

CHURCH HISTORY NOTES

PART ONE: THE EARLY CHURCH (65-430 A.D.)

Apostolic Fathers (Actually Post-Apostolic; 95-150 A.D.)

Generally, these were certain elders or bishops held in high esteem by their church members, and those whose historical relationship with later church developments were significant. The Apostolic Fathers were persons who knew the Apostles and were their disciples and began reflecting on and writing about the teachings of the Apostles.

Examples include Clement (d. c. 96 A.D.) bishop of the church in Rome, in whose letters (the *First and Second Epistles of Clement*) are admonitions regarding the importance of church leadership and church unity. He may have been the Clement mentioned in Philippians 4:3.

Another example is Polycarp (c. 69-c. 155), Greek disciple of the Apostle John who became bishop of Smyrna. It is believed Polycarp was the Apostle John's scribe, who recorded John's visions which are the book of Revelation. He wrote a letter to the Philippians, and was martyred in Rome. An account of his martyrdom was written by his church, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. [General description given in Roland H. Bainton, *The Church of Our Fathers* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 23-24.; also included in an edition *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, James A. Kleist, S. J., trans. (NY: The Newman Press, 1948)].

Apostolic Instruction

The Didache (*The Teaching*), short for *The Teaching of the Twelve Disciples*, was a manual written before the end of the first century, believed to be instruction based on the sayings of Jesus and the teachings of the Apostles for instruction of Gentiles who desired to become Christians. *The Didache* includes instruction on the Christian way of living, Christian worship, and Church organization.

Apologists and Polemicists

It did not take long for many false teachings and unbelievers' criticisms to threaten the faithful communication of the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles, and consequently the credibility of the Christian faith and the growth of Christianity. A number of writers produced apologies (L. *apologia*) to defend Christianity. An apology was a legal term referring to a reasoned defense of the Christian faith. Polemicists were writers who confronted and refuted error and theological controversy within the Church; they wrote disputations on correct doctrine, otherwise known as polemics (a word from the Latin referring originally to war).

Irenaeus

An example of an apologist is Irenaeus (c. 130 – c. 200), born of Christian parents in Asia Minor (Turkey), possibly in Smyrna because he is known to have been a student of

Bishop Polycarp. He became Bishop of Lyons in Gaul (France) and wrote *The Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-Called*, also known as *Against Heresies*, a defense against Gnosticism. Irenaeus believed in the full deity and full humanity of Jesus. He is the first Christian writer to use, as Scripture, almost all of the books that are in our New Testament. It is believed he was martyred.

Tertullian

An example of both an **apologist** and a **polemicist** was Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus, known as **Tertullian** (c. 160 – c. 220), who was born into a Roman family living in Carthage in North Africa. He was trained as a lawyer and became a Christian as an adult. In his *Apologeticum* (c. 197) he attacked pagan superstitions, appealed for toleration of Christians as useful citizens of the state, and rebutted a variety of charges levied against Christians, demonstrating the superiority of the Hebrew-Christian tradition over paganism.

In *Against Praxeus** he established the orthodox understanding of the Trinity, using the terms *trinitas*, *substantia*, and *persona*, thus laying the foundation for a theology of the nature of God as one in essence (substance), and three in person. In *De Oratione* (*On Prayer*) he produced one of the earliest expositions of the Lord's Prayer. Because he wrote extensively about church doctrine and in Latin, he is called the "**Father of Latin Theology**." Tertullian also forwarded the beliefs in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the imminent return of Jesus, a position advanced by Montanus from Phrygia. Tertullian pleaded with Christians to shun idol worship. A famous quote of his reads: "The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church." *[Praxeus was from Asia Minor, believed in the unity of the Godhead and vehemently disagreed with any attempt at the divisions of the personages of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.]

Tertullian's works were not only apologetic and polemical, but also moral, practical and doctrinal. In *De Oratione* may be seen his doctrinal and practical method of biblical interpretation. Doctrinally, the first part offers a phrase-by-phrase exegesis of the clauses of the Lord's Prayer. Practically, he then offers some reflections on the problems of conduct and disposition during prayer. Regarding the Lord's Prayer, Tertullian said its phrases comprise a "**compendium of the Gospel**."

From his various writings may be discovered his basic **principles of biblical interpretation** (hermeneutics). These include, among others:

Scripture should be taken mostly literally, using allegory only when the literal meaning is impossible;

Passages that are unclear must be interpreted on the basis of others that are clear;

The verbal structure and context of each passage must be taken into account;

The meaning of a Scripture passage must be in concert with the essence of the Christian faith, meaning there is a fundamental and normative truth in Scripture (*regula fidei*) which may be discerned. [From Michael Joseph Brown, *The Lord's Prayer Through North African Eyes* (NY: T & T Clark International, 2004), 228-229.]

Theologians

As Christianity developed there was an increase of those who were engaged in the very studious enterprise of the “science of theology;” in other words, the tasks of **formulating statements of belief**, doctrine, **based on** the teachings of the **whole Bible**. In the Early Church Era we speak of **Alexandrian Theologians** (North Africa), **Western Theologians** (those related primarily to the church centered in Rome), and **Eastern Theologians** (those ministering in Asia Minor (today Turkey) and Syria).

Prominent **Alexandrian Theologians** include **Origen** (c. 185-c. 254), who was the head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria. Origen was one of the earliest Bible commentators, and one of the first to construct a doctrinal framework for the Christian faith. Another noted theologian was **Athanasius** (c. 296-373), Bishop of Alexandria, who formulated doctrine on the Trinity.

The most prominent **Eastern Theologian** was **John Chrysostom** (c. 347-407), Bishop of Constantinople. He is most known for the theology gleaned from his sermons, of which 650 still exist. Chrysostom was one of the most powerful and eloquent preachers of his day. His sermons reveal him to be one of the greatest biblical expositors, using both the moral and literal interpretative approaches.

The **Western Theologians** of the early church are those with whom we are more familiar because they laid the foundation for the kinds of theological thinking and formulations which later blossomed in the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. One example is **Ambrose** (374-397), Bishop of Milan, who also wrote **commentaries** using the allegorical-mystical method of interpretation, and who introduced **congregational singing** of psalms and hymns in worship.

Jerome

Another significant Western Theologian was **Jerome** (c. 345-420), born east of northern Italy in what today is the country of Slovenia. He was educated in Rome where he studied grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and languages. At nineteen he was baptized. Jerome was drawn to the **ascetic lifestyle**; that is, living an austere life, denying self the things of this world, and concentrating on study and writing.

Eventually, he was ordained a priest, became a monk, and immersed himself in scholarship. Being skilled in Hebrew and Greek, he wrote **commentaries** on most of the books of the Bible. In 382 he was summoned to Rome to be secretary to Pope Damasus, who commissioned Jerome to produce a Latin translation of the Bible. After Pope Damasus died, Jerome settled and lived out his life in Bethlehem where he was Abbot of a monastery. It was there, after **twenty-three years of translating** from the available Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, that the Bible version in the common Latin language, known as the **Vulgate** (a term which means “common”), was completed. It was used in the church for a thousand years, and in 1546 the Council of Trent declared the **Vulgate** the only authentic Latin text of the Scriptures.

Augustine

A most important theologian in the western branch of Christianity was Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Born in Tagaste (in modern Algeria in North Africa), Augustine was educated in Carthage. In 384 he moved to Italy where he taught rhetoric in Milan and was influenced by the Bishop of Milan, Ambrose. Augustine repented of his sins and embraced Christianity in 386. He returned to North Africa, was ordained a priest in 391, elected Bishop of Hippo in 396, and served in that role until his death in 430.

Augustine was a prolific writer. Many of his sermons, essays, letters, and commentaries on many of the books of the Bible survive. Augustine had a very high view of the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible.

One of the first books written by him was his Confessions, essentially an autobiography in the form of a prayer, in which he was brutally honest about his sinfulness. A major work was his book On the Trinity, in which he summarized the development of the doctrine to that point: God is one in essence and three in person.

Augustine's most well-known work is his City of God, an apology (defense) of Christianity. This was the first developed philosophy of history, in which he traced the development of the city of earth and the city of God through biblical and secular history and shows the destiny of the two cities.

His doctrinal formulations, such as the doctrine of original sin which leads to the absolute need of God's grace for salvation, became the foundation for the leaders and theologians of the Protestant Reformation. He wrote that it is "not possible not to sin."

The Canon

One of the main accomplishments of the Early Church era was the establishment of the Canon of Scripture. The term "canon" means rule or standard, and refers to the standard number of accepted writings that make up the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The Old Testament writings had been agreed upon in 90 A.D. by a synod of rabbis at Jamnia, near Joppa. Near the end of the 1st century A.D., some of the writings of the New Testament were recognized as canonical. However, it was not until the Councils of Hippo and Carthage in 393, 397, and 419 that the final list of twenty-seven accepted writings was finalized. Criteria for acceptance as scripture included: Apostolicity (written by an apostle or someone close to the apostles); Internal Appeal (containing moral and doctrinal elements which measured up to the standards set by the apostles in their acknowledged writings); and the Testimony of the Church Fathers.

Councils and Creeds

The years during which the first six great Ecumenical Councils met (325-681) were turbulent. They were years during which the Church was torn apart by many theological controversies, yet which resulted in the formulation of great statements of faith. Creeds (L. *credo*, to believe) developed in response to the need for official statements of belief due to the many heresies which threatened the propagation of biblical truth. Emperor Constantine called an ecumenical Council in 325 at Nicaea in northwest Asia Minor.

Over three hundred bishops plus others gathered for the occasion. Heresies were exposed and the **Deity of Christ** affirmed. Controversy over the person and nature of the Holy Spirit led to the formulation of a statement of belief at the **Council of Chalcedon in 451**. During this period the church developed its hierarchical organization.

PART TWO: THE MIDDLE AGES (@ 500-1500)

Definition

In European history, the Middle Ages is so named because it has been thought of as the middle period of the three large divisions of Western history: Antiquity, Middle Ages, and the Modern Era. The Middle Ages is also called the **Medieval** Period. Medieval is a term derived from the Latin (L. *medium aevum*) meaning **middle age**. This era is marked by the collapse of the Roman Empire, the founding of many monasteries, and the gradual development of the "Holy Roman Empire." By 500 barbarian clans from the north and west were invading and chipping away at the borders of the Roman Empire, conquering the whole western portion of it.

Gregory the Great (c. 540-604)

Gregory the Great is often called the **first of the medieval popes** and is ranked with Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine as one of the four great leaders of the Latin Church. Around 570 he was made **prefect** of the city of Rome. He became a **monk** in 575, was ordained a **deacon** in 579, and was elected **pope** in 590. A new wave of barbarian invasions forced the pope to become more involved in government. As a result Gregory became a stabilizing political and ecclesiastical influence.

Gregory was the first pope to send missionaries to England. He also simplified and clarified Christian doctrine, enabling it to survive among the less cultured barbarian peoples of the Early Middle Ages. Consequently, he is **remembered as an important link between the wisdom and piety of the Early Church and Medieval Christianity**. Among his writings was a guide for bishops called the **Pastoral Rule** which became a standard manual for ministry leadership.

Islam

A rising threat to medieval Christianity should be mentioned. In 622 Mohammed began a successful period of preaching and constructed a theology which produced a steamroller movement that soon flattened the Middle East, North Africa, and part of Europe. Before his death in 632, Mohammed had won much of western Arabia. His successors continued the conquest of many areas, systematically overtaking the eastern Roman provinces. Damascus was overthrown in 635, and Jerusalem fell in 638. By 750 the map looked quite different.

A New Society

The old Roman Empire was a thing of the past, and the church centered in Rome stepped into the power void and brought a degree of unity to what was left of the empire in the West. Like Gregory the Great, the various popes became effective civil, political, military, as well as religious leaders in the West. Even the kings that eventually arose were appointed and coronated by the pope, such as the French king, Charles, who was crowned by Pope Leo III in the year 800. He became known as Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, and with his coronation, what came to be known as the **Holy Roman Empire** began. The term “Holy” is significant because of the close association between the **church and state** that characterized the Middle Ages in Europe.

The Spread and Split of the Church

Surprisingly, from 800 to 1073 the boundaries of Christendom greatly expanded to include geographical locations known to us as Bohemia, Moravia, Poland, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Russia. At the same time, however, tensions between the eastern and western segments of the church developed to the point when **fragmentation** was the result. Some of the factors which led to the split include the following. First, the two churches (Roman and Eastern) engaged in debate over **the use of icons** (images). Second, there was disagreement over the procession of the **Holy Spirit**; the East taught that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father; the West declared the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. Third, the **Patriarch of Constantinople** and the **Pope at Rome** were unwilling to be subservient to each other. Fourth, there was **no sharp definition of the boundaries** between territories to be ruled by Rome and Constantinople, with frequent disputes over the administration of border areas. Fifth, basic **differences** in **cultural background** and influence between East and West hindered understanding and cooperation. Sixth, there were numerous **liturgical differences**. **The official breach took place in 1054.**

Scholasticism

The **centers of education** during the Early Middle Ages were the **monasteries**. By about 1000 A.D. Europe had been “Christianized” religiously and stabilized politically. This set the stage for a **revival of theological study**. As in the past, however, theological undertakings were **strongly influenced by philosophy**, or more specifically, reason or logic. As a result, **medieval theology** focused on **the relationship between faith and reason**; that is, how Christianity can be shown to “make sense.” The term applied to this philosophical approach to theology at that time until about the fifteenth century was **Scholasticism**.

Anselm

The **first truly Scholastic theologian** was Anselm (1033-1109), born in Italy. He became a monk and devoted himself to studying the Bible and the Church Fathers, acquiring a significant reputation for his intellectual abilities, spiritual maturity and

ascetic lifestyle. In 1078 he became the Abbot of a monastery in Normandy (France), and in 1093 was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, in England.

An example of Anselm's writings was his *Proslogian*, originally entitled *Faith Seeking Understanding*. He wrote: "I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order that I may understand." While most people in general would think that we come to an understanding of something first, and then we decide whether or not it is worthy of belief, Anselm believed the things of God must first be accepted by faith, and only then can they be more fully understood through the use of human reason. **In Anselm's thinking, reason or logic is the God-given link between our thoughts and His thoughts.**

Anselm's process of theological thinking was not only based on biblical teaching, it was shaped by the philosophical approach of Plato (in Classical Antiquity, @ 400 B.C.), who, in the consideration of things, began with the "universals" of the spiritual realm. It was a good "fit" with Christianity.

In the *Proslogian*, Anselm expressed his famous argument for the existence of God. He had been intrigued by what the psalmist said in Psalm 14:1: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Why was atheism inherently foolish? Even atheists had to be able to imagine a being called God in order to deny God's existence. Anselm believed that any atheist would agree that "God" could be defined as "a **being** than which nothing greater can be conceived," that is, the greatest of all beings that can be imagined. Moreover, a being that exists in reality must be greater than a being that exists only in the imagination. So if existence is greater than nonexistence, then a God who exists is greater than an imaginary God. And if God is the greatest of all beings imaginable, then God must really exist. Anselm's reasoning (logic) shows that atheists are fools because atheism is irrational.

Thomas Aquinas

Scholastic theology focused on the integration of theology (revelation) and philosophy (reason). In the Middle Ages a shift in approach to thinking theologically took place, influenced by the application of the philosophy of Aristotle with his emphasis on the "particulars." Like Anselm, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) believed that reason could provide arguments for the existence of God. However, Aquinas rejected Anselm's argument because, following Aristotle, one must start with what can be observed through the senses and reason from there. And yet, the differences in thinking are really not that far apart, because even for Aquinas, something cannot come from nothing; therefore, the universe came from something, the "uncaused cause," or God.

Aquinas's most famous writing is his *Summa Theologica*, a summary, exposition, and critique of Christian theology from the first century. It was written in the form of a series of 512 questions, followed by answers from Scripture, previous theologians, and reason. Then came an in-depth critique of those answers, and ending with Aquinas's concluding answer and support for it. While Aquinas had a high view of reason, he believed some things could be understood only by special or super-natural revelation, meaning the Scriptures.