

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

WEEK 4 **February 7, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Grisham**

On the Trinity

Read the following passages, which refer to the “threeness” of God: Matthew 3:16-17; 1 Peter 1:1-2; Romans 8:16-17; Ephesians 1:1-14; and Matthew 28:18-20; and to these that refer to the divinity of Christ: John 1:1-4, 14; 10:30; 20:28; Philipians 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20; 2:9; and Hebrews 1:1-4.

Imagine that we don’t have over 1,500 years of orthodoxy to explain these things using such admittedly non-biblical terms as “Trinity.” **How exactly would we speak about God’s oneness and its relationship to his threeness?** How would we understand and explain Christ’s relationship to God as a man? Not easily! Especially not easily without giving some Scripture passages more or less weight than others, thus distorting the whole testimony of Scripture. This is how heresies arise, in exactly this manner: when the truth of Scripture is distorted by over- or under-emphasizing particular passages without giving due attention to the whole testimony of Scripture. We can even say that heresies played a role in the early church, for driving the formulation of orthodox doctrine.

Tertullian is known as the “**father of the Latin church.**” **One of his greatest gifts to us is the term “Trinity,”** and the early, though incomplete, formation of the concept of “one substance, three persons,” as well as a battery of other phrases and ideas that have come to us down through all these centuries. First, a little background:

IRENAEUS (early 2nd century-c. 202)

In his youth in his hometown of Smyrna, he **had listened to Polycarp**, Bishop of Smyrna, who had himself been a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus was raised as a Christian, and became the **Bishop of Lyon**, in what is today southern France. His most famous book, *Against Heresies* (180), attacked Gnosticism. He **emphasized the authority of the apostolic church** and its central role in defending the **apostolic doctrine preserved in the whole of Scripture** (e.g., all four Gospels, not just one favorite; and all the epistles, not excluding those, say, by Paul or by James). Opposing Gnostic and Marcionite views of God, emphasizing the unity of Scripture (Old Testament and New), **the goodness of creation**, the incarnation of the Word, the bodily resurrection, and a literal, physical Second Coming. In fact, he was premillennialist, and was therefore less popular in the eastern church. But his role in the codification of the New Testament is incalculable, excluding late-written Gnostic Gospels from the canon, and saturating his writing with biblical quotes (citing 21 of the 27 books of the New Testament in his writings, with only Philemon, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude not being quoted, which doesn’t necessarily indicate that he didn’t have access to even these, but only that he didn’t actually quote from them in any of his extant writings).

His emphasis on **a thoroughgoing biblical orientation**, as well as his practical approach to biblical interpretation and doctrinal formulation, and his opposition to the intellectualizing and “spiritualizing” of the Gnostics and Marcionites, was very influential for Tertullian.

TERTULLIAN (c. 155-c. 222)

Tertullian was **born about 160 in Carthage**, the son of a centurion. He was apparently a **lawyer**, as evidenced by his close acquaintance with and frequent mention of the procedures and terms of Roman law in his writings. He knew Greek as well as Latin, and wrote works in Greek which have not come down to us, but what is most significant is that his works were in Latin – making him the first of the church fathers to have left a substantial body of writing in Latin, capturing the emphases of the western part of the empire.

Tertullian was a pagan until middle life, he had shared the pagan prejudices against Christianity.

His conversion happened about the year 197, and for him which was absolutely life-changing. “A Christian is made, not born,” he wrote, emphasizing his view that conversion is necessary for the Christian. Apparently he **became a priest in the church of Carthage (c. 200)**.

But he **became a Montanist in about 206**, and, when that sect was condemned, he himself **separated from the Catholic church in about 211-213**. According to Jerome, he lived on until extreme old age.

Because of fervent support for the condemned Montanists and his subsequent separation from the church, he has never been recognized as a saint of the church. However, his writings, while often polemical and harsh, are filled with brilliant insights and terms (e.g., **the Trinity**) and phrases (“**The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church**,” “**What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?**”, etc.) that have echoed down through the centuries.

His writings follow the course of his life and can be divided in three categories:

1. Apologetics (directed to non-Christians)

- Not like the apologists (e.g., Justin Martyr), who relied so much on philosophy. Like Irenaeus, more thoroughly biblical in outlook. **Tertullian used philosophy** when it suited him to do so, **but ultimately rejected it** as foreign to the outlook of Scriptural revelation – and distinctly inferior to it.
- Tertullian is **the earliest of the Western (Latin) church fathers**, providing a picture of the outlook and concerns of the western part of the Roman Empire, out of which the medieval church (and ultimately our church) developed.
- Tertullian’s writing is **polemical and hard-hitting**, but also **brilliant and memorable**.
- In terms of his **apologetic approach**, he set forth an array of powerful arguments, building lawyer-like, to show **the irrationality of anti-Christian persecution and the rationality of Christian faith**. He was the first Latin writer to boldly assert that Christianity is the *vera religio*, while all the other interlocking legally approved cults in the Empire were mere superstitions.

2. Defense of Orthodoxy (against heretics, especially Marcion)

- **Defending the whole of Scripture:** with Irenaeus, vs. Marcion, Gnostics. Tertullian also introduced the terms *vetus testamentum* (Old Testament) and *novum testamentum* (New Testament). For Tertullian, the question with which to confront heretics and their endlessly fissuring schools, was this: “To whom does the faith belong? Whose are the Scriptures? **By whom, through whom, when, and to whom has been handed down the discipline by which we are Christians?**” His answer was that Christ had sent his apostles, who founded churches in each city, from which the other **apostolic churches** had been planted, so that “they also are apostolic in that they are the offspring of the apostolic churches.” And the apostolic churches **together affirm the authority of the Scriptures**, and share the distillation of faith which he called the **Rule of Faith** (e.g., adherence to Apostles’ Creed).
- **Affirming and defending the one-in-threeness of God: coined the term Trinity**¹ and gave the first written expression to the Latin formula “*tres Personae, una Substantia*” (“three Persons, one Substance,” related to the Greek formula “*treis Hypostases, Homoousios*,” “three hypostases, one being”). While Tertullian opposed, on the one hand, Marcionite Docetism and its theological successor, Monarchianism; and on the other hand, Ebionitism and its theological successor, Adoptionism, his Trinitarian theology was incomplete, and can be seen to be (however unwittingly on Tertullian’s part) a theological successor to Jewish Docetism, whose implied view of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father would open the way to the later crisis of Arianism.

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¹ Theophilus of Antioch had earlier spoken of God as Trinity (Greek *trias*), but he had a different concept in mind, i.e., “God, his Word (Logos), and his Wisdom (Sophia).”

**Christ is God
but not man**

**Christ is not quite God
and not quite man**

**Christ is not God
but man**

Marcionite Docetism	Jewish Docetism	Ebionitism
/	/	/
Modalism (Modal Monarchianism) ("Patripassianism")	Tertullianism (good: God = triune) (bad: Christ subsequent and subordinate)	Adoptionism (Dynamic Monarchianism)

- **Affirming Christ as the Word become flesh:** Tertullian affirmed that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was the Word become flesh, that he was resurrected in the body, and that his Second Coming would be literal, physical, and bodily. His view in this area also had some problems, in that (1) he can almost be said to place too much emphasis on corporality (e.g., in teaching that even God himself has a body); more importantly (2) his teaching on the Son's divinity and relationship to the Father (as being neither eternal nor equal to the Father) is incomplete (as we've seen above); and (3) (note that this is only a problem for Catholics!) he didn't affirm the perpetual virginity of Mary, but taught that Jesus had siblings.
- **Arguing for a view of the human soul called traducianism,** which **rejected** the Gnostics' (and Origen's!) view of **the eternity of the soul**, while also distinguishing itself from **creationism**, the view that God creates a new soul at conception. Traducianism holds that our soul is passed down from Adam by means of natural generation – in other words, that **our souls are derived from our parents**. This helps to explain our inheritance of the fallenness through Adam. The church has consistently dismissed the notion of the eternity of pre-embodied souls as tending too strongly in a Gnostic direction (i.e., their view of our souls being imprisoned in our bodies, as if embodiment were not our "natural" state). But it has been less clear on the matter of traducianism vs. creationism. Most have since the Middle Ages supported the latter (with Thomas Aquinas calling traducianism a heresy); but many others, including Augustine and several Protestant theologians, have supported the latter. In favor of traducianism: (a) creation was finished on the sixth day; (b) creationism seems to subsume the miraculous creation of the soul into natural processes; (c) God created all things "very good," but how can we then be born sinfully? (d) Genesis 46:26 and Hebrews 7:10 indicate that souls were already present in the loins of ancestors; and (e) Genesis 6 is difficult to understand as referring to angelic-human unions and their fruit except by reference to traducianism. In favor of creationism: (a) it takes divine initiative and action to create a human soul, not simply natural processes, and (b) if the soul is derived from one's parents, regenerate parents would be expected to give birth to regenerate children...

3. Embrace of Montanism (against perceived laxity)

- In about 206, he became an advocate of Montanism (or **the New Prophecy movement**), which was a sort of early church form of Pentecostalism, emphasizing the continuing revelation of the Spirit to his anointed prophets. The **theological and ecclesiastical problems** with this movement were obvious: (1) its proponents **challenged the authority of bishops** and other appointed, anointed leaders of the church, in they now claimed direct authority in their pronouncements from God; (2) this also **challenged the unique authority of Scripture**, as new revelations were continually being added to it; and (3) it **created divisions in the church** between those who anointed themselves "spiritual" and the rest, to whom they referred condescendingly as "physical."
- It might seem surprising that Tertullian would be drawn to this movement, until we understand **its inordinate emphasis on discipline in the Christian life**, demanding more rigor than the Bible itself (which is the very essence of legalism).
- Central to Tertullian's thinking is **an extreme emphasis on the coming judgment of God**, which orients all his thinking for Christian life around the need for rigorous discipline.

- His view is rather different than that of Augustine (or of our own theological outlook, for that matter), which emphasizes our innate and continuing sinfulness and holds that we are saved by grace alone from beginning to end. For Tertullian, extreme discipline is required to persevere till the end – and being a martyr definitely helps. Indeed, **he believed that martyrdom entailed the remission of all offenses.**
- This excessive rigor was characteristic of the north African church (compare the later Donatist controversy in the time of Augustine). For example, Tertullian held that Christian girls in Carthage should wear veils.
- Tertullian in his later, Montanist phase, **totally opposed remarriage**, even after the death of spouses; he declared that **one could not be a soldier and a Christian**; he insisted that **one could not attend theater** or spectacles without damaging one’s faith, and so shouldn’t; and held to a doctrine of there being **no forgiveness for certain classes of grievous sins** (like lapsing from the faith under torture, or even fleeing from persecution).
- In defense of this insistence on a discipline more rigorous than that required by Scripture, Tertullian explained that, **while doctrine never changes, discipline develops.**
- These views led him away from the very convictions he had earlier argued against the heretics, about the authority of the apostolic church. And **when the church condemned Montanism in about 211, Tertullian found himself holding to a sectarian view, opposed by and opposing the orthodox mainstream.**
- To this day, Tertullian is **not received as a saint of the church**, but he is remembered for his vigorous apologetics against a persecuting society, his arguments against heretics, and his memorable theological formulations, especially the “Trinity.”

Tertullian's Defense:

1. First, anti-Christian views are shown to repose on unreasoning hatred only.
2. Next, the process of persecution is shown to be illogical: the offence is nothing but the name of Christian, which ought rather to be a title of honor! Moreover, no proof is shown for any crimes, only rumor; there are no witnesses presented, to prove the crimes alleged; and the first persecutor was Nero, the worst of all emperors! Then the Emperor Trajan ordered his governors not to seek us out, but yet to punish us if we were known (don't ask, don't tell). And in the end, consider the strangeness of this: that instead of being tortured until we confess, we are tortured until we deny!
3. Next, he meets some of the actual charges that were made against Christians;
4. That Christians were the cause of earthquakes and famines. Nonsense!
5. That Christian mock the pagan gods. Bah, it is the pagans themselves that despise their own gods, banish them, forbid their worship, mock them on the stage; the poets tell horrid stories of them; indeed, these "gods" were in reality only men, and bad men at that!
6. That Christians practice infanticide: it is Christians who protect children, who adopt the unwanted; it is you who expose your own unwanted children and kill the unborn!
7. That Christians' gatherings are lustful and incestuous: again, it is your promiscuous lust causes you to be in danger of the incest of which you accuse us!
8. That Christians do not swear by Caesar: no, but we are loyal, and pray for him, for his life, whereas you revolt against him.
9. That Christians despise death: but of old such contempt of death was esteemed heroic virtue. No, but we believe in God's judgment, and his justice!
10. Finally, therefore: do US justice! Examine our case, and change your minds!
11. Consider then: we believe in one God, the Creator, invisible, infinite, to whom the soul of man, which by nature is inclined to Christianity, bears witness.
12. We have the testimony from our sacred books, which are older than all your gods! And the fulfilled prophecy of these ancient books is the proof that they are divine.
13. Christ is the Word of God, born of a virgin; he was crucified, was resurrected, and ascended into heaven.
14. His disciples have spread Christ's doctrine throughout the world; and Nero "sowed it with blood" in Rome. In sum, "we worship God through Christ." What are we but "a body compacted by community of religion, of discipline, and of hope."
15. We meet together to pray, even for the emperors and authorities, to hear readings from the holy books and exhortations.
16. We judge and separate those who fall into crime. We have elders of proven virtue to preside.
17. Our care fund is replenished by voluntary donations each month, and is spent not on gluttony but on the poor and suffering.
18. You think us fools; and we rejoice to suffer for this.
19. We conquer by our death. "Inquire into the cause of our constancy. We believe this martyrdom to be the remission of all offences, and that he who is condemned before your tribunal is absolved before God."