

HEROES AND HERETICS:
An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

WEEK 3 **January 31, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Pickens**

Origen – Greek Philosophy and Early Apologetics

Life:

Justin Martyr (d. 165) – he wrote to emperor (Antoninus) against atheism, genuinely loved philosophy. Justin was martyred in Rome after wrongly accused in debate while defending Christianity. He went through many different philosophies in a pursuit of truth. In turning to Christianity he determined that he found a more perfect philosophy in Christ. This is good in that it brings to light the reality that we only understand things rightly as we are taught by God through his Word. The trouble is that this still glorifies human thought as the highest and pinnacle pursuit and subject. It belittles God's relation to everything else that he's created.

Clement of Alexandria (starting of school, d. 210, criticized foreign religions and yet well-schooled and sympathetic toward Greek philosophy). He principled the Alexandrian school (started by Pantaenus for the purpose of preparing people for baptism) and taught Origen. Under his leadership this school transforms into a training ground for pastors and theologians (seminary). High view of Greek philosophy: 1) it can prepare one for Christian theologian and 2) can enable one to go deeper into theology.

Origen (185-254)

He was born in a Christian family in Alexandria. Persecution was widespread in the city at the time of his birth. He was eager for martyrdom. His own father was imprisoned for such an end and he wanted to join him. His mother hid his clothes to keep him from doing so. He wrote to his father: 'Mind you don't change your mind on our account.' He was thoughtful and committed even at a young age.

His parents placed greatest priority on his being raised in the Lord and with an understanding of God's Word. Before he moved to other studies, he began with God's Word. He asked deep questions of the Scriptures even at an early age. His father's great joy was in seeing Origen's commitment to the Word and faith. He was martyred when Origen was 17 and had 6 younger brothers. This meant poverty for Origen and his family.

Origen was an incredibly intelligent man. Even at such a young age he is recognized as brilliant. He was taken in by a wealthy woman who was swayed by the teachings of a heretic (Antiochene) in Alexandria. However, Origen kept from his teachings and continued to study God's Word and secular subjects. He began teaching others in literature at an early age. He began teaching his students the basic subjects (literature, arithmetic, geometry) and then moved on to philosophy. Because of the need of teachers (many fled because of the persecution) he began instructing others in God's Word at the age of 18.

He aided martyrs greatly. He would encourage them. He would even go right up to them as they were being led to their executions and kiss them and encourage them to stand firm in the faith. Many opposed him and soldiers were even posted around his house as he would teach. "The same divine and heavenly grace protected him again and again on other occasions too many to count; for because of his fearlessness and extreme enthusiasm for the word of Christ he was at that time the target of plotters."¹

He lived a very ascetic form of life. He wouldn't wear two coats or shoes (Mt. 10:10) and strived not to worry about the future (Mt. 6:34). He lived in chosen poverty, fasting, restricting his sleep, and living on meager rations to a degree that it was poor for his health.

When he was still a young man his enthusiasm and immaturity shone forth. Origen took Jesus' words in Matt. 19:12 in an absurdly literal sense and made himself a eunuch. Interestingly and unfortunately it was a decision he came to regret later in life.

As the school began to grow, and it did significantly under Origen, Origen found himself in a situation where he had no time to study and develop theology so he appointed Heraclas (one of his pupils) to teach the entry level students and took the advanced classes for himself. This also left him with time to study and write. He was incredibly gifted at winning others, especially intellectuals, to Christ.

¹ Eusebius, 182

At different times in his life Origen went abroad and was invited to teach biblical interpretation by the bishops of other regions. He was well-respected during his time as a teacher and theologian. People would even travel to Alexandria in order to study under Origen.

Due to conflict with the Bishop of Alexandria at the time (Demetrius) Origen left Alexandria and went to Caesarea where he was ordained as a presbyter. Afterward he was actually excommunicated from the Alexandrian church. While there Origen started a school for theology which also grew well-known. In Origen we see a movement to engage the text in the original language. He learned Hebrew and put the Old and New Testaments on the same level as God's word. One of his greatest contributions was the Hexapla which put the Hebrew text alongside of several other translations. He wrote commentaries on almost every book in the Old and New Testaments. He wrote several volumes against heresies and in support of the true faith as well. Later in life he permitted that his lectures be taken down so as to be reproduced.

Many of his students faced martyrdom: "Thanks to him, men like this with all their heart honestly embraced faith in the word of God, and came into prominence in the persecution that broke out at that time, some of them being arrested and finding fulfilment in martyrdom."²

Eventually Origen was invited back to Alexandria and he taught there again. Decius succeeded Philip as Roman Emperor. Philip had been generous to Christians. Decius had hated Philip and enacted persecution against Christians. Under his reign the bishop of Rome and the bishop of Jerusalem were martyred. He also imprisoned Origen who was then living in Caesarea. He was tortured terribly in an attempt to make him renounce the faith but he would not. He died in 254 AD as a result of his imprisonment and injuries accumulated under the severity of his torture.

Thought:

Origen is the first great systematic theologian.

God is the Creator of the world. He is an incomprehensible, spiritual being. Origen commits to eternal creation where in a sense everything has always existed and goes through creative changes.

In terms of his Christology, Christ is of the same essence of the Father and proceeds from the Father. Origen does have some subordinationism in saying that Christ is a copy of the Father (this is very typical of the time). He views the divinity of Jesus as lesser in some way than that of the Father; he is eternal and yet created by the Father.

Spiritual beings turned away from God (except one), before the fall, and their punishment is to be clothed with spiritual bodies. This is the creation of the world. The Logos takes to himself this one spiritual body that did not fall. There is no true incarnation and the Logos does not suffer on the cross. The Logos comes to redeem humanity. There is an atoning sacrifice without which men are doomed to die for their sins. Origen has a view of total restoration that encompasses everyone being restored to God (universalism). Origen has a view that even the redeemed enter into a training period at death for a deeper knowledge of God (similar to purgatory). The wicked will have a painful purification process.

Allegorical interpretation – while the method of interpretation may not comfort us or find agreement with us, we should find great comfort from the source to which they go. They go to God's Word and acknowledge its authority. Origen argued that there was a surface meaning to Scripture but also a deeper spiritual meaning and that these two meanings should be distinguished. This is somewhat connected to platonic thought and Gnosticism. He longs to go for a deeper faith and knowledge.

"Having spoken thus briefly on the subject of the divine inspiration of the holy Scriptures, it is necessary to proceed to the (consideration of the) manner in which they are to be read and understood, seeing numerous errors have been committed in consequence of the method in which the holy documents ought to be examined, not having been discovered by the multitude."³

Christianity and faith are not anti-intellectual. This is a strand of thought that is very present today. Certainly Christianity does not turn away those who are not intellectuals. There is simplicity to the Christian faith. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." However, to say that there is simplicity in the Christian faith is not the same as saying it is without depth. The most profound intellectual can spend their entire life plumbing the depth of the Christian faith and not be disappointed or have exhausted the work.

² Eusebius, 183

³ Origen in Placher, 37

Apologetics – answering questions from those outside. It is giving a defense (1 Peter 3:15-16). There were many charges of immorality focused against the Christian church. Many of the New Testament letters pick up on morality structures of the Roman world at the time. The apologists answer such charges. Greek philosophy is an entry point that they use to speak into the culture and give a defense of the faith. Apologetics gives defense about false accusations; however, it also appeals to those outside of the faith by giving firm reason as to its validity. They appeal rationally to emperors and others. Apologetics and evangelism are two sides of the same coin.

Warning: in this Greek approach to apologetics there can be a compromising on what is given precedence. Philosophy can be seen as necessary to approaching Scripture if we're not careful. Philosophy is not the lens by which we view Scripture but Scripture the lens by which we view philosophy. In some ways this will be a struggle that carries on through the medieval church.

Beginning with Justin and continuing on through Origen you have priority and acknowledgement given to the New Testament. They comment on the Scriptures. They receive them as the Word of God and make their defenses from Scripture. However, these men are typically first philosophers and then theologians. Christianity is the true philosophy according to this view.

Take Away:

The value of teaching Christ and placing priority on him from the onset of life. Being raised in the Lord is a rich privilege. Foundations are of great value as is raising our children in the Word.

Be aware of your own hobbies and interests. We must learn to place things under the lens of Scripture and not to view Scripture under the lens of our own creating.

Life does matter and sin matters. While we want to be careful not to be absurdly literal with certain texts of Scripture, we also want to understand how powerfully they speak about sin. "An ounce of sin can cause us more harm than a ton of suffering" (Tim Keller).

Eusebius wrote about Origen and apologists that took a very different approach than he and he writes of both with admiration. We will rarely find someone with whom we agree on every point. If you do find someone who fits this description there may even be use in searching out why you follow them. However, even those whom we disagree with on certain points in the faith we should seek to learn from as they have learned from Scripture. We should seek to round out our own theology with truths they have learned. We can be quick to look at the worst of others to such a degree that we can't learn from their strengths. We should acknowledge that Scripture doesn't permit our consciences to go places that these brothers and sisters did; however, we should acknowledge them as brothers and sisters. We should also seek to sharpen our thinking with their own strengths. We have not come to perfection. Listening and refining is important while maintaining conviction. We must also recognize that disagreement on certain points does not exclude admiration and respect. I had a teacher who would only listen to his children's complaints about one another after they had said something good about them first. That is a good practice. We can acknowledge weaknesses and disagreements but it is often good to acknowledge strengths and admiration beforehand. It reminds us of our mutual identity in Christ, their commitment to the gospel, and how God has led and matured them.

Don't slip into dualism and thinking that the body is bad. We are spiritual and physical. It's better to be with Christ than to continue on in the body but what is better yet is to have redeemed bodies in the presence of the Lord forever.

Resources:

William C. Platcher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Vol. 1: From Its Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation*

Eusebius, *The History of the Church*

Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*

Tim Dowley, *The History of Christianity*