

## THE DAWN OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH: THE FIRST SIX HUNDRED YEARS

The Third Century: 200 to 300 A.D. – Part I

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### INTRODUCTION

Last week we were able to look at some of the **challenges** facing the church of the second century. These we divided in two: **persecution from without; heretical teaching from within**. We saw that the false teaching was largely related to Gnostic teaching and the teaching of Marcion. We saw what Gnosticism and Marcionism were, and how the Church responded both through the development of Catechetical schools, and the writings of great Church leaders. We also saw what some of the accusations against the church were, and how she responded through the writings of “apologists”.

A few of the names of apologists and teachers we mentioned were:

- **Aristides:** in 138 A.D.
- **Justin Martyr:** Wrote: *Apology I and II*, around 155-160 AD, and *A Dialogue with Trypho*,
- **Athenagoras**, 177-180 wrote, *A Plea for Christians*. He also wrote a treatise called: *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.
- **Tatian**, *An Address to the Greeks*; Tatian also wrote a harmony of the Gospels in 170 A.D.,
- **Theophilus**, bishop of Antioch, wrote *Three Books to Autolytus*, which dealt with the doctrine of God, the interpretation of Scripture, and Christian life.

### Teachers (also called Church Fathers):

- **Irenaeus of Lyons**, made bishop of Lyons in A.D. 178. He wrote extensively against false teaching. We still have two of his books: *Against Heresies*, (otherwise known as *Refutation of the So-Called Gnosis*) 185 AD; and *Demonstration of Apostolic Faith*.
- **Pantaenus** founded a Catechetical School at Alexandria: in 180 AD he also visited the Mar Thoma Church on the west coast of India
- **Clement of Alexandria:** he was a disciple of Pantaenus and flourished between 180-200 AD; he died in 215 AD.

Today, we embark upon what I believe to be the greatest century of early Christianity: greatest because the Church was still independent of all alliances with Imperial authority that were to come about with the conversion of Constantine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, and yet continued to grow mightily with internal integrity and unity across the Roman world. As we look at this growth, and this great century, we'll ask a number of questions. We'll do so over the next three weeks.

1. We'll begin by looking at the teachings of Tertullian and Origen, two of the leading lights of the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century.
2. Then we'll take a peak at the geographical growth of the Church and some of the reasons for that growth including treatment of women and the Church's conduct during epidemics.

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3. We'll talk about Gregory Thaumaturgus, whose name meant Wonder-worker.
4. We'll ask about the effect of persecution upon the church. And we'll see how the effects of persecution were profound. In the course of this discussion we'll look at Cyprian of Carthage.
5. And finally, we'll have a look at an element that was to have vast implications for later centuries: the birth and development of asceticism. The name usually associated with this is **Anthony of Egypt**. We'll have a look at his life and read some of what he said.

## I. TERTULLIAN AND ORIGEN

Let's begin with a brief look at two figures who were to have a profound influence in their day: Tertullian and Origen. One of them--Tertullian--still influences us today. Why are they important?

**Tertullian of Carthage** who lived between **160 and 220 A.D.** is important, among other things, because he was a masterful thinker and a skilled word smith. Some of the words he developed while wrestling with difficult theological concepts are still in use today. **He also wrote in Latin**, one of the first to move away from Greek, and is thus considered the founder of Western Theology.

First a word about his background. You'll notice he was born well within the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: around 160. But Tertullian, did not convert until he was around 40 years of age, that is, around 200 A.D. And though he spent the lion's part of his life in North Africa in what we now know of as Tunisia, (he was, many believe, a **Berber**, or native North African) he converted in Rome and returned to Carthage in Africa. All his teaching occurred after the year 200.

Tertullian, it is believed, had a lawyer's training because when he writes, he writes as a lawyer, marshaling his arguments logically as lawyers of the period did. He does so both in defense of Christianity, against secular authorities; and in attacking the doctrinal error of heretics. But he was also a rhetorician. And as such, he is unsparing in his use of irony and sarcasm. For example, in his most effective work: *Prescription Against Heretics*, in a section treating the teaching of Marcion and Marcion's god he says this: (remember, Marcion believed that there were two gods: the Old Testament god Jehovah, who was evil and who created the world; and the New Testament god, the Father, who loves everybody and will never judge anyone); he writes concerning Marcion's god that, whereas the God of the Church has made this entire world and all its wonders, Marcion's god—the one Marcion finds in the N.T. only-- hasn't created a single vegetable. And then he asks: “what was Marcion's god doing before his recent revelation in Jesus? Is the divine love that Marcion touts a {quickie} affair of the last minute?” (page 76, Gonzales).

Other teaching:

- He writes compellingly to the authorities concerning emperor Trajan's ruling—the one we saw several weeks ago, that Christians should not be sought out for their crimes, inasmuch as their crimes aren't worth the trouble, but that only if they are denounced should they be punished—Tertullian writes that if their crimes aren't worth seeking out, why persecute Christians at all?

- Another teaching, one that was to have a very long life: was his conviction that the Scriptures belong to the church, and not to heretics. Let's look at an excerpt of his writing in this regard and try to deduce his essential arguments. He is writing against the Gnostics and the Marcionites

QUESTION: What can you glean from his argument relative to why we should trust the Church's teaching over that of the Marcionites and Gnostics?

*“The Apostles first bore witness to the faith of Christ Jesus throughout Judeaea; they founded churches there, and then went out into the world and preached to the nations the same doctrine of the same faith. They likewise founded churches in every city, from which the other churches thereafter derived the shoot of faith and the seeds of doctrine—yea, and are still deriving them, in order to become churches. It is through this that these churches are themselves apostolic, in that they are the offspring of apostolic churches. Every kind of thing must needs be classed in accordance with its origin. And so the churches, many and great as they may be, are really the one Primitive Church issuing from the Apostles, which is their source. So all are primitive and all Apostolic, while all are one. And this unity is proved by the peace they share, by their title of brotherhood, by their contract of hospitality; for these privileges have but one ground, the one tradition of the same revelation. .. It is therefore on this ground that we put forward our ruling, namely that if Jesus Christ sent out the Apostles to preach, no others are to be accepted as preachers but those whom Christ appointed, since 'No other knoweth the Father save the son and he to whom the son hath revealed him.' And the Son seems not to have revealed him to any but the Apostles whom he sent to preach—assuredly to preach what he revealed to them. But what they preached, that is, what Christ revealed to them, this, on my ruling, ought to be established solely through those same churches which the Apostles themselves founded by preaching to them as well by the living voice, as the phrase is, as by their Epistles afterwards. If this is so, it follows straightway that all doctrine which accords with those apostolic churches, the sources and originals of the Faith, must be reckoned as the truth, since it preserves without doubt what the churches received from the Apostles, the Apostles from Christ, and Christ from God...; We are in communion with the apostolic churches; there is no difference of doctrine; this is the testimony of the truth.” (Documents of the Christian Church, Henry Bettenson, ed., pages 70-71, cf. *De Praescriptione haereticorum*, xx, xxi)*

- His position was essentially that it is the church alone that has the right to interpret the Scriptures, inasmuch as the church in Rome, in Antioch, and in Alexandria has always possessed the Scriptures, has interpreted them uniformly, and is descended from the apostles who wrote them with unbroken lines of bishops and teachers to pass them on; whereas heretics (Gnostics and Marcionites) are coming onto the stage at a later time and taking what does not belong to them and then foisting upon the scriptures interpretations that the church has never recognized. In this way Tertullian appeals to tradition, lineage from the apostles, and uniform interpretation by the churches to denounce heresy and its theft of scripture. This teaching has a long life which reappears at the time of the Protestant Reformation when the Catholic Church denies the right of

Protestants to interpret the scriptures, claiming its long line of descent from the early church. But to be fair, Protestants were claiming doctrinal descent from the early church, saying that the Church in the Middle Ages added doctrines that were never there to begin with.

- Another teaching of Tertullian that has had a long life brings along with it three theological terms of enormous significance. I told you that he invented some theological expressions that are still with the church today. The three I'm speaking of are: **“Substance” “Person,”** and **“Trinity.”** In order to understand why he developed these terms, we need to look at two things. First, we need to understand a certain theological dilemma of the Church with regard to Christ and God. Then, we need to look at a certain teaching coming out of Rome that Tertullian felt obliged to denounce. This was a teaching which did not emanate from Marcionites or Gnostics, but from an influential figure worshiping in Rome whom Tertullian calls Praxeas. First, let's look at the dilemma or paradox which faced the church with regard to its doctrine of God; Then we'll look at the teaching Tertullian denounced.

Here is, very briefly, the theological conundrum. The Church knew from the scriptures and from its Jewish roots that there is only One God. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One”, (Deut. 6. 4). And again and again in Isaiah: “There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.” (Isaiah 45.21), or “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.” (Is. 43.10). And I am the First and the Last”. This Creator of all things revealed Himself to Moses as being the same as He who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and when Moses asked him, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.” (Exodus 2.13-14).

### **So there is One God, and His name is I AM.**

Okay. Now what do you do with the following information? Jesus, who was born of a virgin, performed miracles, raised the dead, healed those born blind, multiplied bread for the multitude like God giving Manna to the Israelites in the desert; this Jesus, who forgave sins of people he'd never met; who claimed to have been sent by the Father to earth; who told his disciples he was going to lay down his life of his own accord, that no one was going to take it from him, and that he had the authority to lay it down and raise it up again (John 10.18), and did so in his resurrection; this Jesus who conquered death and sin and who accepted worship from his disciples (20:28), also said: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and, “I am the First and the Last” (Rev. 22:13) and, that which was the coup de grace for the Israelites: “Before Abraham was born, I AM.” (John 8:58).

So who was this Jesus? From his own statements, **Jesus must have been God** or at least to have considered himself God. And from the earliest time, the Church worshiped him as such. Remember the Governor of Bithynia, Pliny's statement to the emperor Trajan around 112 AD, that after having tortured three deaconesses, all he could get out of them was “that on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god...”? (c. 112 AD). Christ was worshiped as God from the earliest days. **So if Jesus is God, who is the Father? If Jesus prays to the Father while on**

**earth (cf John 17), how are we to understand His relationship to God? Is there one God or are there two? And if there are two, would we not be denying the Old Testament which says there is only One?** And since Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as being the Spirit of God and having personality (cf John 14:15-17 and the references to “He” in speaking of the “Counselor” or “paraclete” throughout this section of John) **are there in fact three Gods?** How can we affirm that there are three Gods and yet only One?

Well one of the solutions going round was that of Praxeas, who may well have been Pope Calixtus of Rome.

- Tertullian writes about it in a work called Against Praxeas. Let's read it and see what we can determine was his solution to the problem.

**QUESTION: What can you glean from it concerning the nature of Praxeas' heresy?**

*“The devil has striven against the truth in manifold ways. He has sometimes endeavored to destroy it by defending it. He champions the unity of God, the omnipotent creator of the world, only to make out of that unity a heresy. He says that the Father himself descended into the virgin, was himself born of her, himself suffered; in fact that he himself was Jesus Christ...It was Praxeas who first brought this kind of perversity from Asia to Rome...he put the Paraclete to flight and crucified the Father.”* (Documents, Bettenson, ed., page 38).

- Calixtus, it would seem, had developed a tantalizing idea in trying to unravel the mystery of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Praxeas, (or Calixtus) taught “that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were simply **three modes** in which God appeared, so that God was sometimes Father, sometimes Son, and sometimes Holy Spirit. This is what has been called 'patripassianism' (the doctrine that the Father suffered the passion, from the Latin *patri*—father, and *passian*—to suffer). This idea was rejected by the church under the name 'modalism'--the doctrine that the various persons of the Trinity are 'modes' in which God appears, as though putting on masks” (Gonzales, page 77). **Modalism** is like saying that God uses masks: sometimes wearing one mask of the Father, and at other times wearing the mask of the Son, or again of the Holy Spirit. But Tertullian, pointing to Scripture, disagrees.

**QUESTION: What do we know in Scripture that would contradict this?** (And please take note of how seriously the Church took the Scriptures as their authority. You've got to hand it to them. They did not simply white out the contradictions and re-write the New Testament or the Old. They refused to reject the paradox. Like scientists looking at the phenomenon of light and trying to determine whether light is a wave or a particle, who ended up affirming both without being able to understand it, they looked at the Biblical evidence, retained what they found, and affirmed that, paradoxically, God must be one in three and three in one. They felt they should bow to the scriptures and admit they were too poor in their human natures to grasp the nature of God with their rational minds. And this, many believe, is how rational science really got its start. Rational Theology gave birth to modern science. We look at the world as our data point, and deduce laws from it. Cf Stark, The Victory of Reason.)

- The Data point for Tertullian and the Church was the Scriptures. And so we read that, for example: the Son prayed to the Father while he was on earth, and returned to him when he ascended. Jesus obeyed the Father. Jesus loved the Father, and the Father loved Him. There was obviously a relationship between the Father and the Son that was continual. Two separate entities in conversation with one another. At one point Jesus admitted that only the Father knew the times and days set for Jesus' own return. Jesus spoke of the communion, the Glory he had with the Father before the world began. Subsequently, Tertullian comes to the conclusion that all three members of the godhead exist concurrently. How then can they be one? He explains that the **Triune God** is to be understood as **One divine substance** in three different, but nonetheless perfectly unified **persons who all exist concurrently in One Godhead**. This is the origin of the theological concept known as the **Trinity**, a word that he coined.
- To help solve the problem of the Incarnation, or the relationship of an Eternal God to a fleshly body, Tertullian explained that Jesus had both a human and a divine nature. That He was **one person, with two natures or two substances**, one being divine and the other human. We'll get to more of this later as we enter the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries; but I want to underline that these words and concepts were to have a long life, being subsequently widely adopted by Church Councils. They are still standard use in confessions of faith and churches around the world today, along with the words used to explain them, to wit, the words: **Trinity; Persons; and Substance**. Three Persons, One Substance, One God, in Holy Trinity. Together with Tertullian and orthodox believers down through the centuries, we as a church are **Trinitarian** in our doctrine and thinking.

**QUESTION: Why is that important? What benefit or blessing can we find in knowing God as One God in three?** Aside from upholding Scripture, what does the notion of One God in three persons add to our faith that makes it more compelling, more beautiful? [God is Love. There is communion and love within the godhead since all eternity. That means that the Creation, indeed all of the Universe is founded upon love. It is the overflow of a communion within God since all eternity, even as a child is the overflow of the love of two parents. The book The Shack helps to portray this truth. Aside from this, there are some advantages from a philosophical point of view. There is an ontological basis for: unity and diversity; freedom; the individual in distinction to the many; the Mind in distinction to Matter, etc. All other religious systems otherwise tend toward “monism” the belief that all is one and that nothing has a real separate existence apart from God and his divine substance.]

- The last thing to note here is that, in Tertullian's time and on into the next century, theologians from North Africa and elsewhere—Antioch, Alexandria, Caesarea, etc.--considered themselves on an equal standing with the bishops of Rome and argued their ideas from the scriptures on an equal to equal basis. Tertullian dared face down the bishop of Rome, and it was Tertullian's ideas that were adopted.

### **Paul of Samosata and the First Council of Antioch in 269.**

Incidentally, lest you should think that Tertullian was doing all the thinking for the Church, please note that Modalism, and the ideas Tertullian fought in his day were also being rejected elsewhere in the Mediterranean in addition to other ideas. 70 Bishops of the Church met in Council at Antioch in AD 269 to condemn the teachings of the Bishop of Antioch. His name was Paul of Samosata. His teaching was the following:

\* *"Having been anointed by the Holy Spirit he (Jesus) received the title of the anointed (i.e. Christos), suffering in accordance with his nature, working wonders in accordance with grace. For in fixity and resoluteness of character he likened himself to God; and having kept himself free from sin was united with God, and was empowered to grasp as it were the power and authority of wonders. By these he was shown to possess over and above the will, one and the same activity (with God), and won the title of Redeemer and Saviour of our race."*

▲ *"The Saviour became holy and just; and by struggle and hard work overcame the sins of our forefather. By these means he succeeded in perfecting himself, and was through his moral excellence united with God; having attained to unity and sameness of will and energy (i.e. activity) with Him through his advances in the path of good deeds. This will be preserved inseparable (from the Divine), and so inherited the name which is above all names, the prize of love and affection vouchsafed in grace to him."*

**QUESTION: What was the nature of Paul of Samosata's teaching here? Anything you disagree with?**

**This teaching became known as Monarchism, from the idea that Jesus was adopted as a son by a god ruling as monarch over him.** As you can see, these early centuries of the church became a testing ground for establishing what was to become Orthodox teaching in the centuries to come.

**Origen of Alexandria** born c. 185, probably in Alexandria, Egypt — died c. 254

Just a word about Origen. His father was a martyr during the persecution of Emperor Septimius Severus, and as a young lad, Origen wanted desperately to join his father in martyrdom, but his mother hid all his clothes and he was forced to remain at home. So he wrote his father, who was being held in prison, a treatise on martyrdom. Origen became one of the greatest teachers of his day. His brilliance was recognized early on, and in his late teens he was appointed head of the Catechetical school of Alexandria in Egypt where he taught people wishing to become Christians for several years. After this, he founded his own Christian school of philosophy where he taught until about 234 when he settled in Caesarea on the coast of Palestine and continued teaching there. People came from far and wide to hear him, including the mother of the emperor at the time, three quarters of a century before Rome was Christian. Due to a number of factors one of which was jealousy, he was forced out of Alexandria and settled in Caesarea where he taught for another 20 years before being tortured to death during the persecution of Decius in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. He was extremely intelligent, at times dictating to some **7 secretaries at once, seven different documents.** He was orthodox at base, but, was probably, in his desire to build a bridge to pagan philosophy, more Platonist

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than Christian, letting himself go into wild speculations about the nature and creation of the world. He speculated, for example, that there were two separate creations: first a spiritual one, then a physical one; and that the physical world came about because of the rebellion of spirits in the spiritual world. We ourselves were first created as spirits. God had to create the physical world and form bodies to house our spirits here once we had sinned. So God was creator of the physical world, but did so, only because we'd sinned in the spiritual world, and he needed to find a place for us in order to redeem us. As you can see, this is another variant on how the spiritual world is far preferable to the material world. These ideas are directly descended from Plato. Just so you know, Origen's speculations were condemned as heretical by the church later on, which is why he's not called "Saint Origen." But this man still contributed some very important stuff to the church of his day, including work on the relationship between the natures of Christ.

As a scholar Origen wrote the *Hexapla*, an edition of the Old Testament in six columns, four of which were different translations of the Hebrew into the Greek, one of which was the Hebrew text itself, and another a transliteration of the Hebrew into Greek; along with an entire system of symbols indicating variants, omissions, and additions. I say this so you will know that early church scholars compared texts too. They wanted to be sure they got back to the original and translated it accurately. And they did this at the Catechetical school in Alexandria as well as elsewhere. What Jesus and the apostles actually taught was very important to them. **We didn't invent scholarship and textual criticism at the Reformation and at the Enlightenment.**

## GREEK CULTURE: ORIGEN VS TERTULLIAN

One other thought that is worth pausing to consider. Origen exhorted his pupils **to bring the intellectual treasures of the Greeks to the service of Christian philosophy, and thus imitate the Jews who employed the golden vessels of the Egyptians to adorn the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.** That is, he felt that Greek philosophy, which he loved, could be, indeed should be, seen as God's work among the pagans, preparing them for Christ, and that therefore we can use the best of pagan culture to show God's glory and teach about his nature. Compare this with Tertullian of North Africa who felt that once a person became a Christian they should stop speculating and using Greek philosophy, because they'd found the truth and who had only disparaging remarks to make about Aristotle and the other Greek philosophers. He famously asked: "*What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? or the Academy* (that is, the premiere school of Athens) *with the Church?*"

**QUESTION: So what do you think? What relationship should Christians have with the best of the world's literature and philosophy? Should we turn from it, as being the work of people who are deluded about the nature of truth and the purpose of life? Or should we harness what they have written and produced to the Truth we find revealed in Christ and as a means to bring them to faith?**