

FROM THE APOSTLES TO THE EARLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Post-Apostolic Christianity, c. AD 100-313

The Genealogy of Christian Division

A Historical and Biblical Study of Schism, Reformation, and the Making of Modern Christianity

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Abstract

Between approximately AD 100 and 313, Christianity moved from the age of living apostolic witnesses into a dispersed, increasingly institutionalized communion that had to preserve apostolic teaching without direct access to the apostles themselves. This chapter reconstructs that transition through the Apostolic Fathers, apologists, heresiologists, martyr texts, episcopal correspondence, early liturgical witnesses, canonical evidence, and modern scholarship. It argues that the period cannot responsibly be described either as a simple continuation of first-century church order or as the sudden invention of a later Roman Catholic system. Rather, local and regional churches responded to distance, persecution, doctrinal rivalry, contested revelation, and disciplinary crises by strengthening episcopal leadership, articulating rules of faith, identifying public lines of teaching succession, gathering authoritative apostolic writings, developing baptismal and Eucharistic practice, and using synods and interchurch correspondence to preserve unity. Ignatius provides early evidence for a threefold bishop-presbyter-deacon pattern in several Asian churches, while Polycarp and other witnesses show that development was not uniform. Irenaeus used succession, Scripture, and the rule of faith together against esoteric claims; Marcion sharpened disputes over Scripture; the New Prophecy forced reflection on continuing revelation; and Cyprian expressed a strongly episcopal, catholic ecclesiology while simultaneously demonstrating that Rome had prestige without yet exercising the universal ordinary jurisdiction claimed in later centuries. By AD 313, a recognizable pre-Nicene catholic Christianity had emerged across major regions, continuous with the apostolic gospel in crucial respects yet marked by significant post-apostolic institutional and doctrinal development. A *Sola Scriptura* assessment therefore affirms legitimate safeguards of truth while refusing to treat antiquity, succession, sacramental practice, or ecclesial consensus as self-validating apart from Scripture.

Keywords: *Apostolic Fathers; early catholic Christianity; episcopacy; apostolic succession; rule of faith; New Testament canon; persecution; pre-Nicene church*

1. Introduction: The Problem Created by the Passing of the Apostles

The apostolic age ended with a problem that every later Christian tradition has had to answer: how can the Church remain apostolic when the apostles themselves are no longer present? The first century had already supplied the essential answer in principle. Christ remained the head of the Church; the Scriptures of Israel were received as God's Word; commissioned apostolic witnesses taught with unique authority; apostolic writings were being read and circulated; local churches were led by recognized ministers; and prophecy, doctrine, and leadership were to be tested rather than accepted merely because they claimed spiritual authority. The preceding chapter established that baseline and also showed that several later structures, including a uniform monarchical episcopate, a universal Roman jurisdiction, a seven-sacrament system, and a formally closed twenty-seven-book New Testament, were not yet demonstrable as completed first-century institutions (Sangwa, 2026).

The generations after the apostles inherited the apostolic gospel, but they inherited it under changed historical conditions. Christian communities were spreading across an enormous geographical area. Some churches possessed memories of apostolic founders, some possessed apostolic letters, and others were shaped by missionaries whose connection to the first generation was indirect. Teachers claiming secret traditions competed with publicly transmitted teaching. New prophetic voices claimed the Spirit. Persecution periodically forced believers to decide whether confession, flight, compromise, or martyrdom constituted faithfulness. Disputes over baptism, Eucharist, repentance after grave sin, the date of Pascha, and the reconciliation of the lapsed demanded decisions that could no longer be referred to a living Peter, Paul, John, or James. The central historical question is therefore not whether organization appeared after the apostles. Organization already existed. The question is how earlier forms of order, doctrine, and interchurch relationship were expanded, concentrated, and defended when apostolic immediacy gave way to apostolic memory.

The answer unfolded gradually and unevenly. By the early second century, some churches clearly centered unity on a single bishop surrounded by presbyters and deacons, a pattern commonly called monarchical or monoepiscopal government, while other evidence still reflects collegial patterns. By the late second century, writers such as Irenaeus appealed to the publicly known succession of bishops as a rebuttal to secret teaching, while simultaneously grounding that succession in a rule of faith and apostolic Scriptures. By the third century, city bishops corresponded across provinces, regional synods addressed discipline, and figures such as Cyprian could speak of one episcopate shared by many bishops. Yet this same evidence reveals limits. Roman bishops were influential, sometimes forceful, and often treated as especially important, but other bishops resisted them, disagreed with them, and did not behave as though Rome possessed an uncontested universal ordinary jurisdiction over the whole Church (Dunn, 2007; Sullivan, 2001).

This chapter therefore uses the expression **early catholic church** historically and with precision. The adjective *catholic*, from Greek *katholikos*, means "according to the whole" or "universal." Ignatius of Antioch gives the earliest surviving Christian use of the phrase "catholic church" in the early second century, where it denotes the fullness or universality of the Church gathered around Christ, not the fully developed Roman Catholic communion of the medieval or modern periods (Ign. Smyrn. 8.2; Holmes, 2007). Over the second and third centuries, *catholic* increasingly became a boundary term identifying churches that claimed continuity with the apostolic faith and communion against groups judged heretical or schismatic. The term is therefore historically appropriate for the period, but it must not be used anachronistically to smuggle later papal, sacramental, canonical, or juridical systems backward into AD 100-313.

The chapter's chronological endpoint is equally deliberate. AD 313 conventionally marks the Constantinian-Licinian settlement commonly called the Edict of Milan, which extended toleration and provided for restoration of confiscated Christian property after Galerius had already granted imperial toleration in AD 311. The transformation after imperial toleration belongs to the next chapter. Here the focus remains on Christianity before durable imperial patronage, when bishops, canons, creeds, sacraments, and interchurch structures developed primarily within a religious minority that possessed no Christian emperor, no ecumenical council, and no imperial machinery capable of enforcing a universal settlement.

2. Sources, Chronology, and Method

The evidence for AD 100-313 is rich but uneven. The earliest post-apostolic layer includes writings conventionally grouped as the Apostolic Fathers: First Clement, the Didache, the letters of Ignatius, Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the fragments of Papias, and related texts. These writings are not a single theological school, nor do they carry equal historical weight for every question. Their dates are often approximate, and some preserve multiple compositional layers. Nevertheless, they offer indispensable windows into local leadership, worship, ethics, discipline, prophecy, and the memory of the apostles in the late first and early second centuries (Holmes, 2007).

The second-century evidence broadens through apologists and anti-heretical writers, often called heresiologists because they catalogued and refuted teachings judged heretical. Justin Martyr describes baptism, Eucharist, Sunday assembly, Scripture reading, prayer, charity, and Christian confession at Rome around the middle of the century. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing around AD 180, preserves extensive information about Valentinian and other theological systems while arguing for the public apostolic faith, episcopal succession, and the fourfold Gospel. His value is immense, but he is an advocate in controversy, not a neutral ethnographer of rival movements. Likewise, Tertullian of Carthage supplies extraordinary evidence for Latin Christianity, baptism, discipline, anti-Marcionite polemic, Trinitarian vocabulary, and the New Prophecy, yet his writings span changing ecclesial alignments and must be read chronologically rather than flattened into one static position (Evans, 1964, 1972; Osborn, 1997).

The third century is especially well documented in North Africa. Cyprian's letters allow historians to watch episcopal government functioning in real time during persecution, schism, the reconciliation of the lapsed, and the rebaptism controversy. They reveal consultation among bishops, clergy, confessors, and laity, but also a pronounced concentration of responsibility in the bishop. The Roman correspondence preserved in the Cyprianic collection is particularly important because it exposes both the prestige of Rome and the practical limits of Roman authority in the mid-third century (Clarke, 1984-1989; Dunn, 2007).

Non-Christian and governmental evidence is equally important. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia-Pontus, asked Trajan around AD 112 how Christians should be tried, thereby supplying an external description of Christian worship and Roman legal uncertainty (Pliny, Ep. 10.96-97; Pliny the Younger, 1969). Inscriptions and archaeological remains, including the third-century Christian building at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, confirm that Christian communities adapted domestic and urban space before the age of monumental basilicas (Hopkins, 1979). Surviving *libelli*, certificates associated with the Decian sacrifice requirement, illuminate the bureaucratic mechanisms that generated the mid-third-century crisis (Rives, 1999). Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, preserves earlier letters, lists, martyr narratives, and disputes that would otherwise be lost; his work must be used critically because he writes after many of the events and organizes them within his own theological historiography (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*).

This chapter follows three methodological controls. First, historical sequence comes before later theological system. A text from AD 110 is not read through a thirteenth-century sacramental definition, nor is a third-century Roman intervention automatically treated as an exercise of nineteenth-century papal jurisdiction. Second, doctrinal controversy is reconstructed from the strongest available primary evidence while recognizing the asymmetry of survival: many so-called heretics are known chiefly through opponents. Third, the *Sola Scriptura* assessment is deliberately separated from historical description. The historical question asks what Christians actually taught and practiced; the theological question asks whether those developments faithfully express the apostolic Scriptures.

Table 1. Selected chronology of post-apostolic Christianity, c. AD 100-313

Date / period	Major development
c. AD 95-100	1 Clement; Roman intervention in Corinth; transition from living apostles to inherited ministry.
c. AD 100-117	Ignatius writes en route to martyrdom; clear one-bishop, presbyter, and deacon pattern in several Asian churches.
c. AD 100-150	Didache, Polycarp, Papias, and other witnesses show diverse patterns of ministry, worship, prophecy, and textual authority.
AD 112	Pliny and Trajan correspondence documents Christian worship and Roman legal uncertainty in Bithynia-Pontus.
AD 132-135	Bar Kokhba revolt intensifies Jewish-Christian differentiation in Judea without producing one universal separation everywhere.
c. AD 140s	Marcionite movement sharpens disputes over Creator, Old Testament, Gospel, Paul, and authoritative writings.
c. AD 150s-180s	Justin, Irenaeus, and other apologists/heresiologists articulate worship, rule of faith, succession, and fourfold Gospel.
c. AD 160s-170s	New Prophecy emerges in Phrygia; continuing revelation, rigorism, and church discernment become contested.
AD 177	Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne; persecution and translocal correspondence strengthen shared identity.
c. AD 190s	Victor of Rome and Asian bishops dispute Paschal practice; Roman influence is visible but contested.
AD 203	Martyrdom of Perpetua, Felicity, and companions at Carthage.
AD 249-251	Decian sacrifice requirement creates empire-wide crisis of confession, apostasy, and readmission of the lapsed.
AD 251	Novatian schism at Rome over post-baptismal apostasy and reconciliation.
AD 255-256	Cyprian, Stephen of Rome, and other bishops dispute baptism outside catholic communion.
AD 257-260	Valerian persecution, Cyprian's martyrdom, followed by Gallienus' toleration and property restoration.
AD 303-311, with eastern continuation to 313	Great Persecution under the Tetrarchy: destruction of churches and Scriptures, legal disabilities, imprisonment, and sacrifice demands; Galerius issues toleration in 311, while pressure continues under Maximinus Daia in parts of the East until 313.
AD 311 and 313	Galerius grants toleration in 311; the Constantinian-Licinian settlement of 313 extends toleration and provides for restoration of confiscated Christian property, closing the pre-Nicene persecuted-church period.

Note. Dates are approximate where the surviving evidence does not permit precision.

3. The Post-Apostolic Transition: Preserving a Faith Received from Eyewitnesses

The death of the apostles did not produce an immediate institutional vacuum. Churches already possessed local leaders, apostolic letters, remembered teaching, worship practices, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and translocal networks. What changed was the mechanism by which disputes could be resolved. During the apostolic age, a congregation might receive correction from Paul, a delegation from Jerusalem, or the intervention of a recognized apostle. In the second century, the churches increasingly relied on public teaching inherited from the apostles, written apostolic texts, acknowledged ministers, and communion with other churches that claimed the same faith.

The transition can already be seen in First Clement, a letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth probably written near the end of the first century. The Corinthian church had removed some presbyters from ministry, and the

Roman church intervened with a lengthy appeal to peace, humility, order, and the pattern of appointed ministry. First Clement states that the apostles appointed their "firstfruits" as bishops/overseers and deacons and then made provision for approved successors so that ministry would continue after their death (1 Clem. 42-44; Holmes, 2007). This is an important early witness to succession, but the character of the succession must be observed carefully. The text does not present a chain of universal monarchs. It defends the orderly continuation of local ministry and argues that faithful ministers should not be arbitrarily deposed. The same document frequently uses the language of presbyters for those whose removal caused the conflict.

First Clement is also significant for Roman prestige. A church in Rome writes authoritatively to Corinth, a community associated with Paul, and expects its admonition to be heard. Yet the letter is sent in the name of the Roman church rather than under the personal name of a Roman bishop, and it never presents a Petrine office of universal jurisdiction. The evidence therefore establishes early Roman concern beyond Rome and an impressive sense of responsibility for interchurch order, while leaving open how leadership in Rome itself was structured at that moment (Sullivan, 2001; Stewart, 2014).

A similar mixture of continuity and adaptation appears in the Didache, probably composed from materials that reached final form around the late first or early second century, although dating remains debated. The Didache assumes itinerant apostles and prophets, local teachers, baptism, fasting, Eucharistic meals, confession, Sunday gathering, and the appointment of bishops and deacons. Its instruction to "appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons" because they too perform the ministry of prophets and teachers is particularly revealing (Did. 15.1; Holmes, 2007). Charismatic and local institutional ministries coexist rather than appearing as mutually exclusive stages. The document's baptismal instructions are equally practical: immersion in running water is preferred, other water is acceptable, and pouring is permitted where sufficient water is unavailable (Did. 7). That flexibility warns against imagining early Christianity as liturgically uniform even when common rites were already well established.

The Didache also preserves Eucharistic prayers whose wording differs markedly from Paul's wording in [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#). It emphasizes thanksgiving, unity, the gathering of the Church from the ends of the earth, and holiness at the table. This does not imply that the Pauline tradition was unknown or rejected. It demonstrates that second-century liturgical practice could preserve recognizable apostolic themes without being reduced to one universal script. The same source warns communities about false itinerant prophets, especially those who exploit hospitality or money. Charisma is honored but bounded by moral and doctrinal discernment, a pattern continuous with [1 Thessalonians 5:19-22](#) and [1 John 4:1](#).

3.1 Jewish-Christian differentiation after AD 70 and the Bar Kokhba revolt

The post-apostolic transition also unfolded within a changing relationship between Christians and Jewish communities. Christianity had begun as a Jewish messianic movement, and Jewish followers of Jesus did not disappear at the end of the first century. Nevertheless, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, the growing numerical weight of Gentile churches, the developing rabbinic movement, and disputes over Jesus, Torah, synagogue boundaries, and the interpretation of Israel's Scriptures produced increasing differentiation. Modern scholarship therefore cautions against imagining one universal moment when "Christianity" and "Judaism" suddenly became two fully separate religions. The separation occurred at different speeds in different locations and social networks (Alexander, 2021; Jacobs, 2009).

The Bar Kokhba revolt of AD 132-135 intensified these pressures in Judea. Bar Kokhba was acclaimed by supporters as a messianic liberator against Rome, a claim Christians who confessed Jesus as Messiah could not share. Later Christian sources connect the revolt with pressure on Jesus-followers who refused to join the insurgency, although the surviving evidence is later and must be handled cautiously. What can be said with confidence is that the revolt devastated Judea, transformed Jerusalem under Roman rule, and contributed to the further marginalization of Jewish-Christian communities within a church that was becoming predominantly Gentile. It did not, however, erase Jewish Christianity or produce a complete empire-wide "parting of the ways" in AD 135 (Eshel, 2006; Jacobs, 2009).

The literature of the period also shows the danger of theological differentiation hardening into anti-Jewish polemic. The Epistle of Barnabas interprets covenant and ritual in ways that sharply displace Jewish claims, and Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* presents a sustained Christian argument that Israel's Scriptures find their fulfillment in Christ and the Church. These texts belong to real contests over Scripture and messianic identity, but their rhetoric should not be confused with the apostolic prohibition of Gentile boasting over Israel ([Romans 11:17-24](#)). A historically responsible

genealogy must therefore trace Christian separation from Jewish communities without treating contempt for Jews as an apostolic necessity.

3.2 Households, women, charity, and the rise of ascetic ideals

Institutional development did not occur only at the level of bishops and controversies. Christian communities were also reorganizing ordinary social life. Households remained crucial venues for worship, patronage, hospitality, catechesis, and care for the poor, but by the second and third centuries some churches had grown large enough to maintain regular systems of relief, support clergy and widows, ransom captives, bury the poor, and assist distant congregations. Justin's description of the Sunday collection and Dionysius of Corinth's praise of Roman generosity indicate that charity had become a visible mark of catholic identity as well as a continuation of apostolic concern for the vulnerable (Justin, *1 Apol.* 67; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.23).

Women remained visible as martyrs, patrons, widows, virgins, teachers in some settings, and participants in prophetic movements. Pliny reports interrogating two enslaved women called *ministrae*, commonly translated “deaconesses” or “female ministers,” although the precise ecclesial office denoted by his Latin cannot be established with certainty (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96). Perpetua and Felicity became authoritative martyr memories in North Africa, while Prisca and Maximilla were central prophetic figures in the New Prophecy. Third-century church orders also attest increasingly differentiated ministries to women, especially in service to other women. These witnesses complicate any narrative in which stronger episcopal structure simply made women disappear, even though formal presbyteral and episcopal offices became overwhelmingly male in the surviving catholic evidence.

Ascetic ideals also intensified before the rise of mature monastic institutions. Fasting was already apostolic and early Christian, but second- and third-century communities increasingly honored lifelong virginity, continence, voluntary poverty, vigils, and sexual renunciation as concentrated forms of devotion. Widows and virgins could acquire recognized spiritual status, while teachers such as Tertullian and Origen developed extensive arguments for disciplined renunciation. This ascetic current began in urban churches rather than in fourth-century monasteries and later supplied important theological and social resources for the desert movement (Finn, 2020). The development contained genuine biblical impulses toward self-control, fasting, simplicity, and undivided devotion ([Matthew 6:16-18](#); [1 Corinthians 7:32-35](#); [1 Timothy 6:6-8](#)), but it also created a recurring risk of ranking celibacy, food abstention, or severe bodily discipline as inherently holier than faithful marriage and ordinary Christian vocation ([Colossians 2:20-23](#); [1 Timothy 4:1-5](#)).

4. Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement, and the Emergence of Stronger Episcopacy

4.1 Ignatius of Antioch and the single bishop

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch, written while he was being escorted toward Rome for execution, are among the most consequential documents for the history of church order. Ignatius repeatedly urges churches in Asia Minor to maintain unity with one bishop, a council of presbyters, and deacons. To the Smyrnaeans he insists that a valid Eucharistic celebration is one presided over by the bishop or someone authorized by him and then writes the famous sentence, “wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church” (Ign. Smyrn. 8.1-2; Holmes, 2007). Similar appeals occur in his letters to the Magnesians, Trallians, Philadelphians, and Ephesians. For Ignatius, the bishop is not merely an administrator. Episcopal unity protects the Eucharist, guards against schism, and visibly orders the community around one confession of the incarnate and suffering Christ.

The historical importance of this evidence should neither be minimized nor universalized. By the early second century, a form of monarchical episcopacy was clearly present in several churches known to Ignatius. It is therefore inaccurate to claim that a single city bishop was invented only in the late second or third century. At the same time, Ignatius' own urgency suggests that his preferred pattern was not self-enforcing. His language is exhortative because unity is threatened. Moreover, his Letter to the Romans is unusual in not naming or appealing to a Roman bishop, and contemporary or near-contemporary witnesses elsewhere do not always reflect the same structure. The safest conclusion is development toward one-bishop leadership at different rates in different places, not one synchronized constitutional change across the Christian world (Brent, 2006; Stewart, 2014; Sullivan, 2001).

Ignatius' ecclesiology cannot be separated from his Christology. He opposes teachers who appear to have denied or diminished the reality of Christ's flesh and suffering. Against such tendencies he emphasizes that Jesus truly suffered,

truly rose, and that the Eucharist belongs to the Church that confesses the real incarnation (Ign. Smyrn. 1-7; Holmes, 2007). Institutional unity and doctrinal unity therefore reinforce each other in his thought. The bishop is not presented as an independent source of new revelation but as a focal point of a community that confesses the apostolic Christ.

Ignatius' intense desire for martyrdom has also shaped later Christian spirituality. His Letter to the Romans asks believers not to prevent his death and uses striking imagery about becoming God's wheat through the teeth of beasts. The rhetoric must be interpreted within his specific imprisonment and expectation of execution. It should not be generalized into a command that Christians seek death. Other early texts criticize rash self-surrender and distinguish faithful endurance from theatrical pursuit of martyrdom. The New Testament itself permits flight in persecution while honoring steadfast confession ([Matthew 10:23](#); [Acts 9:23-25](#)).

4.2 Polycarp and evidence of nonuniform development

Polycarp of Smyrna, a contemporary of Ignatius and later martyr, provides a useful control against overly linear narratives. Ignatius addresses Polycarp personally as bishop of Smyrna, but Polycarp's own Letter to the Philippians speaks extensively about presbyters and deacons without clearly identifying a single bishop in Philippi (Pol. Phil. 5-6; Holmes, 2007). This does not prove that Philippi lacked a bishop in every sense, but it shows why scholars should resist treating Ignatius' pattern as an already universal constitution.

Polycarp's letter is also deeply saturated with New Testament language. It echoes or cites material from Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans, First Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, the Pastoral Epistles, First Peter, and other early Christian writings. The importance of such evidence is not that Polycarp possessed a leather-bound twenty-seven-book New Testament. He did not. It is that apostolic writings were already functioning across regions as textual authorities within Christian moral instruction. The transition from living apostle to authoritative apostolic text was well underway before formal canon lists appeared (Gamble, 1995; Holmes, 2007).

The Martyrdom of Polycarp, composed after his death in the middle of the second century and transmitted with later editorial features, shows how martyrdom was becoming a corporate memory practice. Polycarp is portrayed as neither denying Christ nor rushing into death irresponsibly. His death becomes a model of faithful witness, while the text carefully distinguishes honoring martyrs from worshiping Christ. This distinction matters because later Christian veneration of martyrs and relics would develop far beyond the practices visible here. The source shows memory, burial concern, and commemoration; it does not yet contain the full devotional system of later centuries (Holmes, 2007; Musurillo, 1972).

4.3 Papias and the value of remembered apostolic voices

Papias of Hierapolis, writing in the early second century, is known mainly through fragments preserved by Irenaeus and Eusebius. He famously preferred what he could learn from the "living and abiding voice" of those who had followed the elders, while also transmitting traditions about Mark and Matthew. Papias illustrates a transitional world in which written Gospels circulated alongside personal chains of remembered testimony. His approach does not imply hostility to written Scripture. Rather, it shows that the generation immediately after the apostles still valued named human links to eyewitness memory even as written texts became increasingly central (Holmes, 2007; Gamble, 1995).

Taken together, Clement, the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias reveal neither chaos nor uniformity. They show churches with doctrine, ministers, sacraments, moral discipline, and interchurch awareness, but they also show multiple configurations of authority. The historical trajectory is toward stronger local episcopal concentration, especially as doctrinal and disciplinary pressures increased, yet the evidence does not support the claim that every Christian city moved at the same moment or in the same way.



Development was real but uneven. No single date marks a universal constitutional change across all churches.

Figure 1. The uneven development of episcopal order, c. AD 100-300

Note. Author's synthesis from 1 Clement, the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and modern scholarship on early church order.

5. What Early Christians Meant by the "Catholic Church"

The word *catholic* is one of the most easily misunderstood terms in this period. In Ignatius, "the catholic church" refers to the whole Church in relation to Christ, contrasting the fullness of the gathered body with schismatic separation. The expression is not yet a denominational brand opposed to "Orthodox" or "Protestant," categories that did not exist. Its force is universality, wholeness, and communion in the same faith.

During the second and third centuries, however, catholicity acquired sharper confessional and institutional edges. As Valentinian, Marcionite, Montanist, Monarchian, and other communities formed durable networks, Christians increasingly used "catholic" to identify the translocal body that recognized a shared apostolic rule of faith, Scriptures, bishops, baptism, Eucharist, and communion. By Cyprian's time the phrase "Catholic Church" could designate the one visible communion from which schismatics had separated. In this sense, catholicity was becoming simultaneously theological and institutional.

This development arose from a real pastoral problem. A person in a major city might encounter multiple groups all claiming Christ, Scripture, apostles, prophecy, or superior spiritual knowledge. The question "Which church is apostolic?" could no longer be answered merely by finding a Christian assembly. The emerging catholic answer combined public doctrine, public Scripture, publicly known teachers, sacramental communion, and historical connection with churches associated with apostles. Irenaeus' appeal to succession lists belongs inside this multi-part argument rather than standing alone as though a list of officeholders could authenticate any doctrine automatically (Irenaeus, Haer. 3.3.1-3; Irenaeus of Lyons, 2012).

Catholicity therefore expressed a legitimate concern for visible unity, but it also created a new historical problem. If unity was increasingly identified with communion with recognized bishops, exclusion from episcopal communion could become exclusion from the Church itself. That logic would become especially strong in Cyprian and would shape later Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies. Whether the New Testament authorizes such a strict identification between the visible episcopal communion and the entire Church of Christ is a theological question that must be assessed separately after the historical development is fully described.

6. Persecution and the Formation of Christian Identity

6.1 From local hostility to imperial policy

Christian memory often speaks of the first three centuries as an "age of persecution," but the phrase can mislead if it implies uninterrupted empire-wide repression from Nero to Constantine. Before the mid-third century, persecution was usually local, intermittent, and dependent on accusation, civic conflict, or provincial policy. Pliny's correspondence with Trajan around AD 112 is especially revealing. Pliny had never presided over Christian trials and was uncertain about procedure. He interrogated accused Christians, demanded invocation of the gods and the emperor's image, and punished those who persisted. Trajan approved punishment of obstinate Christians who were properly accused but instructed

Pliny not to search them out and not to accept anonymous accusations (Pliny, Ep. 10.96-97; Pliny the Younger, 1969). This was hostile, but it was not yet a universal police campaign.

Pliny also records what former Christians said believers had done: they met before dawn on a fixed day, sang responsively to Christ "as to a god," bound themselves by oath not to commit crimes, and later shared ordinary food. His hostile administrative letter independently confirms worship centered on Christ, moral discipline, scheduled assembly, and communal meals in early second-century Bithynia. It also demonstrates why Christian refusal of sacrifice could appear politically troublesome even when Christians denied criminal conduct. In Roman civic religion, sacrifice was not merely private spirituality; it was woven into public loyalty, festivals, associations, and imperial order (Hurtado, 2016).

The second century witnessed several notable martyrdoms without a single continuous imperial policy. Ignatius was sent toward execution under Roman guard. Polycarp died at Smyrna in the mid-second century. Christians at Lyons and Vienne suffered brutal violence in AD 177, preserved in a letter later quoted by Eusebius. Justin Martyr was executed at Rome, probably in the 160s. These episodes strengthened a theology of witness in which public confession of Christ became a visible test of allegiance. Yet Christians also debated the boundaries of prudent endurance. Martyr texts could condemn denial of Christ while discouraging reckless provocation of the authorities (Musurillo, 1972).

The often-repeated claim that Septimius Severus issued a universal edict in AD 202 specifically forbidding conversion to Christianity rests on later and difficult evidence and should be treated cautiously. Severe local persecutions occurred in this era, including the martyrdoms of Perpetua, Felicity, and their companions at Carthage in AD 203. The Passion of Perpetua is especially significant because it preserves, within a later editorial frame, a first-person prison narrative attributed to a young North African woman. The text shows catechumenal identity, dreams and visions, family conflict, baptism, imprisonment, and martyr expectation. It also demonstrates that charismatic experience had not disappeared from mainstream Christian life (Heffernan, 2012; Musurillo, 1972).

6.2 Decius and the crisis of the lapsed

A decisive change came under the emperor Decius in AD 249-251. Decius required inhabitants of the empire to participate in sacrifice and obtain certification. The surviving edict itself is lost, and modern scholarship emphasizes that the requirement appears to have been framed as a universal act of Roman religious solidarity rather than as a document naming Christians alone. Nevertheless, Christians who refused sacrifice were placed in acute danger, and the measure produced the first empire-wide crisis of this type (Rives, 1999, 2024). Some Christians confessed and suffered; some fled; some sacrificed; some obtained certificates without sacrificing; and others later sought restoration.

The pastoral consequences were enormous. The issue was not merely whether apostasy was sinful. Everyone agreed that denying Christ and sacrificing to the gods was grave. The dispute concerned repentance, authority, and reconciliation. Could the lapsed be restored? If so, how soon? Could imprisoned confessors issue letters of peace that effectively guaranteed restoration, or did reconciliation remain subject to the bishop and church? Cyprian initially withdrew from Carthage during the persecution, a decision critics attacked as cowardice, but he continued governing by correspondence and insisted on an orderly penitential process rather than either permanent exclusion or immediate blanket restoration (Clarke, 1984-1989; Brent, 2010).

The crisis produced schisms on both sides. At Rome, Novatian represented a rigorist position that opposed restoration of those who had committed grave apostasy and allowed himself to be consecrated as a rival bishop against Cornelius in AD 251. Novatian was theologically sophisticated and Trinitarian; his separation did not arise because he denied the deity of Christ or embraced Gnosticism. This is genealogically important. Not every enduring Christian division began with a dispute over the identity of God or Christ. Some arose over discipline, ecclesial authority, and the terms of readmission after sin. The catholic response maintained that grave sinners could be reconciled through repentance, while condemning the creation of a rival episcopal communion (Cyprian, *Ep.* 55; Clarke, 1984-1989).

6.3 Valerian, Gallienus, and the Great Persecution

Valerian's policies in AD 257-258 targeted Christian clergy, assemblies, and property more directly. Cyprian was exiled and then executed at Carthage in AD 258; Sixtus II of Rome was also killed. Gallienus subsequently ended the persecution and restored property, inaugurating a period of relative peace that lasted several decades in many regions. By the late third century, Christian communities had grown sufficiently visible to possess recognized buildings, cemeteries, clergy, and property, even though their legal status remained vulnerable (Ferguson, 2013; Rives, 2024).

The final pre-Constantinian assault began in AD 303 under the Tetrarchy. The so-called Great Persecution ordered the destruction of churches, surrender and burning of Scriptures, loss of certain legal rights, imprisonment of clergy, and eventually sacrifices. Enforcement varied dramatically by region and ruler. It was comparatively shorter in parts of the West and prolonged in the East under Galerius and Maximinus Daia. Galerius issued a toleration edict in AD 311 permitting Christians to exist and assemble if they prayed for the welfare of the state. The persecution continued in some eastern regions until the political settlement of AD 313 (Lactantius, *Mort. pers.*; Creed, 1984; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8-9).

Persecution shaped church organization in at least four ways. It elevated martyrs and confessors as moral authorities. It forced churches to clarify the relationship between charismatic prestige and episcopal office. It turned possession and surrender of Scriptures into a test of fidelity, especially in the Great Persecution. It also created disciplinary categories for the lapsed and for clergy accused of compromise. These pressures did not create episcopacy or Scripture, but they intensified the need for recognizable authority and common rules of reconciliation.

Table 2. Major phases of Roman pressure and persecution before AD 313

Period	Policy / event	Historical significance
c. AD 112: Pliny/Trajan	Accused Christians punished if obstinate; Christians not to be sought out; anonymous accusations rejected.	Local/provincial procedure rather than continuous empire-wide persecution.
2nd century episodes	Martyrdoms of Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, and believers at Lyons/Vienne among others.	Martyr identity grows, but persecution remains episodic and geographically variable.
AD 249-251: Decius	Empire-wide sacrifice requirement and certification.	First empire-wide religious test of this kind; crisis of confessors and the lapsed.
AD 257-260: Valerian	Policies target clergy, assemblies, property, and leading Christians.	Cyprian and Sixtus II executed; ended under Gallienus.
AD 303-311: Great Persecution (eastern continuation to 313)	Destruction of churches and Scriptures, loss of legal protections, imprisonment, and sacrifice demands.	Most severe pre-Constantinian campaign; Galerius tolerates Christianity in 311, while Maximinus Daia continues pressure in parts of the East until 313.
AD 311 and 313: toleration settlements	Galerius permits Christian existence and assembly in 311; Constantine and Licinius extend toleration and property restoration in 313.	Marks the legal transition into the imperial-Christian environment treated in Chapter 3.

Note. The first three centuries should not be described as one uninterrupted empire-wide persecution.

7. Apologetics: Defending Christianity in the Roman Intellectual World

The post-apostolic church did not respond to hostility only through martyrdom. It also developed an increasingly sophisticated apologetic literature addressed to emperors, educated pagans, Jews, and internal doubters. The apologists defended Christians against accusations of atheism, cannibalism, incest, political disloyalty, irrationality, and social danger. They argued that Christians prayed for rulers while refusing worship of rulers, rejected idols while confessing the one Creator, and lived morally disciplined lives rather than the secret crimes attributed to them.

Justin Martyr is central to this development. A philosopher converted to Christianity, Justin addressed his First Apology to Antoninus Pius and the imperial household around the middle of the second century. He demanded that Christians be judged for actual crimes rather than merely for the name "Christian." His account of baptism portrays candidates as people persuaded of Christian truth who commit themselves to live accordingly, fast, pray, and then receive washing in the name of the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Justin, *1 Apol.* 61; Barnard, 1997). His description of the Eucharist and Sunday gathering is equally valuable: the "memoirs of the apostles" and the prophets are read, the presider exhorts the congregation, all pray, bread and wine mixed with water are offered with thanksgiving, deacons distribute the elements, and voluntary gifts support orphans, widows, prisoners, strangers, and others in need (Justin, *1 Apol.* 65-67; Barnard, 1997).

Justin also illustrates a major intellectual development: the use of Logos theology to explain the relation of Christ to the one God and to truth glimpsed in Greek philosophy. Later writers, especially Theophilus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, would expand Christian engagement with philosophical vocabulary. This engagement did not

simply "Hellenize" an originally non-Greek faith from the outside. The New Testament itself was written in Greek and already used terms such as *logos*, *ousia*, *soma*, and *pneuma* within a Hellenistic world. Nevertheless, second- and third-century theologians increasingly used philosophical distinctions to answer questions that the biblical texts did not address with later technical vocabulary.

Origen of Alexandria represents the height of pre-Nicene Christian scholarship. He produced biblical commentaries, homilies, textual scholarship, apologetics, and systematic theological reflection. His *On First Principles* attempted an ordered account of Christian teaching while explicitly distinguishing apostolic teachings that were clearly handed down from questions that remained open to investigation. Origen's speculative theology later became controversial, and some of his formulations about the Son would be judged inadequate by post-Nicene standards. Historically, however, his work demonstrates that by the early third century Christian intellectual life had become capable of sustained philological and philosophical argument on a scale comparable to major ancient schools (Wilken, 2012; Ferguson, 2013).

Origen's apologetic achievement is clearest in *Contra Celsum*, written around AD 248 in answer to Celsus' second-century critique of Christianity. Celsus had attacked Christian claims about revelation, incarnation, miracles, resurrection, social composition, and exclusive allegiance to the biblical God. Origen did not answer by dismissing pagan learning. He quoted and analyzed his opponent at length, distinguished Christian claims from caricatures, appealed to Scripture and reason, and argued that the gospel was intellectually defensible while remaining addressed to ordinary people rather than to an educated elite alone. The exchange is historically valuable because it preserves a serious pagan critique and shows how far Christian apologetics had developed from courtroom-style petitions into sustained philosophical controversy (Origen, Cels.; Origen, 1980; Wilken, 2012).

Apologetics therefore strengthened Christianity in two directions at once. Externally, it answered pagan criticism and claimed intellectual legitimacy. Internally, it forced Christians to define what they meant by one God, Christ, resurrection, morality, Scripture, and worship. The same process that made the Church more articulate also created new technical questions, preparing the conceptual world in which the fourth-century Trinitarian controversies would unfold.

8. Gnostic Movements and the Rule of Faith

8.1 The problem with treating "Gnosticism" as one church

Few words in early Christian history have generated more confusion than "Gnosticism." Ancient writers such as Irenaeus grouped together multiple teachers whom he believed shared a family resemblance of error, while modern scholarship has shown that the groups labeled "Gnostic" differed substantially and did not constitute one denomination with a common headquarters, creed, or canon. It is therefore more accurate to speak of **Gnostic or gnosticizing movements** and to identify particular systems where possible, including Valentinian and Basilidean forms, rather than imagining a single rival "Gnostic Church."

Many of these systems offered elaborate accounts of divine emanations, a transcendent ultimate God, lower cosmic powers, the origin of matter, the fall or entrapment of spiritual elements, and salvation through revealed knowledge. Some distinguished sharply between the highest God revealed by Christ and the creator of the visible world. Others interpreted biblical texts allegorically within complex mythic systems. Claims to secret apostolic teaching were especially important. If Christ had given private mysteries to a spiritual elite, then public preaching alone could be judged elementary or incomplete.

The attraction of such systems should not be reduced to irrational fantasy. They addressed serious problems: the presence of evil, suffering, the apparent distance between God and the material world, difficult passages in Israel's Scriptures, and the longing for transcendent identity. Some also offered sophisticated exegesis and a strong sense of spiritual election. Fair historical analysis requires recognizing that their teachers could be intellectually formidable. The decisive conflict concerned the identity of the Creator, the goodness of creation, the unity of salvation history, the true incarnation of Christ, bodily resurrection, and the location of authoritative apostolic teaching.

8.2 Irenaeus: Scripture, rule of faith, and succession together

Irenaeus of Lyons answered these movements not with one argument but with a coordinated structure of authority. First, he appealed to the public "rule of truth" or rule of faith, a narrative summary of belief in one Creator God, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son, the Holy Spirit, Christ's saving work, resurrection, and judgment. Second, he appealed to the

Scriptures read according to that rule. Third, he argued that churches founded by apostles had publicly transmitted the same faith through known leaders. Fourth, he emphasized the worldwide agreement of churches in this confession, despite linguistic and geographical diversity (Irenaeus, Haer. 1.10.1; 3.1-4; Irenaeus of Lyons, 1992, 2012).

His famous appeal to Roman succession in *Against Heresies* 3.3 must be read in this context. Irenaeus lists Roman bishops from Linus through Eleutherus and presents Rome as a church of exceptional antiquity, public renown, and apostolic association with Peter and Paul. The Latin transmission of his statement about every church agreeing with Rome contains wording whose precise force has been debated, particularly the phrase commonly translated "preeminent authority" or "more excellent origin." What is not disputed is that Irenaeus regards Rome as an especially useful public witness against secret traditions. What the passage does not establish by itself is a later doctrine of papal infallibility or universal ordinary jurisdiction (Dunn, 2007; Sullivan, 2001).

Irenaeus also gives the earliest surviving explicit defense of a fourfold Gospel as precisely Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. His symbolic argument that there must be four Gospels because there are four winds is not what established their historical authority, but it shows that by around AD 180 he regarded the fourfold collection as settled enough to defend as a unit (Irenaeus, Haer. 3.11.8; Irenaeus of Lyons, 2012). Tatian's Diatessaron and other second-century evidence likewise presuppose the circulation and combination of the four Gospels, while scholarship continues to debate how early the fourfold collection achieved broad recognition (Hannah, 2008; Gamble, 1995).

The importance of Irenaeus for Christian genealogy is therefore enormous. He did not invent apostolic doctrine, episcopal ministry, or Christian Scripture. He brought them into a mutually reinforcing anti-heretical argument. In his model, succession is meaningful because successors publicly preserve the apostolic rule of faith attested in Scripture. Detached from that doctrinal content, succession would lose the very function for which he invokes it.

9. Marcion and the Canon Problem

Marcion of Pontus arrived at Rome in the second century and became one of the most influential alternative Christian teachers of the period. He sharply distinguished the God revealed by Jesus from the Creator and lawgiver depicted in Israel's Scriptures, rejected the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, and used a Gospel closely related to Luke together with a collection of Pauline letters. Patristic opponents accused him of editing texts to remove elements inconsistent with his theology. Modern textual scholarship is more cautious about reconstructing exactly how Marcion's Gospel relates to canonical Luke, and a minority has even argued for Marcionite priority in some form. What remains clear is that Marcion's community possessed a deliberately delimited corpus and a hermeneutic that severed the gospel from the Creator and Israel's scriptural history (Roth, 2012, 2022; Evans, 1972).

It is common to say that Marcion "created the New Testament" and forced the Church to respond with its own canon. That formulation is too strong. Christian communities used apostolic Gospels and letters before Marcion; Polycarp, Ignatius, and other early witnesses demonstrate this, and collections of Paul's letters almost certainly predate the 140s. Marcion nevertheless intensified the canon problem by making selection and exclusion explicit. If a teacher could reject Israel's Scriptures, privilege one Gospel, and rearrange the Pauline corpus around a theological antithesis, churches defending continuity with the apostles needed to clarify which writings were received and why (Gamble, 1995; Haines-Eitzen, 2000).

The response was gradual, not the decision of a single second-century council. By the late second century, the fourfold Gospel enjoyed strong recognition, Paul's letters circulated as a collection, and Acts, First Peter, First John, and other writings were widely used. At the same time, books such as Hebrews, James, Second Peter, Second and Third John, Jude, and Revelation had uneven regional reception, while respected works such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Apocalypse of Peter could be valued without finally entering the universally received New Testament. The Muratorian Fragment remains important but should be used with chronological caution. It has traditionally been dated to the late second century and a Roman or western setting; proposals for a fourth-century eastern date have generated sustained debate, while substantial scholarship continues to defend a late second-century origin. The Fragment therefore illustrates the complexity of early canonical reception rather than supplying an uncontested fixed date for a completed New Testament (Hahneman, 1992; Gallagher & Meade, 2017).

The historical process is therefore best described as **recognition, collection, testing, and convergence**. Apostolic origin or connection, conformity to the received rule of faith, widespread ecclesial use, antiquity, and liturgical reading all

contributed to reception. No surviving evidence from AD 100-313 supports the claim that one bishop or one council simply conferred inspiration on previously nonauthoritative books. Rather, texts already treated as authoritative were progressively distinguished from disputed, useful, or rejected works. The full twenty-seven-book list familiar today appears explicitly only after this chapter's period, most famously in Athanasius' Festal Letter of AD 367 (Schröter, 2016).

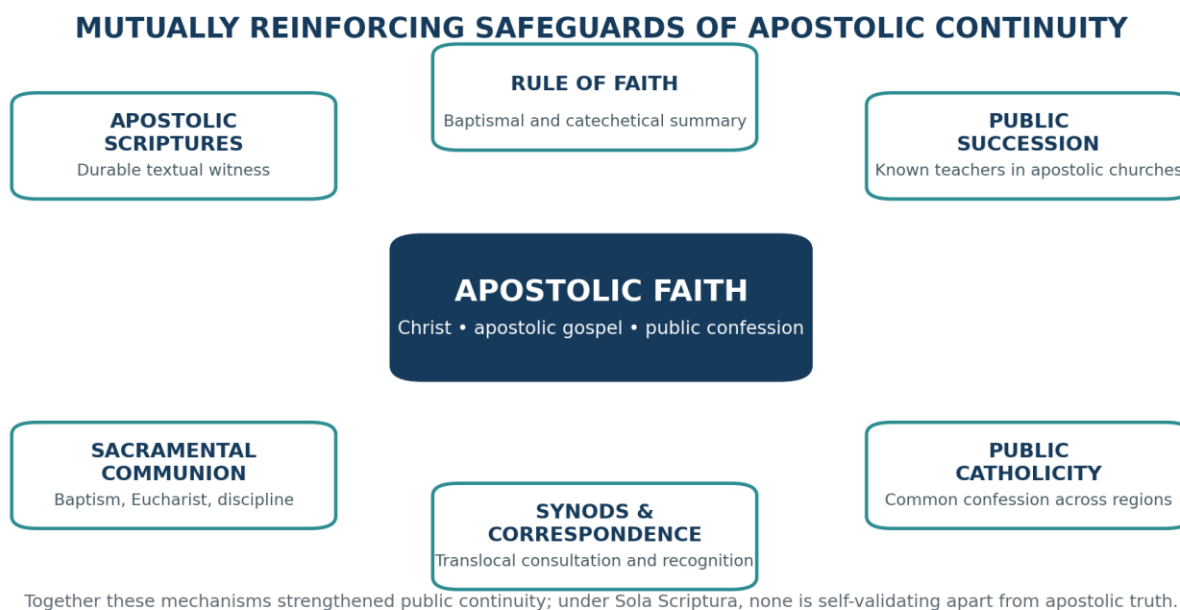


Figure 2. Canon, rule of faith, succession, and communion as mutually reinforcing safeguards

Note. The diagram describes a historical pattern, not a claim that any institutional mechanism possesses authority independent of Scripture.

10. Montanism and the Question of Continuing Prophecy

The movement later called Montanism arose in Phrygia in Asia Minor during the second half of the second century and called itself, or was known by supporters as, the **New Prophecy**. Montanus and the prophetesses Priscilla (or Prisca) and Maximilla delivered oracles in an ecstatic style, emphasized rigorous fasting and holiness, expected eschatological fulfillment associated with Pepuza, and claimed the continuing activity of the Paraclete. Precise dating is debated, with ancient chronological evidence pointing to the 160s or 170s; modern scholarship commonly places the movement's public emergence within that range (Trevett, 1996; Frend & Edwards, 2016; McKechnie, 2019).

The controversy is important because it did not begin as a simple dispute between "spiritual" Christians and a church that denied all prophecy. Mainstream second-century Christianity still knew prophecy, visions, dreams, healings, and charismatic speech. The martyrs of Lyons, the Passion of Perpetua, and other sources show that charismatic experience continued well outside Montanist communities. The question was whether the New Prophecy's mode, authority, eschatological claims, rigorist discipline, and new oracles were consistent with apostolic truth. Opponents accused Montanus and the prophetesses of abnormal ecstasy and theological excess; supporters believed the Spirit was calling the Church to deeper obedience.

Tertullian eventually embraced the New Prophecy, and his later writings reveal how the movement could intensify already existing Christian tendencies rather than simply replace Christianity with another religion. He defended stricter fasting, opposed remarriage, and criticized what he considered lax episcopal absolution. The controversy therefore sharpened an issue that would recur repeatedly in Christian history: if the Spirit continues to speak, what kind of authority can later prophecy possess? Can a new oracle bind the whole Church? Can it establish discipline not demonstrably required by the apostolic teaching? Can claimed revelation correct bishops, or can bishops suppress genuine prophecy?

The emerging catholic answer was not necessarily that God could never guide or gift believers after the apostles. It was that later spiritual claims were subordinate to the received apostolic faith. This principle was already biblical. Prophecy

must be weighed ([1 Corinthians 14:29](#)); spirits must be tested ([1 John 4:1-3](#)); and even an angelic message must be rejected if it proclaims a different gospel ([Galatians 1:8](#)). The Montanist crisis therefore contributed to stronger institutional discernment while also exposing a danger on the opposite side: the possibility that the defense of order could become suspicion of all charismatic vitality.

11. Before Nicaea: Trinitarian and Christological Clarification

The second and third centuries also witnessed major debates about how Christians could confess one God while worshiping the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and affirming the real incarnation of Christ. The New Testament had already supplied the controlling data: one God; Jesus identified with divine titles, works, worship, and preexistence; the Spirit acting personally and divinely; and baptism into the singular "name" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ([Matthew 28:19](#); [John 1:1-18](#); [Philippians 2:6-11](#); [2 Corinthians 13:13](#)). What later writers increasingly sought was technical language capable of safeguarding all of these affirmations simultaneously.

One set of disputes involved forms of Monarchianism, so called because their proponents were concerned to preserve the "monarchy" or sole rule of God. Dynamic or adoptionist forms treated Jesus as a uniquely empowered man rather than as the eternally divine Son. Modalist forms identified Father, Son, and Spirit as modes or manifestations of the one divine person rather than enduring personal distinctions. Noetus, Praxeas, and Sabellius became associated with forms of modalism, although much of what is known comes from opponents.

Tertullian's *Against Praxeas* is historically important because it deploys Latin language of one *substantia* and three *personae* in arguing that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct without being three gods (Evans, 1948). His terminology should not be treated as identical in every respect with later Nicene usage, but it shows that Trinitarian conceptual development was well advanced before Constantine. Origen likewise distinguished the Father, Son, and Spirit and strongly affirmed the Son's preexistent divine status, while employing hierarchical or subordinationist formulations that later theology would refine or reject.

The controversy over Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch and condemned by regional synods in the 260s, further demonstrates that bishops were already using synodal mechanisms to adjudicate Christological teaching before the ecumenical councils. Yet the pre-Nicene church had no universally received technical formula equivalent to the Nicene *homoousios*. The historical line into Chapter 3 is therefore direct: Nicaea did not invent the question of Christ's relation to the Father. It inherited more than a century of scriptural interpretation, anti-heretical argument, and incomplete terminology.

12. Baptism: From Apostolic Initiation to Stronger Sacramental Language

Baptism remained one of the clearest continuities between the apostolic and post-apostolic church. The Didache assumes pre-baptismal instruction and fasting and permits different modes according to circumstances. Justin describes candidates who believe the Christian teaching, commit themselves to live accordingly, pray and fast, and receive washing in the triune name (Did. 7; Justin, *1 Apol.* 61). These sources preserve the strong connection between faith, repentance, catechesis, and baptism already visible in Acts.

At the same time, the language used about baptism becomes increasingly sacramental and regenerative. Justin calls baptism "illumination" and associates the washing with new birth and remission. Tertullian's *On Baptism*, written around the beginning of the third century, treats water baptism as the ordinary churchly rite of cleansing and spiritual initiation. He also states that the bishop has the chief right of administering baptism, followed by presbyters and deacons with authorization, while conceding that laypersons can baptize in necessity (Tertullian, *Bapt.* 17; Evans, 1964). This is a much more developed ministerial framework than the New Testament explicitly legislates.

Infant baptism is especially important because the evidence becomes clearer during this period. The New Testament contains household baptisms but no unambiguous narrative specifying an infant candidate. Tertullian advises delaying baptism in certain cases, "especially" for little children, which strongly suggests that the baptism of children was already practiced even though he personally counseled caution (Tertullian, *Bapt.* 18; Evans, 1964). Origen later claimed that the Church had received the practice of infant baptism from the apostles, a historical claim difficult to verify independently because he writes more than a century after the apostolic age. By the mid-third century, however, infant baptism is unquestionably established in North Africa. Cyprian and a council of sixty-six bishops rejected the idea that a newborn

should wait until the eighth day, arguing that divine grace should not be withheld from infants (Cyprian, *Ep.* 64 [58 in older numbering]; Clarke, 1984-1989).

This trajectory must be stated carefully. The evidence demonstrates development from an apostolic pattern strongly associated with hearing, repentance, faith, and baptism toward a church in which infant baptism could be defended as normal by the mid-third century. That does not by itself prove whether infant baptism is biblically valid or invalid. Historically, it means that the practice is early but not equally explicit in every layer of evidence. Theologically, its legitimacy must be argued from Scripture rather than inferred simply from its third-century antiquity.

A second major baptismal issue concerned the validity of baptism administered outside the catholic communion. Rome under Stephen accepted baptism performed with the triune formula and received converts from heretical or schismatic groups through laying on of hands rather than rebaptism. Cyprian and many North African bishops rejected such baptisms as invalid because, in their ecclesiology, the Holy Spirit and saving baptism could not exist outside the one Church. The dispute in AD 255-256 was sharp and nearly ruptured communion between major episcopal centers (Cyprian, *Ep.* 73; Clarke, 1984-1989; Methuen, 2016).

The controversy exposes how far sacramental and ecclesial reasoning had developed. The question was no longer only "Was water used?" or "Was the triune name spoken?" It involved the identity of the minister, the boundaries of the Church, the relation of Spirit to sacrament, and the authority of tradition. It also reveals genuine diversity within the catholic communion itself. There was no universally enforced Roman solution in Cyprian's lifetime.

13. Eucharist, Sunday Worship, and the Growth of Liturgical Order

The Eucharist likewise shows continuity and development. Ignatius treats the Eucharist as a central sign of church unity and opposes teachers who, in his description, avoid the Eucharist because they deny that it is connected with the flesh of Jesus Christ (Ign. Smyrn. 6-7; Holmes, 2007). His language is realist and anti-docetic. It should not be reduced to a modern symbolic memorialism. At the same time, it is anachronistic to read later medieval transubstantiation, with its Aristotelian distinction of substance and accidents, directly into Ignatius.

Justin's First Apology provides the fullest mid-second-century account. After baptism, believers join communal prayer and exchange a kiss; bread and wine mixed with water are brought to the presider; he offers thanksgiving; the people answer "Amen"; deacons distribute the elements and carry them to the absent. Participation is restricted to those who believe the Christian teaching, have been baptized, and live according to Christ. Justin insists that the Eucharistic food is not received as "common" bread and drink and relates it directly to the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus (Justin, *1 Apol.* 65-66; Barnard, 1997).

The following chapter of Justin's Apology describes the Sunday assembly. Christians from town and countryside gather, read the "memoirs of the apostles" and the prophets, hear exhortation from the presider, stand for prayer, celebrate the Eucharist, and give voluntary offerings for people in need. This description establishes several features with confidence by the mid-second century: regular Sunday gathering, public reading of Christian and Jewish Scriptures, a presiding minister, congregational prayer, Eucharistic thanksgiving, diaconal distribution, and structured charity (Justin, *1 Apol.* 67; Barnard, 1997).

By the third century, liturgical patterns became more elaborate in many places, although reconstructing one universal rite is impossible. The work conventionally called the Apostolic Tradition, long attributed directly to Hippolytus of Rome, preserves influential material on ordination, baptism, Eucharistic prayer, and church discipline. Modern scholarship has challenged both its unitary authorship and simple Roman provenance, so it should not be used as a transparent photograph of "the Roman liturgy in AD 215." It is better treated as a composite witness to early church-order traditions that crystallized across the third century (Bradshaw et al., 2002).

Sacrificial language also becomes more pronounced. Early Christians had long used sacrifice metaphorically for praise, prayer, generosity, and the self-offering of believers ([Romans 12:1](#); [Hebrews 13:15-16](#); [1 Peter 2:5](#)). Irenaeus connected the Eucharistic offering with thanksgiving for created gifts, while Cyprian described the Eucharist in priestly and sacrificial terms that would strongly influence later Latin theology. Even here, historical precision is required. The fully developed medieval doctrine of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice offered by an ordained priest according to scholastic

sacramental categories lies centuries later. The pre-Nicene evidence shows the growth of sacrificial and sacerdotal language, not the completed medieval system.

14. Penance, Forgiveness, and the Problem of Grave Post-Baptismal Sin

The earliest church preached forgiveness freely in Christ but also treated baptism as a decisive break with the old life. This combination created a pastoral difficulty: what should happen when a baptized believer committed adultery, murder, apostasy, or another grave sin? The New Testament clearly commands restoration of the repentant and church discipline for persistent sin ([Matthew 18:15-20](#); [1 Corinthians 5:1-13](#); [2 Corinthians 2:5-11](#); [Galatians 6:1](#)). Yet post-apostolic communities increasingly developed formal processes for confession, exclusion, penance, and reconciliation.

The Shepherd of Hermas, probably composed at Rome in the first half of the second century, is a major witness. It portrays a post-baptismal community concerned about serious sin and speaks in one place of a limited opportunity for repentance after baptism. The details are complex and should not be flattened into the later sacrament of penance. What the work clearly shows is a church struggling to hold together the seriousness of baptismal conversion and the possibility of mercy for Christians who fail after baptism (Holmes, 2007).

Tertullian's writings show further development. His earlier *On Repentance* recognizes ecclesial repentance after grave sin, including public confession and acts of penitence. In his later rigorist period, especially *On Modesty*, he attacks what he sees as excessive episcopal power to absolve grave sexual sins. The contrast is historically valuable because it reveals disagreement over the scope of churchly forgiveness within the same theological culture.

The Decian persecution turned this pastoral issue into an institutional crisis. Lapsed Christians sought readmission; confessors sometimes issued recommendations; bishops debated degrees of guilt; and rival communities formed over whether reconciliation was too strict or too lenient. Cyprian's solution preserved both penance and the bishop's authority to reconcile. Novatian's refusal to restore apostates led to a separate communion. By the mid-third century, therefore, penitential discipline was not merely a private spiritual exercise. It had become a major instrument of ecclesial membership and episcopal governance.

A Sola Scriptura assessment must distinguish what is biblically warranted from what later grew around it. The Church unquestionably has authority to discipline and restore according to Christ's Word. Public sin may require public repentance, and leaders have a real pastoral duty to judge credible repentance. Scripture, however, locates the ground of forgiveness in Christ's atonement and God's promise, not in an independently efficacious institutional act. The historical emergence of formal penitential systems is therefore understandable and partly biblical in purpose, but no later disciplinary mechanism can become a second mediator alongside Christ ([1 Timothy 2:5](#); [1 John 1:9-2:2](#)).

15. Cyprian and the Fully Episcopal Church of the Third Century

Cyprian of Carthage offers the clearest surviving portrait of mature pre-Nicene episcopal ecclesiology. Converted as an adult and elected bishop of Carthage around AD 248/249, he faced in rapid succession the Decian persecution, disputes with confessors and clergy, the Novatian schism, questions about the lapsed, plague, conflict over the baptism of heretics, and finally Valerian's persecution and his own martyrdom in AD 258. His writings are therefore not abstract speculation about church government. They are the records of a bishop trying to preserve a real communion under pressure (Brent, 2010; Clarke, 1984-1989).

Cyprian speaks of the bishop in exceptionally strong terms. In one letter he writes that "the bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop," so that separation from the bishop entails separation from the Church (Cyprian, *Ep.* 66.8 [68 in some numbering]). He also insists that the episcopate is one, with each bishop holding his share of the undivided whole. This is not papal monarchy. It is a collegial-sacramental understanding in which every legitimate bishop presides locally while remaining joined to the worldwide college of bishops.

Cyprian's church is visibly structured. The bishop ordains and supervises clergy, manages discipline, presides in sacramental reconciliation, convenes councils, communicates with other bishops, and represents the unity of the local flock. Yet the laity are not absent. Cyprian repeatedly refers to the *plebs*, consults the community in disciplinary and electoral matters, and assumes that episcopal legitimacy includes public recognition. The mature third-century bishop is therefore strong, but he is not simply an isolated autocrat.

Cyprian also sharpens the identification of salvation with visible catholic communion. In controversies over schism and baptism, he argues that there is no saving baptism outside the one Church and deploys the image of the Church as mother. His strict formulation, often summarized as "outside the Church there is no salvation," was directed especially against baptized schismatics and heretics who claimed Christian salvation while rejecting catholic unity. Its later application to all people outside visible Catholic structures belongs to subsequent theological history and should not be retrojected without qualification.

The most revealing feature of Cyprian's ecclesiology is its combination of high episcopal claims with resistance to Rome. When Bishop Stephen of Rome rejected North African rebaptism of heretics and defended the received Roman practice, Cyprian refused to submit. At the council of Carthage in AD 256, he explicitly insisted that no bishop should set himself up as a "bishop of bishops" or compel colleagues by tyrannical fear, because each bishop had freedom of judgment under Christ. The rhetoric must be understood within a fierce controversy, but it is decisive evidence that Cyprian did not treat the Roman bishop as possessing uncontested universal jurisdiction (Dunn, 2007).

16. Rome Before the Papacy of Later Centuries

The church of Rome was unquestionably prestigious long before Constantine. It was located in the imperial capital, associated early with the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, socially and geographically connected to Christians from across the empire, and capable of substantial charity and correspondence. First Clement demonstrates Roman intervention in Corinth near the end of the first century. Ignatius addresses the Roman church in unusually honorific language. Irenaeus uses the Roman succession as a public anti-heretical witness. Dionysius of Corinth, according to Eusebius, remembered Roman generosity to other churches. These data make attempts to portray Rome as an insignificant local church historically untenable.

Prestige, however, must be distinguished from later papal jurisdiction. First Clement does not name a Roman bishop as universal head. Ignatius does not appeal to a Roman bishop in his Roman letter. Irenaeus gives Rome exceptional weight but also appeals to succession in other apostolic churches and grounds his case in shared doctrine. The Paschal controversy around the end of the second century provides especially instructive evidence. Bishop Victor of Rome attempted to cut off churches in Asia Minor that observed Pascha on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month Nisan regardless of the weekday. This practice is commonly called Quartodeciman, from the Latin for "fourteenth," and was associated with figures such as Polycarp and Polycrates. Other bishops, including Irenaeus, rebuked Victor and urged peace, remembering that earlier Roman and Asian leaders had maintained communion despite different observance (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23-25).

This episode demonstrates both Roman ambition and its limits. Victor believed he could exert broad disciplinary pressure, yet his action was contested by other bishops and did not simply settle the matter by virtue of his office. A similar pattern appears in the third-century baptism controversy. Stephen of Rome defended Roman practice and threatened separation; Cyprian, Firmilian of Caesarea, and North African synods opposed him. Modern scholarship differs over how aggressively Stephen articulated Roman prerogatives, but the evidence does not show a universally acknowledged juridical supremacy comparable to later papal doctrine (Dunn, 2007; Sullivan, 2001).

Rome's Petrine associations were nevertheless becoming increasingly important. Writers appealed to Peter as a symbol of unity, and Roman succession lists linked local episcopal memory to apostles. Cyprian himself could use Petrine language strongly while still affirming the equal responsibility of bishops. This combination warns against two opposite errors. It is historically wrong to claim that Roman primacy appeared suddenly centuries later with no earlier roots. It is equally wrong to treat every early reference to Peter, Rome, or succession as though it already contained the full later papal system.

The pre-Nicene evidence is best described as a developing Roman preeminence in prestige, apostolic memory, charitable reputation, and practical intervention, without demonstrable universal ordinary jurisdiction. Later claims of papal jurisdiction must therefore be reconstructed from their own subsequent historical evidence rather than assumed to be fully present in the second or third century.

Table 3. Rome before the papacy of later centuries

Evidence	What it shows	What it does not by itself prove
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Evidence	What it shows	What it does not by itself prove
1 Clement, c. AD 95-100	Roman church intervenes in Corinth; authoritative moral and ministerial exhortation.	Shows early translocal responsibility; does not name a universal Roman bishop.
Ignatius, early 2nd c.	Roman church receives unusually honorific address.	Demonstrates prestige; Ignatius does not name a Roman bishop in the letter.
Irenaeus, c. AD 180	Appeals to Roman succession and apostolic memory of Peter and Paul against secret traditions.	Strong Roman witness within a broader appeal to apostolic churches and public doctrine.
Victor and Pascha, c. AD 190s	Roman bishop attempts broad exclusion of Asian churches over Quartodeciman practice.	Shows expanding intervention; other bishops rebuke Victor and communion is not settled simply by Roman decree.
Stephen and rebaptism, AD 255-256	Rome rejects rebaptism; Cyprian, Firmilian, and North African councils resist.	Demonstrates Roman influence together with clear limits on uncontested jurisdiction.
Cyprianic Petrine language	Peter can symbolize ecclesial unity while bishops share one episcopate.	Early Petrine interpretation does not yet equal later papal universal ordinary jurisdiction.

Note. The evidence supports developing Roman primacy of prestige, apostolic memory, and intervention while leaving later jurisdictional claims to subsequent history.

17. Regional Synods and the Growth of Translocal Governance

The period AD 100-313 also saw the increasing use of councils or synods. These were not yet the ecumenical councils of the imperial age. They were gatherings of bishops and clergy from regions who sought common judgments on disputed teaching, discipline, or practice. Synods addressed the date of Pascha, the New Prophecy, the lapsed, Novatian, rebaptism, and the teaching of Paul of Samosata. Their authority depended on reception, communion, and the standing of participating churches rather than on an emperor's legal enforcement.

This synodal habit mattered because Christianity was becoming too extensive to be governed through bilateral correspondence alone. A bishop could lead one city, but disputes crossed cities and provinces. Councils allowed churches to compare practice, articulate shared judgments, and isolate teachers or bishops regarded as outside the apostolic faith. They also created precedents for later conciliar Christianity. Nicaea in AD 325 would be unprecedented in imperial scale and representative ambition, but not in the basic Christian practice of bishops meeting to settle disputes.

The pre-Nicene church therefore developed a layered authority structure. Local congregations remained concrete communities of worship and discipline. City bishops increasingly concentrated oversight. Presbyters and deacons served under or alongside them according to local structures. Neighboring bishops formed provincial networks. Influential apostolic centers such as Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, and later Caesarea exercised transregional weight. Scripture and the rule of faith supplied doctrinal norms. Synods provided collective judgment. None of these elements functioned in isolation.

18. Major Christian Centers Before AD 313

The story of early catholic Christianity cannot be reduced to Rome. Antioch connected the apostolic mission to Syria and the eastern Mediterranean and produced Ignatius. Asia Minor contained dense Christian networks, the Johannine legacy, Polycarp, Papias, the Paschal controversy, and the New Prophecy. Alexandria became a major center of Christian learning associated with Clement and Origen. Caesarea in Palestine became important through Origen's later work and a major scholarly library. Carthage and wider Roman North Africa produced Tertullian, Cyprian, martyr traditions, regional councils, and a distinctive Latin theological vocabulary.

Syriac-speaking Christianity also expanded beyond the dominant Greek-Latin axis. Edessa and the regions east of the Roman frontier developed Christian literary traditions whose genealogy would later contribute to the Church of the East and Syriac Christianity. Evidence is more fragmentary than for Rome or Carthage, but the existence of Christian communities in Mesopotamia by the second and third centuries is beyond serious doubt. The painted Christian building at Dura-Europos, remodeled around the 230s and containing a baptistery, offers archaeological confirmation that

Christian worship had taken durable architectural form on the Euphrates before Constantine (Hopkins, 1979; Wilken, 2012).

Egyptian Christianity also extended beyond elite Alexandrian theology. Papyri preserve early copies of New Testament and other Christian writings, demonstrating active textual networks in Egypt. The codex, rather than the roll, became strongly associated with Christian book culture, and early Christians copied, exchanged, and publicly read texts with remarkable intensity relative to their size (Gamble, 1995; Haines-Eitzen, 2000; Hurtado, 2016). Canon formation was therefore not only a decision about abstract lists; it was a material process of copying, collecting, reading, transporting, and preserving books.

Material culture adds another dimension to the pre-Nicene record. Christian funerary inscriptions, catacomb paintings, sarcophagi, symbols such as the fish and Good Shepherd, and the painted baptistery at Dura-Europos show that Christians were developing a visual vocabulary before imperial patronage. These remains demonstrate neither an image-free primitive church nor the fully developed devotional theology of icons found in later centuries. They show instead that biblical narratives and Christian symbols were already being placed in funerary, catechetical, and worship settings, a fact that will matter when later chapters address the long history of Christian images and their contested veneration (Hopkins, 1979; Jensen, 2024).

Armenian tradition associates the Christianization of the Armenian kingdom with Gregory the Illuminator and King Tiridates, often dated around AD 301, although the exact chronology remains debated and some scholars favor a somewhat later date. What matters for this chapter is that Christianity was already crossing imperial and linguistic boundaries before Constantine. The church that emerged by AD 313 was Mediterranean in many of its best-preserved texts, but it was not merely Roman, western, or Latin.

Table 4. Major pre-Nicene Christian centers

Center / region	Key witnesses	Genealogical significance
Rome	1 Clement; Justin; Peter/Paul memory; Roman bishops; charity; major controversies.	Greek and Latin; imperial capital; growing prestige.
Antioch / Syria	Ignatius; Theophilus; later Paul of Samosata; Syriac and Greek networks.	Bridge between apostolic mission, eastern theology, and later Christological conflict.
Asia Minor	Polycarp, Papias, Paschal controversy, New Prophecy, dense Johannine and Pauline memory.	Major laboratory of early episcopacy, martyr tradition, prophecy, and liturgical diversity.
Alexandria / Egypt	Clement, Origen, catechetical and scholarly traditions, early Christian papyri.	Biblical scholarship, theological synthesis, and expanding Egyptian Christianity.
Caesarea / Palestine	Origen's later work, scholarly library, bishops and synods.	Major intellectual and textual center linking Palestine to wider eastern networks.
Carthage / North Africa	Tertullian, Perpetua and Felicity, Cyprian, regional councils.	Latin theological vocabulary, martyr memory, rigorous discipline, strong episcopal ecclesiology.
Edessa / Mesopotamia	Early Syriac Christianity and cross-frontier literary networks.	Shows expansion beyond the dominant Greek-Latin Roman axis.
Dura-Europos	Third-century Christian building and baptistery on the Euphrates.	Archaeological evidence of stable worship space before Constantine.

Note. *The pre-Nicene church was multicentered. Rome was influential but never the whole story.*

MAJOR PRE-NICENE CHRISTIAN CENTERS, c. AD 100-313



Figure 3. Major pre-Nicene Christian centers, c. AD 100-313

Note. Author's schematic using approximate modern coordinates for orientation. Points identify centers discussed in the chapter and do not imply exact ancient provincial boundaries, uniform jurisdiction, or identical dates of Christian establishment.

19. The Canon, Creed, and Bishop as Mutually Reinforcing Safeguards

By the late second and third centuries, three developments increasingly worked together: a recognized body of apostolic writings, a rule of faith summarized in baptismal and catechetical confession, and an episcopal network claiming public continuity with apostolic churches. These are sometimes described as the "canon, creed, and episcopate" response to heresy. The formula is useful if it is not treated as a single centrally planned program.

The **canon** provided durable textual access to apostolic witness. The **rule of faith** provided a concise narrative framework for reading Scripture as one story of the Creator, Christ, Spirit, salvation, resurrection, and judgment. The **bishop** provided a visible local teacher and guardian of communion. When these elements agreed, they made secret revelation difficult to sustain. A teacher claiming that the Creator was not the Father of Jesus had to explain why the churches' Scriptures, baptismal confession, and public teachers agreed otherwise. A prophet claiming new obligatory revelation had to face churches that possessed a received apostolic norm. A schismatic bishop had to explain why neighboring churches did not recognize his communion.

Yet each safeguard also carried risk. A canon could be interpreted badly. A creed could become a substitute for close biblical exegesis. A bishop could teach error or abuse power. A synod could make a mistaken judgment. The New Testament itself anticipates these possibilities. Elders can become wolves ([Acts 20:29-30](#)); teachers can distort the gospel ([Galatians 1:6-9](#)); churches can tolerate false teaching ([Revelation 2:14-20](#)); and leaders can love preeminence ([3 John 9-10](#)). Historical continuity therefore cannot eliminate the need for scriptural discernment.

This distinction is essential for evaluating apostolic succession. First Clement and Irenaeus show that continuity of ministry was an early Christian concern, and there is nothing inherently unbiblical about churches appointing faithful leaders who then train and appoint others ([2 Timothy 2:2](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)). The problem arises when succession is treated as an automatic guarantee independent of doctrine and character. In Irenaeus' own argument, succession matters precisely

because the successors publicly teach what the apostles taught. The historical evidence therefore supports succession as a means of continuity, but not succession as a self-authenticating replacement for apostolic truth.

20. Immediate Triggers and Deeper Causes of Post-Apostolic Development

The institutional changes of AD 100-313 cannot be explained by one cause. The first and most obvious cause was **chronological**: the eyewitness generation died. Authority had to be mediated through remembered teaching, written texts, trained ministers, and public tradition. The second cause was **geographical**: the Church expanded across languages, provinces, and social settings. Local flexibility remained possible, but shared identity required mechanisms of translocal recognition.

Language and regional culture also mattered. Greek remained the dominant language of much eastern Christian literature and was still important at Rome, while Latin Christian writing became increasingly influential in North Africa and the West, and Syriac traditions developed in Syria and Mesopotamia. These linguistic worlds did not yet constitute separate communions, and translation frequently connected them. Nevertheless, regional vocabularies, intellectual habits, and patterns of communication began to give major centers distinctive theological accents. This diversity would become increasingly consequential in later Christological and jurisdictional disputes, so it should be recognized here as an emerging condition rather than projected backward as an already completed East-West divide (Wilken, 2012).

A third cause was **doctrinal competition**. Valentinian teachers, Marcion, the New Prophecy, Monarchian controversies, and other movements forced churches to define the boundaries of the apostolic confession. A fourth was **persecution**. Roman pressure created martyrs, confessors, lapsed believers, property disputes, and the need to decide who could restore whom to communion. A fifth was **liturgical consolidation**. Baptism, Eucharist, fasting, Sunday assembly, ordination, and penance acquired increasingly regulated forms as communities grew larger and more socially diverse.

A sixth cause was **social and administrative scale**. A house church of several dozen people could rely heavily on personal knowledge; a city with multiple assemblies required coordination, common discipline, and management of charity. Stronger bishops were one historically intelligible response. A seventh cause was **intellectual engagement**. Christian teachers increasingly debated educated critics and used philosophical vocabulary to articulate doctrines already present in biblical form. This encouraged technical theological development even before ecumenical councils.

Finally, **institutional self-preservation** must be included without reducing everything to cynical power. Offices, boundaries, and disciplinary systems can genuinely protect communities, but they also accumulate authority. The same bishop who defended a congregation from exploitative teachers could also become difficult to challenge. The same appeal to unity that prevented faction could be used to silence legitimate correction. Historical analysis must therefore recognize both pastoral necessity and the ordinary dynamics of institutional power.

21. By AD 313: Continuity and Development

By AD 313, Christianity remained recognizably continuous with the apostolic faith in foundational ways. Churches confessed the one Creator God, Jesus Christ as incarnate Son, his real death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit, the future resurrection, final judgment, and the saving work of Christ. They read Israel's Scriptures and a growing body of apostolic writings. They baptized converts, celebrated the Lord's Supper, prayed, sang, cared for the poor, disciplined members, trained leaders, preached to outsiders, and expected holiness. They had not abandoned the apostolic gospel in order to become a wholly different religion.

At the same time, the institutional form of Christianity had changed substantially. In many regions, a single city bishop had become the normal center of local unity. Bishops increasingly exercised sacramental, disciplinary, teaching, and administrative responsibilities that had been less concentrated in the first-century evidence. Regional synods had become regular mechanisms for dispute resolution. "Catholic" increasingly named a visible interchurch communion over against heresy and schism. Succession lists functioned as historical credentials. Baptismal and Eucharistic theology had become more elaborate. Infant baptism was securely attested by the mid-third century. Formal penitential processes regulated restoration after serious post-baptismal sin. Rome possessed substantial prestige and transregional influence, although the surviving evidence does not establish the universal ordinary jurisdiction defined in later Roman Catholic doctrine.

Ministerial identity also became more sharply differentiated from the rest of the baptized community. The New Testament already distinguishes recognized leaders from the congregation, but second- and third-century sources increasingly speak of an ordered clergy and apply priestly or sacerdotal vocabulary to bishops and presbyters, especially in Latin Christianity. This was not yet the fully developed medieval theology of priesthood, and the terminology varied by region, but it marks an important conceptual shift: ecclesial office was being understood not only through teaching, oversight, and service but increasingly through sacramental presidency and cultic analogy. That development would profoundly shape later Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology and, much later, Reformation debates over ministry and priesthood (Ferguson, 2013; Stewart, 2014).

Doctrinal formulation had also advanced. The rule of faith summarized Christian belief in increasingly stable form. Four Gospels were widely received as a collection. Pauline letters and many other New Testament books functioned authoritatively, though the final twenty-seven-book boundary was not yet universally fixed. Trinitarian vocabulary had grown more technical under pressure from adoptionist and modalist alternatives. The Church was therefore more institutionally integrated and doctrinally articulated than it had been in AD 100, yet it still stood before the great fourth-century conciliar settlements.

Table 5 summarizes the central distinction that must govern the genealogy: continuity is real, but development is also real. A responsible account need not choose between the claim that "nothing changed" and the claim that "Christianity was reinvented." The historical record supports neither extreme.

Table 5. Apostolic continuity and post-apostolic development by AD 313

Area	Recognizable apostolic continuity	Clear post-apostolic development by AD 313
Gospel and Christology	Crucified and risen Christ, incarnation, resurrection, one Creator God, Father/Son/Spirit patterns.	Rules of faith and technical anti-heretical vocabulary; pre-Nicene Trinitarian terms.
Scripture	Israel's Scriptures plus authoritative apostolic writings already circulating.	Fourfold Gospel, growing collections, reception criteria, disputed-book boundaries.
Church leadership	Elders/overseers, deacons, teachers, prophets, translocal workers.	One-bishop city leadership increasingly common; regional episcopal synods and succession lists.
Catholicity	Translocal fellowship and one apostolic gospel.	"Catholic Church" becomes a visible confessional and institutional boundary marker.
Baptism	Initiation associated with faith, repentance, Christ, Spirit, and church membership.	More explicit regenerative/sacramental language; infant baptism clearly attested by mid-3rd c.; ministerial regulation.
Lord's Supper	Remembrance, participation, thanksgiving, unity, proclamation.	Stronger realist, sacrificial, and sacerdotal language; more regulated presidency and communion boundaries.
Discipline / repentance	Exclusion and restoration according to repentance.	Formal penitential systems, debates over grave post-baptismal sin, confessors, and episcopal reconciliation.
Prophecy	Gifts tested under apostolic truth.	New Prophecy controversy sharpens subordination of later revelation to received apostolic norm.
Rome	Early Roman church, apostolic associations, interchurch contact.	Growing prestige and intervention, but no demonstrable universal ordinary jurisdiction by AD 313.

Note. A later development is not automatically false, but it must be distinguished historically from what is explicit in the apostolic age and tested theologically by Scripture.

22. Biblical-Theological Assessment: Testing Development by the Apostolic Word

22.1 The legitimacy and limits of stronger church order

Scripture requires ordered churches, qualified leaders, doctrinal vigilance, discipline, and faithful transmission of teaching. Paul directs Titus to appoint elders, describes overseer qualifications, and commands leaders to refute contradiction ([Titus 1:5-9](#)). Peter commands elders to shepherd willingly without domineering ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). Paul expects the Ephesian elders/overseers to guard the flock against wolves ([Acts 20:17, 28-31](#)). The post-apostolic desire to stabilize leadership was therefore not a betrayal merely because structures became clearer.

The critical question is whether one particular later structure can be made a divine condition of the Church when Scripture does not clearly impose it. In the New Testament, *presbyteros* and *episkopos* substantially overlap in key passages, and local leadership is frequently plural. By Ignatius, bishop, presbytery, and deacons are clearly distinguished in several churches. That development may be a permissible form of polity, but *Sola Scriptura* does not allow historical antiquity to turn it automatically into a universally mandatory apostolic ordinance. The church is obligated to the functions Scripture requires, including shepherding, teaching, oversight, discipline, and service; the precise post-apostolic concentration of those functions must remain accountable to Scripture.

The same principle applies to episcopal authority. Ignatius and Cyprian rightly saw division, false teaching, and self-appointed ministry as grave dangers. Yet no bishop is given biblical authority to become uncorrectable. Peter was publicly corrected by Paul when his conduct compromised gospel truth ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)). Overseers themselves must be tested by doctrine and character. Therefore, episcopal unity can serve apostolic fidelity only when the bishop remains under Christ and the apostolic Word.

22.2 Apostolic succession: useful history, insufficient guarantee

The desire to transmit faithful ministry from one generation to another is biblical. Paul commands Timothy to entrust what he has heard to faithful people who will be able to teach others also ([2 Timothy 2:2](#)). Churches appoint elders; existing leaders lay hands on ministers; teachers are expected to preserve sound doctrine. First Clement's concern for orderly succession therefore corresponds to a real apostolic principle.

What Scripture does not teach is that an unbroken physical chain of ordinations guarantees doctrinal truth regardless of what successors teach. Israel possessed historical priestly continuity and yet repeatedly fell into corruption. New Testament churches founded by apostles could also tolerate serious error within one generation ([Revelation 2-3](#)). Paul makes the gospel itself the controlling test, even if the contradictory message comes from an angel ([Galatians 1:8-9](#)). Apostolic succession is therefore biblically meaningful only as **succession in apostolic faith, character, and mission**. Historical succession can support a continuity claim; it cannot settle the claim by itself.

This conclusion is not foreign to Irenaeus. His succession argument is inseparable from the public rule of faith and the apostolic Scriptures. He does not commend a bishop because succession licenses doctrinal novelty. He argues that public churches can show that their known teachers did not transmit the secret myths alleged by the Gnostics. The later theological mistake would be to preserve the list while weakening the doctrinal test that gave the list its force.

22.3 The rule of faith and creeds

The emergence of the rule of faith was one of the period's strongest defenses against arbitrary exegesis. Scripture itself contains compact confessional summaries, including the tradition Paul "received" and "passed on" about Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances ([1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#)), the confession of Jesus as Lord ([Romans 10:9](#)), and baptism into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ([Matthew 28:19](#)). Churches are therefore biblically free to summarize doctrine for teaching, baptism, worship, and protection against error.

The danger appears when a summary becomes an independent source of revelation rather than a ministerial restatement of Scripture. A creed may clarify what Scripture teaches; it cannot make true what Scripture denies or require as saving truth what God has not revealed. The *Sola Scriptura* position is therefore not anti-creedal. It is anti-coordinate authority. Creeds are useful precisely to the degree that they faithfully summarize the apostolic Word.

22.4 Canon: recognition rather than ecclesial creation of inspiration

The gradual formation of the New Testament canon is sometimes used to argue that Scripture depends for its authority on the later Church that selected it. Historically, this confuses recognition with inspiration. Apostolic writings functioned authoritatively before a universally fixed list existed. Paul's letters were read in churches during his lifetime; the Gospels carried apostolic testimony; by the early second century writers were already citing multiple New Testament books as normative. The Church's later discernment answered the question, "Which writings belong to the apostolic deposit?" It did not retroactively make those writings the Word of God.

The biblical model likewise treats prophetic and apostolic revelation as authoritative because it comes from God, while God's people have the responsibility to receive and test it. Israel did not make Isaiah inspired by recognizing Isaiah; churches did not make Paul's gospel apostolic by circulating Romans. The long canonical process demonstrates

providential discernment through imperfect communities, not the superiority of an institution over the revelation it receives.

This conclusion also guards against a simplistic "Bible dropped from heaven" narrative. The canon came to later Christians through copying, preservation, debate, and ecclesial use. Gratitude for that historical process is entirely compatible with *Sola Scriptura*. The theological priority of Scripture does not require denying the real human history by which manuscripts were transmitted and collections recognized.

22.5 Baptism and the danger of sacramental automaticity

The post-apostolic church rightly retained baptism as Christ's commanded initiatory ordinance. The New Testament speaks of baptism with exceptionally strong language, connecting it with repentance, union with Christ, forgiveness, discipleship, and incorporation into the body ([Acts 2:38-41](#); [Romans 6:3-4](#); [Galatians 3:27](#); [1 Peter 3:21](#)). Any theology that reduces baptism to an optional decorative symbol underestimates the apostolic witness.

At the same time, Scripture refuses to make the external rite an automatic mechanism detached from faith. Simon Magus was baptized while his heart remained wrong before God ([Acts 8:13, 20-23](#)). Paul distinguishes his gospel commission from his personal administration of baptism ([1 Corinthians 1:14-17](#)), although sacramental interpreters rightly observe that his immediate concern is factional boasting rather than a depreciation of baptism itself. Peter also qualifies baptism's saving significance as not the removal of physical dirt but an appeal or pledge of a good conscience toward God through Christ's resurrection ([1 Peter 3:21](#)). The post-apostolic tendency to speak increasingly of baptism as itself washing away sin must therefore be interpreted through the apostolic union of Christ, faith, Spirit, and the commanded sign rather than through the rite in isolation.

Infant baptism requires a separate judgment. Its third-century attestation proves historical antiquity, not apostolic command. No New Testament text explicitly records the baptism of an identified infant. Paedobaptist arguments from covenant continuity and household solidarity deserve serious engagement, while credobaptist arguments from the repeated sequence of hearing, repentance, faith, and baptism also carry substantial weight. The historical record of this chapter cannot settle the biblical debate merely by citing Cyprian. Under *Sola Scriptura*, the practice must stand or fall by the total biblical case.

22.6 Eucharistic realism without anachronism

Ignatius and Justin make it impossible to describe the mid-second-century Eucharist as a casual memorial snack. They treat it as sacred communion intimately related to the incarnate body and blood of Christ. This seriousness resonates with Paul's warning that unworthy participation can profane the body and blood of the Lord and incur judgment ([1 Corinthians 10:16-17](#); [1 Corinthians 11:27-32](#)). A biblical assessment should therefore reject both trivialization and anachronism.

The New Testament commands remembrance, proclamation, self-examination, and participation, but it does not explain the mode of Christ's presence through the later categories of substance and accidents. Nor does it describe the Lord's Supper as a new or additional propitiatory sacrifice alongside Christ's once-for-all offering. Hebrews repeatedly stresses the finality of Christ's sacrifice ([Hebrews 9:24-28](#); [Hebrews 10:10-14](#)). Early sacrificial language can be understood in relation to thanksgiving, offered gifts, self-offering, and liturgical participation so long as Christ's finished atonement remains the controlling norm. Later Eucharistic sacrificial interpretations must therefore explain how their language preserves, rather than multiplies or supplements, the once-for-all sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

22.7 Penance, discipline, and the sufficiency of Christ's mediation

The early church was right to reject the idea that baptism grants permission for later moral lawlessness. Serious sin after conversion must be confronted. Christ gives churches authority to discipline; Paul commands exclusion in extreme cases and restoration after repentance. The Decian crisis therefore posed a legitimate pastoral question.

The biblical danger is the conversion of pastoral discipline into a system that makes ecclesiastical acts the indispensable cause of divine forgiveness. The New Testament directs sinners to confess, repent, and trust Christ, the one mediator and advocate ([1 Timothy 2:5](#); [1 John 1:9-2:2](#)). Church leaders announce the gospel, assess repentance for purposes of fellowship, and restore the repentant; they do not possess an independent treasury of forgiveness detached from Christ's promise. The pre-Nicene penitential system should therefore be evaluated as a historically understandable attempt to

guard holiness, with elements that can become problematic if institutional reconciliation is confused with the ground of justification before God.

22.8 Continuing prophecy under the apostolic norm

The New Testament does not portray the Holy Spirit as inactive after Pentecost. Prophecy, discernment, gifts, guidance, and prayer belong to church life. The anti-Montanist response is therefore biblically sound only if it distinguishes ongoing spiritual activity from a new doctrinal authority capable of supplementing or revising the apostolic gospel.

The decisive test is not whether a claim is supernatural, emotionally powerful, ecstatic, or accompanied by moral rigor. Scripture explicitly anticipates impressive signs alongside deception ([Matthew 24:24](#); [2 Thessalonians 2:9-12](#)). Claims must be tested by Christology, gospel fidelity, Scripture, moral fruit, and prophetic accuracy ([Deuteronomy 13:1-5](#); [Deuteronomy 18:20-22](#); [1 John 4:1-3](#)). The New Prophecy therefore raises a permanent question for every later movement built on visions, prophets, apostles, angels, or restored revelation: does the new message submit to the apostolic Word, or does it functionally become another authority over it?

22.9 Rome, Peter, and universal jurisdiction

The New Testament gives Peter genuine prominence. He is prominent among the Twelve, confesses Christ, receives a major kingdom commission, preaches at Pentecost, and plays a leading role in Gentile inclusion. Any Protestant account that minimizes Peter to avoid later papal conclusions mishandles Scripture. Yet prominence does not by itself establish a perpetual Roman office of universal ordinary jurisdiction.

Peter calls himself a "fellow elder" when addressing other elders ([1 Peter 5:1](#)), can be corrected by Paul ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)), and does not preside alone over the Jerusalem decision in [Acts 15](#), where James also plays a decisive role. The New Testament never states that Peter's distinctive role is transmitted specifically to the bishops of Rome as universal governors of all churches. The second- and third-century evidence in this chapter similarly shows Roman prestige and intervention without universal uncontested jurisdiction.

A Sola Scriptura judgment must therefore distinguish respect for Rome's early historical importance from acceptance of later papal claims. The former is historically required. The latter demands independent biblical proof and cannot be established simply by reading later definitions backward into Clement, Ignatius, Irenaeus, or Cyprian.

22.10 Catholic unity and the boundary between unity and institutional absolutism

The early catholic desire for unity reflects a profound biblical good. Christ prays for his people to be one ([John 17:20-23](#)); Paul condemns factionalism ([1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#)); believers are commanded to preserve the unity of the Spirit ([Ephesians 4:1-6](#)). Schism generated by pride, ambition, or refusal of sound doctrine is therefore a serious sin.

Yet biblical unity is never unity at the expense of the gospel. Paul withstood Peter when gospel truth was at stake, commanded separation from persistent false teaching, and pronounced anathema on another gospel. Institutional communion is therefore a means of Christian unity, not its highest norm. If an institution departs from apostolic teaching, loyalty to Christ may require correction or separation. Conversely, private individualism that rejects all accountable church authority is equally foreign to the New Testament. The apostolic pattern holds truth and embodied communion together.

23. Contemporary Significance

The period AD 100-313 continues to shape almost every major debate about Christian authority. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and some Lutheran traditions appeal to early episcopacy and succession as evidence that historic ministry belongs to the Church's apostolic structure. Free-church and restorationist traditions often appeal to the earlier New Testament overlap of elder and overseer to argue that the Ignatian model represents a permissible or problematic development rather than an apostolic mandate. Both sides are strengthened by acknowledging the full evidence rather than selecting only the witnesses that resemble their present polity.

Canon debates also remain directly relevant. Critics sometimes claim that the Church "created" the Bible, while some Protestants speak as though the canonical collection had no historical process. The second and third centuries refute both

simplifications. Apostolic writings possessed authority before universal lists, while churches genuinely labored to identify, copy, compare, and receive them. Historical mediation and scriptural supremacy are not mutually exclusive.

Modern charismatic and prophetic movements likewise reenact questions raised by the New Prophecy. The issue is not whether Christians may believe the Spirit guides, gifts, convicts, or speaks through biblically accountable prophecy. The issue is whether later revelations acquire authority capable of binding the conscience beyond Scripture. The pre-Nicene struggle shows how quickly claims of heightened spirituality can become a second source of authority.

Finally, the early catholic church warns against romanticizing either "institution" or "restoration." Institutional development can protect truth, preserve texts, care for the vulnerable, and resist destructive teachers. It can also accumulate power beyond biblical warrant. Restoration movements can rightly expose inherited traditions, but they can also create new founders, new revelations, or selective reconstructions of the apostolic age. The history of AD 100-313 therefore reinforces the methodological principle of this book: neither age nor novelty proves truth. Every claim must ultimately be tested by the apostolic Scriptures.

24. Genealogical Summary

Table 6. Genealogical summary: from apostolic communities to pre-Nicene catholic Christianity

Field	Chapter 2 genealogical finding
Parent tradition	First-century apostolic Christianity: local churches founded and instructed through apostles and coworkers, with elders/overseers, deacons, ordinances, Scripture, apostolic teaching, and translocal fellowship.
Approximate emergence	c. AD 100-313 as a gradual post-apostolic consolidation rather than a single founding date.
Geographical origin	Multiple centers across Rome, Italy, Syria, Asia Minor, Egypt, Palestine, North Africa, Mesopotamia, and other regions.
Principal actors	Clement of Rome; Ignatius; Polycarp; Papias; Justin Martyr; Irenaeus; Tertullian; Clement of Alexandria; Origen; Cyprian; numerous bishops, martyrs, confessors, deacons, teachers, women ascetics and prophets, synods, and local churches.
Immediate trigger	Passing of eyewitness apostles and the need to preserve doctrine, order, worship, and communion amid growth, distance, persecution, and doctrinal rivalry.
Deeper causes	Geographical expansion; heresy and alternative scriptures; contested prophecy; persecution and the lapsed; social scale; liturgical consolidation; intellectual apologetics; Jewish-Christian differentiation; institutional self-preservation.
Authority structure	Apostolic Scriptures and public rule of faith increasingly interpreted and guarded through bishops, presbyters, deacons, synods, succession memory, and interchurch communion.
Principal doctrinal distinctives	One Creator; incarnation, death, resurrection, and lordship of Christ; Father/Son/Spirit confession; resurrection; catholic unity; baptism and Eucharist; public apostolic teaching against secret revelation and dualism.
Immediate branches / schisms	Marcionite churches; Valentinian and other gnosticizing networks; New Prophecy/Montanist communities; Novatian communion; Monarchian and other contested theological streams.
Later descendants	Pre-Nicene catholic episcopal structures become the immediate institutional environment from which fourth-century imperial conciliar Christianity, and later ancient communions, develop.
Present-day presence	The period remains foundational for Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Church of the East, Anglican, and many Protestant debates over canon, ministry, succession, sacraments, tradition, and catholicity.
Major biblical questions raised	What makes succession apostolic? How is the canon recognized? Can later prophecy bind conscience? What authority belongs to bishops and synods? What is baptism? What is the Eucharist? How should Peter and Rome be interpreted? When does visible unity become institutional absolutism?

25. Conclusion and Transition: From Persecuted Catholicity to Imperial Christianity

Between AD 100 and 313, Christianity changed profoundly without ceasing to be recognizably rooted in the apostolic proclamation. The churches inherited the confession of the crucified and risen Christ, baptism, the Lord's Supper,

holiness, mission, Scripture, and ordered ministry. They then confronted challenges the first generation could not solve by appealing to a living apostle. Distance required networks. Heresy required clearer doctrinal boundaries. Competing revelation required tests. Persecution required discipline for confessors and the lapsed. Growth required more stable leadership. Intellectual criticism required explanation in the philosophical language of the wider world.

The result was not one instant "Catholic Church" created on a particular date. It was a cumulative consolidation. One-bishop leadership became increasingly common. Presbyters and deacons became more clearly located within episcopal structures. The word *catholic* came to identify a visible translocal communion. The rule of faith, the emerging New Testament collection, public succession, and synodal consultation reinforced one another. Baptismal, Eucharistic, and penitential theology became more developed. Rome acquired unusual prestige, yet other bishops still resisted Roman judgments. North Africa, Syria, Asia Minor, Alexandria, Mesopotamia, and other regions remained indispensable to the story.

Theologically, the period provides examples both of faithful preservation and of developments that require scriptural testing. The defense of Christ's true incarnation against docetic tendencies, the insistence on one Creator against Marcionite dualism, the preservation and circulation of apostolic writings, and the rejection of secret gospels were substantial achievements. At the same time, stronger identification of the visible episcopal institution with the total Church, increasingly sacramental language, infant baptism, formal penitential systems, and elevated claims about ecclesial authority became more explicit than they can be demonstrated with the same clarity in the apostolic sources. The existence of a development does not prove that it is false, but neither does its antiquity prove that it is apostolic.

By the beginning of the fourth century, the pre-Nicene Church had therefore built the structures that would make empire-wide coordination possible, but it had never yet experienced a Christian emperor or an ecumenical council backed by imperial power. That changed abruptly after Constantine's rise. Legal toleration, patronage, property restoration, clerical privilege, imperial convening of councils, and state involvement in doctrinal disputes would transform the practical meaning of Christian unity. The next chapter turns to that Constantinian threshold and to the Arian controversy, Nicaea, Constantinople, Donatism, and the formation of imperial conciliar Christianity.

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