

## CHRISTIANITY, THE FIRST 400 YEARS SECOND CENTURY

### INTRODUCTION

Last week we were able to trace some of the persecution; the amazing speed of the Church's spread; and some of the literature left behind from that era: the Didache—a pre-baptismal document used to instruct candidates at the end of the first century, and the First Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Church in Corinth. These writings allow us to gain a glimpse into what communities of Christians at the turn of the century held dear; how they practiced baptism and the Lord's Supper; how they trained candidates for baptism; and how they chose leaders. We see their theology and their moral earnestness.

Besides these literary glimpses from Church documents themselves, we have seen, that there was also reference made to Christians in the secular world, by the Roman Historian Tacitus. We also glimpsed a few historical tidbits from the first century transmitted by Eusebius, the father of Church History, writing in the 320's: how some of the Gospels were written, notably, how Matthew originally penned his Gospel in Hebrew, and how that Gospel was taken as far as India, either by Thomas or by Bartholomew, both disciples of Jesus. Eusebius is a mine of interesting details: if time had permitted, we'd have seen that he reported how Peter took a wife around with him in his preaching; that Peter spoke to the men, and his wife to the women. We saw how Eusebius reported that Paul had been beheaded and Peter crucified upside down, both in Rome; how James the Just, the brother of Jesus and the author of the Epistle of James was thrown from the Parapet in Jerusalem, or stoned around 62 AD.

But, truth be told, much remains obscure. Most of the documents Eusebius himself used have since been lost; and the church, being small and struggling, having left its formative documents in the New Testament, did not leave much else in terms of literature or buildings in the years after the death of the apostles aside from the two documents I've mentioned. But when we leave the first Century and make our way into the second, as a tribute to the growth of the church, writings and names of church leaders begin to multiply. Here we are on much more concrete ground.

What do we know? Well, we know that with the spread of our faith, once again, we encounter persecution.

Jesus said: *“A disciple is not above his master; if they persecuted me, they will persecute you too.”*

So it is here, with persecution, I'd like to begin. And interestingly enough, some of what we know, comes to us from a secular source: a ruling made by the emperor Trajan himself concerning Christians that was to affect the church in the Roman Empire for many years. The documents that inform us of this ruling come to us in the form of correspondence between Trajan and a provincial governor. They date to around AD 111, that is, exactly 1900 years ago.

### PERSECUTION UNDER TRAJAN

Here's what we know, excerpted from Justo Gonzales' [The Story of Christianity](#):

“In A.D. 111, Pliny the younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, on the northern shore of what today is Turkey. We know from correspondence that Pliny, who appears to want to do a good job as governor was being faced with an unexpected problem. **There were already many Christians in the**

**area, so many that Pliny declared that the pagan temples were almost deserted, and that the sellers of sacrificial victims found few buyers.** When someone sent the new governor a list of Christians, Pliny began inquiries, for he knew that this religion was illegal.

“The governor had the accused brought before him, and thus began learning of the beliefs and practices of Christians. Many declared that they were not Christians, and others said that, although they had followed the new faith for a time, they had abandoned it. Of these Pliny required only that they pray to the gods, burn incense before the image of the emperor, and curse Christ, something that he had heard true Christians would never do. Once they performed these rites, he simply let them go.

“Those who persisted in their faith posed a different problem. Pliny's practice was to offer them three opportunities to recant, while threatening them with death. If they refused, he had them executed, not so much for being Christians, as for their obstinacy. If they were Roman citizens, he had them sent to Rome, as the law required.

“But Pliny considered himself a just man, and therefore felt obliged to find out what crimes, besides sheer obstinacy, Christians committed. All he could learn was that Christians gathered before dawn to sing to Christ 'as to a god,' and to join in an oath not to commit theft, adultery, or any such sins. They also used to gather for a common meal, but had discontinued this practice when the authorities had outlawed secret meetings. Not quite convinced that this was the whole truth, Pliny put two female Christian ministers to torture. But they simply confirmed what he already knew.

“The question then was, should Christians be punished for concrete crimes, or should the very name 'Christian' be considered a crime? Not knowing what course to follow Pliny suspended the proceedings and wrote Emperor Trajan for further instructions.

“The emperor's response was brief. When it comes to the punishment of Christians, there is no general rule that is equally valid in all circumstances. On the one hand, the nature of their crime is such that the state should not waste time seeking them out. On the other hand, if they are accused and refuse to recant they should be punished. Those who are willing to worship the gods should be pardoned without further inquiries. Finally, anonymous accusations should be disregarded, for they are a bad legal precedent and are unworthy of this age” (Gonzales, pages 40-41).

This legal ruling was to determine the way the Romans dealt with Christians for well over a hundred years.

- ◆ No general rule
- ◆ Don't seek them out: their crimes are not of a kind that is worth the time it takes to find and prosecute them.
- ◆ If they are accused, and refuse to recant, prosecute them
- ◆ If they recant, and worship the gods again, let them go
- ◆ Disregard anonymous accusations

What this meant concretely, during this fairly anodyne period of persecution, was that few but very public Christian officials were persecuted. That is, well known pastors and teachers. And of these, we actually have records of a few: Two were mega-church pastors: Ignatius and Polycarp. And we still have some of their writings.

## **IGNATIUS AND POLYCARP**

Ignatius and Polycarp were bishops, that is, head pastors, of important Christian communities. The correspondence we have from Ignatius comes to us from around 107 and 108; he was martyred a short time later. Polycarp who also wrote in the first half of the second century was martyred around 155. For centuries these men, because of their early dates and writings, have been referred to as *Apostolic Fathers*. We'll talk about Ignatius now, and close the class with a brief glance at Polycarp.

**Ignatius** was the third bishop of the church of Antioch, that same church from which Paul and Barnabas had been sent out as missionaries in about the year AD 46 in Acts 13:1-3. Antioch was an important church at the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel to non-Jews, and remained for about four centuries one of the most important churches in Christendom. It should be mentioned that, at the time Ignatius was writing, Antioch was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. In Acts 11: 26, we are told that a great multitude believed there, and that it was there in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

Well, Ignatius was the third pastor of the Church in Antioch, and wrote the letters we still possess today. He penned these only 60 years after the episode of Paul and Barnabas's sending out as missionaries in Acts 13. Ignatius claimed to be a student of John the Apostle, who lived to a very old age. Ignatius was martyred in Rome circa 108 A.D. in the Colosseum, killed by lions. **On his way to Rome he wrote six epistles**, one of which he sent to Polycarp; the others he sent to various churches, such as Rome and Smyrna letters which give a good idea of the theology of the period. The nature of this class disallows study in detail of his letters, but I'd like to quote a few of his words to help us understand the era. The first relates to his martyrdom. These words relating to martyrdom he wrote to the Church in Rome, the city to which he was traveling to meet his death. He wrote:

*“I enjoin all, that I am dying willingly for God's sake, if only you do not prevent it. I beg you, do not do me an untimely kindness. Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which is my way of reaching to God. I am God's wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ.”— Letter to the Romans*

This is a glimpse of the attitude prevalent in the church regarding martyrdom; and this attitude toward martyrdom, which reflects Paul's words in Acts 21: 13 to the disciples in Caesarea when he says: *“Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus,”* these words of Paul and Ignatius will have an **interesting afterlife**. They will become a pattern, not only for martyrdom, but also in some countries, for self-exile in monasticism. But more of that later. In other words, to die for Christ became an honor.

Ignatius says a few other things that give an early glimpse of what is to come in the second century. One relates to a term he uses: the term is **“katholicos”**.

You'll recognize this as the word from which the term “catholic” arises. Ignatius used the term “katholicos” (in Greek) to refer to that theology and practice which were universally recognized among the churches. The word means “complete” or “according to the whole”. He was using the term in such a way, that it seems to reflect a usage current already among the churches of his day to distinguish between that which was widely taught in churches throughout the empire and beyond as accepted doctrine, and that which was heterodox, new, or unfamiliar teaching. This has led many to believe that the term “catholic” for those churches which were faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles was already in use in the late first century.

So Ignatius writes: *“Avoid divisions as the beginning of evils. All of you follow the bishop as Jesus*

*Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery (or elders) as the Apostles; and respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no man perform anything pertaining to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Lord's Supper over which the bishop (or pastor) presides, or one to whom he commits it. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal (or catholic) church. It is not lawful to baptize or give communion without the consent of the bishop (or pastor). On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God. Thus, whatever is done will be safe and valid"* (page 63-4, Documents).

We're reminded of a line from the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:17): *"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden."*

So, why were Ignatius and other churches finding it necessary to use this term *Katholicos*? Because, even as there were false teachers arising in Paul and John's day of whom they warned in epistle after epistle, false teachings were arising in Ignatius' day, at the turn of the century.

Here is a problem: in an environment where there is no recognized book of church order; where four gospels and various epistles are still floating around from church to church without yet having been formed into a recognized canon of scripture in a single book, where spurious documents were also arising purporting to come from the apostles, how do you know what is true? Moreover, in an environment where the work and power of the Spirit were accepted as part of the church's heritage, people might find themselves "inspired" to say any kind of nonsense and gather a following for themselves. Not only this, but illustrious pagan teaching as well as mystery cults of all kinds surrounded the fledgling community. The temptation was to pull that teaching into the church in order to make the church more palatable. Teachers could arise within the community and pull a following after themselves.

**How to discern truth?** Well, one way was to recognize truth by what was already widely being taught in other churches planted by the apostles. Moreover, to guarantee some semblance of theological order in this tender sprout that is the young church, you exhort Christians to submit to and obey the pastors and leaders of the churches who have themselves been disciplined by the apostles. You establish lineage and tradition.

When John writes in his 2nd epistle: *"Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the anti-Christ. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for; but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him,"* he is talking about a real problem.

Paul wrote already to the Galatians: *"As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"* (1:9). Today we might call a comment like that bigoted, but we must understand the reason for it. The reason this is important is that the inner vitality of our faith is at stake. Just anything that, as Paul says in 2 Timothy, tickles peoples' fancies, won't do. We want the truth as we find it laid out by Jesus' life, death, resurrection, teaching, and the teaching of his apostles. We want what really happened, and what God really intended us to believe. We want a reliable testimony. This is where life, where vitality lies. To deny its essential core, is to destroy the Church and the way to Salvation. And here we have it: false teaching was an attempt to destroy the Gospel, the Good News, and the path

God has opened for us, the only one, to Salvation. False teaching was to be the bugaboo of the church for another three hundred fifty years. And so it is to this we must now turn. **Two major threats** of false teaching both assailed the church in the second century. Both built schools of thought that lasted for centuries. Paul, John, and Ignatius in his turn, were already fighting against the first: **Gnosticism**. The second, **Marcionism**, we'll turn to in a minute. Let's begin then, with a look at **Gnosticism**.

**Gnosticism**, is a rather vague term defining what was nevertheless a very real attack on the Christian faith. It came both from within the church and from without inasmuch as Gnosticism, as a religious thought form, already flourished in Greek and Roman culture. Two Gnostic teachers stand out in the second century who brought Gnostic teaching from the surrounding culture into the church : the first, **Basilides**, who taught in Egypt from **117-138**, wrote commentaries on the Gospels and letters. He imposed a five year silence on his disciples. The second, more important, was a man who, though he founded a school in Egypt, also taught in Rome and Cyprus. His name was **Valentinus, and he was roughly a contemporary of Basilides**. Both these men seemed to wish to reconcile Greek Platonic philosophy with Christianity. Valentinus wrote a gospel called the Gospel of Truth. Basilides a gospel called, the Gospel of Basilides.

How do we know what they and other Gnostics taught? We know this teaching in two ways: first, we find it quoted in refutations by Christian teachers, and second we actually possess some of their writings. **In 1945** a cache of Gnostic writings in a sealed glass jar was unearthed in **Nag Hammadi** on the west bank of the Nile in upper Egypt by two farmers digging for natural fertilizer. There were in this jar, some 52 Gnostic treatises by various writers, found in 13 codices, or leather bound books, one book of which was burned by the farmers. They all date to the second century. The most famous was the **Gospel of Thomas**, about which, more in a minute. They were all written in Coptic, or Egyptian probably translations from the Greek. All these writings are available online.

## GNOSTIC TEACHING

**What did the Gnostics teach?** Though the outlines of the teaching are relatively amorphous, there are a few characteristics that we might summarize as follows (Gonzales, pages 58-60):

- ◆ Gnosticism comes from the word gnosis, in Greek, meaning “knowledge”. Gnostics taught that the **key to salvation** was mystical understanding, reserved for people with a special enlightened knowledge.
- ◆ All matter is evil or at best unreal.
- ◆ Humans are eternal spirits that have been trapped in material bodies.
- ◆ The Gnostic's goal is to escape from the body and this material world in which we've been exiled. The world is not our true home, but rather an obstacle to salvation.
- ◆ Originally, all reality was spiritual. The supreme being had no intention of creating a material world, but only a spiritual one. The supreme being in the beginning generated a number of spiritual beings (some said as many as 365), called “eons”. One of them, far removed from the supreme being, fell into error and created the abortion that is the material world.
- ◆ Since this world was nevertheless made by a spiritual being, there are still 'sparks' or 'bits' of spirit in it. It is these that have been imprisoned in human bodies and must be liberated through gnosis, or divine knowledge.
- ◆ In order to achieve that liberation, a spiritual messenger must come to this world, to waken us from our 'dream', to remind us who we really are, and to call us to struggle against our imprisonment in our bodies where we are driven by impulses and passions.
- ◆ Above us are heavenly spheres ruled by evil powers whose aim is to prevent us from reaching

the spiritual realm.

- ◆ In order to reach the spiritual “fullness,” we must break through each of those spheres.
- ◆ The only way to do this is to have the secret knowledge that opens the way—much like a spiritual password.
- ◆ The heavenly messenger, sent to give us that knowledge, without which there is no salvation, is Christ. He reminds us of our heavenly origin, and gives us the secret knowledge which allows us to return to the spiritual mansions.
- ◆ Since the body is evil, Christ did not have a body like ours: it was only an appearance, like a ghost that seemed real. This doctrine we call “**Docetism**”, from the verb, to appear or seem.
- ◆ Others taught that the material Jesus and the Spiritual Christ were separate beings, the one just indwelling the other.
- ◆ Most denied that Jesus was born as an infant because that would have put him under the power of the material world.
- ◆ Since the body is the prison of the spirit, gnostic teachers recommended basically two way to deal with it: either, to control the body and its passions through rigorous **asceticism** and thus weaken its power over the spirit...or, simply leave it to its passions, since the body is unimportant anyway and will die, whereas the spirit is by nature good and cannot be destroyed.

**What does all this deny?** Creation, the goodness of our Creator, the reality of the material world, the truth of the Old Testament; the connection between the Old Testament God and the New; the incarnation, the resurrection; the goodness of marital love; the true nature of sin, faith, and especially, the work of Christ for us on the cross: a gift to be accepted by faith.

An aside here: in books such as Brown's The Da Vinci Code it is taught that there were many Gospels competing in the first decades of the church, all equally valid, and that the four Gospels in our NT today were simply imposed by the guys who got their preferences adopted in the Church councils, a kind of political game that could have gone any number of different directions. (cf. Walter Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (1934). However, there were never any other than four Gospels in the first century, and lest any of you be fascinated by the teaching of the Gnostic Gospels which were written in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and some of which rediscovered at Nag Hammadi, I'd like to read a few excerpts, from four such Gospels published in the book: The Secret Teachings of Jesus, translated by Marvin W. Meyer, so that you can see for yourselves how different and inferior these were to the Gospels which we honor and which bear testimony to that which Jesus actually said and did.

### 1. **Gospel of Thomas:**

These are reputed secret sayings that Jesus spoke and Thomas the Twin recorded:

**(Sayings 11 and 12):** “ Jesus said,

"This heaven will pass away, and the heaven above it will pass away.

The dead are not alive, and the living will not die.

During the days when you ate what is dead, you made it alive.

...

On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?

The disciples said to Jesus, 'We know you will leave us. Who is going to be our leader then?'

Jesus said to them, 'No matter where you reside, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.'" (pages 20-21)

**Saying 103:** “Whoever recognizes father or mother will be called the child of a whore.”

**Saying 113:** “Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, because women are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, 'Behold, I shall guide her so as to make her male, that she too may become a living spirit like you men. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'”

2. **The Secret Book of James:** (for a look at specious wisdom and paradoxical nonsense)  
(page5, chapter 2.10-16)

“For this reason I tell you: be filled, and let there be no empty space within you, for otherwise the one who is to come can laugh at you.”

Then Peter answered, “Behold, three times you have told us to be filled, but we are already filled.”

The Savior answered and said,

“I have told you to be filled so that you may not lack anything since those who are lacking will not be saved.

Thus, to be filled is good and to lack is bad.

Yet, it is also good for you to be lacking, but bad for you to be filled.

For those who are filled are also lacking, and one person who is lacking is not filled in the same way as another.

The one who is filled, though, becomes sufficiently perfect.

Hence, you should be lacking when you can be filled, and filled when you can be lacking,

because then you can be filled even more.

So be filled with spirit but lacking in human reason, for human reason is only human reason, and the soul, too, is only soul.”

3. **The Book of Thomas** (a Dialogue between Jesus and Thomas, overheard and recorded by Matthew, arranged in chapters and verses)

(Chapter 4:13-5:7)

“The Savior answered and said,

'Blessed is the wise person who seeks truth.

When one find it, one rests upon it forever, and is not afraid of those who want to disturb one.'

“Thomas answered and said, 'Is it good for us, Lord, to find rest among our own people?'

“The Savior answered and said,

'Yes, it does help. It is good for you, since what is visible in human existence will pass away. For the fleshly body of people will pass away, and when it disintegrates, it will find its place in what is visible and can be seen.

Then the fire that those people see will make them suffer, because of their love for the faith they once had. They will be brought back to the visible realm. Moreover, those people who can see in the invisible realm will be consumed, without that first love, in their concern about life and the raging of the fire.

There is but a little time before what you can see will pass away. Then shapeless ghosts will come and live in the tombs among the corpses, forever bringing pain and destruction of soul.'

“Thomas answered and said,

'What can we say in the face of these things?'

What shall we say to people who are blind?

What instruction shall we give to these miserable mortals?

They say, 'We have come to do good, not to curse,'

but add, 'If we had not been born in the flesh, we would not have known about sin.'"

The Savior said, 'This is true: do not thin of them as human beings, but consider them as animals. For as animals devour each other, so also people like this devour each other.

Moreover, the kingdom is taken from them, since

they love the delights of fire,

they are slaves of death,

and they revel in filth.

They fulfill the lust of their parents. These people will be thrown down into hell, and will be beaten as their bitter, wicked natures deserve. They will be whipped to drive them down to the unknown and will leave the limbs of their bodies behind, not with courage but with despair."

4. **The Secret Book of John** (arranged in chapters and verses, the longest at 32 pages; It has lists and lists of gods, demons and angels and how all came about. Here is an example:)

The throng of angels stood by and received these seven psychical substances from the authorities. Then they could create a network of limbs and trunk, with all the parts properly arranged. The first angel began by creating the head:

Eteraphaope-Abron created the head,

Meniggesstroeth created the brain,

Asterechme the right eye,

Thaspomocha the left eye,

Yeronomos the right ear,

Bissoum the left ear,

Akioreim the nose,

Banen-Ephroum the lips,

Amen the teeth,

Ibikan the molars,

Basiliademe the tonsils,

Achchan the uvula,

Adaban the neck,

Chaaman the vertebrae,

Deracho the throat,

Tebar the right shoulder ...

Abitrion the right palm,

Euanthen the left palm, Kurs the right hand...

(This goes on for four pages.)

[MARCION: flourished 140 to 160 A.D.](#)

Another, equally pernicious and long lasting false teaching was that of Marcion, who developed a large following in Rome, and whose "church" (he ordained bishops) lasted for centuries, existing as a rival to the real thing. Marcion, whose father was bishop of Sinope in Pontus, knew Christianity from an early age. But he profoundly disliked both Judaism and the material world. As you can see, he had some Gnostic traits. And was stridently anti-Jewish. About A.D. 144 he went to Rome and joined the Church there where he gathered a following. When it became clear that his teaching contradicted the

universally accepted teaching of the church, he left the Church and formed his own.

### Teaching of Marcion

- ◆ Two gods: Since the material world was evil in Marcion's eyes, he had to figure what to do about its creator, and came to the conclusion that the **Creator of the Old Testament was not the same god as the God of the New**. For him there were two gods: Jehovah, of the Old Testament who was an evil, stern, and warlike judge, and the other, the Father or Supreme God of the New, a gentle, mild, kind, and supremely good god: .
- ◆ The Supreme God's purpose was for there to be only a spiritual world; however, the evil Jehovah god, by accident or however, managed to make this material world and place mankind in it. He is vindictive, arbitrary, wrathful, and...he did indeed inspire the Old Testament.
- ◆ The Father god of Christians however, is not vindictive, but loving. This God requires nothing of us, but rather gives everything freely, including salvation. This God does not seek to be obeyed, but to be loved. It is out of compassion for us, Jehovah's creatures, that the Supreme God has sent his Son to save us. But Jesus was not really born of Mary, since such a thing would have made him subject to Jehovah. Rather, he simply appeared as a grown man during the reign of Tiberius. Naturally, at the end, there will be no judgment, since the Supreme God is absolutely loving, and will simply forgive us.
- ◆ Scriptures: So where does that place us so far as the scriptures are concerned? The Old Testament, or Hebrew scriptures were simply set aside. They were the words of an inferior god and should not be read in church.
- ◆ Marcion made a list of the books he considered valid from what we call the New Testament today—books circulating in the churches of his day, as in the days of the Apostles--but excluded 3 of the 4 Gospels, only **retaining Luke**, which he heavily edited, taking out any references to the Old Testament. He also retained **the 10 epistles of Paul**, which he also edited, taking out all Old Testament quotes. He claimed these quotes were later interpolations, the handiwork of Judaizers seeking to subvert the original message. He took out all references to Bethlehem and Nazareth, the narratives of the Annunciation to Mary, Christ's baptism, the temptation, and the genealogy. Jesus, of course, was not a Messiah announced ahead of time in the Old Testament.
- ◆ Incidentally, Marcion's teaching still holds significant attraction in the world today. Think of the writings of Richard Dawkins, and his book, the God Delusion, “one of the most successful works of atheist apologetics in recent years (Heresy, Alister McGrath, page 131). The God that Dawkins does not believe in is 'a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (Dawkins, page 31).

### What is wrong with his teaching?

Creation is evil; our bodies are evil...this would have been the death of science before it was even invented. (Cf., India and China where science did not develop, but where similar ideas as to the material world were current in religious philosophy.) It would also have debased marriage. There is no truth if there is no judgment. Jesus comes randomly, without any preparation of God beforehand; history becomes meaningless. Evil is found elsewhere than the heart. How does one repent of the material world, except in asceticism? The incarnation is eliminated, and hence, God's loving closeness to us; the work of atonement for us is unnecessary, etc. Prejudice against the Jewish race...; Jesus' own teaching that he was the fulfillment of the Law, is discarded.

Paul, 1 Timothy 4:1-5 *“The Spirit clearly states that in later times some will abandon the faith and*

*follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”*

## TEACHERS AND APOLOGISTS

So how did the Church respond? The Church, finding itself surrounded, not only by persecution, but by false teaching of this kind, taught. Among its ranks, men rose up to argue before Rome and the church's critics the truth of the Christian faith (these we call today, **apologists**); Others founded schools and published books, to repudiate the Church's internal enemies (these we call the **Teachers**). They made a cogent exposition of orthodox faith, writing extensively. As we don't have time to examine their writing in detail, I'll simply list the most important names of the second century.

### Apologists

- ◆ **Aristides:** in 138 A.D. wrote an apology that has recently been rediscovered.
- ◆ **Justin Martyr:** Wrote: *Apology I and II*, around 155-160 AD, and *A Dialogue with Trypho*, a Jewish rabbi. He made it through torture for his faith, but died shortly thereafter, in 165, having been denounced to the emperor. Justin was a convert to Christianity, having searched through much philosophy before becoming a Christian. He attempted to show that the Logos of God through whom the universe was created, was the principle, as well, behind everything beautiful and worthy in pagan creation, thus attempting to build a bridge between Greek and Christian culture.
- ◆ **Athenagoras**, 177-180 wrote, *A Plea for Christians*, a treatise he sent to the emperor, arguing the truth of Christianity. You can find the whole document online. It is a remarkable document and well worth reading. Among other things, he shows the folly of the accusations of Christians eating babies hidden in loaves of bread when he writes: *“And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care, and then when it has passed into life, to kill it; (or on one hand) not to expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it. But we are in all things always alike and the same, submitting ourselves to reason, and not ruling over it.”* He also wrote a treatise called: *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.
- ◆ **Tatian**, one of Justin Martyr's students, and an Assyrian. He wrote, *An Address to the Greeks*; Tatian also wrote a harmony of the Gospels in 170 A.D., which is thought to be the first translation from the Greek of the Gospels into a local language, the Syriac language. He was proud to be an Asian. In his Address to the Greeks, he asks: *“Where did the Greeks learn their astronomy?”* he asks. *“From Babylon in Asia. Their alphabet? From the Phoenicians. Their poetry and music? From Phrygia in Asia Minor. Their postal system? From Persia. In every way the East excels and most of all in its religion, the Christian religion, which also comes from Asia and which is far older and truer than all the philosophies and crude religious myths of the Greeks.”* (Moffatt, Vol. 1, page 74).
- ◆ **Theophilus**, bishop of Antioch, wrote *Three Books to Autolytus*, which dealt with the doctrine of God, the interpretation of Scripture, and Christian life.

A word might be said here as to why these apologists would have to defend their faith against calumny.

Some of the rumors circulated against Christians were these (Gonzales, pages 49-50):

- ◆ Christians gathered every week to celebrate a “love feast” to which only those having been baptized were admitted. They called each other brother and sister and referred to their spouses as their sisters. Joining these facts together, they were accused by the surrounding culture as joining in orgiastic celebrations in which Christians ate and drank to excess, put the lights out, and vented their lusts in indiscriminate and incestuous unions.
- ◆ Since Christians spoke of being nourished by the body and blood of Christ, and since they also spoke of him as a little child, some came to the conclusion that, as an initiation rite, Christians concealed a newborn in a loaf of bread, and then ordered the neophyte to cut the loaf. When this was done, they all joined in eating the warm flesh of the infant.
- ◆ Some also claimed that Christians worshiped an ass.

### **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*. Among his arguments is that the teaching of the Gnostics was new; that it was not taught in the early church.
- ◆ **Pantaeus** founded a Catechetical School at Alexandria: in 180 AD he also visited the Mar Thoma Church on the west coast of India where he discovered the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, but little is known of him, except that he was widely loved and respected.
- ◆ **Clement of Alexandria**: he was a disciple of Pantaeus and flourished between 180-200 AD; he died in 215 AD. He succeeded Pantaeus as head of the Catechetical school in Alexandria. He wrote *Exhortation to the Pagans*. He had a profound effect.
- ◆ **Tertullian of Carthage**, (c. 160 – c. 220 AD) was a native of North Africa, possibly a Berber. He converted to Christ in Rome when he was about forty years old, though he lived most of his life in north Africa in Carthage in what is now Tunisia.
- ◆ **Origen**, disciple of Clement of Alexandria was born c. 185, probably in Alexandria, Egypt — died c. 254, Tyre, Phoenicia). We'll get to him next week.

### **Apostles' Creed or Symbol of the Apostles.**

About this time, the Apostles' Creed or Symbol of the Apostles also began to circulate in an early form. Though most of the Creed was written in the 2nd century AD, some of the clauses originate from the 4th or 5th centuries. The present Creed, formulated around 450, is the end product of gradual development and may originally have been used as a pre-baptismal declaration of belief. If you think about it, you can easily see how many of the clauses in it stand against gnostic teaching, as well as Marcion's:

- \* “I believe in God the Father Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth”,
- ◆ “born of the virgin Mary”,
- ◆ “He suffered” etc.,
- ◆ “Was crucified, dead, and buried...”

### **The MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP**

About 155, while the policy outlined by the emperor Trajan concerning Christians was still in effect, a bishop to whom I referred earlier, met his death in martyrdom. His name was Polycarp. We are lucky enough to have the whole event recorded and preserved. Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna, in what is now Turkey, one of the churches mentioned in the book of Revelation. This is what happened.

A group of Christians was denounced and brought before the authorities for questioning. One of them was an old man named Germanicus. With pity for his old age, the authorities told him to take into account his age and recant rather than suffer torture. But Germanicus had just witnessed the torture of the other members of the group and replied that he had no desire to continue living in a world where such injustice occurred. And to show how much he meant it, he called to the beasts to come and get him. This provoked the crowd more which began to shout: "Down with the Atheists!" meaning, people who worshiped an invisible god. And then "Bring on Polycarp!"

When Polycarp heard of this, he followed the advice of his flock and went into hiding for several days; but after having changed hiding places several times, he finally decided that if he was discovered, it was the will of God and waited for his persecutors to find him. When they did, they attempted all the way to the authorities to persuade him to recant as did the proconsul who presided over the trial. First his judge told him to merely shout out: 'Down with the Atheists!' (meaning, the Christians). Polycarp obliged by pointing at the crowds in the arena and shouting 'Down with the Atheists!'

Flustered, the proconsul reminded him that he was an old man and promised him that if he would swear by the emperor and curse Christ he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied: *"For eight-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?"*

"Thus the dialogue went on. When the judge threatened him with burning, Polycarp simply answered that the fire that the judge could light would last only a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out. Finally, we are told that after he was tied to the post in the pyre, he looked up and prayed out loud: 'Lord Sovereign God...I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ....For this...I bless and glorify you. Amen' (Gonzales, page 44-5). And so the wood was lit, and so Polycarp died. He was 86 years old.

### **MARCUS AURELIUS emperor 161-180 A.D.**

Incidentally, the Roman emperor who came to the imperial throne six years later in A.D. 161, was one of the most enlightened in Roman history. His name was Marcus Aurelius. He wrote a collection of Meditations which are among the literary masterpieces of the age. We might expect him to have been lenient with Christians. And yet, this emperor who was enlightened, humble, refined, dedicated to doing his task with simple dignity, kindness, freedom and justice; this man who was no lover of power was nevertheless a child of the age. He was superstitious, constantly seeking the advice of seers and offering sacrifices before every significant undertaking. When an endless string of invasions, floods, epidemics and other disasters struck the empire during his reign, he accepted the explanation floating about that these things were happening because the gods were angry with Rome for tolerating the presence of Christians, so, on the one hand, he attempted to revive interest in the Greek and Roman religion, and on the other, renewed persecution of Christians, to whom, the only reference he makes in his writings, is of being "obstinate." Justin Martyr the apologist died during his reign, having been denounced by a philosopher he had bested in public debate in Rome.