

CHURCH HISTORY (1): Ante-Nicene (1)

The history of the church can be divided into six main sections: Apostolic Age (30-95), Ante-Nicene (95-325), Nicene and Post-Nicene (325-590), Medieval Ages (590-1517), Reformation Era (1517-1580), and Post-Reformation Era (1580-present). Generally speaking, the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene eras (95-590), combined are called the "Patristic age" or "the Age of the Church Fathers" (*pater* is Latin for father). "It has become customary to delineate four main criteria to identify a 'father of the church': they must be ancient, orthodox in doctrine, holy in life, and approved by other Christians" (Litfin).¹

Michael Haykin, in his book *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, suggested several reasons to read and study the Church Fathers:² (1) study of the Fathers, like any historical study, liberates us from the present. "Every age has its own distinct outlook and presuppositions that remain unquestioned even by opponents. The examination of another period of thought forces us to confront our innate prejudices, which would go unnoticed otherwise." (2) The Fathers help us to understand the NT. "We have had too disparaging a view of Patristic exegesis and have come close to considering the exposition of the Fathers as a consistent failure to understand the NT. But the Fathers were commenters upon Scripture and often provide profound insight into the sacred text." (3) The Fathers are an aid in defending the faith. "The early centuries of the church saw Christianity threatened by a number of theological heresies: Gnosticism, Arianism, and Pelagianism, to name but three. While history never repeats itself exactly, the essence of many of these heresies has reappeared from time to time in the long history of Christianity." (4) The Fathers often provide spiritual nurture and example. "In Hebrews 13:7, the author urges his readers to 'remember' their past leaders, those who had spoken God's Word to them. Here is a key reason for studying the history of the church and the church fathers in particular. Their writings and lives are worthy of both study and imitation."

I. Ante-Nicene (A.D. 95-325)

1. *A time of transition.* (1) From apostles to church fathers. The transition from apostles (30-95), to Ante-Nicene fathers (100-300), is a change "from the fountain of divine revelation to the stream of human development; from the inspirations of the apostles and prophets to the productions of enlightened but fallible teachers. The hand of God has drawn a bold line of demarcation between the century of miracles and the succeeding ages, to show, by the abrupt transition and the striking contrast, the difference between the work of God and the work of man, and to impress us the more deeply with the supernatural origin of Christianity and the incomparable value of the New Testament. There is no other transition in history so radical and sudden, and ye so silent and secret" (Schaff).³ (2) From predominantly Jewish to Greek. "But by the time the Jewish state disappeared in the wars with the Romans (70-135), Christianity was firmly planted in its second cultural context, the culture of the Greco-Roman world. That is one way to look at the spread of Christianity, from a Jewish sect to a religious faith embraced by Gentiles far and wide as well as by Jews" (Calhoun).⁴ (3) From catacombs to palaces. "Catacombs were tunnels and caves near Rome. These were primarily places to bury the dead and were used by pagans, Jews and Christians alike. But by the third century the Christian burials were outnumbering the others. Early burials were simple: the dead were wrapped in white cloths and laid directly in the niches carved from the rock, without coffins, just as Jesus Himself had been" (Hill).⁵ "In their catacombs the Christians could assemble for worship and take refuge in times of persecution. Very

¹ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 8

² Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 17-23

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:7

⁴ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 2

⁵ Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 52

rarely they were pursued in these silent retreats...The catacombs represent the subterranean Christianity of the ante-Nicene age. They reveal the Christian life in the face of death and eternity" (Schaff).⁶ By the third century, Christianity had spread into higher social classes (even the Roman political scene). This was especially true during 260-303, when the church flourished under a string of moderate Emperors. "During this long season of peace, the church rose rapidly in numbers and outward prosperity. Large and even splendid houses of worship were erected in the chief cities, and provided with collections of sacred books and vessels of gold and silver for the administration of the sacraments. But in the same proportion discipline relaxed, quarrels, intrigues, and factions increased, and worldliness poured in like a flood" (Schaff).⁷

2. *A time of persecution.* "The first three centuries are the classical period of heathen persecution and of Christian martyrdom. The martyrs and confessors of the ante-Nicene age suffered for the common cause of all Christian denominations and sects, and hence are justly held in reverence and gratitude by all" (Schaff).⁸ (1) Its source. The primary source of persecution was the Roman Empire. "The first persecution of the Church took place in the year 67, under Nero, the sixth emperor of Rome" (Foxe). After Nero, there was a string of Emperors who (to varying degrees) persecuted Christians. This continued until Emperor Constantine (311). "The period from the death of the apostle John to the end of the persecutions, or to the conversion of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, is the classic age of the heathen persecution, and of Christian martyrdom and bravery, of cheerful sacrifice of possessions and life itself. It furnishes a continuous commentary on the Savior's words: *'I came not to send peace on earth, but a sword.'* No merely human religion could have stood such an ordeal of fire for three hundred years" (Schaff).⁹

(2) Its reasons. In addition to hatred of the true and living God, early Christians were persecuted for a number of reasons: (a) *False charges and slander.* Because early Christians worshiped in secret, they were falsely accused of such things as cannibalism and incest. Christians spoke of the Lord's Supper in terms of "eating flesh and drinking blood," and they spoke of each other as "brother and sister." "Christians call one another 'brother' and 'sister.' They had the habit of greeting one another with a 'holy kiss.' And the love Christians had for one another was transposed in the Roman mind to sexual behavior and even incest" (Calhoun).¹⁰ (b) *Failure to worship Caesar and Roman gods.* "This became a source of persecution, not because Christians were Christians but because Christians were Christians only. The magistrates often charged Christians this way, 'You do not worship the gods. You do not sacrifice to the emperor.' All they had to do was sacrifice to the emperor and worship the gods and all would be well" (Calhoun).¹¹ Official Roman policy, as communicated in a letter from the Emperor to the governor of Bithynia (AD 112), was as follows: "Christians are not to be sought out. Do not go looking for them. But if someone denounces someone as a Christian, then bring that person in and question them. And if that person refuses to recant and worship our gods, then they should be punished." "If anyone accused of being a Christian could prove that he was not, by worshipping the Pagan gods, the magistrates must acquit him. But anyone found guilty of being a Christian must be put to death. This became the normal policy for the next 200 years" (Needham).¹² (c) *Failure to fully support the Roman Empire.* "The charge was also often made that the Christians were not patriotic. Christians, it is true, did not participate in some of the city festivals. because immorality was practiced in connection with those

⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:7

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:8

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:8

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:9

¹⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 3

¹¹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 3

¹² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:86

festivals, and emperor worship was part of the city duty in those festivals. Therefore Christians would absent themselves from the festivals, from the celebrations. And consequently, they were charged with lack of patriotism" (Calhoun).¹³

(3) Its results. (a) *It purified the church.* Tertullian describes persecution as, "God's winnowing fan, which even now cleanses the Lord's threshing floor." Persecution would blow away the chaff and leave the good grain. Persecution did purify the church. When we come to the time of the end of persecution under Constantine, the church has a new problem: *nominalism*. This happened because it became popular to be a Christian. But before Constantine it was not popular to be a Christian, and Christians faced very serious threats and even death. (b) *It extended the church.* The fires of persecution spread Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. "Every genuine martyr was a living proof of the truth and holiness of the Christian religion" (Schaff).¹⁴ "Persecution in many instances helped to publicize the Christian faith. Martyrdoms were often witnessed by thousands in the arena. The term martyr originally meant 'witness,' and that is precisely what many Christians were at the moment of death" (Shelley).¹⁵ Tertullian, in speaking to the enemies of the church said, "All your creative cruelties can accomplish nothing; they are only a lure to this sect. Our number creases the more you destroy us. The blood of Christians is the seed of the church."¹⁶

Early Christians were not being asked to say that Caesar is the *only lord*, only that *Jesus is not the only Lord*. Roman religion was polytheistic. It recognized all kinds of gods, including Caesar. It was therefore not a problem for the state if a person believed in a wide variety of gods, each appropriate to his personal activities—so long as he also swore loyalty to the emperor and the empire by saying, "Caesar is Lord." But Jesus was different. It was clear that His lordship could not be confessed alongside that of other lords, for when Christians said, "Jesus is Lord," They clearly meant that He alone and no other is Lord. Therein lay the grounds for faithful Christians to be accused of, and tried for, the capital offense of treason.¹⁷

3. *A time of expansion.* "First-century Christianity was a spiritual explosion. Ignited by the Event, the presence of Jesus Christ, the church extended in all directions, geographic as well as social. The second and third centuries provided the channel for this power" (Shelley).¹⁸ For the first 300yrs, the church spread throughout the Roman Empire. By 325, most major cities in the Roman Empire had churches. Often the largest cities had the most influential churches. "Early Christianity was primarily an urban faith, establishing itself in the city centres of the Roman Empire. Most of the people lived close together in crowded tenements. There were few secrets in such a setting. The faith spread as neighbors saw the lives of the believers close-up, on a daily basis" (Curtis). "Christianity moved culturally out of Judaism to the Greco-Roman world. It moved throughout the social levels of the Roman Empire, although the large majority of Christians remain people of the lower classes, common people" (Calhoun).¹⁹ In his *Apology to the Rulers of the Roman Empire*, Tertullian said: "We are a people of yesterday, and yet we have filled every place belonging to you—cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum! We leave you your temples only. We can count your armies; our numbers in a single province will be greater."²⁰

¹³ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 3

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:14-15

¹⁵ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 29

¹⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:55

¹⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *In the Year of Our LORD*, 25

¹⁸ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 29

¹⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 2

²⁰ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:17

Christianity largely spread through the witness and testimony of average Christians to family, friends, and co-workers. Early Christianity was largely a "grass-roots" movement. Humble Christians, changed by the gospel, shared that gospel with those around them. "We who hated and destroyed one another...now, since the coming of Christ., live closely with them, pray for our enemies, and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God the ruler of all" (Martyr).²¹ Justin Martyr suggested three things unbelievers saw in Christians: "the consistency they witnessed in their neighbors' lives, the extraordinary forbearance they saw in fellow travellers when defrauded, and the honesty of those with whom they conducted business." With this backdrop of humble submission, godliness, and love, early Christians shared the truth with others. "In the early period, the second calling of every Christian was to be a missionary. The Gospel was carried by merchants along the trade routes and by soldiers from post to post as these Christians went throughout the empire and also into the East, one loving heart setting another on fire. These Christians were able to witness by word, but they also witnessed by deed" (Calhoun).²² "God had prepared the world for the expansion of the Church. The whole civilized world of that time was under the one government of Rome. Excellent military roads leading from every corner of the Empire to the city of Rome, and the countless ships that plied the great Mediterranean Sea in every direction provided the means of travel. There was at that time one world language. Into that universal language, the Greek, the OT had been translated. All these conditions were such as to aid the rapid spread of the Gospel" (Kuiper).²³

(1) Early Christianity in Asia. "Asia was the cradle of Christianity. The apostles themselves had spread the new religion over Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor. In the second century Christianity penetrated to Edessa in Mesopotamia, and some distance into Persia, Media, Bactria, and Parthia; and in the third, into Armenia and Arabia" (Schaff).²⁴ "The transfer of power from Rome to Constantinople, and the founding of the East Roman empire under Constantine, gave to Asia Minor, and especially to Constantinople, a commanding importance in the history of the Church for several centuries" (Schaff).²⁵ (2) Early Christianity in Africa. Christianity arrived in Egypt in the middle of the 1st century and by the end of the 2nd century it has reached Carthage. Alexandria in the north-east and Carthage in the north-west, became important Christian cities. (3) Early Christianity in Europe. "By 185 AD Christianity had spread more widely in Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, and had also spread all the way to Gaul (France). There was persecution in the city of Lyons in Gaul in the year 177 AD, during which a Christian bishop was put to death. There was a Christian center up in Germania (Germany). There were Christian churches in different parts of Spain" (Calhoun).²⁶

The church of this period appears poor in earthly possessions and honors, but rich in heavenly grace, in world-conquering faith, love, and hope; unpopular, even outlawed, hated, and persecuted, yet far more vigorous and expansive than the philosophies of Greece or the empire of Rome; composed chiefly of persons of the lower social ranks, yet attracting the noblest and deepest minds of the age, and bearing in her bosom the hope of the world; conquering by apparent defeat, and growing on the blood of her martyrs; great is deeds, greater in sufferings, greatest in death for the honor of Christ and the benefit of generations to come.²⁷

²¹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:159

²² David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 2

²³ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 44-45

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:23

²⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:23-24

²⁶ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 2

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:9