We all know that Jesus forgave the woman. But the manner in which he forgave her seems so... reckless. It's all too free. It's too easy. It seems scary.

¹ Deuteronomy 22:22-24

² All Scripture references taken from New International Version (NIV) © 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission. Excerpted from Compton's Interactive Bible NIV. Copyright (c) 1994, 1995, 1996 SoftKey Multimedia Inc.

Is such a fear lurking behind the reason why some early manuscripts omit these verses? ³ When textual criticism weighs in favor of including this text as inerrant and inspired scriptures, it is not idle speculation to suspect that Jesus' treatment of the repentant adulteress was judged by some in the early church to be an anomaly. ⁴ That Jesus immediately sends her off in full pardon and with only a short directive, void of any ecclesiastical caution or control, apparently seems suspicious to some Christians.

We don't know definitively why this portion of Scripture is missing from some early manuscripts. But we do know that the post-apostolic church was contesting over the doctrines of repentance and forgiveness long before a man named Novatian came on the scene. When he did, he created a controversy with these doctrines that history tags with his name. And this occurred during an time of intense persecution.

I. AN ERA OF PERSECUTION

Peter didn't see it coming when a servant girl suddenly outed him: "This man was with [Jesus]!" But he denied it. 'Woman, I don't know him,' he said" (Luke 22:56-57). Like the woman caught in adultery, a blushing Galilean was caught in idolatry. He loved his skin more than his Savior.

While Peter survived that immediate threat of persecution that caused him to lapse from his faith in Jesus, many other followers of Christ would not lapse from faith, standing strong for Christ even as they fell into death at the hands of persecutors. Such was the case of one of Novatian's opponents, named Cyprian, who was the Bishop of Carthage.

The Bishop was brought before the Proconsul, who called on him to sacrifice in the name of the Emperors. Cyprian refused, and when the Proconsul urged him to comply from regard for his safety, he only answered [with a polite refusal]. Galerius reluctantly pronounced the sentence of decapitation, which Cyprian received with thanks to God, while the Christian spectators cried, "Let us go and be beheaded with him!" He was at once led forth to a level space surmounted by trees, the branches of which were soon laden with Christians, who climbed up (says his biographer) like Zacchaeus, to witness their bishop's triumph over death. He knelt down, and, after praying for a short time, bound his own eyes, and ordered a

³ "The oldest and best manuscript (Aleph, A,B,L,N,W) do not have this story. It makes its first appearance on Codex Bezae. It is found in the later uncials (the so-called Koine text) and the cursives based upon them...Some manuscripts place it at the close of the Fourth Gospel and some (the Ferrar cursives) after Luke 21:38." (William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, Vo. II, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1954, p. 34.)

⁴ "Augustine has stated definitely that certain individuals had removed from their codices the section regarding the adulteress, because they fear that women would appeal to this story as an excuse for their infidelity..." (Hendriksen, p. 35).

present to be given to the executioner. As the sword struck off his head, his blood was caught in handkerchiefs, which were kept as relics.⁵

To put one's neck on the line for Christ was more than an idiomatic phrase in the second and third centuries after Christ. If anyone knows anything about the history of the early church, most likely it's something about the Roman persecutions. They began with Emperor Nero in 64 AD and lasted until Emperor Diocletian in 303 AD. (For additional information, see Appendix I - A History of Persecution.)

As we focus our attention on the last decades of the second century, the church experienced an easing of persecution that had been plaguing the church on and off since they began with Emperor Nero. This easing appeared to indicate even better times ahead- maybe Rome was finally making room for Christianity. And for about the first fifty years of the third century, it seemed so. There was relative calm that, unfortunately, helped make what happened next all the more hideous. Quite unexpectedly, in 250 AD Emperor Decius unleashed a comprehensive persecution of immense proportions, "the most systematic and severe that the church had known until that time..."⁶ Historians call this the Decian persecution.

It has been conjectured that as conditions in the empire deteriorated, there was a yearning for the "good old days" when the empire was strong and its citizens virtuous. What had gone wrong? One noticeable change was that fewer and fewer people were paying attention to the temples of the gods and to traditional religion. And so there was a feeling that they needed to turn back the clock and revive the old institutions... [Thus] Decius decreed that all citizens were required to sacrifice to the ancient gods. Those who obeyed were given a certificate saying that they had complied. Non Christians had no trouble complying, even if they considered it a joke. But for Christians it was another matter. To sacrifice was apostasy, and apostasy was a sin that was considered unforgivable. Some Christians capitulated and saved their lives. Others purchased fraudulent certificates from dishonest officials without actually performing the sacrifices. Others fled to places of safety. But many steadfastly refused to sacrifice and were tortured, imprisoned, or killed outright...⁷

Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, was beheaded for his faith. He put his neck on the line not only against the pagan persecutors, but also in opposition to Novatian whose controversial teachings arose out of the circumstances of the immense severity of this persecution.⁸ In essence, Novatian

⁵ Philip Smith, *The History of the Christian Church*, Vol. I (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1885), p. 166.

⁶ Justo L Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. I, Rev.[2nd English] ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, c1987), pp. 218-219.

⁷ Joel Prange, *Forward in Christ at the Dawn of the First Millennium*, (Reformation Symposium, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, October 30 & 31, 2000), p. 14-15.

⁸ Cyprian managed to stay alive during the Decian persecution and was beheaded later, under the Valerian persecution that soon followed.

demanded that there be a “pure” church, one that strictly and licitly denied the re-admittance of any who had denied the faith. His rigorist and rigid teaching gained traction through a series of opportunistic circumstances created by the Decian persecution. Let’s meet the principle people involved with this situation.

Rome	North Africa
<p>Callistus 217-222 as Bishop of Rome; lenient. Offered restoration to those guilty of fornication who made penance.</p>	<p>Tertullian⁹ 197-225 as a priest; rigorist. Opposed Callistus by teaching that the repentant may be forgiven without being received back into the communion of the visible Church; to protect church purity.</p>
<p>Hippolytus¹⁰ 212-236 as a priest; rigorist. Opposed Callistus by tightening the penitential system, to keep some sinners excluded.</p>	<p>Cyprian 248-258 as Bishop of Carthage; lenient. Allowed the lapsed to be reconciled to the church after suitable penance and delay. Opposed Novatian's rigorist teachings.</p>
<p>Cornelius 251-253 as Bishop of Rome; lenient. Followed the advice of Cyprian, allowing the lapsed to be reconciled to the church after penance.</p>	<p>Novatian 251-257 as rival Bishop of Rome; rigorist. As he opposed Cornelius, he reached out to Cyprian. But Cyprian supported Cornelius in joint opposition to Novatian.</p>
<p><i>Decian Persecution</i> 250-253</p>	

II. DEALING WITH THE LAPSED

The Decian persecution erupted a year after Decius became Emperor, when he “undertook the first systematic persecution of the Christians, beginning with the execution of Fabian, the Bishop of Rome, in January 250 AD.”¹¹ Although Decius soon died in 251 and the persecution

⁹ George Park Fisher, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Andover-Harvard Theological Seminary, 1896), p. 82

¹⁰ Gonzalez, 212-213

¹¹ F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, Eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd Ed (Oxford University Press, 1974), sub “Decius.”

sputtered, it was revived under Emperor Gallus, lasting until about 253 AD.¹² Although not long in duration, it burned with an unprecedented intensity across the whole Roman Empire, producing more martyrs than any of the preceding persecutions.¹³ While not every Christian arrested was punished with death, its violence was not limited to church leaders either.¹⁴ The result was an enormous amount of Christians who denied the faith. “There was a large voluntary abjuration of Christianity, whether literally by ‘the majority of his flock’ may be uncertain, but [the Bishop of Carthage] Cyprian felt himself ‘seated in the ruins of his house...’ Many of the clergy fell or fled, leaving scarcely enough for the daily duty of the city, as did many provincial bishops.”¹⁵

If the clergy were falling *like flies*, what of the laity? Clergy and laity alike “were led by panic to flock to the pagan temples. Others succumbed later to the pressure of friends and relatives, and still others avoided martyrdom by obtaining false certificates.”¹⁶ The multitudes who denied the faith were called the lapsed (Latin: *lapsi*) and were classified in three categories.¹⁷

But even before the persecution passed, many of the lapsed had begun to repent and express their desire to return to the church. So, quite naturally, the question arose: how should the church deal with the lapsed? The church had come to a general consensus that

after repentance which took place in baptism, it was somehow possible to repent again and thus be forgiven for post-baptismal sin. This took place through the public confession of sin committed, followed by a period of penance and excommunication, in order to be admitted again within the Christian community through a formal act of restoration... [This applied to sins beyond what were considered] minor sins that Christians found themselves committing daily.... On the other hand, toward the end of the second century and early in the third there

¹² Henry Wace and William C. Piercy, Eds., *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1911), sub “Cornelius (2).”

¹³ The Decian persecution “was occasioned partly by the hatred he bore to his predecessor Philip, who was deemed a Christian, and partly to his jealousy concerning the amazing increase of Christianity; for the heathen temples began to be forsaken, and the Christian Churches thronged.” (John Foxe, *The Book of Martyrs*, Altenmunster, Germany: Jazzybee Verlag Jurgen Beck, 2012, p. 10.)

¹⁴ “Theodora, a beautiful young lady of Antioch, on refusing to sacrifice to the Roman idols, was condemned to the stews [prostitution], that her virtue might be sacrificed to the brutality of lust. Didymus, a Christian, disguised himself in the habit of a Roman soldier, went to the house, informed Theodora who he was, and advised her to make her escape in his clothes. This being effected, and a man found in the brothel instead of a beautiful lady, Didymus was taken before the president, to whom confessing the truth, and owning that he was a Christian the sentence of death was immediately pronounced against him [so that he was] first beheaded and [his body] afterward burnt.” Foxe, p. 11

¹⁵ *A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature*, sub “Cyprianus.”

¹⁶ Gonzalez, p. 218

¹⁷ The three categories of the lapsed: *Thurificati* – those who make a sacrifice to the national gods (such as by burning incense). *Libellatici* – those who procured fraudulent certificates, falsely stating that they had sacrificed. *Acta Facientes* – those who made false statements in order to deny their Christianity. (Lutheran Cyclopedia, sub “Persecutions of Christians.”)

was a general opinion that the church could not or should not forgive those who were guilty of homicide, fornication, or apostasy. This was the opinion not only of Hippolytus, but also of Tertullian and Origen.”¹⁸

This was the overwhelming consensus of the church *until* the advent of the Decian persecution¹⁹ when the church was overwhelmed by the enormous amount of Christians who lapsed into apostasy and then wanted to return to the church. In a departure from this prevailing consensus, notable church leaders like Cornelius and Cyprian decided to re-admit the lapsed after penance and probation, to which historians attach the modifier “lenient” (as in lenient in comparison to Novatian who is tagged with the modifier “rigorist”). Against the leniency of Cornelius and Cyprian, Novatian rose up in opposition. The battle over doctrine and practice that would ensue had already been fomenting in the early church.

III. A DRIFT IN UNDERSTANDING REPENTANCE

“When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). So Paul had instructed the believers in Corinth to practice discipline with a man in the church who was sleeping with his father’s wife. The joyous outcome of this discipline is reported in Paul’s second letter. The Apostle Paul, reflecting the spirit of Jesus when he forgave the woman caught in adultery, writes: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). To the contrite and broken-hearted both Jesus and Paul applied full and free gospel, without conditions.

Yet from the time of Christ and the Apostles, there was a drift taking place in the understanding of sin, repentance and forgiveness. Somehow (maybe due to the influence of asceticism)²⁰ the early church adopted the general opinion that three sins- homicide, fornication, and apostasy- were considered unforgiveable sins. Concerning this Gonzalez observes that “this denial of the forgiveness of certain sins, while it tended to keep the moral strength of the church, was also a denial of the spirit of love and forgiveness which is characteristic of the gospel. Therefore, it was necessary that sooner or later there would develop a conflict between those who wished to preserve the moral purity of the church at all costs and those who believed that evangelical love

¹⁸ Gonzalez, p. 122.

¹⁹ The one notable exception is Callistus, Bishop of Rome, who allowed penitent fornicators to be restored to the communion of the church through the process of penance.

²⁰ Asceticism’s life of abstinence, often tied to Gnosticism; it exerted a certain influence on the early church. (Walther A. Elwall, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2007), sub “Encratites”)

should be followed even at the expense of moral rigor.”²¹ This conflict develops out of a “seamless garment of history” that we are going to need to artificially divide into segments that allow us to more easily grasp a complicated interaction between a number of significant people.²² Let’s therefore focus on only two regions (of the six)²³ most involved with the Novatian controversy. They are also the theological and literary activity centers during the Decian persecution: Rome and North Africa.

Essentially, in these two regions, and in the short three years of the Decian persecution, the Novatian controversy displays a continual drifting from God’s Word concerning the doctrines of repentance and forgiveness. If we today would be forced to choose sides, in many respects we would be forced to choose between “the lesser of two wrongs.” The summary that J. P. Koehler offered of the earlier church fathers finds similar application to the Novatian controversy. Koehler laments that “there is a marked lack of understanding the Gospel... Christ became the conveyor of the true perception of God and of the right moral law...” (emphasis mine).²⁴ In other words, living for Jesus became more important than knowing how Jesus lived, died and rose for the salvation of all sinners.

We call Tertullian and Hyppolytus our Church Fathers. We thank God for them as we quote their doctrinally solid writings in our Seminary’s Dogmatic classes. Yet the Biblical principles that drove Jesus to forgive the broken-hearted woman caught in adultery, and that drove Paul to restore the penitent fornicator in Corinth, do not have proper influence on the theology of these two church fathers. They both subscribe and support the dogma that fornication was an unforgiveable sin. And the seeds they sowed through their influence on the church germinated and then mutated in the Novatian controversy. (For additional information, see Appendix II - Tertullian and Hippolytus.)

IV. NOVATIAN: THE SCHISMATIC TURNED HERETIC

Little is known about the early life of Novatian. And due to the similarity of the names of Novatian and Novatus, a companion schismatic, there has been a lot of confusion between the two.²⁵ The history we have begins when Novatian was a catechumen and in the process of being

²¹ Gonzalez, p. 122

²² “History is a seamless garment that scholars artificially divide into segments in order to more easily handle the data.” (Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Ages*, 3rd ed., Zondervan Publishing, 2009, p. 23.)

²³ Rome (Gaul and Italy). Constantinople (Asia Minor). Antioch (Syria). Caesarea (Palestine). Alexandria (Egypt). Carthage (North Africa).

²⁴ Prange, p. 14-15.

²⁵ Philip Schaff, *Fathers of the Third Century*, Vol. V. (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, no date), From the Christian Classics Ethereal Library. p. 1293.

officially brought into the Christian faith as a young adult, a lengthy process similar to a Bible instruction class for membership we see today.²⁶

During this time, as a catechumen, it's reported that he became demon possessed. In his illness he came close to death. As was the practice in those days, an adult who was not yet instructed in the faith, but was close to death, received Holy Baptism (which is called a clinical baptism).²⁷ According to church law at that time, someone who received clinical baptism was considered unqualified to be admitted to the clergy. Because he was a "man of learning" and "had been trained in literary composition" and had "eloquence" in speaking, a bishop (no one knows which one of the many) promoted him to be a presbyter.²⁸ Although some within the church protested this move, Novatian continued to serve as a presbyter in Rome.

Novatian is important because of his treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity. However, in defending against those who taught 'Modalist' Monarchism (that the one person of God experienced a succession of modes), Novatian overstated Scripture. "Novatian so emphasizes the distinction between the Father and the Son that the latter turns out to be 'inferior to the Father,' or 'less than the Father.'"²⁹ This tendency to over-emphasize a truth in order to protect it is not uncommon in the history of the church. With Novatian, it appears to be a trait that manifests itself again in his teachings on how the church was to handle the penitent lapsed, driven by his concern for the sanctity of the church.³⁰

In early 250, Decius issued his edict of persecution. Fabian, the Bishop of Rome, was martyred on January 20th, and due to the press of the persecution, it was impossible to elect a new bishop. As the persecution pressed hard, Novatian went into hiding. The local deacons exhorted him come out and assist those who were in danger, but he refused.³¹

Historians are divided, but according to William Fausset, in the same year that Novatian went into hiding, he also wrote two letters to Cyprian on behalf of the Roman clergy "asking his counsel upon the vexed question of the treatment of the 'lapsed,' i.e. those who under stress of the Decian persecution has sacrificed."³² Novatian states in them that he was willing for the new bishop, when elected, to give his judgment about this situation. But when the persecution eased enough so that the church in Rome could elect a new bishop—and Cornelius was made bishop—Novatian tried to upend the results. Whether he was maneuvered by others, or he manipulated his

²⁶ Tim Dowley, Ed. *Eerdmans' Handbook to The History of Christianity* (Berkhamsted, Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1977), pp. 115-116

²⁷ Catholic Encyclopedia, sub "Novatian and Novationism"

²⁸ Schaff, *Fathers of the Third Century*, p. 1904

²⁹ Gonzalez, p. 217.

³⁰ Gonzalez, p. 216

³¹ Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, sub "Deacon"

³² Novatianus. William York Fausset, ed. *Novatiani Romanae Urbis Presbyteri De Trinitate Liber: Novatian's Treatise On the Trinity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909), p. XIV.

own rival election (scholars are divided), the end result is that Novatian becomes a rival bishop to Cornelius.³³

In his correspondence to Cyprian, Novatian had used “ominous” words to describe himself as someone having “a clear conscience, resting on the vigour of evangelical discipline...”³⁴ Fausset remarks: “Novatian had evidently prejudged the question, as one that involved not merely the discipline, but the healthy ‘vigour’ of the church: and upon the election of Cornelius [as bishop] he placed himself at the head of the of the party of rigorist who held that the lapsed, while they might be exhorted to repentance, were to be excluded from the Church communion for ever” (emphasis mine).³⁵

Envoys scurried epistles back and forth between Rome and Carthage, and all the more as the church sought to remain united under the stress of the Decian persecution. Because Novatian was attempting to wrestle for himself the position as Bishop of Rome, and because Novatian opposed Cornelius for his “lenient” treatment of the lapsed, Novatian had reached out to Cyprian for his support. Yet at the same time that Novatian was seeking alliance with Cyprian, he actually opposed Cyprian’s so-called “leniency” —he allowed for a penitential system to restore the lapsed.

As epistles crisscrossed between continents, differences between Novatian and Cornelius were at first considered a *schism*. But within a few quick months, Cyprian publicly emerged with support for Cornelius.³⁶ Soon after Novatian the *schismatic* was branded a *heretic*. And what was Novatian’s heresy? He taught that “the Church had no right to restore to communion any who had fallen into [apostasy]. They might repent and be admitted to a life-long penance, but their forgiveness must be left to God; it could not be pronounced in this world.”³⁷

Because of this hard stance, history labels Novatian a “rigorist.” In contradiction Cyprian is described as “lenient.” Cyprian took a position similar to Callistus, when approximately two decades early Callistus had made allowance for fornicators to be restored to the church.

³³ Early in the Decian persecution, a presbyter in Carthage by the name of Novatus rose up in opposition to Cyprian....Novatus opposed Cyprian for not being lenient enough with the repentant lapsed. Novatus appointed Felicissimus as a deacon who then forcefully carried on in opposition against Cyprian (for not being lenient enough with the lapsed). Felicissimus and associated parties over-reacted in their quest for more leniency; some clergy granted restoration based on indulgences. In an surprising move, Novatus traveled to Rome and made a radical flip-flop by taking a leading role in propelling Novatian’s rigorist teachings and in propelling Novatian’s schism against Cornelius. Citing this flip-flop, historians label Novatus a schismatic more than a heretic. (Brief Analysis of the Sects, Heresies and Writers of the First Three Centuries (Cambridge: Printed for James Cooper, 1857) p. 44.

³⁴ Novatian’s Treatise on Trinity, p. XV

³⁵ Ibid, p. XV

³⁶ In the letters between Novatian, Cyprian and Cornelius, there is a marked change from the time of Epistle XLIX to the Epistle LIV in which Cyprian sent his “De Lapsis” to Rome. In the next letter, Ep. LV, we find the mention of the Novatian heresy. Cf. Catholic Encyclopedia, “Novatian and Novatianism.”

³⁷ Catholic Encyclopedia, “Novatian and Novatianism.”

Similarly, Cyprian allowed a penitential process during which the penitent lapsed could prove his or her repentance and be restored to the communion of the church. More specifically his practice stated that

those who refuse to do penance should not be forgiven, even on their deathbeds; those who[had not sacrificed to the gods but had] purchased [forged] certificates [to escape martyrdom] should be admitted immediately; the fallen [who did sacrifice to the gods] should do penance for the rest of their lives, and would be restored to the communion of the church on their deathbeds or when they proved the true nature of their repentance in another persecution; finally, the fallen clergy should be deposed. On the other hand, regarding the [Novatian and his] schism, Cyprian recommended that its followers be excommunicated.³⁸

Penance is important to both Novatian and Cyprian as they practiced repentance. It is something vastly different than the Biblical teachings of being penitent or being repentant.³⁹ Penance, also referred to as the penitential system, is altogether different. Penance, derived from the Latin *poena* (penalty), refers to disciplinary measures against sinners, that provides a chance of restoration after undergoing a course of fastings, prayers, alms-giving and even flagellations.⁴⁰ Penance is further described as “humiliating” to the point that “most men try to avoid it, but if they neglect it, they cannot be saved. It is proper that one should suffer when one has sinned, yet the pain which *exomologesis* causes the sinner is nothing to the punishment of hell which it enables him to escape.”⁴¹

Cyprian’s punishing (probationary) period for someone to prove they were repentant would *generally* last some 3 to 4 years, or be abridged if the person was soon to die.⁴² Amazingly, this is classified as “lenient.” In opposition, Novatian taught that the repentant lapsed would need to continue in this punishing probationary period for the rest of one’s life.

Such harsh sentiments were not altogether a novelty. Tertullian [and] Hippolytus [were] inclined to severity. In various places and at various times laws were made which punished certain sins either with the deferring of Communion till the hour of death, or even with refusal of Communion in the hour of death. [In other words, Novatian was guilty of] no

³⁸ Gonzalez, p. 219.

³⁹ To be penitent or repentant is the spiritual state of contrition for sin, in the narrow sense of the term. To repent, when understood in the wide sense of the term, includes both contrition over sin and faith in Christ.

⁴⁰ Only after this time, in the fourth century, penitents would be classified into four groups: weepers, kneelers, hearers and standers.

⁴¹ Johannes Quasten, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1959), p. 11.

⁴² The word “generally” is inserted because according to Gonzalez (see footnote 47) the lapsed who actually made a sacrifice would do penance for the rest of their lives and be restored at the point of death, or if in another persecution, they remained faithful.

heresy until [he] denied that the Church has the power to grant absolution in certain cases. This was Novatian's heresy....⁴³ (emphasis mine)

Although Novatian was the anti-bishop in opposition to Cornelius, the legitimate Bishop of Rome, it's Cyprian who steps forward as the vocal spokesman for himself and Cornelius.^{44,45} So basically, the battle can be spoken of as falling between Novatian with his rigorist practices and Cyprian with his more lenient practices. However, this two-sided battle then became triangulated when a man named Felicissimus, a presbyter in Carthage, stepped onto the battlefield.

Felicissimus taught that the church had to be more lenient with the lapsed than Cyprian was willing to be. He allowed the lapsed to return to the church without the requirement of passing through a penitential system.^{46,47} This cheers our hearts, for he was moving in the right (Biblical) direction.

But Satan would not have this. So he planted "weeds" in the good field that Felicissimus was farming. These "weeds" were certain unnamed parties associated with Felicissimus that taught the acceptance of peace-bills, known as indulgences, as a method for restoring the lapsed. These indulgences would allow the penitent lapsed to ease the penitential process, and to by-pass it totally. The result is that so many lapsed were turning to indulgences that "a regular trade was carried on...."^{48,49} Certainly Novatian had to know about this "regular trade of indulgences" that stood in extreme opposition to his rigorist ideals. And if he still harbored a tendency to over-react in defense in his beliefs, as he did when he wrote his treatise on the Trinity, this would have excited him even more.

Standing in-between these opposite extremes is Cyprian, who appears to have been moving toward a Biblical practice, but under the weight of this triangulated tug-of-war, lapsed into the

⁴³ Catholic Encyclopedia, "Novatian and Novatianism."

⁴⁴ "Since only several of [Cornelius'] letters have survived, history relies much more on the surviving letters of Cyprian...to understand the Novatian controversy." F. L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), sub Cornelius.

⁴⁵ "Everybody visits [Rome] from all parts [of the world, and] Christians...carry into it the testimony of all other churches... Primitive Rome received orthodoxy instead of prescribing it." Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Refer to footnote 39 for more background information concerning Felicissimus.

⁴⁷ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 258.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 258.

⁴⁹ "The granting of indulgences [not at this time called indulgences] to lapsed persons by confessors and martyrs, which had been...sharply criticized by Tertullian...grew very quickly under the influence of some of those clergy who had opposed Cyprian... The veneration for sufferers who seemed actually to be the saviors of Christianity was intense... A strange document [also circulated] in the form of an absolution to 'all the lapsed' from 'all the confessors' [i.e., those martyred] which the bishops are desired to promulgate..... [Cyprian allowed] the acts of the confessors to be recognized... so far as that persons in danger....should be readmitted." A Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature, sub "Cyprianus."

rationally “safe” middle ground. The result is that Biblical truth was buried. (For additional information, see Appendix III – Cyprian Takes the “Safe” Middle Ground.)

In AD 251 sixty bishops gathered at Rome for a council, arriving from across Italy and the neighboring islands. They excommunicated Novatian. His heretical schism had followers, however, and spread as far as Spain in the west and Syria in the east. These later followers of Novatian were given the name *Katharoi* or Puritans. “They considered themselves the “pure church” to distinguish themselves from the more lenient majority church [and] anyone who connected with the majority church had to be re-baptized when joining a Novatian congregation, agreeing that they were only now becoming members of the true church.”⁵⁰ The Novatianists continued to drift further from the truth, and eventually taught that not even God would forgive the penitent if the sin was apostasy, fornication or idolatry. The Novatianist church persisted into the fourth century and even into the seventh century according to some sources.

V. NOVATIAN CONTINUES A BLEMISHED RECORD

This is not a pleasing panorama of the church as we discover how the Cyprian-Cornelius alliance represented a less-than-Biblical view of repentance and forgiveness. Simply stated, this controversy continued what was already a blemished record of the early church.

As various controversies beset the church and as Christians attempted to communicate their faith to others, this message of salvation [in Christ] too often took a seemingly secondary position. The Gospel does not shine through with the same brilliance in Clement of Rome as it does in Paul even though they were writing to the same congregation with many of the same problems. The apologists in the second century were more concerned to defend the Christian belief in one God than they were to impress the message of salvation. In some of the Apologies the saving Word of Jesus Christ is hardly discussed.⁵¹

Yet the Holy Christian Church continued to stand even as steeples of orthodoxy in the visible church were falling. Because Christ promised that not even the gates of hell can overcome his kingdom (Matthew 16:18) we should not be surprised that during the Novatian controversy “a group of confessors whose courage during persecution gave them great moral influence... [taught] that those who had fallen and who now claimed to repent were to be restored immediately to the communion of the church....”⁵²

⁵⁰ Prange, p. 15.

⁵¹ Prange, p. 10, quoting Walter Oetting, *The Church of the Catacombs* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1964), p. 58.

⁵² Gonzalez, p. 218

Christ promised that “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Mark 13:31). The power of this promise shines brilliantly from a letter of this time period, written by an anonymous bishop who espouses the Biblical view of repentance and forgiveness that Novatian and his all his opponents (Cyprian, Cornelius and Felicissimus) were failing to grasp.⁵³ “It is quite possible that the phrase ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins’ was added to the Apostle’s Creed at this time in reaction to those who withheld forgiveness from the lapsed.”⁵⁴

The Novatian controversy raced along within the whirlwind of less than two years of time. More precisely, Novatian himself rocketed from presbyter to schismatic to heretic within a matter of mere months. In a relatively short span of time the Novatian controversy caused a series of chain reactions in church dogma and practice. Does not this reflection lead us to appreciate more deeply how our Savior is also the master teacher and great high priest? In the tornadic moments during which the woman caught in adultery was pushed before his face, and enemies with their demanding questions got into Jesus’ face, Jesus simply lowered his face in silence. He would not be caught up and rushed along with the howling winds of emotion, pride or legalism. Purposely slowing things down, the Eternal One bent down and quietly began to write on the ground. Twice.

VI. NOVATIAN’S IMPACT ON THE CHURCH

Novatian was moving the church towards a permanent division. To stop him, Cyprian and Cornelius coalesced and worked to suppress Novatian’s rigorist teachings, and to suppress Felicissimus and affiliated parties that either rejected or “indulgenced” around the penitential system. From this triangulated controversy emerged the victorious Cyprian-Cornelius alliance of the “majority church” along with dogmas and practices that would influence the church for centuries. Let’s categorize these influences into three themes:

1. Hierarchal Unity Replaced Doctrinal Unity
2. The Penitential System Became Entrenched and Enlarged
3. Legalism Replaced the Power of the Gospel

1. Hierarchal Unity Replaced Doctrinal Unity

The process that the majority church took to marginalize and defeat Novatian’s schism elevated the hierarchal structure of the church. Cyprian stamped down the doctrinal hotspots by appealing to the ruling decisions of the bishops as those who had the power from God to decide the rules for penance and restoration. This in turn led to the idea that belonging to God’s kingdom

⁵³ Schaff, *Fathers of the Third Century*, p. 2030.

⁵⁴ Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *Christianity Through the Ages*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 48, as quoted in Prange, p. 15.

required a visible attachment to the bishops of the majority church, especially in juxtaposition to Novatian who took his stand as the anti-bishop of Rome.

Consider two sweeping claims made by Cyprian in order to attack the anti-bishop of Rome: “‘He cannot have God for his father who has not the church for his mother’ and ‘There is no salvation outside the church.’”⁵⁵ In other words, Cyprian

contended that the unity of the church was Episcopal [that is, an episcopal hierarchy], not theological. The oneness of the church was to be found in the union of the college of bishops. Disassociation from the bishops was *ipso facto* [by that very fact a] separation from the true church. He taught the episcopal unity was expressed in Christ’s mandate to Peter (Matthew 16:18). The bishops as the successors of the apostles manifest this unity.

Immediately, we the heirs of the Reformation, recognize what it means that a doctrinal unity of the church was replaced by a hierarchal unity of the church-- Pandora’s box (the one fashioned by hell) was opened. And from it will come the college of bishops, the papacy and the elevation of Tradition over scripture.

Luther and the Reformers re-established the Biblical model. The true essence of the church, the Holy Christian Church, is taught succinctly and powerfully in the Augsburg Confession.

[We] teach that the one holy church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph 4,5,6.⁵⁶ (emphasis mine)

Notice the emphasis on the word *rightly taught* and the sacraments *rightly administered*. The Reformers do not say, “the sacraments administered by the right *person*.” We heirs of the Reformation recognize that the word and the sacraments are efficacious because of the power and promise of God, even if evil men administer them. Controversy surrounding this teaching will become another yet schism in the church in the early fourth century. It develops from the seeds of the Novatian controversy. (For additional information, see Appendix IV – The Efficacy of Baptism and Donatists)

2. The Penitential System Became Entrenched and Enlarged

Novatianism denies that the church has the ability to grant forgiveness on earth for certain sins.

⁵⁵ Ewall, sub “Cyprian.”

⁵⁶ Augsburg Confession, Of the Church, Article VII, p. 47

They focused at the beginning on apostasy, but then later, included also fornication and idolatry. But even as they made this claim, they at the same time directed penitent sinners to engage in the penitential system in the (despairing) hope that perhaps God might still forgive them. Thus *Poenae* (punishment), a penalty for paying for one's sins, was part and parcel to Novatianism. So this is how Novatianism proceeded to weave the penitential system into the fabric of the majority church, that would continue to progress (erode) into Catholicism. "Cyprian's views advocating degrees of penance became the accepted practice and contributed to the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance."⁵⁷

Not even fifty years will pass after Novatian's schism, and the church's penitential system will have devolved into categorizing penitents into four classes (weepers, kneelers, hearers and standers) and will have expanded to include sins *beyond* apostasy, idolatry and fornication. Eventually penance would become a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church. How tragic this is since penance embeds in its

nonscriptural nature [a number of] evils... (1) It misunderstands the problem of postbaptismal sin; (2) it detracts from the atonement; (3) it promotes related errors such as... Masses, indulgences and invocation of saints; (4) it creates legalism and formalism....The Reformers cut through the whole falsification of theory and practice by insisting that what the [New Testament] demands is not Penance but penitence....⁵⁸

When the Augsburg Confession defines repentance, there's no list of unforgivable sins. There's no demand for submitting to a penitential system by which one would earn forgiveness by making "satisfactions." Instead in Article XII: Of Repentance, we teach

that for those who have fallen after Baptism there is remission of sins whenever they are converted; and that the Church ought to impart absolution to those thus returning to repentance. Now repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that, for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience and delivers it from terrors. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance.⁵⁹

Interestingly, the Augsburg Confession cites Novatian and his followers for teaching false doctrine. It states that "the Novatians are also condemned, who would not absolve such as had fallen after Baptism, though they returned to repentance."⁶⁰ And finally, although they are not named specifically, the words of Article XII reject the teachings of Cyprian and Cornelius who

⁵⁷ Ewald, sub "Cyprian"

⁵⁸ Ewald, sub "Penance"

⁵⁹ Augsburg Confession, Of Repentance, Article XII, p. 49

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 49

supported the penitential system. So in a generic way this Article XII concludes that “they also are rejected who do not teach that remission of sins comes through faith, but command us to merit grace through satisfactions of our own.”⁷⁷ (emphasis mine)

We, the heirs of the Reformation, are liberated in Christ from the *salvation by works* enslavement that’s at the core of the *poena*-based penitential system. Christ makes satisfaction for our sins, not the blood of the martyrs applied through indulgences, or peace-bills. “Baptism demands faith and gives the faith it demands.” Why? Because baptism is given us by the Gracious Lord who demands perfection and gives us the justification he demands. This is the gracious Lord who requires faith and gives the faith he requires. This is the gospel, pure and untainted: that God “accepts what his love has provided: ‘the atoning sacrifice.’ Even our good works fall short. Even our tears need washing. Even our repentance needs to be repented of. Jesus’ innocence and agony have made satisfaction.”⁶¹ (emphasis mine)

What Novatianism entrenched into the church would need to be exorcised. It would be a mighty, holy, miraculous struggle for the Lutherans to restore the blessed truth to the church. “For Luther, it was inconceivable that the teaching of Jesus Christ and the Apostles would have been at the root of the corrupt penitential practices of the Catholics... Thanks to Melancthon, who showed him how the etymology of *metanoieta*, (“Repent”) entailed a change rather than penance...”⁶²

Our privilege today is to retain the truths restored to us by the Reformers. There’s no room for pride that assumes we could never lose these restored truths. Might these truths, in fact, need more of our attention?

Let’s use as a working example what’s not uncommon today, which also had application in the Novatian controversy: the unmarried pregnant couple. If the pregnant couple desires marriage in the church, but they’re plainly impenitent as manifested by their words and actions, the minister has no choice but to refrain from officiating. But what of the marriage of the bride who is already pregnant, and the couple is clearly penitent? The couple has confessed their sin and as a fruit of repentance, ceased living together. But now we, the clergy, consider the scope of the wedding ceremony that we can offer.

To the repentant we proclaim full and free forgiveness in Christ. So on one hand there should be no prohibitions that hinder any of the rites or privileges we normally offer in our marriages. But on the other hand, we do not wish to project a false impression to society that we condone extra-

⁶¹ Richard D. Balge, *Justification-A Brief Study*. (Wisconsin Association of Lutheran Educators, Wisconsin Lutheran College, October 26, 1984), p. 6.

⁶² Guy G Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tuebingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 158.

marital sex. Here then is our dilemma: how do we practice Biblical repentance and forgiveness without allowing Novatianism and its offspring of *penance* to creep in? For the sake of the gospel, do we (the spiritual leaders) ask for the marriage ceremony to be kept subdued, maybe private? Or that the bride refrains from wearing the traditional dress of white?

We are not Novatianists and neither are we antinomians. We employ the law according to its third use to give guidance to the believer, even as we hasten to use the gospel again (and again, and again) to empower the believer to willingly, joyfully and spontaneously live in the law that pleases our Savior and brings blessings to the believer. “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free” (Psalm 119:32). So our goal is to win the forgiven hearts of the couple to willingly and joyfully “run in the path” of action (whether to have a small wedding or to forego the white dress, and so on).

But immediately we sense a problem. How do we safeguard the situation so that the forgiven couple freely and willingly obeys the law in its third use, without the pressure of fear or threat, without the presence of *poena*? To borrow from Paul: “Who is equal to such a task?” (2 Corinthians 2:16).

In many ways we’re speaking here of an attitude that takes a superior position: “You brought this on yourself, learn to deal with it.” Or there could be on-the-defensive thoughts: “Don’t get mad at me; you created these consequences.” Or “Just be glad it’s not worse; beggars can’t be choosy.” Such thinking breathes a spirit of Novatianism which stunts the fruits of repentance. Novatianists look for penance. Lutherans look for the fruits of repentance:

Penitent sinners, by definition, produce the fruits of repentance. “Somewhere Luther says that you need not tell a Christian that he should love the Lord just as you need not tell a pear tree to bear pears,” (“Christian Liberty,” in WELS Proceedings—1983, p. 186). That the fruits of repentance must be motivated by faith cannot be emphasized enough. Any other impulse for them, such as atonement for shame [or] desire to appear righteous in the eyes of others...is outright legalism.... At the same time, those who, sorrowful from terrors of conscience and motivated by faith in full and free divine forgiveness, want to produce fruits are given a guide to follow...the law in its third use.

“Repentance calls for proper fruits. Scripture does not outline these in detail for every situation.... The term ‘fruit’ implies willingness and a degree of spontaneity. Fruit produced without legal compulsion. Hence we find that Scripture has not set up a code book that specifies the exact form which fruit of repentance must take in the case of every sin. But broad principles can be recognized:

Fruit of repentance is to desist from the sin for which one repents.

Fruit of repentance is to restore, if possible, what sin has ruined.

Fruit of repentance is to amend one’s sinful life, to replace evil with good.

Fruit of repentance is to do all to the glory of God, whether we eat or drink, or work or play,” (“Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage” in Our Great Heritage, Volume III, p. 371).⁶³

My own failures to live up to our Lutheran theology most frequently happens under times of stress. Novatian was stressed by the Decian persecution that amped up his fears about keeping the church pure. Cyprian was pressured by Novatian on one hand and by Felicissimus on the other. From their pressure-cooker situations emerged bad teaching and practice. Therefore we can learn something from Jesus who, when under the pressure of a hellish trap, found at his feet a woman drowning in the guilt of adultery. And he bent down and wrote on the ground. Jesus would not let himself be motivated by raw emotion, societal expectation, trickster lawyers or even the superiority of his own superior position. There would be no *poena* in the penitence he looked for and no conditions to the forgiveness he gave. So in rising up to care for the soul of the woman, he was simply reckless. “Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir.” “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

What Jesus did is repugnant to someone who relies on *poena* to produce the right behavior. And what Jesus did is reckless to a legalist.

3. Legalism Replaced the Power of the Gospel

Look how reckless Jesus appears to be! He didn’t force the woman caught in adultery to speak out loud that she was sorry. He didn’t make her write a letter to the synagogue asking for forgiveness. He didn’t ask her to prove anything to anyone about how sorry she was. He didn’t put her on probation. And he didn’t tell his disciples to keep a suspicious eye on her. No, he gave her the easiest way possible to walk away with new life. She didn’t even ask for it, but Jesus gave her the unconditional gospel of forgiveness when he said: “Neither do I condemn you.”

Notice the order of Jesus’ words: “Then neither do I condemn you... Go now and leave your life of sin.” As Donald Grey Barnhouse notes, if these sentences were reversed, there would be no gospel. “Go and leave your life of sin” followed by “I won’t condemn you” makes the pardon dependent upon the person’s performance. That is not grace. That is what people often do, but not God! It is only after we have been forgiven can we live a godly life....⁶⁴

There are no conditions attached to [forgiveness] such as: If you are sufficiently sorry, or If you believe strongly enough, or, If you live a holy enough life... Those who make the

⁶³ Allen Lindke, *Apology, Article XII (V): Of Repentance* (Northern Conference, Hope, Indian River, MI, September 22, 1998), p. 4.

⁶⁴ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *The Love Life* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, ©1973) as quoted in *Believing Is Seeing #19, “Nobody’s Perfect.”* (<http://home.insightbb.com/~tcc-archives/042008.doc>), accessed Sept 5, 2013.

forgiveness of sins dependent of something in man are preaching “another gospel”....⁶⁵
(emphases mine)

Novatian and his followers wanted a pure church. Novatian admits this with his “ominous” words in that letter to Cyprian. He and followers were afraid that the church was becoming corrupted by the lapsed who sought restoration. Later, his followers proudly called themselves the *Kathoroi*. We are the “pure church” they bragged.

This strong emphasis on the purity of the church resurfaced within our family tree in the form of Pietism, a movement that also tried to create a pure church by means of strict demands in the areas of repentance and sanctification.⁶⁶ Although the age of pietism has passed, the legalistic spirit that animated Novatian can still infiltrate us, too. It happens when Christians

take the motives and forms of their actions from the law instead of letting them flow from the gospel... This behavior manifests itself... [with] a bravado of sanctification, which asserts itself particularly by measures of church government.⁶⁷ (emphasis mine)

This is legalism: using the law in ways for which it was never designed. The law is designed to expose sin, condemn the sinner; and then after repentance and faith, it can only point out God’s will to the sinner. That’s it. It cannot move a believer to follow the law. That is the power assigned by God to the gospel.

During the Decian persecution, when the church was being persecuted for not being “politically correct,” Novatian fell into the trap of fighting fire with fire. He saw the power of law employing fear and threat to change the behavior of Christians, and how it was effective at stripping Christians away from the church. In response, Novatian arguably reached for the law in order to keep the church united, strong and pure. So he thought.

Even though the persecution we face today has not led to imprisonment or martyrdom (in our country), we labor under a subtle yet powerful persecution waged by the laws of political correctness. It’s tempting to revive Novatian’s legalistic methods by relying on the law to fight fire with fire. The result is that

legalism infiltrates among us in the form of bragging about orthodoxy... [which is a practice of] adhering to orthodoxy where the stress is shifted from *faith* to *correct* faith. Such adherence to orthodoxy is primarily of an intellectual kind, and functions by [a] demanding,

⁶⁵ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, *The Doctrine of the Ministry of the Keys* (The Winnebago Lutheran Teachers’ Conference: Brillion, Wisconsin, February 9, 1978), p. 8.

⁶⁶ Prange, p. 15.

⁶⁷ J. P. Koehler, *Legalism Among Us in The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol II. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), p. 229-230.

and with an admixture of consciousness of one's own being in the right or having everything right."⁶⁸

I admit that this sounds familiar. Because like Novatian, I too can become fixated on having everything right in the church. I get a feeling of security when things seem right. And if I'm not careful, I will be depending on the law to achieve this. Are you like me? Or am I an oddity to find the law appearing to

promise safety and order and consistency in a world that's broken, chaotic, crazy, capricious— a world that frightens us. We hate unpredictability; we hate things being out of control. So we love rules because we think they'll protect us from all that. We're control freaks— filled with fear and slow to trust anyone outside ourselves.⁶⁹

I'm a control freak, by nature. And so are you. We are this way because we have the Old ~~Adam~~ Novatian living inside us, even though we are redeemed children of God (Romans 7). So we're naturally slow to trust anyone outside ourselves. We're even slow to trust... *wait for it*... Jesus.

Jesus scares us— he's so unpredictable, so uncontrollable. Jesus' operating system— unconditional grace— is wild. It's unmanageable, uncontainable. It unsettles everything by wresting control out of our hands, thereby putting us at the mercy of God. So we spend our lives trying to manufacture an existence we can control. All this happens inside us with the finest of subtlety. In fact, most of us convince ourselves that we're actually honoring Jesus with our rules and regulations, that we're paying attention to him and pleasing him more and more. But all the while, we're only demonstrating that we believe in ourselves much more than we do in Jesus. Our default faith mode is to trust, above all things, our own ability to create a safe, controllable, predictable world.⁷⁰

Relying on anything less than Jesus and his radical, uncontrollable, wonderful gospel to produce godly behavior is legalism. Behavior

that proceeds from faith, love, hope is *original, immediate, unconstrained, genuine and true* because it flows from [the gospel], an actual, proper source of life; [but the behavior and] activity of legalism takes shape as *mechanical, external, afflicted with mental reservations and secondary objectives, calculated for the moment, ungentle, and untruthful*... [This happens because legalism] puts law in place of the gospel, and on the other hand, it perverts law as much as the gospel, so that neither law nor gospel remain.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Koehler, 239.

⁶⁹ Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2011), p. 48.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 48

⁷¹ Koehler, p. 235

When I look at myself in the mirror of these words, I see how my own behavior is often “*mechanical, external, ungenue, and untruthful.*” I can find attitudes in myself that are “*afflicted with mental reservations and secondary objectives.*” And I can hear myself speaking with words “*calculated for the moment.*”

- I hear that a hymn is being used in worship that comes from a Reformed hymn book, and my first reaction is judgmental and prejudiced, instead of having genuine gospel joy that piques my interest to discover how the message is wonderfully Biblical.
- I read of someone using a novel idea to create a “come and see” event to draw the community to their church campus. And I give it my stink eye because I know how such events could be misused, instead of first rejoicing in Jesus that this congregation is striving to carry out its mission.
- I see that a sister church is using lay people to conduct Bible studies and I praise God to see the priesthood of all believers being developed. No, actually, my initial reaction was to wonder how much false doctrine was going to sneak past the non-seminary-trained teachers.

I publicly confess that in each of these examples, and many more that I’ve not listed, a legalistic spirit was within me. But I am washed, I am forgiven, I am justified in the blood of Christ, and I can rejoice that today is a new day to begin again to live in and out of the gospel.

Please don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that the gospel will move us to drop our quest for doctrinal purity. The Jesus who forgave the adulteress also sent his spirit into Paul to teach the doctrine of church fellowship, for example.

That the gospel should remain pure is self-evident; for without the truth of the gospel, unless one has understood the gospel *correctly*, one cannot believe... However, keeping the gospel pure is not an immediate interest of evangelical preaching, but it is rather a secondary goal. As its *first goal*, evangelical preaching has faith in mind. Faith is what preaching wants to produce.... [and it does so by means of] the wonderful evangelical truth, an amazed preaching of the evangelical truth, an entreaty with the truth. With this approach the *secondary goal* can at once be kept in mind, that one stands up for purity of the gospel if the other person has a misunderstanding... [But] certainly an explanation of this kind can be made in such a manner that the correction retains the character of evangelical preaching. In fact, this is the only way the correction assures itself of acceptance by the faith of the gospel it produces.⁷²

⁷² Ibid, p.239-240.

Sanctified living—such as leaving a life of sin-- “flows from the gospel only when the gospel is the center of our thinking and more highly valued than the holiness that flows from it.”⁷³

Far too many people are going to hell because they think that if we behave, we belong. Such souls have not yet been set free by Jesus who teaches that when we believe, we belong. We, the heirs of the Reformation, will not want to ever leave people with the impression that if we behave then we belong. “Legalism happens when *what we need to do*, not what Jesus has already done, becomes the end game...”⁷⁴

This is not to say that the law is not used. Just the opposite. When the law is used in its primary role, it makes a person nothing before God and destroys all false of hope of getting a break from God. One’s only hope then is the blessed gospel, which, when valued more highly than living right, will produce right living.

So how do we keep our church orthodox? How do we keep our people living godly lives? How do we keep ourselves growing in sanctification? By trusting that the gospel will accomplish what God intends it to accomplish. This means to exclusively rely on the gospel by emphasizing again and again that because of who Christ is, and because of what Christ has done, we can be what the Spirit has made us to be, and we can do what the Father wills us to do. “Our call to the gathered flock, then, is not so much “Do!” as it is “Believe!” because “the primary message of Christianity is not “This do!” but “This happened!”⁷⁵

Luther taught that all who believe in Jesus are little Christs. And he taught that the more we believe this, the more we will live it.

Novatian was played by the dark powers of this world. The Decian persecution created spiritual disarray in the church, which the Evil One used to create the fear that the church was not right enough. Motivated by fear, Novatian followed his natural instincts, grabbing for the law as his way to fix it. Jesus was also presented with spiritual disarray, beginning with the disheveled adulteress dumped at his feet. But there were also the evil prosecutors who were pimping the woman in order to persecute Jesus, to destroy his message as the Messiah. But Jesus did not follow the natural instincts of man, for he was here to save us from ourselves. So he bent down and wrote on the ground. Twice. And when he confronted the broken-hearted adulteress, he comforted her with the gospel, trusting it to raise her to new life. That’s crazy scary to a legalist. But you and I are not Novatianists. We are little Christs. ✠✠✠

⁷³ Robert J. Koester, *Gospel Motivation: More Than “Jesus Died for My Sins.”* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2006), p. 14

⁷⁴ Tchividjian, p. 47.

⁷⁵ John C. Jeske, *Spiritual Renewal as Faithful Application of Law and Gospel in Today’s Secular Society* (Written as a Spiritual Renewal mailing to all pastors and teachers of the WELS, August 22, 1989), p.20,25

Appendix I

A History of Persecution

Jesus forewarned his followers that there would be these persecutions. This alone will be incentive to be somewhat familiar with what Jesus predicted. And because an intensely sharp persecution created a blood-splattered canvass upon which Novatian painted his controversy, it's beneficial for us to be somewhat familiar with how these crises afflicted the ante-Nicene church.

Consider how Paul's body was disfigured by the persecutions he endured. Then both he and Peter were killed under Nero's watch, according to Clement of Rome. The first of the Roman persecutions began under Nero and were "based on the vague charge that the Christians were haters of society."^{76, 77} Suspicions and cruel slanders of non-Christians fueled outbreaks of persecution. Christian ideas found in the "Agape love-feast," or expressed in the "holy kiss," or addressed in the terms of "brothers and sisters" were twisted into vulgar rumors that Christians practiced incestuous fornication.⁷⁸

Tacitus tells us of Christians crucified; sowed into the skins of animals and fed to wild dogs; covered with pitch and set aflame in order to illuminate the imperial garden. Next came Emperor Flavian who persecuted Christians for disturbing the peace. He was followed by Domitian, the one who called himself Lord and God. Emperor Trajan followed, who martyred Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, by throwing him to wild beasts in Rome's coliseum. Then came some emperors considered more favorable to the Christians: Hadrian (117-138), Pius (138-161) Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and Septimius Severus (193-21). While persecutions under these emperors may have softened on a national level, yet under the reign of each of them, localities of Christians saw some of their faithful killed. Some places, for instance, reported that so many Christians were executed at the same time, bodies were piled in the street until they were burned and their ashes carted off.⁷⁹

Although some today wish to downplay the trauma of the history of the persecutions Christians have suffered, note the caveat in parentheses: "the early Christians (that is, after about a.d. 300) exaggerated the degree to which earlier Christians had suffered persecution for their beliefs"⁸⁰ In other words, what history records about the Roman persecutions are as factual as history can be.

⁷⁶ Lutheran Cyclopedia, sub "Persecutions of Christians."

⁷⁷ A famous quote from Tertullian goes, "If the River Tiber reaches the walls, if the River Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!' What, all of them to one lion?" (Tertullian's Apology)

⁷⁸ *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, Vol. 1 mi. A-J, sub "Calumnies Against the Christians"

⁷⁹ Lutheran Cyclopedia, sub "Persecutions of Christians."

⁸⁰ John O'Sullivan, citing "The Myth of Persecution" by Candida Moss, in "Persecution of Christians, Then and Now," *National Review Online*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/node/344557/print> (accessed September 4, 2013).

Appendix II

Tertullian and Hippolytus

A student of the New Testament epistles is familiar with how the Apostles had to exert much effort helping the early Christians to overcome the Judaizers who wanted to put salvation in Christ onto a legal foundation constructed of Old Testament laws. This of course threatened Christ's gift of salvation by grace through faith. What we witness in the New Testament-- the struggle to overcome the gravitational pull offered by the Judaizers—continued in the post-Apostolic age.

As the church moved through the second century, the gravity of the Judaizer's "salvation by participation" continued to exert influence. Specifically, as Christians moved from the Old Testament rituals and Jewish traditions to a "new, independent religious system and community" the early Christians felt the gravitational pull of making repentance a public ritual, and the practice "of individual repentance underwent a mutation, and was transformed into the ritualized public penance."⁸¹ This bent demonstrates itself in Tertullian's writings.

Tertullian taught "that the power of the binding and loosing belonged not to the bishop, but that to the prophet as the organ of the Spirit it belonged to (sic) determined whether the repenting offender in any case is forgiven of God."⁸² By this we understand that Tertullian was fighting against the gravitational pull of returning to legalistic Judaism that was at work within the church.⁸³ Tertullian's footing, however, does lose traction concerning an similar doctrine, for he taught that a repentant sinner "may be thus forgiven without being received back into the communion of the visible Church, which is bound in its discipline to prevent in the future, as far as it can, transgressions of the same character."⁸⁴ Going beyond what God teaches in his word, even if it has the noble intentions of keeping the church pure, betrays a spirit that relies on the law to accomplish what the gospel alone can do. Thus the seeds of legalism were being sown.

Hippolytus was more advanced than Tertullian in favoring a penitential system that included the power of the bishops to forgive sins. Like Tertullian, Hippolytus believed that fornication, homicide and apostasy were mortal sins. In fact, that these three sins were unforgiveable sins was the general opinion of the church.⁸⁵ His opposition to Bishop Callistus was not that the bishop was granting the penitent forgiveness and re-admittance to the church, but that he was granting it to those who had committed fornication.⁸⁶ The fear that drove Hippolytus to oppose the bishop was his fear that "a secularizing spirit...had crept into the Church along with its growth in numbers."⁸⁷

⁸¹ Guy G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tuebingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), p. 158.

⁸² Fisher, p. 82

⁸³ Barbarian p. 167

⁸⁴ Fisher, p. 82.

⁸⁵ Gonzalez, p. 212

⁸⁶ Callistus offered the grace of repentance and restoration to repentant fornicators, which was a departure from the prevailing consensus of the church. Gonzalez, p. 122.

⁸⁷ Fisher, p. 82-83

Appendix III

Cyprian Takes the “Safe” Middle Ground

Under the influence of Tertullian’s teachings, Cyprian at first believed that those who lapsed into apostasy could never be received back into the communion of the church.

But then came the Decian persecution. At its beginning, Cyprian went into hiding to avoid martyrdom. He did so, as he explained, in order for his leadership, still functioning from his hidden location, would benefit the church. But Cyprian caught flack for his hiding, with some critics calling for his resignation. Thus he felt the heat of the fire, which apparently helped him identify with the pressures that were causing so many to lapse.

As one peruses Cyprian’s many epistles⁸⁸ he senses that Cyprian had a true shepherd’s heart for his flock. In his letters he showed great concern for the Christians who were victims of persecution. He writes compassionately about restoring the lapsed, for their benefit of receiving the assurance of forgiveness and the blessed confidence of eternal life.⁸⁹

Could it be, therefore, that Cyprian was growing in Biblical wisdom, and was on a trajectory to break free from Tertullian’s rigorist views of repentance and restoration?⁹⁰ To ask it another way, was Cyprian learning, from experience and the Scriptures, to deal with the repentant lapsed the same way Christ treated the woman caught in adultery; that Paul treated the penitent fornicator in Corinth?

But from his point of view, the church was already teetering from the violent Decian persecution, and was also in danger of dividing because of the schism created by Novatian. If it was already difficult to be doing battle with Novatian and his rigorist views, how did he size up the situation when Felicissimus and the ultra-lenient parties entered the fray? Now the battle had become triangulated.

Cyprian appears to have been moving toward a Biblical practice. But with the battle occurring between the extremes represented by Novatian and Felicissimus, Cyprian appears to have opted for middle ground. He had to arrive at this rationally for his “safe” middle-ground position is not Scriptural.

Eventually Cyprian and his views would be victorious and establish precedent in the majority church. The result, unfortunately, is that Biblical truth was buried under this triangulated tug-of-war.

⁸⁸ Cyprian’s epistles, translated into English, are available in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. V* by Philip Schaff.

⁸⁹ See for example Cyprian’s Letter, LIII, Shaff, *Fathers of the Third Century*, p. 1080-81

⁹⁰ Schaff reports how Cyprian was concerned for “secur[ing] the fallen against despair.” And an earlier rule that prohibited communion for those desiring it “merely from fear of death” he later removed. “He was thus of course not entirely consistent, but gradually accommodated his principles to circumstances...” Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 258.

Appendix IV

The Efficacy of Baptism and Donatism

Novatian's fixation on producing a pure church translated into his followers naming themselves *katharoi*, or Puritans. If people left the majority church to convert to the *katharoi*, they were to be re-baptized. Likewise, Cyprian taught that when Novatianists converted to the majority church, they were to be re-baptized.⁹¹ Not every bishop in the majority church, however, agreed with Cyprian. Thus there was controversy concerning whether baptism administered by heretics was valid or not, and therefore, whether one should rebaptize converted heretics.

The view of the Novatianists carried on, regaining the spotlight in a new schism of the Donatists, who broke from the majority church, circa 313. Donatists followed *katharoi* beliefs, and extended the controversy concerning the efficacy of baptism to include also Holy Communion. They taught that the sacraments were invalid if administered by clergy who had lapsed during times of persecution.

Novatianists and Donatists tied the efficacy of baptism to the worthiness of the one administering the sacrament. The Latin term for this is *ex opera operantis*, meaning *from the work of the one doing the working*. Ultimately, then, the validity of the sacrament, they taught, depends on the worthiness and holiness of the minister. In opposition to this, the majority church would move away from its own *ex opera operantis* leanings at the time of Cyprian, and espouse the *ex opera operato* theology, meaning *from the work having been worked*.⁹² This teaches that the validity of the sacrament depends upon God, who accomplishes his work through the minister, even if he is an unbeliever. However, the Roman Catholic Church's fixation on the episcopal hierarchy voids faith from the sacraments as it teaches *ex opera operato*.⁹³ We, the heirs of the Reformation, recognize this when the Augsburg confession says: "[We] condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify by the outward act [*ex opera operato*], and who do not teach that, in use of the Sacraments, faith which believes that sins are forgiven, is required."⁹⁴ From this arises the summary phrase frequently employed in our Lutheran instruction for confirmation: "Baptism requires faith and gives the faith it requires."

The Donatists, and well as the "such like" Novatians, are referenced in the Augsburg Confession when it states "that both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men. [We] condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect."⁹⁵

⁹¹ Schaff, *Fathers of the Third Century*, p. 1195-1197

⁹² Elwell, sub "Roman Catholicism: The Sacrament"

⁹³ Note the emphasis on the episcopal hierarchy when it says, "Only priests who have received the faculty of absolving from the authority of the church can forgive sins in the name of Christ." Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 1495.

⁹⁴ Augsburg Confession, Of the Use of the Sacraments, Article XIII, p. 49

⁹⁵ Augsburg Confession, What the Church Is, Article VIII, p. 47

Appendix V

The Hierarchy of Catholicism

When the concept of the church's unity morphed from a doctrinal unity and into a hierarchal unity, the way was opened for the church to accelerate into an expanding echelon that would eventually include the college of bishops, the papacy and the elevation of Tradition over scripture. Consider these statements of the Roman Catholic Church found in the Catholic catechism.

77 In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors... Indeed, "the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time." 78 This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it... The sayings of the holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition... 82 As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence."⁹⁶(emphasis mine)

869 The Church is apostolic... Christ governs her through Peter and the other apostles, who are present in their successors, the Pope and the college of bishops. 870 The sole Church of Christ... is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. 881 The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head." This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope. 882 The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful." "For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."⁹⁷ (emphasis mine)

⁹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 77,78 & 82.

⁹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 869, 870 & 881.

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Rome	North Africa
<p>Callistus 217-222 as Bishop of Rome; lenient. Offered restoration to those guilty of fornication who made penance.</p>	<p>Tertullian 197-225 as a priest; rigorist. Opposed Callistus by teaching that the repentant may be forgiven without being received back into the communion of the visible Church; to protect church purity.</p>
<p>Hippolytus 212-236 as a priest; rigorist. Opposed Callistus by tightening the penitential system, to keep some sinners excluded.</p>	
<p>Cornelius 251-253 as Bishop of Rome; lenient. Followed the advice of Cyprian, allowing the lapsed to be reconciled to the church after penance.</p>	<p>Cyprian 248-258 as Bishop of Carthage; lenient. Allowed the lapsed to be reconciled to the church after suitable penance and delay. Opposed Novatian's rigorist teachings.</p>
<p>Novatian 251-257 as rival Bishop of Rome; rigorist. As he opposed Cornelius, he reached out to Cyprian. But Cyprian supported Cornelius in joint opposition to Novatian.</p>	<p><i>Decian Persecution</i> 250-253</p>