



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## **Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)**

### **Lesson 6 – Early Christian Teachers:**

#### **Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, and Origen**

The early Christians treasured the writings of the apostles and their associates as words coming from the Holy Spirit. These writings were copied and recopied many times so that the enemies of Christ could not stamp out the truth that God wanted to preserve forever. The early Christians also wrote letters and other documents during the years of persecution. These writings, however, were not verbally inspired like the writings of the New Testament and do not have the same authority. Some of the earliest writings that have been preserved include the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, a letter that Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians, a summary of Christian teaching called *the Didache (Teaching) of the Twelve Apostles*, *The Shepherd*, and that very special letter to Diognetus that was mentioned earlier. No doubt there were many other writings of Christians during these years that have not been preserved.

When the false teachers started spreading their ideas through their writings, it was necessary for Christian leaders to respond to these false ideas through writings of their own. The main responders were the four Christian teachers: Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, and Origen of Alexandria. Not one of these teachers was completely orthodox in his teachings. The devil had led them also away from the truth in various ways. But on the core of Christian doctrine, they remained grounded in the writings of the apostles.

Irenaeus was probably born in Smyrna, one of the seven cities that John addressed in Revelation, but he carried out his work as a Christian pastor in Lyons, a city in southern France. Only two of his writings have survived: *Demonstration of Apostolic Faith* and *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus followed the Scriptures closely in presenting the history of salvation. He showed from Scripture that the Gnostics were all wrong in their view of creation and the Old Testament. He emphasized the fall of man into sin and God's immediate presentation of the Good News of a future Savior to be born of a woman. But we cannot follow Irenaeus in some of his interpretations of the visions of Revelation. The false-teaching millennialists of today claim Irenaeus as one of their own.

Clement of Alexandria was not a pastor but a philosopher and a teacher. He was influenced by the teachings of Greek writers like Plato. He tried to prove that Christianity and Greek philosophy were similar or at least had the same goal. His mistake was that he was not

satisfied with the plain wording of Scripture but tried to find a deeper meaning in the words. This led him into non-Christian speculation.

In contrast to Clement, Tertullian of Carthage in north Africa opposed all philosophical speculation in trying to understand the Scriptures. He had a lawyer's mind, and that is the way he argued against the false teachers and the governmental authorities of his time. He proved that the Christian congregations in Rome, Antioch, and other places were teaching the very same things the apostles had taught, and thus were orthodox (teaching the truth), but the Gnostics and followers of Marcion were teaching falsely.

Tertullian was one of the first Christian leaders to write in the Latin language. It was Tertullian that created the terminology that we still use today to summarize the Biblical teaching about God and His Son Jesus Christ. Tertullian showed that God is *Triune*, having one substance in three persons. He showed that Jesus was both human and divine, one person with two natures. One of his chief writings was directed against a false teacher named Praxeas, who taught that the Father, Son, and Spirit were simply modes in which God appeared, rather than three distinct persons.

Nevertheless, Tertullian in his last days joined the heretical movement known as Montanism, named after Montanus. Montanus was a teacher who claimed to possess the Holy Spirit; he sought to usher in a new age characterized by more rigorous morality through new revelation from the Holy Spirit. The early Christians did not follow Tertullian in his teaching about the Holy Spirit, however. They recognized that the incarnation and redemptive work of Jesus Christ began the new age, and that this age will continue to the end of the world without some new revelation that goes beyond the Old Testament and New Testament.

Origen of Alexandria in north Africa was a Christian from his youth and was a gifted teacher and writer. He was put in charge of training the catechumens, and soon he became a famous teacher attracting students from all over the world. Later he founded a Christian school of philosophy. He knew his Bible well but was influenced too much by his teacher Clement and his philosophy. He rejected Gnostic teaching about God but came up with his own speculations about the spirit world, insisting that God created spirits (or souls) first and then later put them into bodies. Origen went so far as to speculate that even Satan would finally be saved along with all people (Universalism). On many points Origen was more Platonist than Christian.

Origen published a book called the *Hexapla*, which was an edition of the Old Testament in six columns: two in Hebrew and four in different Greek translations. He wrote commentaries on many Bible books. He defended Christian teaching in opposition to Celsus. In fact, he was so full of words that it is said that he was able to dictate seven different writings through seven different secretaries at the same time.

Of all these early Christian leaders, Irenaeus, the pastor of Lyons, is the one who taught the most correctly. On the difference between Origen and Irenaeus, Justo Gonzalez writes:

“Origen rejects the doctrines of Marcion and of the Gnostics, that the world is the creation of an inferior being; but then he comes to the conclusion that the existence of the physical world – as well as of history – is the result of sin. At this point there is a marked difference with Irenaeus, for whom the existence of history was part of the eternal purpose of God. And when it comes to the preexistence of souls, and to the eternal cycle of fall and restoration, there is no doubt that Origen strays from what Christianity has usually taught” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 81). How blessed it is that we have a much better teacher than Origen in the Holy Spirit, the true Author of Holy Scripture, whom we can trust to teach us the truth!

#### **Questions:**

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1. Why was it important for the Scriptures to be copied and recopied?
2. What did Irenaeus find false in the teaching of the Gnostics?
3. What do we find false in the teachings of Irenaeus?
4. Why makes Clement of Alexandria an unreliable teacher?
5. What did Tertullian contribute to the presentation of Christian teaching?
6. Who was Montanus and what did he teach?
7. What was Origen’s field of study?
8. Prove that Origen was a false teacher.
9. How was Origen misled into non-Biblical speculations?
10. How must we always test the writings and speech of Christian leaders?