

Church History #2:

100 – 311 Anno Domini

THE CHURCH CHALLENGED

1. External
 - Roman Persecution
 - Philosophies
 - Misrepresentations
2. Internal
 - Heresy
 - Schism

ROMAN PERSECUTION

1. After 70 AD, the Romans began to persecute the Church for several reasons.
 - Christianity was no longer viewed as a sect of Judaism (*religio licita*).
 - Christians would not worship Caesar in any form.
 - Christians refused to take part in politics or submit to military service.
 - Christians were accused of incest and cannibalism.
 - Accused of Atheism – no idols, no religious paraphernalia.
 - Meetings at Night – Conspiracy.
 - Social Class Equality.
 - Economic Disruption – Idol & Sacrificial animal sales.
2. There were several notable persecuting emperors.

“All your ingenious cruelties can accomplish nothing. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”¹

 - **Domitian (81-96)**
 - 95 AD - Funding Construction of Temple to Jupiter – Jews and Christians refused to pay tax and were banished.
 - Apostle John Exiled to Patmos.

¹ Tertullian, Quoted in, D. Matthew Allen, *Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology*, p. 9.

- **Trajan (98-117)** was the first emperor to pronounce Christianity a restricted religion.
 - **Letters from Pliny the Younger depict the Roman handling of Christians.**
 - **107 AD Ignatius martyred to lions at Rome.**

- **Marcus Aurelius (161-180)** established a system of spies to accumulate evidence against Christians.
 - Justin Martyr

- **Decius (249-251)** tried to destroy the Church by returning the Empire to the official pagan state religion.
 - In order to stabilize the empire an edict in 250 requiring *libellus* for annual offering.
 - Plague of Cyprian – Christians blamed & sought as scapegoats.
 - Origen tortured.
 - Reaction of Believers
 - Martyrdom (Pope Fabian)
 - Flee, Hide
 - Bribe for *libellus*
 - Renounced/Apostate
 - Repentance & Restoration of *Lapsi* led to Novatian Schism.

- **Diocletian (284-305)** tried to uproot Christianity by burning Bibles and destroying churches.
 - He tried to restore pagan state religion compelling sacrifice to the gods and eradication of Christianity.
 - Traditors refer to bishops and other Christians who turned over sacred scriptures or betrayed their fellow Christians to the Roman authorities under threat of persecution.
 - Donatist Schism developed out of this.

THE DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL

Attacks of heresy and schism forced the Christians of this era to defend and define the truth of the Gospel.

Heresy is doctrine that violates a central tenet of the faith and renders the adherents outside of the historic faith.

Schism is a breach of union with the organized church over doctrine that is important, but not central to salvation.

HERESY

1. Gnosticism

- The primary tenet of Gnosticism is a radical dualism between evil matter and pure spirit. From this come the following ideas:
 - A good God could not have created the evil material world; it was created by a lesser god or emanation (demiurge) usually associated with the God of the Old Testament.
 - God, being pure spirit, could not dwell in a human body. Jesus, therefore, was either not God, or He just appeared to have a material body (Docetism).
 - Morality could be ascetic or libertine.
- Many groups had their own special books, others used a selection of Christian and pseudo-Christian writings (Pseudopigrapha).
- Repudiated by Irenaeus

2. Marcionism

- Marcion (c. 100-160) taught there were two gods, the stern God of the Old, and the merciful God of the New Testament.
- Compiled the first collection of New Testament books, keeping only ten of Paul's letters and an edited Luke and Acts.
- Founded an anti-Jewish sect, ascetic, and celibate. It diminished by the fourth century.

SCHISMS

1. Montanism

- Montanus was a self-proclaimed prophet who reacted to the formalism of the second century Church and the lack of dependence on the Spirit.
- He advocated an extreme asceticism that included celibacy and prolonged fasting.
- He predicted the imminent return of Christ and gave the exact location of His arrival in Phrygia.
- Montanus taught that Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit was not fulfilled at Pentecost, but that the coming of the Spirit was now at hand and that the end of the world was near.
- Around 156, Montanus went into a trance in a small village in Phrygia and began prophesying. From there he traveled throughout Asia Minor teaching and prophesying with his two female associates, Prisca and Maximilla.
- He was excommunicated in 177 because the Church was afraid of the potentially divisive effects of the movement. By the sixth century, the sect was gone.

Novatianism and Donatism both emerged from reaction to persecutions (Decian 250 AD and Diocletian 303-305 AD respectively).

2. Novatianism

- After the martyrdom of Pope Fabian, Novatian opposed the election of Pope Cornelius on the grounds that he was too liberal in accepting lapsed Christians. Novatian refused to grant absolution and communion in the church to those believers who renounced their faith. He was consecrated a bishop by three other bishops and proclaimed himself Bishop of Rome.
- Novatianism spread rapidly and they called themselves Purists.

3. Donatism

- Penance sufficient to restore those who had renounced their faith.
- Viewed themselves as the “True Church,” the only one with valid sacraments.
- Primarily in North Africa; Opposed by Augustine; Ended with Muslim Conquests.

SUMMARY

1. Response of the Church

- Canon of Scripture.
- Creeds to summarize the essential teachings of the Bible.

Apostle’s Creed (earliest writing - 4th century)

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was
buried; he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the
Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

- Christian Theology to answer false beliefs.
- Episcopacy was strengthened as a rallying point against internal and external pressures.

2. Learning from our History

- Gnostics
 - Divine in us.
 - Secret Knowledge and initiation rites.
 - Blending of platonic philosophy with Christianity.
 - Extra-biblical Books.
- Marcionism
 - Continuity of OT & NT.
 - Anti-Semitism in the church.
- Montanism
 - Bizarre Prophetic & New Revelation.
 - Elitism & Charismatic Leadership.
 - Imminent eschatology.
 - Asceticism.
- Novatianism/Donatism
 - Unmerciful.
 - Puritanical/Legalism.
 - Exclusivity – the “true church”.
 - Resisted numerous corrections and appeals for unity.

Discussion and Consideration

1. Consider your pastor under pressure of persecution turns you and your family over to the authorities resulting in torture or death. Afterwards, he is repentant and wants to be restored as your pastor. How do you handle this?
2. Discuss a current day movement that rehashes one or more of the old heresies.
3. What does present day Montanism look like? What issues should set off your early-warning, spiritual radar?
4. How has Donatism reemerged in Christianity? What alarming issues do you discern?

DEVELOPMENT OF AN ECCLESIASTICAL STRUCTURE

1. Elders governed the churches in the New Testament, but by the second century, elder and bishop had become two offices with the bishop presiding over elders in a single congregation.
 - The New Testament uses the terms elder and bishop (*episkopos*) to describe different aspects of the same office.
 - By the middle of the second century, the bishopric had expanded to a Diocesan office. Gradually they fell into different ranks, according to the importance of their diocese.

2. The Roman bishop gradually assumed the title of pope and claimed supremacy over all of Christendom. This claim was based on several factors.
 - Rome was the only apostolic church in the West.
 - There were four apostolic churches (also called patriarchates) in the East: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and later Constantinople.
 - In the First Letter of Clement (c. 96), the ruling elder of Rome displayed an awareness of responsibility for other churches. This idea grew through the Roman bishops Victor I (189-199) and Stephen I (254-257). The traditions of the Roman church were considered normative for other churches.
 - Rome was a large congregation with (by 250 AD): one bishop, forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes, fifty readers, exorcists, and door-keepers. The size of the congregation was fifty or sixty thousand, about 5% of the population of the city.
 - Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome.
 - Rome was the most important city in the empire.

INFLUENTIAL CHURCH LEADERS

The early Church fathers are categorized by four designations: Apostolic, Apologetic, Polemical, and Theological.

1. The Apostolic Fathers are characterized by their close relationship to the Apostles.

The term Apostolic Fathers refers to the martyrs and major figures of the first and second centuries who wrote in Greek. Their writings are an important source of early Church history.

- **Clement of Rome** (died c. 97) is best known for his epistle to the Corinthians.
 - Church tradition identifies Clement as Paul’s fellow worker mentioned in Philippians 4:3.
 - Clement’s letter to the Corinthians is one of the most important documents of the apostolic era. It is the earliest non-canonical Christian writing for which the name, location, and date of the author are attested historically.
 - A fierce dispute in the church at Corinth and the deposing of several elders occasioned Clement’s letter. His goal was to secure the restoration of the deposed elders and to heal the dissension. (It is interesting to note that the party spirit and strife Paul addressed in I Corinthians was never resolved.)
Clement quotes Old Testament examples of envy and strife, and of the blessedness of humility, submission, and concord. He calls for obedience to church leaders, contending that church elders receive their authority from the apostles, who received it from Christ.
 - The letter is the first example of intervention by Rome in the affairs of another church.

- **Ignatius of Antioch** (35-107) was a disciple of John and the bishop of Antioch. He was martyred in Rome.
 - The emperor Trajan sentenced him to be thrown to the lions at Rome. On his way to Rome, he wrote several important letters that survive to this day.
“I...am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will – unless you hinder me. I implore you: do not be unseasonably kind to me...Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can obtain God. I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ.”
 - Ignatius is the first author to present the bishop as distinct from and superior to elders. He presents a three tiered hierarchy of Bishop, Elder, and Deacon.
In his letter to the church at Smyrna he said, “The people should unconditionally obey the bishop and do nothing without his will. Blessed are they who are one with the bishop, as the church is with Christ, and Christ with the Father, so that all harmonizes in unity. Apostasy from the bishop is apostasy from Christ, who acts in and through the bishops as his organs. He that honors the bishop shall be honored by God; he that does anything without the knowledge of the bishop serves the devil.”

- The letters of Ignatius contain warnings against heresy, detailed summaries of doctrine, and information concerning the organization of the early church.
 - He is the first to use the term “catholic” meaning “universal”.
 - **Polycarp (69-155)** was arrested as an old man and burned at the stake.
 - **When given an opportunity to recant by the Roman proconsul, Polycarp said, “Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”**
 - At Smyrna, a local outbreak of persecution arose, and twelve Christians were condemned to die. Soon Polycarp was also sought out and brought to the crowded stadium to be burned alive. As the flames leapt around him, Polycarp looked up to heaven, praising God and thanking Him that he was counted worthy to take the cup of Christ.
 - Polycarp’s martyrdom ended this local outbreak of persecution and there was a period of rest for the believers.
 - Discipled Irenaeus.
2. The Apologetic Fathers are characterized by their defense against the attacks on the Church. The Apologetic Fathers had a more extensive education than earlier leaders and they generally took a philosophical approach when defending the faith.

The pagan populace told many false stories about the Christians and misrepresented their teaching. The Apologetic Fathers defended Christianity against these attacks and demonstrated the superiority of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. They defended Christianity against charges of atheism, cannibalism, immorality, and antisocial action.

- **Justin Martyr (100-167)** was the first learned theologian and Christian thinker among the Church Fathers.
 - Justin pursued numerous philosophical mentors ultimately resulting in disillusionment. In Christ he found a more perfect philosophy revealed by God.
 - The *First Apology* passionately defends the morality of the Christian life, and provides various ethical and philosophical arguments to convince the Roman emperor, Antoninus, to abandon the persecution of the fledgling sect.
 - *Dialogue with Trypho* uses an intellectual conversation with Trypho, a rabbi, to conclude that Christians are the true people of God, and to prove from Scripture that Jesus is the

- Jewish Messiah.
 - During a trip to Rome Justin was arrested. He and his six companions refused to offer sacrifice to the emperor (Marcus Aurelius) and were sentenced, and beheaded.
 - **Tertullian** (160-225) was a prolific author from Carthage writing apologetic treatises, attacks on heresies, and moral tracts. His writings greatly influenced later Church fathers, and eventually all theologians in the Latin Church.
 - He defended Christianity from allegations of infant sacrifice and incest; He indicted the inhumanity of gladiatorial games; He argued that the gods have no existence against which Christianity can offend; and defended the refusal to worship emperors.
 - Tertullian was the first Christian to formulate theological concepts in Latin, such as the nature of the Trinity – a word he coined.
 - He became the teacher of Cyprian and the predecessor of Augustine
 - Repelled by the growing worldliness of the Roman Church and attracted to the discipline of the Montanists, Tertullian joined their ranks around 207 AD.
 - Influential Writings:
 - Five Books Against Marcion - polemic against Marcionism.
 - *Apologeticus* addressed to the Roman magistrates, is a skilled defense of Christianity and the Christians against the reproaches of the pagans, and an important legacy of the ancient Church, proclaiming the principle of freedom of religion as an inalienable human right and demanding a fair trial for Christians before they are condemned to death. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”
 - In *Adversus Praxeam* he gives the oldest extant use of the term “trinity” with corresponding terminology of substance, persons, economy, etc., later to be incorporated into the *Nicene Creed*.
3. The Polemical Fathers are characterized by their attempt to attack heresy within the Church.

While the Apologetic Fathers of the second century endeavored to present a rational explanation and justification of Christianity to the Roman authorities, the Polemical Fathers of the late second and early third centuries sought to meet the problem of heretic teaching.

- **Irenaeus** (130-200) was an early Church Father and Bishop of Lyons, a disciple of Polycarp, and a brilliant polemicist against Gnosticism. His work is credited for laying out the orthodoxies of the church, its faith, preaching, and the sacred texts it holds as authoritative.
 - When Irenaeus was young he heard Polycarp. Irenaeus was one of the first to use the principle of apostolic succession to refute his opponents.
 - He was a vigorous anti-heretical writer and theologian, famous for his work *Against Heresies*. He addressed fundamental doctrines challenged by Gnosticism:
 - The creation of the world by one God.
 - Jesus’s divine and human nature.
 - Resurrection of the body.
 - Scripture is a succession of covenants through which God revealed his will progressively.
 - Public Apostolic succession.
 - Jesus as the New Adam & Mary as the New Eve.
“By disobeying, Eve became the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race. In the same way, Mary... by obeying, she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race”
 - He classified as canonical, not only the Old Testament, but most of the books of the New Testament, while excluding many Gnostic works that flourished in the second century and claimed scriptural authority.

- **Cyprian** (200-258 AD) as Bishop of Carthage, he guided with great success the church of Africa through the Decian persecution, the Cyprian plague, disputes, schisms, and the initial stages of the Valerian persecution during which he was exiled and beheaded.
 - During Decian persecution, that especially targeted the bishops, Cyprian chose to go into hiding and to shepherd in absentia.
 - After his return, he held a firm course during the Novatian lapsi controversy between the laxist and the rigorist parties both of which elected opposing bishops to him.
 - During plague and famine he exhorted Christians to active charity toward the poor and suffering, setting a personal example.
“What grandeur of spirit it is to struggle with all the powers of an unshaken mind against so many onsets of devastation and death! What sublimity, to stand erect amid the

desolation of the human race, and not to lie prostrate with those who have no hope in God; but rather to rejoice, and to embrace the benefit of the occasion; that in thus bravely showing forth our faith, and by suffering endured, going forward to Christ by the narrow way that Christ trod, we may receive the reward of His life and faith according to His own judgment!”

- *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* is his most famous work in which he attacks the schisms (Novatian and Novatus) and pleads for the unity of the church.
4. The Theological Fathers are characterized by their attempts to blend theology with philosophy.
- **Clement of Alexandria** (150-215) was head of the theological school at Alexandria. He was influential in persuading Hellenistic culture toward Christianity; however, his paradigm caused undue Hellenistic influence on Christian theology.
 - He has an extensive knowledge of Greek mythology and philosophy. Clement supports the idea that philosophy had a pedagogical role for the Greek, similar to the function of the law for the Jews.
 - He attacks Greek paganism and mystery religions and exhorts them to adopt Christianity.
 - He provides practical rules for living a Christian life and how one should respond to the love of God authentically.
 - He writes about asceticism, sexuality, equality of the sexes, faith, martyrdom, etc.
 - Three of Clement's major works have survived in full, and they are collectively referred to as the *Trilogy*:
 - *Protrepticus* (Exhortation) – written c. 195.
 - *Paedagogus* (Tutor) – written c. 198.
 - *Stromata* (Miscellanies) – written c. 198 – c. 203.
 - **Origen** (185-254) was the first Christian theologian. He was one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Church. However, in Origen Christianity blended with the pagan philosophy in which lived the desire for truth and the longing after God.
 - Origen wrote 6000 works in multiple branches of theology and textual criticism; 29 homilies were recently discovered in a German library.
 - He was the greatest textual critic of the early Church, directing the production of the massive *Hexapla*, a study edition of the

Old Testament, presenting Hebrew text, a Greek transliteration, and four Greek translations in six parallel columns.

- *On First Principles* was the first Systematic Theology of the Church containing doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, reason, creation, redemption, etc. The work is the first endeavor to present Christianity as a complete theory of the universe, and was designed to remove the difficulties felt by many Christians concerning the essential basis of their faith.
- He was one of the greatest biblical scholars of the early Church, having written commentaries on most of the books of the Bible. Origen was largely responsible for the collection of information regarding the texts that became the New Testament.
- He employed an allegorical exegesis of scripture searching for hidden “spiritual” truth.
- He lived an extreme ascetic life and became spiritual father of Greek monasticism. He even castrated himself to secure himself against temptation with his female students.

Discussion and Consideration

1. When you hear a preacher allegorizing scriptures (e.g. people, events, numbers, etc.) and revealing a deeper, spiritual understanding, how should you respond?
2. What can we learn from Cyprian about dealing with controversies and opposition in ministry?
3. The Apologetic fathers defended the church against the reproaches of the unbelievers and injustices of the state. Over what contemporary topics do unbelievers regularly misrepresent the church? How can we thoughtfully and persuasively counter these accusations?