

CHURCH HISTORY

The Church Fathers (A.D. 96-313)

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Early Church History, part 10

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. As the apostles passed from the scene through death, other leaders arose in the church to take their place. These leaders are called “fathers” because of the esteem in which they were held by the church in general.
- B. The Church Fathers are usually divided into four groups: the Apostolic Fathers (A.D. 96-150); the Apologists (A.D. 130-180); the Polemicists (A.D. 180-225); and the Scientific Theologians (A.D. 225-460).

II. LOCATING THE CHURCH FATHERS

WEST	EAST
FIRST CENTURY (A.D. 96-150):	APOSTOLIC FATHERS — To Edify Christians; Typological Interpretation.
Clement of Rome (Epistle of Clement)	Ignatius Polycarp Pseudo-Barnabas Second Epistle of Clement The Epistle to Dognetus Papias Shepherd of Hermas (apocalyptic) Didache (catechetical manual)

SECOND CENTURY (A.D. 125-190): APOLOGISTS — To Defend Christianity		
Tertullian	Aristides Justin Martyr Tatian Athenagoras Theophilus	
THIRD CENTURY (A.D. 190-250): POLEMICISTS — To Fight False Doctrine		
<u>Practical (polity)</u> Irenaeus — Gnostics Tertullian — Trinity Cyprian — Episcopacy of Rome	<u>Speculative (theology) Alexandria</u> Pantaenus Clement of Alexandria Origen — <i>Hexapla</i> (text of Old Testament); <i>De Principiis</i> (first systematic theology, used allegory)	
FOURTH CENTURY (A.D. 325-460): GOLDEN AGE OF SCIENTIFIC BIBLE STUDY		
<u>Dogmatic — Creed</u> Jerome — translator of Vulgate Bible Ambrose — preacher Augustine — philosophy of history in <i>City of God</i> ; theologian	<u>Alexandrian School (Allegorical)</u> Athanasius Basil of Caesarea	<u>Antiochene School (Grammatico-historical)</u> Chrysostom — preacher (Christian conduct) Theodore — (use of context)

III. THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS (A.D. 96-150)

- A *Introduction:* The first leaders of the church after the death of the apostles were the Apostolic Fathers. They are called the Apostolic Fathers because they are said to have been taught personally by the apostles. Their writings are filled with typology from the Old Testament concerning the person and death of Christ. The main purpose of the Apostolic Fathers was to exhort and edify the church. At times, they seem to have a poor grasp of salvation by grace through faith, and are not doctrinally oriented. Apparently, the Apostolic

Fathers had not yet penetrated very deeply into the truth revealed in the Bible. Their conception of Christianity was very simple. They thought of Christ chiefly as the revealer of the knowledge of the one true God, and the proclaimer of a law of high and strict morality. On the whole, they picture a church still throbbing with missionary zeal, a church in which individual responsibility is still everywhere recognized, and a church in which hierarchal organization is at a minimum.

- B. *Clement of Rome (A.D. 30-100)*: Clement was the leading elder in the local church at Rome. Around A.D. 97 he wrote several epistles to the church at Corinth, which was rebelling against its elders. He exhorted them to godly living and obedience to their elders. Obedience to elders (bishops) is to be the practical guarantee of Christian unity. Clement's first letter is especially valuable because of its profuse quotations (about A.D. 150) from the Old Testament.
- C. *Ignatius (died A.D. 110)*: Ignatius was bishop of Antioch. In approximately A.D. 110 he was apprehended by Roman authorities because of his Christian profession and sent to Rome for martyrdom. Along the way to Rome, he wrote seven letters to promote unity in the churches. Unity was to be achieved by rooting out heresies, namely Gnosticism which denied the full divine-human nature of Christ, and by the subjection of leaders in local congregations to a ruling bishop. Thus, impetus was given to the power of bishops as a separate office, but only over a local congregation. Ignatius was almost fanatical about his martyrdom, and prevented any action that might have hindered him from being put to death for Christ.
- D. *Polycarp (A.D. 70-155)*: Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna, and had been a disciple of the apostle John. He was a man of simple and beautiful faith, and of a loving heart. Polycarp's letter to the Philippians still remains, which exhorts to faith and daily Christian living. He does not concern himself with church organization and discipline. In A.D. 155 at age 86, he was burnt at the stake for his Christian convictions.

IV. THE APOLOGISTS (A.D. 125-190)

- A. *Introduction*: The Apologists were well educated men who defended the faith to the Roman government and pagan populace who leveled unjust charges and spread vicious rumors about Christians. These defenders of Christianity were much more philosophical than the Apostolic Fathers. They made much use of

Old Testament prophecy to show that Christianity was merely the fulfillment and continuation of the Hebrew faith. Apologists claimed that the Hebrew faith was older than pagan religions, and that any morality the pagan religions had was obtained from the God of Moses. They put a great deal of emphasis upon Christ, thus possessing a Christ-centered faith — although it must be admitted that many did not have a clear concept of the Trinity.

- B. *Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165)*: Born of pagan parents near the town of Shechem, Samaria, he early became a wandering philosopher in search of truth. He tried Stoic philosophy, the noble idealism of Plato, Aristotle's ideas, and other philosophies of his day. His great knowledge of these philosophies of life left him empty, for he realized the inadequacies of human reasoning. One day, walking near the shore at Ephesus, he met an old man "of meek and venerable manners" who pointed him to the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. He was marvelously saved. The flame of a divine love took possession of Justin, and he found the true philosophy. "Straightway," he wrote in one of his books, "a flame was kindled in my soul, and a love of the prophets and of those men who are friends of Christ. Theirs is the oldest and truest explanation of the beginning and end of things and of those matters which the philosophers sought to know because they were filled with the Holy Spirit. This glorified the Creator, the God and Father of all things, and proclaimed His Son, the Christ. I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable."

Justin wrote several Apologies to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his adopted son, Marcus Aurelius, in which he defended Christianity against the charges that this new religion was guilty of atheism, cannibalism, immorality and anti-social action. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, he endeavors to convince the Jews of the messiahship of Jesus Christ. Justin was beheaded for his faith in Christ, and thus received his name Justin Martyr.

The conversion of Justin Martyr is much like that of the late C.S. Lewis of England, who was one of the leading philosophers of his day and strongly anti-Christian. God quietly drew C.S. Lewis to the Saviour, so that he received Christ and became one of the leading Christian philosophers of the twentieth century.

- C. *Tertullian (A.D. 160-225)*: Tertullian is difficult to classify, for he was both an apologist and a polemicist. He is regarded as the founder of Latin theology. Tertullian was born of heathen parents in Carthage, which was a large and beautiful city and the center of Latin culture. He was a well educated lawyer with a keen mind and great mental energy. Before his conversion he lived a

typical pagan life of immorality. He was a layman who became a presbyter in Carthage, and was an excellent student of philosophy and history. Tertullian was characterized with a fiery personality, and was either starting a fight or in the middle of one. He attacked anyone who did not agree with him. Some have called Tertullian the “Poison Pen Pegler” and the “Martin Luther of the Early Church.” He hated philosophy with a passion, and often spoke of “miserable Aristotle.”

Tertullian’s main writings are apologies, in which he defends Christianity against paganism. His legal knowledge brings crushing logic against the pagan religions of Rome. In his *Against Heresies*, he attacks the Gnostics of his day, and probably doing more to destroy this philosophy than any other church father. He was the first to use the word “Trinity” in opposing third century unitarianism. The writing *Christian Virtues* lashes out at the immorality of his day such as the theater, women’s dress, women’s jewelry, moral degeneracy, etc. He opposed these because they were connected with emperor worship and pagan religions which stirred immoral passions. Tertullian was the first fundamentalist who pointed up specific sins as wrong. In his *The Idolatry* he maintained that a Christian could not enter the army or hold public office because he would be called on to participate in heathen rites such as pouring out libations.

Tertullian was a man of stern, gloomy and passionate nature who was very inclined to asceticism and legalism. His nature made him a target for the error of Montanism (involving a perversion of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit), and he was many years in this extreme, fanatical group. He did, however, renew fellowship with the church before his death. In spite of his lapse into Montanism, his great gifts continued to secure for him the respect of the church generally. He had, however, grave faults, and could be unfair, fanatical and vindictive.

V. THE POLEMICISTS (A.D. 190-250)

- A. *Introduction:* The Polemicists were raised up by God to fight the heresies that were beginning to make inroads into the church. In refuting error, they used much of the New Testament and were a key in the forming of a New Testament canon. The work of the Polemicists also gave rise to the concept of an orthodox catholic church opposed to heresy. While most of the Apologists were from the East, most of the Polemicists were from the West. The Eastern mind was more concerned with speculative theology, whereas the Western

mind was concerned with church organization and practical doctrine for solving problems.

- B. *Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202)*: Irenaeus was born in Smyrna and later moved to Lyons in Gaul, now France, where he became bishop. He wrote *Against Heresies* in five books, in which he refuted the Gnostics of that day. Some of Irenaeus' theology was weak, but he did believe in a literal interpretation of Scripture and that all knowledge must be based on the Bible. He was the first to systematize an argument against Gnosticism, and was a biblical theologian. He felt, like most of the church fathers, that the unity of the organized church was the best way to keep out heresy. Irenaeus was martyred for the Faith.
- C. *Cyprian (A.D. 200-258)*: Cyprian was born in Carthage to very cultured, noble parents. At the age of 46, he was won to Christ by an older presbyter whom he had befriended, and who directed him to the study of the Bible. After his conversion, he sold his beautiful estate in literal obedience to the words of Christ and gave the money to the poor. Two years later he became an elder, and very soon after that was made the bishop of Carthage. During the bishopric of Cyprian, a terrible persecution came to North Africa from the Roman emperor Decius. Many Christians, including Cyprian, fled under the persecution. Those who stayed, suffered and died were called Novatians, who followed Novatius. The Novatians did not appreciate these lapsed ones, especially Cyprian, and put into office a rival bishop to Cyprian in Carthage. Cyprian returned after the persecution with many other lapsed ones, and the Novatians would not recognize them as true Christians unless they repented and were baptized. Many Novatians would not readmit any of the lapsed ones under any conditions. Consequently, a great division came to the Christians in Carthage. Cyprian, in order to combat the Novatians, insisted on unity of the church and denounced the sin of not rendering obedience to the bishop. He claimed the bishop held his authority directly from God. He made the most stupendous claims for the absolute supremacy of the bishop as a God-appointed ruler of the church.

More than any other man, Cyprian gave impetus to the idea of the episcopate, setting the scene for the rise of the papal system. He was also the first person to speak of the clergy as sacrificing the very body and blood of Christ. Until Cyprian's time, the church constantly boasted in its dealings with pagans that it had neither altar nor sacrifice. Cyprian died a martyr's death.

- D. *Origen (A.D. 185-254)*: Origen was born in a Christian home, and his father was martyred for Christ. He wanted to die for Christ with his father, but his

mother hid his clothes so that he had to stay home. Origen had a brilliant mind and was by far the greatest scholar in the early church. He was a deep, original thinker, and at age 18 became the leader of the Alexandrian School, which was founded originally to instruct converts to Christ from paganism. This school was based on a faulty view of the interpretation of the Bible. They believed the Bible to be inspired, but accepted the allegorical method of interpretation which goes behind the literal meaning for the deeper more spiritual meaning. Origen was a product of this method of interpretation, and pushed it all the days that he lived. While he had access to wealth through a rich friend, he chose the simple life of asceticism. He died a martyr's death by decapitation.

Origen wrote profusely, producing thousands of works. Jerome said he produced more books than any other man could read in a lifetime. Some estimated his works at 6,000, including letters and articles. His best known works are the *Hexapla* (a critical and textual study of Old Testament), his voluminous *Commentaries*, the *First Principles* (the first attempt at writing a systematic theology), and *Against Celsus* (a brilliant apologetic against an anti-Christian work which had gone unanswered for 70 years. Origen was used by God to give the church a better understanding of Christ, even though he saw the Son as subordinate in nature to the Father.

Origen was not always clear on his theology and in the area of speculation his mind ran riot. His bold, pioneering spirit caused him to be regarded as a heretic in many quarters — and perhaps he was, but God only knows. He held three heretical views: (1) that all souls of men existed as fallen spirits before the birth of the individual, and that this accounted for man's sinful nature; (2) in his atonement Christ paid a ransom to Satan, by whom all were enslaved in the bondage of sin; and (3) the rejected, who go to Hell at death, will experience there a purifying fire which ultimately will cleanse even the wicked, and all will ultimately reach heaven. At the second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553) the church condemned Origen's views as heretical, and since then none of the major branches of the Christian church has held to universalism.