

EXPLORING CHURCH HISTORY



A Guide to History, World Religions, and Ethics

Three Books in One

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INTRODUCTION

IN GENERAL MOST CHRISTIANS are abysmally ignorant of their Christian heritage. Yet an awareness of the history of God's church can help us serve the Lord more effectively. First, knowledge of church history brings a sense of perspective. Many of the cultural and doctrinal battles currently being fought are not really that new. We can gain much from studying the past. Second, church history gives an accurate understanding of the complexities and richness of Christianity. As we realize this diversity and the contributions many individuals and groups have made to the church, it produces a tolerance and appreciation of groups with which we may personally disagree. Finally, church history reinforces the Christian conviction that the church will triumph! Jesus' words, "I will build My church," take on a richer meaning.

As the chapter titles indicate, this book takes a chronological approach to church history—The Ancient Church, The Medieval Church, The Reformation Church, and The Modern Church. Each chapter emphasizes the theological progress and developing consensus within the church on what the Scriptures taught, as well as the institutional development of the church. The chapters on the Reformation (6 and 7) stress the restructuring and fragmentation of the church during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One cannot understand the church today without this background.

Finally, the last five chapters of the book give consideration to the church's struggle with the modern world. Darwinism, Marxism, industrial capitalism, antisupernaturalism, and the challenge of poverty have pressured the church in multiple ways. To a great extent these struggles continue today. Yet through the modern missions movement and revivals, God continues to accomplish His redemptive purposes.

You are about to begin an exciting study. It is my prayer that this book will change your life. I trust that when you are finished, you will have a deeper appreciation for your splendid heritage and a profound conviction that Christ's church will triumph.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Chapter One



FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH: THE APOSTOLIC AGE

*But when the fullness of the time came,
God sent forth His Son . . .*

PAUL, THE APOSTLE, GALATIANS 4:4

IN GALATIANS 4:4 the apostle Paul wrote, “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son.” Paul realized that the first century was a unique period of history, the precise time for God’s Son to enter human history.

Unlike any previous period, the Mediterranean world was united. Throughout this world, the imperial armies of Rome maintained a forced peace—the famous *Pax Romana* (30 B.C.–A.D. 180). As the army guarded the empire from robbers and pirates, trade flourished on both land and sea. Prosperity and wealth followed. Rome brought stability and order to its cities, with free food and public games at the taxpayers’ expense.

The Roman roads provided an infrastructure that knit the empire together. As a result, the army could be anywhere in the realm within two weeks. Communications from the emperor traveled with a speed unheard of in previous empires. In God’s providence, the early church also utilized this communications network to spread the Gospel.

As the imperial army moved with ease through its domain, it carried out the orders of the Caesar with efficiency and discipline. But the Gospel also penetrated the army. For example, Paul speaks of believers in the Praetorian guard, an elite force closest to the emperor (Phil. 1:13). Also, Christianity first came to Britain through Roman soldiers. So significant was the impact of Christianity on the army that one historian called the Roman army the “mouthpiece of the gospel” (Cairns, 37).

The Roman world was also a Greek world. Rome conquered the Greeks militarily, but in many ways the Greeks conquered Rome intellectually. The common language of the day was *koine* Greek, the language spread throughout the empire by Alexander the Great. In God's sovereignty, this was the language of His revelation, the New Testament. In addition, Greek philosophy heavily influenced the way the Roman world thought. Greek philosophers wanted to know truth and the place of human beings in the universe. Despite the variations within Greek philosophy, most of its philosophers shared the belief that there was a realm beyond the physical world, the domain of the transcendent. Christianity took advantage of this hunger for truth and for transcendent reality. Witness Paul's argument with the philosophers in Acts 17, his presentation of Jesus in Colossians 1, and John's philosophical argument in his Gospel and First Epistle. The Greco-Roman world was intellectually "set up" for the Gospel.

The Roman world also pulsed with religious exhilaration and anticipation. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, told of the Eastern cults, false messiahs, and religious fervor that permeated the empire. Many in Israel envisioned the Messiah coming at any moment. The Zealots wanted a revolution against Rome. The Essenes wanted a prophet of light who would expel the darkness of evil. The Pharisees wanted a nationalist leader who would restore the law and free Israel from Rome's oppression.

Furthermore, after the Jewish exile of earlier centuries and the subsequent Diaspora (the migration of Jews throughout the Roman Empire), the synagogue system represented a Jewish presence in every major city. Each time Paul entered a city, he first took the gospel message to the Jews in the synagogue. Only after that did he move on to the Gentiles.

THE LEADERS OF THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

Peter

Pentecost (fifty days after the crucifixion and ten days after the ascension of Christ) marks the birth of the church. As the Spirit filled the 120 believers who were waiting and praying, the miracle of tongues caused a sensation. Some observers accused the Christians of drunkenness. At this point, Peter emerged as the spokesperson for the early church.

Peter dominates the first fifteen chapters of Acts. As the first among the Twelve to see the resurrected Christ, he emerged as the leader of the small community of believers before Pentecost (Acts 1:15). He even insisted that Judas Iscariot be replaced.

At Pentecost he preached the Spirit-inspired sermon that produced three thousand converts. He cut through the fog of exclusive Judaism by declaring of Jesus that “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He performed miracles, defied the Jerusalem authorities, disciplined Ananias and Sapphira, and set up deacons as helpers so the apostles could study and preach. Despite his slip at Antioch when he withdrew from fellowship with Gentile converts (Gal. 2:14), he championed the Gospel’s penetration into the Gentile world.

As the decisive speaker at the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 49) in Acts 15, he brilliantly defended Gentile church membership. After the council, the book of Acts is silent concerning Peter; his activities simply cannot be pinpointed with any certainty. We can, however, be definite about his authorship of 1 and 2 Peter.

Was Peter the founder of the Roman church, its first bishop, and hence its first pope? Incomplete evidence shows he did do missionary work in Antioch and later in Rome, but there is no evidence that he was Rome’s bishop or that he stayed long in Rome. In fact, recent scholarship has shown that the church had a presbyterian structure into the second century and was rather decentralized into the fourth. It is difficult to argue that Rome was the ecclesiastical, let alone theological, center of the early Christian church. At best, it was merely a place of honor.

The end of Peter’s life is wrapped in tradition. The best evidence establishes that Peter died a martyr’s death during Nero’s persecutions, about A.D. 68. The apocryphal *Acts of Peter* contends that he died crucified upside down on a Roman cross. That he was crucified would fit Christ’s words of John 21:18-19. Of the rest of the tradition, we simply cannot be sure.

John

As one of the “pillars” of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9), John, brother of James and son of Zebedee, was Peter’s coworker (Acts 1:13; 3:1-4:23; 8:14-25). Together they healed and preached in the name of Jesus the Messiah. When ordered to stop, they obeyed God rather than men. By laying hands on the new Samaritan converts, Peter and John exercised general supervision over the burgeoning church in Samaria. Although he was probably at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, his name does not

appear in Acts after his brother James was martyred (Acts 12:1-2). We do not know when he left Jerusalem.

The book of Revelation reveals that John was exiled, probably in the early nineties by Roman Emperor Domitian, to Patmos for preaching the Word of God and for his “testimony of Jesus” (1:9). There John recorded the visions he “saw,” which constitute the framework for understanding events surrounding the second coming of Christ. Emperor Nerva apparently released John from exile sometime between A.D. 96 and 98.

After his exile the most reliable evidence places John in Ephesus, where, after living to an old age, he died a natural death. In Ephesus he trained such disciples as Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius—all strategic leaders of the second-century church. Indeed, this mentoring role may give meaning to his self-described title, “the elder,” in 2 and 3 John.

John’s most significant contribution to the church was his writing. His Gospel is unique. Only 8 percent of it is related in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the remaining 92 percent is original with John. Most exceptional is his instruction regarding the deity of Christ. Jesus is the eternal *Logos* (1:1-18), the great “I am” (8:58).

John likewise gives emphasis to the Spirit, especially in the Upper Room Discourse (14–16). There Jesus asked the Father to send another Helper who will indwell believers, teach them truth and enable them to recall it, and convict the world of its sin, righteousness, and judgment. It is the Spirit who regenerates (3:6), and it is He who brings satisfaction and fulfillment to those who believe in Jesus (7:37-39).

Paul

The other decisive leader of the apostolic church was Paul, in whose life three great ancient traditions intersected. Religiously, he was a Jew, culturally a Greek, and politically a Roman. He was born in Tarsus, a major university town and the principal city of the province of Cilicia. Paul understood his Jewish heritage in terms of the Abrahamic covenant (Phil. 3:5-6). His parents may have named him Saul after Israel’s first king, who was also of the tribe of Benjamin. Paul was trained in Pharisaism at the rabbinic school in Jerusalem headed by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Phil. 3:5). His familiarity with Greek authors (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12) and his use of Greek argumentation (Rom. 2:1–3:20; Col. 1:15-20) suggests a Greco-Roman influence.

The Pharisees were not particularly tolerant of new religious movements. So when the “people of the Way” spread to Damascus (Acts 9:1-

2), Rabbi Saul had no problem receiving a commission from the high priest to extradite Jewish Christians to Jerusalem. On the road to that city, Saul met his resurrected Messiah.

Approximately thirteen years separated Paul's conversion and his first missionary journey (A.D. 48). Paul claimed to be *the* missionary to the Gentiles. The missionary journeys that Luke documented in Acts bear this out. The first of these probably provoked the most controversy.

During that trip (Acts 13–14), Paul and Barnabas evangelized Cyprus and the southern part of Galatia. As Gentile churches flourished, two fundamental questions surfaced: What was the relationship between Christianity and Judaism? How is a person justified? A Judaistic group from Judea insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation—something that contradicted Paul's free-grace Gospel. Hence the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

The council affirmed Paul's doctrine of free grace, adding only that Gentile converts abstain from certain practices. Thus the mother church affirmed Paul's ministry of justification by faith plus nothing! Following the council, Paul embarked on two additional missionary journeys that are recorded in Acts 15:26–21:16.

After these journeys he went to Jerusalem to report to James and the elders about his activities in the Gentile churches. There, as a result of trumped-up charges, Roman authorities arrested him. Over the next two years, Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea and stood trial before the Roman procurator Felix, his successor Porcius Festus, and Herod Agrippa II, the titular king of the Jews. Asserting his Roman citizenship, he appealed to Caesar and headed for Rome where officials placed him under house arrest.

Because of the difficulty of determining the exact chronology and place names that appear in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), it seems best to assume that Paul was subsequently released and ministered for six more years (A.D. 62–67). Some scholars even suggest that Paul not only ministered to Asia Minor and Greece but also reached Spain before he was arrested at the height of Nero's persecutions. He was most likely executed by decapitation in the spring of A.D. 68.

SIGNIFICANT WOMEN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Scriptures affirm the equality of men and women, both created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27) and in their position in Christ (Gal. 3:28). While the Bible proclaims equality of the sexes, it also argues for func-

tional differences (role differences) within the home (Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19) and within the church (1 Cor. 11:2-16; 14:33-36; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 3:1-13; 5:1-25; Titus 1:6-9). Whatever the precise meanings and applications of these crucial Pauline passages may be, church history bears witness to an extraordinary number of women in the early church.

The Gospel was a liberating force in the ancient world, challenging old and established traditions rooted in human prejudice. These gradually died. Contempt, discrimination, and demeaning references often characterized rabbinic teachings about women. Rabbis, for instance, were encouraged not to teach women or even speak to them. According to Jewish tradition, women could never be a part of the count needed to establish a synagogue. But Luke cited both men and women who were baptized and persecuted and who contributed to the growth of the church (Acts 5:14; 8:12; 9:2; 17:4, 12).

Women in Jesus' Day

The challenge to ancient traditions began with Jesus' earthly ministry, in which women played a most significant role. Many women financially supported the ministry of Jesus and His disciples and ministered to Him personally (Matt. 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:3). The Gospels usually depict Mary, sister of Martha, as seated at Jesus' feet—an honor normally given to men. Several women had the immensely important distinction of bearing the news of Christ's resurrection—a quite remarkable honor in light of strict Jewish teachings on valid testimony.

Not only were women involved in the ministry of Jesus, but they participated in the events at Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Since the narrative of events in the Upper Room continues into Acts 2, we must assume that the women present were likewise filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:1-4).

Women in the Early Church

The book of Acts also gives accounts of women who played active roles in ministry in the early church. Dorcas (Tabitha) was the only woman in the New Testament to be called a "disciple" (9:36). Her death caused a major stir in Joppa, prompting the believers to urge Peter to travel from nearby Lydda. Peter prayed, and Dorcas was raised from the dead! Mary of Jerusalem, John Mark's mother (12:12), was a wealthy widow whose house became the vital hub of the Jerusalem church. There the young church found refuge and security during the intense persecutions of Herod Agrippa. Lydia, a wealthy woman of commerce and apparently Paul's first convert in Europe, opened her home to Paul and Silas (16:14-15).

But the early church did not limit women to nonverbal ministry. One of the more remarkable women of the New Testament was Priscilla (Prisca). She and her husband, Aquila, early converts to the faith, were banished from Rome. They became intimate friends with Paul, with whom they shared hospitality and the craft of tent-making (Acts 18:1-3). In some way they had risked their lives for Paul (Rom. 16:3-5), perhaps at the same time heightening his awareness of the growing church in Rome. Most significantly, both Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos, the eloquent preacher from Alexandria, “and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Obviously Priscilla knew biblical truth and could explain it with clarity. That the ministry of this couple was well known and widespread is evidenced by the frequent references to them in Paul’s writings (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19). Tradition has it that Priscilla was martyred in Rome.

Another woman of New Testament significance was Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2). Because she was probably the bearer of Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul commends her to the Roman church, asking that they “receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints,” and “help her in whatever matter she may have need of you.” He also says of her that she was a “helper,” which clearly implies active and important functions in the church. Was she, therefore, representing Paul in some official capacity, as perhaps a “deaconess” (“servant” of v. 1), as some have argued? From these two verses, we simply cannot be certain she held an authoritative office in the church at Cenchrea. However, it is clear that Phoebe was significant enough for Paul to go out of his way to single her out and ask the Roman church to take care of her.

Two passages indicate that women functioned as prophets in the early church. Acts 21:9 introduces Philip the evangelist as having four daughters who were “prophetesses.” From Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:5, it would seem that Philip’s daughters were not exceptions, for Paul’s instructions about women’s head coverings occurs in the context of women “praying or prophesying” in the worship service. Whatever the nature of these ministries, women gifted by the Holy Spirit exercised notable responsibilities in the early church.

Other women of the New Testament fulfilled pivotal ministry roles. Euodias and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3) were identified as “fellow workers” with Paul, a remarkable designation when one remembers that Paul also labeled Titus and Timothy “fellow workers.” Paul classified Andronicus and Junias [Junia] (Rom. 16:7)—probably a husband and wife—as “outstanding among the apostles,” most likely a reference to

their role as ones commissioned by the Roman church for special duties, not the New Testament office of apostle. Finally, in the list of “fellow workers” in Romans 16, ten of the twenty-nine people commended by Paul were women.

Women thus played a decisive role in the beginning of Christianity. Their work both complemented the duties of men and involved some leadership responsibilities. Although there are no recorded examples of women evangelists, elders, or formal teachers of biblical truth, their function was both vibrant and vital in the ongoing progress of the Gospel—a clear testimony to the liberating power of Jesus Christ.

With the deaths of Peter, Paul, and John, the mantle of leadership passed to a new generation, the Apostolic Fathers. The Fathers stood on the shoulders of giants, but their theology was often undeveloped. We take up their story in the next chapter.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What was the Pax Romana, and what were some of its characteristics?
2. How did the great Roman road system aid the spread of the Gospel?
3. What were some of the important contributions that Greek philosophy made to the setting of the Roman world?
4. Who were some of the groups of first-century Judaism, and what were their expectations?
5. List some of the decisive contributions that Peter, Paul, and John each made to the apostolic church.
6. In what roles were women involved in the early church, according to the New Testament?



THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

*The test of one's doctrine is following the bishop.
The Episcopal office comes from God, not from man.
Christians are to respect him as they respect
God the Father.*

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

BY THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY, the death of the apostles produced a leadership vacuum in the church. Who had the authority to lead the believers? Who would guide and guard this flourishing new Christian faith? A group generally called the Church Fathers filled the gap.

As a term of affection and esteem, “father” was generally given to spiritual leaders of the church (known as elders or bishops). The Fathers can be divided into three groups: the Apostolic Fathers (A.D. 95–150), the Apologists (A.D. 150–300), and the Theologians (A.D. 300–600). The Apostolic Fathers wrote what was generally devotional and edifying in nature; the Apologists produced literature that defended the faith and countered error; the Theologians began doing systematic theology. The next several chapters cover each of these groups.

This chapter concentrates on the Apostolic Fathers, individuals who wrote Christian literature and gave leadership to the church from A.D. 95 to 150. Their writings reflected a deep commitment to the Old Testament and an understanding that the new faith of Christianity fulfilled the Old Testament. There is, therefore, little theological reflection or doctrinal analysis from the Apostolic Fathers. Their desire was to edify and exhort the saints and give them the hope they needed to persevere. We can best describe their work as devotional, pietistic (encouraging holy living), and pastoral.

The Apostolic Fathers served and led a church exploding with growth and zeal. Such realities demanded counsel, advice, and practical guidelines for spiritual growth and action for both individual Christians and local church bodies. Thus the writings of the Apostolic Fathers often glorified martyrdom and celibacy and stressed the importance of baptism in ways that make modern evangelicals quite uncomfortable. But the time in which they wrote, the first fifty years of the second century, marked a church struggling with how to live obediently and how to structure the church in a vastly pagan culture.

Clement of Rome

As the bishop, or elder, of Rome, Clement (A.D. 30–100) shouldered the responsibility for dealing with a major disturbance in Corinth. As when Paul wrote to the church forty years earlier, the Corinthian church suffered from factionalism and bitterness. Therefore, Clement exhorted the Corinthians to exercise love, patience, and humility as the key to develop sound Christian interpersonal relationships. He also underscored obedience to church leadership as essential for church harmony and desperately needed unity.

Because it is the earliest example of Christian literature outside the New Testament, Clement's letter to the Corinthians is profoundly important. He quoted the Old Testament so frequently that we can readily see how dependent the early church was on its authority. His many allusions to Paul's writings and life also show how widespread Paul's influence was. Finally, as Clement called for obedience to the church leadership, he argued that church elders received their authority from the apostles, who received their authority from Christ. Over the next several centuries, the church decisively expanded this idea of succession.

Ignatius

Because of his martyrdom, Ignatius is considered a giant among the early Church Fathers. The bishop of Antioch in Syria, he was arrested by Roman authorities for his Christian testimony. As he made his way to Rome for execution, he visited several cities along the way. His subsequent letters to these seven churches, written about A.D. 110, stressed the twin themes of heresy and unity. The heresy he addressed was an early form of Gnostic teaching (see the next chapter), which denied the full humanity of Jesus. Thus Ignatius argued that the best defense against such heresy and the foremost guarantee of unity was the bishop.

When Ignatius called for submission to the bishop, he revealed a subtle change developing in the early church. The New Testament docu-

ments show a plurality of church leadership in the first century, principally elders and deacons. However, the growth of the church in the empire demanded a greater degree of authority and superintendence over the local churches. That is apparently why Ignatius stressed to the elders and deacons of the seven churches that they submit to a bishop who would coordinate and rule over their local churches. This, he claimed, was necessary to deal with false teaching and to foster unity among the churches. Subsequent generations of church leaders expanded the office of bishop.

The Shepherd of Hermas

Written about A.D. 150 by a freed slave, *The Shepherd of Hermas* is a rather bizarre work of five visions patterned somewhat after John's book of the Revelation. In graphic detail, Hermas, drawing on personal experiences of himself and his family, depicted the evils of a decadent civilization very much in decline. Repentance and the call to holy living dominate the work.

Polycarp

As a disciple of the apostle John and as bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp wrote a most significant letter to the church at Philippi about A.D. 110. The value of this letter with its copious Old Testament quotations is its dependence on many of the circulating books of the New Testament, especially those written by Paul. This letter shows that the early second-century church regarded the New Testament books as authoritative in calling Christians to holy living.

Polycarp's martyrdom at age eighty-six in A.D. 155 remains one of the great narratives of the early church. At his trial he did nothing to provoke his accusers but passionately defended Jesus Christ as his Lord. He died at the fiery stake, giving praise to his Lord. Venerated for centuries as a model martyr, Polycarp illustrates the truth stated by the apologist Tertullian later that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church."

Didache

One of the most significant of the early church writings is the *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve*. Probably written during the first decade of the second century as a church manual, the *Didache* presents a remarkable picture of early church life. The manual gives counsel on how to do baptisms, how to conduct worship services and the Lord's Table, and how to exercise church discipline. The book likewise furnishes valuable advice on how to detect false teaching in the church. The final part

of the manual exhorts Christians to holy living in light of the second coming of Jesus.

Other writings of the Apostolic Fathers survive, and each reflects the themes summarized in this chapter. However, in about A.D. 150 a significant change occurs in the writings of the church leaders. One notes a more apologetic style as the leaders combat theological error creeping into the church. This shift marks the beginning of the second group of Church Fathers known as the Apologists, the subject of the next chapter.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Summarize the reasons why the church used the term “father” when referring to their early leaders.
2. What are the three major chronological periods of the Church Fathers?
3. List three characteristics of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.
4. Who did Ignatius say was the best defense against heresy and the greatest promoter of unity? Why did he say that?



DEFENDING THE FAITH: ENEMIES WITHIN AND WITHOUT

*The blood of the martyrs is the seed
of the church.*

TERTULLIAN

DEFENDING CHRISTIAN TRUTH has always been of foremost importance in church history. As the church moved into the late second century, this need was especially acute, for both inside and outside the church false teaching and error abounded. Thus God raised up a group of individuals—the Apologists—who defended the Christian faith and, in doing so, led the church toward deeper theological truth. Error forced the church to think more precisely about what it believed and to reach a consensus on what the Scriptures taught.

Most of the error was a crude mixture of Greek philosophy, Judaism, and other Eastern beliefs that assailed Christian teaching about Jesus Christ and His work. Nonbelievers often characterized Christians as atheists, cannibals, or immoral people. The first criticism arose because Christians refused to worship the emperor or the Greco-Roman gods. The second accusation resulted from a misconception about the Lord's Supper and the third from a misunderstanding of the love displayed within the early church.

HERESIES OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

Gnosticism

No other heresy threatened early Christianity more than Gnosticism. Reaching its height in the second century, Gnosticism had its origins at least a century earlier. At its center, this philosophy has a dualistic view

of reality. The material world and the immaterial world were totally separate, the material being intrinsically evil and the immaterial being intrinsically good. For the Gnostics, it was inconceivable that a good God could have created such an evil, material world. Thus they argued that a divine spark, or emanation, from God created the physical universe. It was equally difficult for the Gnostics to believe that Jesus could have had a physical body. Many Gnostics argued Jesus only “appeared” to have a physical body.

These teachings were part of a special body of knowledge, or *gnosis*, that was necessary for salvation. This special knowledge God imparted only to an elite few. Because the soul alone was good, salvation was purely spiritual; there was no place for the resurrection of the body in Gnosticism. The very heart of Christianity was at stake!

Manichaeism

A bizarre cousin to Gnosticism, Manichaeism also was rooted in dualism. Following the teachings of Mani (216–276), this philosophy proclaimed that two opposing forces, light and darkness, were in eternal combat. Salvation was achieved by the children of light through a life of self-denial and celibacy.

Neoplatonism

Built on the teachings of Plato, this highly mystical challenge to Christianity taught that the goal of all humans was reabsorption into the divine essence. Reabsorption was accomplished through various processes including meditation, contemplation, and other mystical disciplines. Salvation was purely spiritual with no Jesus, no cross, and no atonement.

ERRORS WITHIN THE CHURCH

Marcionism

Marcion was a second-century heretic who established a vibrant rival church in Rome. He argued that there were two gods—a creator and a redeemer. The former was the god of the Old Testament, who was evil and capricious. The latter was the god of love and redemption, whom Jesus Christ revealed.

Because of his view of God, Marcion also developed his own canon of Scripture. He totally rejected the Old Testament for its portrayal of God. He likewise repudiated major segments of the New Testament, accepting only portions of Luke’s Gospel and only ten Epistles of Paul.

Marcion thought that all the other books betrayed a Judaistic, Old Testament bias.

This man's ideas were poison to the early church. As a person of wealth and influence, he used both to establish a rival church in Rome that actually lasted for several centuries. In God's sovereignty, Marcion's influence was positive; he forced the church to think more carefully and systematically about the nature of the Godhead and about the canon of Scripture.

Ebionitism

This strange movement emerged late in the first century and continued into the fourth. In many ways, Ebionitism resembled the false teaching with which Paul did battle in the book of Galatians. Ebionites taught that Jesus was the prophetic successor to Moses—not the eternal second person of the Trinity. Furthermore, the Ebionites were legalists who viewed Jesus as an exalted man who perfectly kept the law. Coming from their dualism, they were ascetics, practicing a life of poverty, self-denial, and often elaborate rituals. Legalistic to the core, Ebionites challenged the free-grace Gospel of Christianity.

Montanism

Started by Montanus, this movement had its center in Phrygia (modern Turkey) in the second century. Central to Montanus was the revelation—the “New Prophecy”—that the coming of Christ was near. Obedience to the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) through His messenger—Montanus—was the standard. Necessarily, the movement involved use of the sign gifts as evidence of anointing for the Second Coming. The movement also advocated a rigid asceticism that included celibacy and prolonged fasting. The Montanists challenged the authority of church officials and stood outside the developing New Testament canon. For these reasons, the church condemned the Montanists. The contribution of the movement was that it forced the church to think more precisely about the Holy Spirit's role in Christianity.

EMPIRE PERSECUTIONS

For the first few decades of the church, the Roman Empire regarded Christianity as a sect of Judaism and largely left it alone. However, with the growth of the church, this policy changed. Caesar Nero ruthlessly persecuted Christians in the late 60s. But the first empire-wide persecu-

tions did not occur until the reign of Decius in 250, who attempted to enforce sacrifices to the Roman gods.

The most merciless persecutions occurred under Emperor Diocletian in the early 300s. He ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of the Scriptures, the closing of church meetings, and the imprisonment of Christians. Later he made the refusal to sacrifice to the gods a capital crime.

Increased persecution forced the church to determine what was really important. For what were church members willing to die? For what holy writings were members willing to die? The Apologists sought to determine the answers to these questions.

MAJOR APOLOGISTS AND THEIR WRITINGS

Justin Martyr

Justin was born about 100 in the biblical town of Shechem in Samaria. Extremely well educated for his day, Justin dabbled in all the popular philosophies—those of the Stoics, Plato, and Aristotle. He even committed himself for a while to the philosophy of the mathematician Pythagoras.

But, as he explained in his book *Dialogue with Trypho*, his search for truth ended when, while walking along the seashore near Ephesus, he met an elderly Christian who steered him toward the Scriptures. The correspondence between Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ impressed him. At the age of thirty-three, he embraced the Christian faith.

He continued to pursue philosophical truth, but this time through the grid of the revealed truth of Scripture. Although he founded a Christian school in Rome, his ministry was largely an itinerant one of presenting the superior philosophical position of Christianity. It alone could bring the balanced and noble life that the ancients had sought in Greek philosophy.

Through this ministry, he gathered many disciples, among them Tatian, another famous Apologist. He also battled Marcion. Justin condemned Marcion's view of God as heretical and defended the Old Testament as God's Word. As he demonstrated the continuity of the two Testaments, Justin quoted or alluded to all four Gospels, Acts, eight of Paul's epistles, and 1 Peter. His defense of the integrity of God's Word was crucial to the developing conviction of the New Testament's authority.

However, Justin's greatest legacy was his writing. He wrote two *Apologies* and the penetrating *Dialogue with Trypho*. The two *Apologies*

were directed to the Roman government and offered a brilliant defense of Christianity as far superior to any of the pagan religions or philosophies. He likewise targeted what he saw as the thoroughly unjust persecution of Christians.

His *Dialogue with Trypho* is essentially the narration of a conversation between Justin and Trypho, an educated Jew who was immersed in Greek philosophy. Quite central to the book is Justin's obvious passion to convince Jews that Jesus was the prophesied Old Testament Messiah. At the end of the book, Justin eloquently appealed to Trypho to accept the truth about Jesus and the Christian faith.

Like most of the early church leaders, Justin's theology was not well developed. He believed in the Trinity and the deity of Jesus, but he did not work out the complexities of the Godhead or the relationship between the deity and the humanity of Jesus. His background in Greek philosophy was often more of a hindrance than a help.

During a trip to Rome, about 165, Justin and six other Christians were arrested. After a mock trial in which they refused to recant their faith, they were all beheaded—hence the name, Justin Martyr.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus was one of the earliest and most distinguished opponents of Gnosticism. He was born in Asia Minor around 135. There he knew and was apparently influenced by Polycarp. Irenaeus may have been one of the early missionaries to Gaul (modern France), for by 177 he was the recognized bishop of Lyons. There he spent his life pastoring, teaching, commissioning missionaries to the rest of Europe, and writing. He was evidently martyred about 202.

Two major works of Irenaeus survive: *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* and *Against Heresies*. The first work detailed the Christian faith proved from Scripture and called for readers to defend proper doctrine against heresy. The second work clearly targeted the Gnostics. From his writing we can conclude much about the developing theology of the second-century church.

First, he was the earliest of the Apologists to have a fully developed view of scriptural authority. His arguments refer to both Testaments; in fact, he quoted or alluded to all but four of the New Testament books. He also saw great continuity between the two Testaments, presenting Jesus as the fulfiller of Old Testament prophecies.

Second, because the Gnostics had such a distorted view of Jesus, Irenaeus considered Jesus Christ the very core of theology. Christ was the

basis for the continuity between creation and redemption. What humanity lost in Adam is regained in Christ. In attacking Gnostic dualism, Irenaeus also argued for the literal nature of Jesus' physical body and the absolute centrality of the resurrection of the physical body.

Third, despite his orthodox positions on many central issues of theology, his beliefs held seeds of error that would later flower in medieval Catholicism. For example, in dealing with the Gnostics, he emphasized the physical presence of Christ in the bread and cup—an early form of transubstantiation. Also, his choice of words when it came to the ordinance of baptism seem to indicate that forgiveness accompanied the ordinance. Finally, as he contrasted Adam and Christ, he gave a special place to Mary, Jesus' mother, as the “new Eve.” He taught that her obedience made possible the restoration of humanity. Such teaching was evidence of the developing veneration of Mary that would characterize mature Roman Catholicism.

Origen

Thoroughly committed to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, Origen wrote the first real systematic theology in church history as well as numerous commentaries on books of the Bible. He was born and lived part of his life in Alexandria, Egypt, one of the important intellectual and theological centers of the early church. After finishing his studies, he became head of the Catechetical School at Alexandria, a position he held for twenty-eight years. Due to a struggle with the Alexandrian bishop, Origen ended up in Caesarea where he ministered for the remaining twenty years of his life. He suffered intense torture during the Roman persecutions and died around 254.

Because Origen wanted the church to combat the growing heresies, he committed himself to making the tools for Bible study available. Most significant was his extraordinary work called the *Hexapla*, an edition of the Old Testament including the Hebrew text, the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew text, and four available Greek translations in six parallel columns. A monumental work that took twenty-eight years to complete, it enabled Christians to study the Old Testament with all available scholarship in one book. It also verified the accuracy of the Septuagint, the major Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Origen's interpretation of the sacred text got him in trouble. He taught that allegory was the key to unlock the mysteries of the text, and it was up to the interpreter to find the allegorical key. The centrality of Christ in Scripture gave his method its dynamic. For example, when it

came to the Levitical laws and ceremonies, literalness did not help, he argued. Only allegory aided the interpreter in seeing Jesus in the Levitical system.

His championing of the allegorical method profoundly influenced scriptural interpretation for hundreds of years. Yet the influence of allegorical interpretation has been largely negative. Who is to decide if the proper hidden meaning has been found? What is the standard? As a tool for interpretation, allegory is simply too subjective.

Origen's zeal to serve the Lord also resulted in a deep devotion to asceticism—a life of self-denial—and greatly impacted the monastic communities of later centuries. In his commentary on the Song of Solomon, he stressed that material things and even other people can hinder a person from attaining the deeper spiritual life. Therefore, he denied himself adequate sleep, fasted, and walked barefoot.

The Apologists made their mark in church history as they contended for the faith and began to systematize theological truth. Through their work the church reached consensus on the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon. The church also inaugurated its ecclesiastical structure, with the office of bishop becoming more significant. Most importantly, the Apologists laid the foundation for the mature theological reflection that characterized the Theologians, the topic of our next chapter.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Summarize Gnostic and Manichaean dualism. What does it mean? Why is it incorrect?
2. Explain why the Gnostic view of Jesus was wrong.
3. In what ways are Gnosticism, Manichaeism, and Neoplatonism similar?
4. What was the Ebionite view of Jesus?
5. Why was Marcion a threat to Christian beliefs about the Bible?
6. Where was the error of Montanism?
7. Summarize Justin's contribution as an Apologist.

The Apologists

Who?	Major Writings?	Main Focus?
Justin Martyr (circa A.D. 100–165)	<i>Two Apologies, Dialogue with Trypho</i>	Defense of authority of the Old and New Testaments
Irenaeus (circa A.D. 135–202)	<i>The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching, Against Heresies</i>	Attacked the dualism of the Gnostics by defending the centrality of the physical resurrection of Jesus
Origen (circa A.D. 185–254)	<i>Hexapla</i>	Developed tools for Bible study