

# CHURCH HISTORY

## The Doctrinal Beliefs of the Early Church up to A.D. 313

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

### Early Church History, part 11

#### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Until A.D. 313, the church as a whole was not too interested in deep doctrine, not was it doctrinally oriented. It was much more interested in practical Christian living and the spreading of the gospel. However, heresy forced the true Church to search the Scriptures and set forth systematic theologies.
- B. We can't be too hard on these early churchmen, for they were pioneers in theology. Many of these men were just out of paganism; only portions of the New Testament were available, and very few copies of the Old Testament. Only a handful of people were able interpreters of the Bible.
- C. An understanding of Christian doctrine and its development is very important. Where little doctrine is taught, there is great ignorance of the Christian Faith. The theory that doctrine is unimportant is not only shallow and foolish, it is also crafty. It is one of the devil's best tricks.
- D. From the Apostles' Creed we know the early church believed in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the work of Christ for sin, the virgin birth, the Resurrection, the Ascension, a literal hell, the second coming of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life in heaven.

#### II. DOCTRINAL BELIEFS

- A. *Introduction:* From the Apostles' Creed, it is obvious that the early church believed in the fundamentals of the Christian Faith. There are also controversial areas of doctrine in which the early church gives great help or insight into its own shortcomings.
- B. *The Atonement:* The Fathers were not always clear on the atonement, but were convinced as a whole that there was no salvation apart from the work of Christ

on the cross. They often did not see the death of Christ as a substitution for sinners, which is obviously the clear teaching of the Bible.

1. *Ransom to Satan Theory*: This view is sometimes called the “Military” or “Patristic” theory, and was advocated by Origen. This theory says the death of Christ was a ransom paid to Satan to free man from sin; but Satan was deceived in the bargain, for he could not retain his hold on the Son of God who rose from the dead. In the conflict between the forces of Christ and the forces of evil, Christ wins the battle at the Cross.
  2. *Recapitulation Theory*: This theory, advocated by Irenaeus, viewed Christ as recapitulating in himself the stages of human life, so that he reversed the course on which Adam started humanity by the Fall. Christ’s obedience compensated for the disobedience of Adam.
- C. *The Second Coming*: The early church did not have a well thought out theory of eschatology, but it was looking for the return of the Lord at any time. Clement of Rome, in his letter to Corinth, said:
- “Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall his will be accomplished, as the Scriptures also bear witness saying, ‘Speedily will he come, and will not tarry’; and ‘The Lord shall suddenly come to his temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.’”
- D. *The Millennium*: As far as we can tell from history, the early fathers in the first and second centuries were millennialists who believed that Christ would return to establish his kingdom on earth. Thus, they were premillennialists, believing that Christ’s return would precede his millennial reign. It wasn’t until late in the third century that premillennialism was challenged on a large scale because many premillennialists held such a carnal view of Christ’s literal kingdom. The heretical Montanists were premillennial, and, because of the vivid descriptions given by them of a millennial epoch of sensuous enjoyment, the doctrine of Christ’s second coming, with which this was identified, was de-emphasized by the church as a whole.
1. *Justin Martyr*: “But I and whatsoever Christians are orthodox in all things do know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, and a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, built, adorned, and enlarged, according as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other prophets have promised” (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*).

2. *Tertullian*: “But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; in as much as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem” (*Against Marcion*).
3. *Irenaeus*: “The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead” (*Against Heresies*).
4. *Papias*: According to a second-hand account, Papias received an unwritten tradition of an earthly millennial kingdom after Christ’s return (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1.154).

The evidence also suggests that the early church was post-tribulational. They saw the church as spiritual Israel, and believed that they were in the tribulation period spoken of in the Bible.

- E. *Modes of Baptism*: For adult converts out of heathenism, it is fairly obvious that immersion was the most prominent mode of baptism during the first three centuries. In order to combat the Arian heresy, trine immersion became very popular.
1. *Tertullian*: “When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed.”
  2. *Didache*: “And concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit in running water. But if thou has not running water, baptize in other water; and, if thou canst not in cold water, in warm. But if thou hast neither, put water thrice upon the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”
- F. *Infant Baptism*: It is generally agreed by most objective scholars that infant baptism for children of Christian parents was practiced by most of the early Church Fathers such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Augustine, etc. Other church fathers do not mention infant baptism, but they do not speak against it either. The sole known opponent to infant baptism in the early church was Tertullian. He acknowledged that infant baptism was the norm in

his day, but advised people to delay baptism until late in life because he believed that baptism actually washed away all a person's sins.

G. *Church Government*: The early church had a simple church government with elders or presbyters ruling over a local assembly. But early in the Church a distinction was made between an elder and a bishop (originally they were the same office), and this set the stage for the papal system as we now know it.

1. *Irenaeus*: "Respect the bishop as a type of God, and the presbyters as the council of God, and the college of the apostles. Apart from these there is not even the name of a church."
2. *Ignatius*: "Do ye all follow your bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father. Do nothing without the bishop."
3. *Cyprian*: "He who is not in the church of Christ is not a Christian. He can not longer have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother. There is not salvation outside the church. The church is based on the unity of the bishops. The bishop is in the church, and the church is in the bishop. If anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the church."

H. *Church Polity*: The early church had a very simple service centered around the congregation and the teaching of the Word. Excessive ritual grew out of the Roman Catholic system. Justin Martyr describes the typical church service as follows:

"On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles (i.e. the gospels) or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then, we all rise together and pray, and when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgiving, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given" (*First Apology*).