

LESSON FIVE – Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen

Teachers of the Church

- During the early decades of the church, most Christian writings were addressing a specific problem.
- For a while, after the apostolic age, this type of Christian writing dominated. The various writers of that period whose work has been preserved have been given the title of Apostolic Fathers and each of their writings deal with very specific issues.
- *The Didache* or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, which was a manual of discipline giving guidelines for the Christian life and worship, was not written by the apostles but by an unknown Christian at an unknown time and place.
- The Shepherd of Hermes was written by the brother of the bishop of Rome in the middle of the second century and deals mostly with the forgiveness of sins after baptism.
- Toward the end of the second century the challenge of Marcion and the Gnostics required a different response.
- The heretics had created their own systems of doctrine and to this the church had to respond by having their own teachers offer equally convincing systems of orthodox belief.

Irenaeus

- Irenaeus was a native of Asia Minor, probably of Smyrna. There he was discipled by Polycarp.
- Irenaeus immigrated to Lyons, which today is southern France. There he became an elder in the church and was sent to Rome with a message for the bishop of Rome. Persecution broke out in Lyons while he was gone and bishop Photinus died during that persecution.
- When Irenaeus returned, he was elected bishop of Lyons and served as such until his death in 202 AD.
- Above all else, Irenaeus was a pastor. His interest lay in leading his flock in the Christian life and faith. In his writings he did not seek to rise in great speculative flights, but simply to refute heresy and instruct believers.
- Only two of Irenaeus's works survive: *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* and *Exposure and Refutation of Knowledge Falsely So-Called (also known as Against Heresies)*.
- The writings of Irenaeus are excellent witnesses to the faith of the church toward the end of the second century.

Overview of Irenaeus's Theology¹

- Irenaeus saw himself as a shepherd and he also saw God as shepherd. God is a loving being who created the world and humankind, not out of necessity or by mistake – as the Gnostics claimed – but out of a desire to have a creation to love and to lead, like a shepherd loves and leads his flock.

- The crown of creation is mankind, made from the beginning as a free and therefore responsible creature.
- That freedom is such that it allows us to become increasingly conformed to the divine will and nature and therefore enjoy an ever-growing relationship with our Creator. On the other hand, mankind was not made from the beginning in its final perfection.
- God placed the first couple in the Garden of Eden. They were not mature beings, but rather, like children, with their own perfection as such. This means that God's purpose was that human beings would grow in communication with the divine, eventually surpassing angels.
- Humankind is to be instructed, not only by the angels, but also by the two hands of God, the Word and the Holy Spirit. Led by these two hands, humans receive instruction and growth, always with the goal of increasing communion with God. Irenaeus called this process divinization, that God's purpose is to make us ever more like the divine.
- Irenaeus did not mean though that we are somehow lost in the divine, nor did he mean that we shall ever be like God. Irenaeus maintained that God is so far above us that no matter how much we grow in the likeness of the divine we shall always have a long way to go.
- One of the angels was jealous of the high destiny for mankind and for that reason he led Adam and Eve into sin. As a result of sin, mankind was expelled from paradise, and their growth was thwarted. From this point the unfolding of history is marked by sin.
- Irenaeus believed that although the course of history is the result of sin, the fact that there is history is not. God always had a purpose that there would be history. The situation in Eden, as described in Genesis, was not the goal of creation, but the beginning.
- From this perspective, the incarnation of God in Jesus is not just a response to sin. God's initial purpose included being united with mankind. The future incarnate Word was the model that God followed in making man in His own image.
- Adam and Eve were created, that after a period of growth and instruction, they would become like the incarnate Word. Because of sin the incarnation took on the added purpose of offering a remedy for sin and a means for defeating Satan.
- Before the incarnation and from the very moment of the first sin, God has been leading mankind toward closer communion with the divine. For this reason, God curses the serpent and the earth, but only punishes Adam and Eve. At the very moment of the fall, God is working for human redemption.
- Israel has an important role in the drama of redemption, for it is in the history of the chosen people that the two hands of God have continued their work, preparing mankind for communion with God.
- The Old Testament is not the revelation of a God alien to the Christian faith, but is the history of the unfolding redemptive purposes of the same God whom Christians know in Jesus Christ.
- At the right time, when mankind had received enough preparation, the Word was incarnate as Jesus Christ. Jesus is the second Adam because in His life, death and resurrection a new humanity has been created, and in all His actions, Jesus has corrected

what was twisted because of sin. Jesus has defeated Satan and this allowed Christians to live in renewed freedom.

- Those who are joined to Christ in baptism and nourished by His body through communion also participate in His victory.
- Jesus is the head of the church, which is His body. The body is nourished by worship, particularly communion and is so joined to the head that it is already receiving the first benefits of Christ's victory. In His resurrection, the final resurrection has dawned, and all who are a part of His body will partake in it.
- When the Kingdom of God is established at the second coming, God's task as shepherd will not end. Redeemed humanity will continue to grow in greater communion with the divine, and the process of divinization will go on for eternity, taking us ever closer to God.
- Irenaeus had a grand vision of history and the purposes of God unfolding through it. The focal point of history is the incarnation, not only because through it God's Word straightened the twisted history of mankind, but also from the beginning the union of human with the divine was the goal of history. God's purpose is to be joined with the human creature, and this has taken place in a unique way in Jesus Christ.

“We have learned the plan of our salvation from no one else other than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us. For they did at one time proclaim the gospel in public. And, at a later period, by the will of God, they handed the gospel down to us in the Scriptures-to be the ‘ground and pillar of our faith.’” – Irenaeus, Against Heresies²

“But following the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” – Irenaeus, Against Heresies³

“In all things and for all things there is one God, the Father, and one Word, the Son, and one Spirit, and one salvation for all who believe in Him.” – Irenaeus, Against Heresies⁴

Clement of Alexandria

- The life story of Clement of Alexandria is very different from Irenaeus. Clement was likely born in Athens and his parents were pagans.
- As a young man he converted to Christianity and began to search for a teacher who could instruct him in the Christian faith.
- Clement found a teacher in Alexandria named Pantaenus who satisfied Clement's thirst for knowledge. Clement remained in Alexandria and when Pantaenus died, he became the primary Christian teacher in Alexandria.
- In 202 AD, persecution broke out and Clement left the city and traveled along the Eastern Mediterranean, mainly in Syria and Asia Minor, until his death in 215 AD.
- Clement was not a pastor like Irenaeus, but rather a thinker and a seeker. His goal was not to expound the traditional faith but to help those in quest for deeper truth and to convince

pagan intellectuals that Christianity was not the absurd superstition that some claimed it was.

- In his *Exhortation to the Pagans*, Clement shows the essence of his theological method in making use of Plato and other philosophers. "I seek to know God, and not only the works of God. Who will aid me in my quest?...How then, oh, Plato, is one to seek after God?" Clements purpose was to his pagan readers that a good part of Christian doctrine can be supported by Plato's philosophy. Therefore, pagans could approach Christianity without thinking that it was a religion for the ignorant and the superstitious.
- Clement did not just call on Plato because it was convenient for his argument against the pagans but he was convinced that there is only one truth, and that therefore any truth to be found in Plato can be none other than the truth that was revealed in Jesus Christ and in Scripture.
- Clement believed that philosophy had been given to Greeks the same way the law was given to the Jews. Both have the purpose of leading to the ultimate truth, now revealed in Christ.
- The classical philosophers were to the Greeks what the prophets were to the Hebrews. With the Jews, God has established the covenant of the law; with the Greeks, that of philosophy.
- Clement was convinced that careful study of Scripture would lead to the same truth that the philosophers knew.
- The reason for this, according to Clement, is that Scripture is written allegorically or "in parables," as Clement said. The Scripture has more than one meaning.
- There is a close relationship between faith and reason. They go hand in hand. Reason builds its arguments on first principles which cannot be proven, but are accepted by faith. For the truly wise, faith is the first principle, the beginning point, on which reason is to build.
- Those Christians who are content with faith and do not use reason to build upon it, are like children who are forever content with milk.
- Clement contrasts such people, those who are satisfied with the rudiments of faith, to those who are wise to build on it with reason. He called the second group the true Gnostics. Those are wise to go beyond the literal meaning of Scripture.

A HYMN TO CHRIST THE SAVIOUR.

COMPOSED BY ST. CLEMENT of ALEXANDRIA

I. Bridle of colts untamed, Over our wills presiding; Wing of unwandering birds, Our flight securely guiding.

Rudder of youth unbending, Firm against adverse shock; Shepherd, with wisdom tending Lambs of the royal flock:

Thy simple children bring In one, that they may sing In solemn lays Their hymns of praise With guileless lips to Christ their King.

II. King of saints, almighty Word Of the Father highest Lord; Wisdom's head and chief; Assuagement of all grief; Lord of all time and space, Jesus, Saviour of our race; Shepherd, who dost us keep; Husbandman, who tillest, Bit to restrain us, Rudder To guide us as Thou wiliest; Of the all-holy flock celestial wing; Fisher of men, whom Thou to life dost bring; From evil sea of sin, And from the billowy strife, Gathering pure fishes in Caught with sweet bait of life:

Lead us, Shepherd of the sheep, Reason-gifted, holy One; King of youths, whom Thou dost keep, So that they pollution shun:

Steps of Christ, celestial Way; Word eternal, Age unending; Life that never can decay; Fount of mercy, virtue-sending; Life august of those who raise Unto God their hymn of praise, Jesus Christ!

III. Nourished by the milk of heaven, To our tender palates given; Milk of wisdom from the breast Of that bride of grace exprest; By a dewy spirit filled From fair Reason's breast distilled; Let us sucklings join to raise With pure lips our hymns of praise As our grateful offering, Clean and pure, to Christ our King.

Let us, with hearts undefiled, Celebrate the mighty Child.

We, Christ-born, the choir of peace; We, the people of His love, Let us sing, nor ever cease, To the God of peace above. ⁵

Tertullian

- Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus was born in Carthage, North Africa around 155/160 AD.
- Tertullian received an exceptional education. Little is known of his early life. His parents were pagan and his father may have been a centurion in an African based legion.
- After completing his education, Tertullian went to Rome to continue study. While in Rome he became interested in Christianity but did not convert to the Christian faith until he returned to Carthage toward the end of the second century.
- Tertullian left no account of his conversion but his early work indicates he was impressed by certain Christian attitudes and beliefs.
- Tertullian wrote many treatises in defense of the faith against pagans and defense of orthodoxy against heresy.
- Persecution was an ever-present threat in Tertullian's time. Christians were often perplexed by it. Was it from the devil? Should they try and flee persecution?
- Tertullian took a tough line as difficult to understand today as it was back then. He saw persecution as being from God, it never happens without God willing it and it is fitting, even necessary at times, for God to do so.

- To Tertullian it was clear that persecution works for the improvement of God's people and cannot be blamed on the devil.
- Tertullian's entire literary output bears the stamp of a legal mind. The treatise where Tertullian's legal mind really shines is his, *Prescription Against the Heretics*.
- Tertullian's legal mind led him to affirm that, once one has found the truth of Christianity, one should abandon any more search for the truth. Tertullian believed that Christian who is still seeking after truth lacks faith.

“You are to seek until you find, and once you have found, you are to believe. Thereafter, all you have to do is hold to what you have believed. Besides this, you are to believe that there is nothing further to be believed, nor anything else to be sought.”⁶

“Miserable Aristotle, who gave them dialectics! He gave them the art of building in order to tear down, an art of slippery speech and crude arguments...which rejects everything and deals with nothing.”⁷

- Tertullian condemns all speculation. For example, to ponder on what God’s omnipotence can do is a waste of time and a dangerous occupation.
- Tertullian did use logic and reason against his adversaries. His logic was often inflexible and overwhelming.
- Around the year 207, Tertullian, joined the Montanist movement. Why Tertullian took this step is a great mystery in church history.
- Toward the end of his life Tertullian became disillusioned with Montanism and founded his own sect, which ancient writers call the Tertullianists.
- Even after joining the Montanists, Tertullian continued his campaign against doctrinal error. Probably the most significant of the works he wrote during this time was his treatise *Against Praxeas*, where he coined formulas that would be of great importance in the later Trinitarian and Christological debates.
- Some scholars believe that there was no such person and Praxeas was another name for Calixtus, the bishop of Rome, who Tertullian prefers to attack under a fictitious name.
- Whoever Praxeas was, it is clear that he was influential in the church of Rome, and that he sought to explain the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a manner that Tertullian believed was an error. According to Praxeas, the Father, Son and Spirit were simply different modes in which God appeared, so God is sometimes the Father, sometimes the Son and sometimes the Spirit.
- This is what has been called Patripassianism, the doctrine that the Father suffered the passion or Modalism, the doctrine that the various persons of the Trinity are “modes” in which God appears.
- Tertullian explains in his treatise how the Trinity is to be understood. He proposes the formula, “one substance and three persons.” When discussing how Jesus can be both human and divine, he speaks of “one person” and “two substances,” or “natures,” the divine and the human.
- Tertullian is a unique personality in the history of Christianity. He was a fiery champion of orthodoxy against every sort of heresy, even though he did join a movement the majority of the church believed to be heretical.
- Tertullian was also the first Christian theologian to write in Latin, which was the language of the Western half of the empire. Due to this he can be considered the founder of Western theology.
- Since the 19th century Tertullian has been widely read and studied and is now considered one of the formative figures in the development of Christian life and Western theology.

Origen of Alexandria

- Oregenes Adamantius was the son of Christian parents, born around 185 AD. His father, Leonides was martyred during the persecution of Septimius Severus in 202 AD.
- As a young boy, Origen wished to offer himself up for martyrdom but his mother hid his clothes and he was forced to remain home, where he wrote a treatise on martyrdom addressed to his imprisoned father.
- When Origen was in his late teens, the bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius, gave Origen the task of training catechumens, candidates for baptism.
- It was rumored that Origen castrated himself so he could work freely with the female catechumens. He did live a strict ascetic life but there is no substantial proof that he did indeed castrate himself.
- After teaching the catechumens for several years, he left this task to his best disciples and devoted himself completely to running a school of Christian philosophy that was very similar to those founded by the classical philosophers.
- For several reasons, including jealousy, a conflict arose between Origen and Demetrius. Origen had to leave Alexandria and settled in Caesarea, where he continued writing and teaching for twenty years.
- During the persecution of Decius, Origen had the opportunity to show the strength of his faith. Given the nature of that persecution, Origen was not put to death, but was tortured to such a point that he died shortly after being released, in Tyre at the age of 70.
- Origen got almost everything wrong but his literary output was enormous. Since he was aware of the way diverse versions of Scripture differed, he compiled the *Hexapla*.
- Origen also wrote commentaries on many books in the Bible, an apology *Against Celsus* and a great systematic theology called *On First Principles*.
- Origen's theology is very similar to that of his teacher, Clement of Alexandria. It is an attempt to relate Christian faith to the philosophical tradition of Platonism, that was current in Alexandria.

Overview of Origen's Theology⁸

- Origen was aware of the danger of abandoning Christian doctrine in favor of the teachings of the philosophers, and declared that "nothing which is at variance with the tradition of the apostles and of the church is to be accepted as true."
- This tradition includes the doctrine that there is only one God, creator and ruler of the universe and therefore the Gnostic teaching regarding the origin of the world is to be rejected.
- The apostles also taught that Jesus is the Son of God, begotten before creation, and that His incarnation is such that, while becoming human, He remained divine.
- As to the Holy Spirit, Origen declared that the apostolic tradition was not entirely clear, except in affirming that the Spirit's glory is no less than that of the Father and the Son.
- Lastly, the apostles taught that there will be a time when the soul will be rewarded or punished according to its life in this world, and there will be a final resurrection of the body.

- In the first few chapters of Genesis there are two stories of creation, Jewish scholars noted this long before Origen. In one of these stories, we are told mankind was created after the image and likeness of God, and that male and female, He created them. In the second story we are told God created Adam first, then the animals and woman was formed from Adam's rib. In the Greek translation of the first narrative, the verb describing God's actions is "to create," whereas in the second it is "to form," or "to shape." What is the meaning of these differences.
- Modern scholars would speak of the joining of separate traditions, basically that Genesis 1 is an overview and Genesis 2 is a more specific account of the same event and this is common in Hebrew literature where an author will give an overview of something and then follow it with a more detailed account of the same thing.
- According to Origen, the first creation was purely spiritual. What God first created were spirits without bodies. This is why the text says, "male and female," that is, with no sexual differences. This is why we are told God created and not that God formed.
- God's purpose was the spirits that were created would be devoted to the contemplation of the divine. But some of them strayed and fell. Origen uses Romans 9:11-13 to support this idea as well. "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad – in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of Him who calls – she was told, 'the older will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated.'"
- Origen concludes that Jacob and Esau must have been pre-existent souls that sinned before they were born. This was the exact opposite point Paul was making in the passage.
- When the souls fell it was then that God made a second creation. This second creation is material, and it serves to temporarily shelter or home the fallen spirits. Those spirits who fell farthest became demons, while the rest are human souls.
- It was for these human souls, fallen pre-existent spirits, that God made the bodies we now have, which God shaped out of the earth, making some male and some female. Jesus soul didn't fall and perfectly clings to God.

“The God and Father, who holds the universe together, is superior to every being that exists, for He imparts to each one from His own existence that which each one is; the Son being less than the Father, is superior to rational creatures alone (for He is second to the Father); the Holy Spirit still less, and dwells within the saints alone. So that in this way the power of the Father is greater than that of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and that of the Son is more than that of the Holy Spirit, and in turn the power of the Holy Spirit exceeds that of every other holy being.” -On First Principles, 1.3.5⁹

- Jesus soul takes on flesh to lead up all the other fallen souls back to cling to God. In this idea, Jesus is primarily an intermediary and an example, showing us how to ascend to God, NOT God coming down to accomplish salvation on our behalf.
- All human souls existed as pure spirits or intellects as Origen calls them, before being born into the world, and the reason why we are here is that we have sinned in that prior, purely spiritual existence.

- Origen claims all of this is based on Scripture but it is derived from Platonic tradition, where similar ideas have been taught long before Origen.
- In the present world, the devil, and his demons have us captive, and that is why Jesus came, to break the power of Satan and show us the way we must follow to return to our spiritual home. Since the devil is no more than a spirit like us and since God is love, in the end even Satan will be saved and the entire creation will return to its original state, where everything is pure spirit.
- When we attain salvation, we take on God's qualities, but not in a personal relationship with Him. These spirits, however, will still be free, so there is nothing to guarantee that there will not be a new fall, a new material world, and a new history and that cycle of fall, restoration and fall will go on forever.
- Origen was more of a Platonist than he was a Christian on many points. He rejected the doctrines of Marcion and the Gnostics, that the world is the creation of an inferior being; but he comes to the conclusion that the existence of the physical world, as well as history, is the result of sin.
- Eventually Arius would take up Origen's ideas and bring about, arguably the greatest theological controversy of the Christian church. Origen's teachings were formally condemned in the 5th ecumenical council in 553 AD.

¹ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., pages 84-86

²<https://www.orthodoxchurchquotes.com/category/sayings-from-saints-elders-and-fathers/st-irenaeus-of-lyon/>

³ <https://www.vaticansite.com/st-irenaeus-of-lyons-quotes/>

⁴ <https://www.gaudiumpress.ca/quotes-and-prayer-to-saint-irenaeus-of-lyon/>

⁵https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=0CDgQw7AJahcKEwiQuZv1zrT_AhUAAAQHQAAAAQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.amherst.edu%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fmedia%2F1431%2FHYMNS_Clement.doc&psig=AOvVaw2KgI5KhaFNwJJOknQ9nwoZ&ust=1686346016917326

⁶ Prescription Against Heresies, 8. The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 90

⁷ Prescription Against Heresies, 8,7. The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 90

⁸ The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., pages 94-96

⁹ On First Principles, 1.3.5 – Parkway Church, Church History notes.