

## What They Said, Pt 1

(February 16, 2024)

The more I read and study the writings of the early church fathers from the first and second century, the more amazed I am. I have to ask myself why I never bothered to take the time to read what they actually wrote? Technically, they are referred to as the Ante-Nicene writings, meaning *before* the Council of Nicea, so these writings cover the period following Jesus to about 325AD.

The voluminous writings were originally published in a series of books containing the following information:

- Volume 1: Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus
- Volume 2: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Clement of Alexandria
- Volume 3: Tertullian
- Volume 4: Tertullian (IV), Minucius Felix, Commodian, Origen
- Volume 5: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix
- Volume 6: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius
- Volume 7: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies
- Volume 8: Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, The Clementina, Apocryphal Gospels and Acts, Syriac Documents
- Volume 9: Gospel of Peter, Diatessaron, Testament of Abraham, Epistles of Clement, Origen and Miscellaneous Works
- Volume 10: Bibliography, General Index, Annotated Index of Authors and Works

So, whatever anyone wants to know about what these early fathers of church history believed and taught, it's all right there. It's not hidden, but available. In fact, all of these volumes in print are also available as downloadable PDFs from Christian Classics Ethereal Library.<sup>[1]</sup>

Most of the men listed above were either direct disciples of the original twelve apostles or once removed (a disciple of the direct disciple of one of the original apostles). But what is most interesting is what these men covered in their writings. I won't list the entire contents, but some of the things covered by these men from the first and second century include:

- Authority of the Bible
- The Deity of Jesus Christ
- Calvinism (foreknowledge, free will and predestination)
- Catholicism (papal authority, idolatry, Eucharist and transubstantiation, baptism, Mary, Purgatory, etc.)
- Cults (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism)
- Dispensationalism (Circumcision, Law of Moses, Sabbath)
- End Times (Premillennialism, Schism of Nepos, Return of the Jews, Apostasy of the Church, Rapture)

- Gnosticism
- Moral Issues (abortion, euthanasia/suicide, homosexuality, replacement theology, women in ministry)
- Paganism (astrology, astral projection, evolution, ghosts, Islam, meditation/ecstasy, reincarnation, yoga)
- The Gospel
- Spiritual Gifts
- Text of Scripture

So while we absolutely have God's authoritative Word, which is His final Word to humanity and is profitable for everything we encounter in life, it is also thoroughly beneficial to understand what those who were taught directly by the original apostles actually believed and espoused.

For instance, it was common knowledge apparently to these men that Paul was the human author of Hebrews. Yet, today, Christians debate and discuss it and come to their own conclusions and stand by those conclusions, but here we find that the early church fathers understood that Paul wrote it. Why didn't he include his name as the author as he did so often? No idea, but the absence of his name did not mean to the first and second century church fathers that Paul didn't write it. He did write it, but simply withheld his name and it's likely due to the content of the information, which ultimately is about Jesus.

In this particular series (and I'm not sure how long it'll go), I'd like to cover issues that were important to these first and second century men because of what they had to deal with during their day.

I find it fascinating that the same things we debate (or even argue about), today, were also important to these men and they responded to those issues authoritatively. It is because most Christians are completely unaware of these men, much less that they were taught directly by the original twelve apostles, that we waste our time arguing over things that were already fully settled in the first and second centuries.

But what happened in the third century to cause a shift in thinking? It was essentially the creation of the Roman Catholic Church. Once the pagan errors of what became known as Roman Catholicism were introduced, all manner of harmful doctrines were introduced *and* other solid doctrines that had been believed, practiced and preached for several hundred years were pushed to the side and even off the table completely.

Satan wasted absolutely no time in watering down the Gospel and introducing as much error as he could into the newly created Church. Some of the writers of the New Testament warned about the coming problems that they saw.

So the Roman Catholic Church began introducing literally heresies like *Amillennialism* or *Replacement Theology*, as well as others like *Maryology*, *Transubstantiation*, *Purgatory* and other things, as noted above. It is difficult to believe that Satan would work that hard in his attempts to derail the fledgling Church, but why wouldn't he?

Amillennialism and Replacement Theology are two schisms that have derailed a more literal understanding of Scripture. Amillennialism teaches that there is no literal 1,000 year reign of Jesus following the Tribulation. This, they say is too short of a time for Jesus to reign. So Amillennialists see Jesus' first coming as the actual start of the Millennial Kingdom and His return to this earth will be the consummation of that reign. For Amillennialists, this 1,000 years is simply a figure of speech, but not necessarily an actual 1,000 year period.[2]

In other cases, the early church fathers were very clear about events happening at the end of this age. By the way, they also believed that there are three ages. The first age was from Creation to 2,000 years later. The second age is from the end of that first 2,000 years, to incorporate a second 2,000 year age. The third age is another 2,000 year age that follows that for a total of 6,000 years. The end of this 6,000 years will bring us to Jesus' second coming and the start of the Millennial Kingdom, which will last 1,000 literal years. In other words, the full scope of humanity's timeline (including the final 1,000 years when Jesus reigns), equals 7,000 years. They base this on Peter's comment that a day with the Lord is like a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8).

There will be a literal one-thousand-year reign of Christ (Justin Martyr)  
 Millennial reign, resurrection, and the New Jerusalem are literal (Tertullian)  
 Resurrection is at the end of the six thousand years (Commodianus)  
 Those who were not martyred under the Antichrist will marry and have children during the one thousand years. There will be no rains, snow, or cold during the one thousand years (Commodianus)  
 There will be a total of six thousand years until the millennium (Lactantius)

The point is obvious or should be. These early church fathers who were taught directly by the apostles, understood that a literal one-thousand year period was coming to this earth, in which Jesus would reign supreme over the entire earth and global society. Yet, today, we argue about these things and even separate ourselves from one another because of disagreements.

Regarding the return of Jews to Israel and the rebuilding of the Tribulation Temple, Irenaeus taught the following:

The Roman Empire will first be divided and then dissolved. Ten kings will arise from what used to be the Roman Empire. The Antichrist slays three of the kings and he is then the eighth king among them. The kings will destroy Babylon, then give the Babylonian Kingdom to the Beast and put the believers to flight. After that, they will be destroyed by the coming of the Lord. Daniel's horns are the same as the ten toes. The toes being part iron and part clay mean some kings will be active and strong while others, weak and inactive. And the kings will not agree with each other.

Irenaeus also states in AD 177 (long after the Temple of Jesus' day was destroyed by the Romans), "*The rebuilt temple will be in Jerusalem.*" Tertullian states, "*The Antichrist will be a real man and sit in a real*

temple." Origen's position on this was, "*The prophecies in 1 Thessalonians and Daniel are real prophecies about the end of the world. There will be a literal rebuilt temple.*"

The church fathers also discuss what is meant by the "apostasy" of the Church in latter days. We will get into that in another article in this series.

Let me end this one with an important topic to me: the Rapture. As most know, there are several varying positions on this particular topic:

- PreTribulation Rapture
- MidTribulation Rapture
- PreWrath Rapture
- PostTribulation Rapture
- No Rapture at all

What did those who were taught directly by the apostles understand about the Rapture? Is that something we should even pay attention to? I believe so and since they got their understanding directly from the Lord's inner circle of twelve men, the question is how could they have misunderstood if their view of the Rapture is not correct? Maybe one, possibly two early church fathers might be mistaken, but when taken as a whole, the early church fathers agree on this and other issues related to the end times. Should we take that into consideration when we open God's Word? I think so, but readers of course can do whatever they want to do.

Irenaeus stated (in *Against Heresies* 5.29): "*When in the end that church will suddenly be caught up from this, it is said, 'There will be tribulation such as not been since the beginning, nor will be.'*"

It's also important to understand that often Christians will argue over the actual length of the coming Tribulation, it is clear that these men understood that there would be a literal seven years for the Tribulation and at the end, Jesus would physically return. Yet, consider what many believe today? It's like playing the childhood game, "Telephone," where kids sit in a circle and the first one whispers a statement into the ear of the person next to them. This then gets passed down to each person until the last person has heard it. Then the last person says what they heard and most of the time it has little to do with what the very first person stated. To be accurate, each person would have to go back to that first person and ask them what they actually said.

Cyprian said: "*We who see that terrible things have begun, and know that still more terrible things are imminent, may regard it as the greatest advantage to depart from it as quickly as possible. Do you not give God thanks, do you not congratulate yourself, that by an early departure you are taken away, and delivered from the shipwrecks and disasters that are imminent? Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence and sets us free from the snares of the world and restores us to paradise and the kingdom.*"

Ephraim the Syrian makes it even more clear: "*...because all saints and the elect of the LORD are gathered together before the Tribulation which is about to come and be taken to the LORD...*"

There is so much there in the writings of these men, I've only really scratched the surface. I'd like to recommend that everyone avail themselves of their writings. No, what they say is not "inspired" as God's Word is inspired, but neither were Paul's or Peter's sermons "inspired" as God's Word is inspired. What these men taught was the truth they had learned from those who walked closely with Jesus for roughly three and a half years. It should stand to reason that what they have written, having come directly from the apostles (or a disciple of one of the apostles), has merit and deserves our attention. Does it not?

We will be back with another installment in this series that might offer insight into doctrinal and theological areas that will help us understand more clearly what the apostles actually taught.

[1] <https://ccel.org/fathers>

[2] <https://www.gotquestions.org/amillennialism.html>