

# The Reaction of the Early Church

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – an overview of the reaction to persecution of the Early Church by its fathers
2. aim – to cause us to recognize the value of opposition and time in helping to shape doctrine
3. passage – John 15:18-21

### b. outline

1. The Early Church Fathers
2. The Early Church Reactions

### c. overview

1. the *timeline* of our location
  - a. with the advent of the *primordial church* behind us, we now move into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century
  - b. the *primordial church* gives way to a more “settled” church
  - c. however, in the face of *opposition*, the church grows, and its doctrine *advances* in the world

## I. The Early Church Fathers

### Content

#### a. Irenaeus (c. 130) – a native of Asia Minor (Smyrna?)

1. was a disciple of Bishop Polycarp, who was martyred in 155
  - a. Polycarp was a disciple of John the Apostle; Irenaeus quotes John *through* Polycarp
2. migrated to Lyons (S France) and became a presbyter there; eventually raised to bishop
3. his writings were as of a *pastor* – a shepherd leading his flock in faith and life
  - a. he wrote to refute heresy and instruct believers in orthodox, biblical teachings
  - b. only 2 works survive: *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* and *Against Heresies*
4. **focus:** a grand vision of history; God’s redemptive work in time culminating in the incarnation of Jesus as the *goal* of human history from the beginning

#### b. Clement of Alexandria (c. 200) – a native of Athens

1. converted from pagan parents, then searched for a teacher who could grant him deeper understanding, which he found in Pantaenus in Alexandria (in Egypt)
  - a. took over the teaching duties from Pantaenus upon his death
  - b. fled Alexandria under the persecution of Septimius Severus (202) – probably to Asia Minor
2. Alexandria was a seat of intellectualism – thus the plethora of manuscripts uncovered there
3. Clement was a thinker – to convince intellectuals that Christianity was not an absurd superstition
  - a. he uses Plato as a foundation: if there is only *one* truth, that truth can *only* be found in Jesus
4. **focus:** Christianity can be supported from a clarified view of philosophy; understanding and knowledge implies that *all* systems of thought need to be taken captive *within* Christianity

#### c. Tertullian (c. 195) – a native of Carthage (in N Africa)

1. converted in Rome around the age of 40 – returned to Carthage and wrote apologetic treatises
2. Tertullian was a lawyer – argued against the edict of Trajan and argued for the “natural” Christianity of the human soul (failure to believe was only obstinacy)
3. in *Prescription Against the Heretics* he argues that the deposit of the faith (**i.e.** the Scriptures) has been with the church *longer* than with the heretics, therefore they have no right to use the Scriptures to develop their own belief systems
  - a. this argument was used by Rome against the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> C.
4. **focus:** Christian truth *must* end “vain speculations”; to come to truth (convincingly) and then to *continue* to search for truth is a waste of time and dangerous
5. **footnote:** Tertullian joined the Montanists (c. 207)
  - a. Montanus = a convert in Phrygia (central Asia Minor) who came to believe in a new prophecy
    1. **i.e.** a series of “ecstatic visions” about the second coming of Christ
  - b. he called for a reliance on the Holy Spirit and a more conservative personal ethic, with a deepened sense of personal discipline and ascetism
    1. maybe Tertullian joined because they advocated a rigor of life which he found “comfortable”

- c. the “deviation” of the Montanists suggests the reality of “schism” that would appear and continue in the church – not of *direct heresy*, but of slight alterations or additions to the orthodox faith

**d. Origen of Alexandria (c. 215) – a native of Alexandria**

- 1. raised by Christian parents; father martyred under the persecution of Septimius Severus
  - a. was appointed a teacher of *catechumens* – baptismal candidates – in his late teens
  - b. the jealousy of his Bishop, Demetrius, forced him to leave for Caesarea
  - c. he was eventually tortured to recant his faith, but survived only to die shortly in Tyre
- 2. Origen was a student of Clement, and his writings reflect a similar philosophical bent
  - a. he compiled the *Hexapla* – a six-columned O.T. (Hebrew, a transliteration, and 4 Greek)
  - b. he wrote a number of biblical commentaries, and *De Principiis*, a systematic theology
- 3. **focus:** although Christianity is not to be *confused* with philosophy (unlike Clement) and take itself from *outside* Scripture, those areas that are not *specifically* outlined do allow for much “speculation”
  - a. **e.g.** the Platonic tradition of “pre-existent” human souls (see also the Gnostics)

**e. the importance of the church fathers in theological tendencies**

- 1. in Asia Minor (I): salvation as a union with Christ, established in the sacraments
- 2. in Alexandria (C/O): the quest for unchanging truth, salvation by illumination of the spiritual world
- 3. in Carthage/Rome (T): salvation in moral purity, legalism and ascetism
- 4. the Eastern Church would eventually become a combination of (a) and (b)
- 5. the Western Church would eventually become focused on (c)
- 6. **point: the early church Fathers become important as they begin to interpret and apply Christian theology to the life and practices of the church, particularly in the face of opposition**
  - a. but – they were *imperfect and inconsistent*, and it would take a number of centuries for a full-orbed, well-rounded orthodoxy to be established in Christendom

## II. The Early Church Reactions

### Content

**a. the 4 main persecutors of the early church**

- 1. general persecution prior to the 3<sup>rd</sup> C.
  - a. the persecutions of the Jews (driving the church out of Jerusalem)
  - b. the persecutions of the Romans
    - 1. beginning under Nero and the fire of Rome (**see before**)
    - 2. the edict of Trajan and the “general” persecutions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C.
    - 3. the focus of Rome during the 2<sup>nd</sup> C. on civil wars and defending against the barbarians
- 2. Septimius Severus (c. 193)
  - a. he had much success in stopping civil war and holding back the barbarians
  - b. his decision to bring religious “harmony” to the empire by:
    - 1. reinvigorating the ancient worship of *Sol Invictus* (the “Unconquered Sun”)
    - 2. subsuming all other religious systems under it (all gods under the Sun god)
    - 3. outlawing (by edict in 202) all conversions to Christianity (or Judaism)
      - a. the year Irenaeus was martyred; about the time that Origen’s father was killed in Alexandria
  - c. however, persecution abated shortly thereafter (for unknown reasons)
    - 1. and it remained only in isolated incidents until c. 249
    - 2. in fact, persecution against the church was *never* linear, but moved in waves over time
- 3. Decius (c. 249)
  - a. although depicted to be cruel, Decius was only a simple Roman
  - b. he assumed that the constant incursions into Roman territory, economic downturn, and loss of ancient tradition were due to the abandonment of the gods by ordinary Romans
    - 1. the *simple* policy: if everyone worships the gods, Rome will be restored (conservatism)
  - c. he removed the “value” of martyrdom from the Christians, making them *apostates* instead
    - 1. persecution and martyrdom had significant value for the early church (**see below**)
    - 2. he issued an edict that *everyone* was required to sacrifice to the Romans gods
      - a. and burn a “pinch” of incense before a statue of himself (a “god” in the Roman scheme)
      - b. everyone who did was issued a certificate indicating compliance
      - c. those without such a certificate could be arrested and punished

- d. frankly, Christians were *unprepared* for this new assault upon their beliefs
    - 1. a generation (or two) that lived in relative peace were not ready for martyrdom (any more)
    - 2. Rome did not *directly* kill those who refused; instead, they used various “means” to coerce
      - a. some readily sacrificed, some bought *false* certificates, some stood until coerced
    - 3. a new “title” appeared in the church: the **confessor** = someone who withstood the coercion and torture without flinching, but who was *not* martyred (e.g. Origen who died later in Tyre)
      - a. as compared to the **lapsed** = those who had recanted their faith (in one way or another)
      - b. the church had to deal with the *lapsed* in determining who could remain *in the church*
        - 1. the earliest form of “church discipline” – ultimately the question boiled down to: who had just “sinned” vs. who had genuinely “fallen away” from the faith
      - c. the Roman Catholic sacrament of *reconciliation* (i.e. Confession) traces its roots to this
      - d. ultimately, the decision would be made by those “in power” (i.e. the bishop)
    - 4. again, this form of persecution abated (with a new emperor; c. 251, Gallus)
  - 4. Diocletian (c. 300)
    - a. the last and *greatest* persecution that led to the *Imperial Church* (under Constantine)
- b. the value of persecution to the early church**
- 1. the value of the *Roman empire* to the early church:
    - a. the **specific** relationship of Rome to Palestine and the Jews (e.g. Pontius Pilate)
      - a. the political struggle of the Jews, the use of crucifixion, the destruction of the Temple, etc.
    - b. the **stability** of a worldwide governmental entity under which the church could grow
    - c. the singular **economic state** under which the church could grow (roads, monies, mail, etc.)
    - d. the global **cultural status** under which the church could grow (common languages, etc.)
  - 2. the value of the *persecutions* to the early church:
    - a. it forced Christians to *codify* their beliefs (i.e. Scripture, creeds, writings, etc.; **see before**)
      - 1. the great “councils” of the *Imperial Church* (and later) were called to address various *heresies* that came against a well-established orthodoxy
      - 2. **by contrast**: the quietness of the *Imperial Church* led to a number of unorthodox troubles since the church was not having to defend its beliefs from *outsiders*
    - b. it forced Christians to be *genuine* in their conversions
      - 1. by the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> C., martyrdom was *actively sought* by many Christians as a “sign” of their faithfulness to Christ and a witness to him before unbelievers (e.g. Origen)
      - 2. the various persecutions clearly *differentiated* between those who professed Christ
      - 3. **by contrast**: the quietness of the *Imperial Church* allowed many “so-called” believers to infiltrate the ranks of the church and stir up controversy
    - c. it forced Christians to *evangelize* and grow the church
      - 1. motto: “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”
      - 2. persecution seems to be *the* single substance upon which *numerical* growth occurred
      - 3. evangelism in the Early Church seems to have been solely by individual believers *outside* of the church leading others to Christ individually
        - 1. little evidence of revivals or traveling evangelists in the time-period
        - 2. church worship (i.e. communion) was off-limits to *non-baptized* believers
        - 3. baptism was generally preceded by a lengthy period of *catechesis* and study
    - d. **by contrast**: the quietness of the *Imperial Church* led to a slowing growth of the church
  - d. it forced Christians to remain on the *outside* of governmental power structures
    - a. no mixture of church/state politics and power struggles of the church with society
    - b. **by contrast**: the quietness of the *Imperial Church* led to Christians having to deal with all sorts of new power struggles, especially in the relationship of the church to the state
- c. this providential method of God in Scripture**
- 1. the Israelites in Egypt – God forms a *nation* within the persecution of that 400 years
  - 2. the Israelites in exile – God recreates a *people* within the persecution of that 70 years
  - 3. the inter-testamental period – God *prepares* his people for the messiah during that 400 years
  - 4. the persecuted church today – God grows his people *exponentially* in certain parts of the world