

CHURCH HISTORY (3): Ante-Nicene (3)

Last week we distinguished between the apostolic fathers and the apologists. The former refers to the writers of the first generation after the apostles, and the latter to the two generations that followed them (150-300).

I. The Age of the Apologists

1. *Major apologists and church leaders.* "The works of the apostolic fathers generally address those within the fold of Christianity. After AD 150, though, there is a noticeable shift in the orientation of Christian literature. There is now a significant stress on what we call apologetics" (Haykin).¹ "The name 'apologist' comes from the Greek *apologia*, meaning 'a speech for the defense.' From this we get the word *apologetics* – defending the Christian faith from attacks against its beliefs, and exposing the falsehood of what other religions teach" (Needham).² Thus, the apologists had two main goals: to defend the faith from false teaching that came from within the church, and to defend the faith from false accusations that came from without the church. Philip Schaff said, "the Christian apologists sought to vindicate Christianity by the pen, against the Jewish zealot, the Greek philosopher, and the Roman statesman."³ "The apologists is a name historians give to a number of Christian writers from the 2nd century who wrote in order to disprove the accusations that Pagans made against Christians and to show intellectuals of the Roman world that Christianity was worthy of their attention and their belief" (Needham).⁴ "It was the strategic task of the Apologist Fathers to skillfully explain Christianity to the secular culture of their day and earnestly defend it against popular accusations and conflicting heresies" (Lawson).⁵

Their task (apologists) assumed a threefold character, defensive, offensive, and constructive. They defended Christianity by showing that there was no evidence for the charges brought against its adherents (cannibalism, incest, etc.). Not satisfied with a mere defense, they also attacked their opponents. They charged the Jews with a legalism that lost sight of the shadowy and typical character of much that was found in the law and represented its temporal elements as permanent, and with a blindness that prevented them from seeing that Jesus was the Messiah, promised by the prophets, and as such the fulfilment of the law. Moreover, in their assault on paganism, they exposed the unworthy, absurd, and immoral character of the heathen religion, and particularly of the doctrine of the gods, as compared with the doctrines of the unity of God, His universal providence, His moral government, and the future life. Finally, they also felt it incumbent on them to establish the character of Christianity as a positive revelation of God. In demonstrating the reality of this revelation, they relied mainly on the argument from prophecy, but also, though in a lesser degree, on that from miracles. They appealed repeatedly to the remarkable spread of the Christian religion in spite of all resistance, and to the changed character and lives of its professors.⁶

(1) Justin Martyr (100-165). "The most eminent among the Greek Apologists of the second century is Flavius Justinus, surnamed *Philosopher* and *Martyr*. He is the typical apologist, who devoted his whole life to the defense of Christianity at a time when it was most assailed, and he sealed his testimony with

¹ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 49

² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 89

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:104-105

⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 89

⁵ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 68

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 56-57

his blood" (Schaff).⁷ "Justin is the earliest author who has written much that has come down to us, and the first who wrote defenses of Christianity against the attacks of Jews and infidels, his defenses being the models of the early apologies, even of Tertullian's, down till Origen's" (Cunningham).⁸ "Justin Martyr was a church father who performed the hard work of breaking trail for future generations of Christians. He was among the first to engage the broader Greco-Roman culture with the Christian message. He forged a path many Christian apologists would follow. We owe him a great debt" (Litfin).⁹ "Justin was raised in a pagan home of Greek parentage in Samaritan Palestine. His father and grandfather enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship. Their elevated status gave Justin access to better schools, where he became well educated and deeply versed in the empty philosophies of the world" (Lawson).¹⁰

Eventually, Justin moved to Ephesus in Asia Minor and became a student of Platonism (the system of thought that Plato had developed centuries earlier). This too proved a dead end for Justin. "Around 133, he was walking by himself on a beach when he came upon an old man of ragged appearance. They entered into conversation, and the subject soon turned to the search for truth. Justin asked how the truth was to be found. The elderly man, who was a Christian, pointed Justin to the Bible, saying, 'Search the Scriptures.' The prophets of the OT, the man argued, long preceded the Greek philosophers" (Lawson).¹¹ As Justin engaged the Scriptures, divine light shined within him. "My spirit was immediately set on fire, and an affection for the prophets, and for those who are friends of Christ, took hold of me; and while revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable" (Justin).¹²

"After a period in Ephesus, he moved to Rome, where he established a school devoted to the teaching and defense of the gospel of Christ as 'the perfect philosophy.' Justin spent his last year teaching in Rome, making straightforward claims that Christianity is the true faith" (Lawson).¹³ Three of his works have survived: the *First Apology*, the *Second Apology*, and the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. He was arrested and executed under Marcus Aurelius. "Rusticus the Roman prefect pronounced sentence, saying, 'Let those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and to yield to the command of the emperor be scourged, and led away to suffer the punishment of decapitation, according to the laws.' The holy martyrs having glorified God, were beheaded, and perfected their testimony in the confession of the Savior."¹⁴

(2) Irenaeus (120-202). "Little is known of Irenaeus except what we may infer from his writings. He sprang from Asia Minor, probably from Smyrna, where he spent his youth. He enjoyed the instruction of the venerable Polycarp of Smyrna, the pupil of John, and of other 'Elders,' who were mediate or immediate disciples of the apostles" (Schaff).¹⁵ He was sent as a missionary to Southern Gaul (France) which seems to have derived her Christianity from Asia Minor. "After becoming a presbyter there, he was elected bishop of Lyons (178), and labored there with zeal and success, by tongue and pen" (Schaff).¹⁶ "Church historians recognize him as one of the major contributors to the emergence of

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:712

⁸ William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:134-135

⁹ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 41-42

¹⁰ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 71

¹¹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 72

¹² Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:198

¹³ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 73

¹⁴ Ante-Nicene Fathers, *The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs*, 1:306

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:748-749

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:749

unified, catholic Christianity" (Litfin).¹⁷ "The most important work of Irenaeus is his *Refutation of Gnosticism*, in five books. It is at once the polemic theological masterpiece of the Ante-Nicene age, and the richest mine of information respecting Gnosticism and the church doctrine of that age" (Schaff).¹⁸

Irenaeus was the first important Christian figure to minister in Western Europe in the second-century church. Considered the first among the Western Fathers, he championed orthodoxy against Gnostic heresy. Trained in Asia Minor in the East, he served in Europe in the West. Irenaeus thus stood as a link between early Greek theology and Western Latin theology. His work reveals remarkable theological profundity. It has been said that no post-apostolic Christian writer before Augustine has had as much bearing on modern controversies as Irenaeus.¹⁹

(3) Clement of Alexandria (150-215). "The Egyptian city of Alexandria was, after Rome, the greatest city in the Roman Empire. If Rome was the Empire's legal and administrative capital, Alexandria acted as its intellectual and cultural capital. Clement was the first great Christian teacher in Alexandria whose writings have survived" (Needham).²⁰ According to Needham, three main writings have come down to us: *Exhortation to the Greeks* (an apology for Christianity which criticized Pagan religion and sought to convert the reader to Christ); *The Tutor* (a handbook of instruction for the new convert); *Carpet Bags* (a strange book, in which Clement seems deliberately to wander about over a great variety of themes).²¹ Among his pupils were Origen (185-254) and Alexander of Jerusalem (d. 251).

(4) Tertullian (155-230). Born in Carthage, North Africa, Tertullian was the first prolific writer of Latin Christian literature, producing extensive works on a range of theological topics. "Tertullian was the earliest of the fathers whose works are written in Latin. He was a man of very fiery and vigorous mind, though his works are commonly written in a very rough, abrupt, and obscure style" (Cunningham).²² "Tertullian is seen as the founder of Western theology. He is acclaimed as the father of orthodoxy in regard to the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ. In addition to his accomplishments as a theologian, he is considered the outstanding apologist of the West and, along with Irenaeus, the major opponent of Gnosticism" (Lawson).²³ He wrote important books against two heresies: *Against Marcion* (a teacher of Gnosticism), and *Against Praxeas* (a teacher of Sabellianism). He died peacefully in about 225.

(5) Cyprian (200-258). "Christianity spread quickly through North-West Africa during and after Tertullian's lifetime. It was well established when the emperors Decius (249-51) and Valerian (253-60) ordered the first full-scale, universal, Empire-wide persecutions of the Church. The bishop of Carthage at the time of these persecutions was Cyprian" (Needham).²⁴ Cyprian was likely born in Carthage to an upper class and wealthy family. He was a famous lawyer and professor of rhetoric prior to his conversion. "Converted in 246, he gave his entire fortune away to the poor. Within two or three years of becoming a Christian, his outstanding qualities of character, his gentleness, love and peaceable spirit, led to his election as bishop of Carthage" (Needham, 1:125). The authorities arrested and banished him in 257, and martyred him in 258.

¹⁷ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 63

¹⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:752-753

¹⁹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 83

²⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 127-128

²¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 128-129

²² William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:159

²³ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 98

²⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 142

2. *Major heresies and errors.* (1) Montanism. "Montanism is named after its founder, Montanus, who had been a pagan priest until his conversion to Christianity in 155. At a later time, he began prophesying, declaring that he had been possessed by the Holy Spirit" (Gonzalez).²⁵ "Montanus claimed, that in him and his followers, the last and highest stage of revelation had been reached. The age of the Paraclete had come, and he spoke in Montanus. The descent of the heavenly Jerusalem was near at hand. It would be located at Pepuza (town in Phrygia, Asia Minor). In view of this, Christians should dissolve the bonds of wedlock, fast strictly, and assemble in Pepuza to await the descent of the New Jerusalem" (Seeberg).²⁶ "The revelations given through Montanus were mainly concerned with separation from the world in preparation to the end. From this it would seem that the most essential element in Montanism was its legalistic asceticism" (Berkhof).²⁷ Eusebius (265-339), an early church historian and bishop of Caesarea, said of Montanus: "In his lust for leadership, he became obsessed and would suddenly fall into frenzy and convulsions. He began to be ecstatic and speak and talk strangely, and prophesied contrary to that which was the custom from the beginning of the church. Those who heard him were convinced that he was possessed. They rebuked him and forbade him to speak, remembering the warning of the Lord Jesus to be watchful because false prophets would come."²⁸

(2) Gnosticism. "The name 'gnosticism' derives from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means 'knowledge'" (Gonzalez).²⁹ "Gnosticism is a general name used for several related heretical systems of the first two centuries" (Cunningham).³⁰ "The term Gnosticism is an umbrella term used to identify a variety of movements, each one offering some way of enlightenment prescribed by a guru, a philosopher who possessed the gnosis or knowledge of the way of life. This special knowledge of the spiritual world posed a major threat to apostolic Christianity" (Shelley).³¹ This special knowledge took the form of two errors: Dualism and Docetism.

(a) Dualism. The Gnostics believed there were two powers, not one. They did not believe in a single God but in an evil god and a good god. They believed the god of the OT was evil and the god of the NT was good. Marcion was an early Gnostic teacher who promoted this view. "Marcion was a native of Pontus (southern coast of Black Sea in Asia Minor), who was driven from his home, so it seems, on account of adultery, and made his way to Rome about the year 140" (Berkhof).³² "Marcion was a rich businessman with an interest in church affairs. As is often true in such cases, his money gave him the opportunity to propagate his own peculiar theology. In 140, Marcion arrived in Rome and made a huge donation to the church. But when the leaders there found out what he was actually teaching, to their credit they returned the sum in full and excommunicated him" (Litfin).³³ "The great question for Marcion was how to relate the OT to the New. He accepted the OT as the genuine revelation of the God of the Jews, but declared that He could not be the same as the God of the NT. He is the Creator of the world, but a God by no means perfect. He rules with rigour and justice, is full of wrath, and knows nothing of grace" (Berkhof).³⁴ For Marcion, Jesus was the Son of the God of the NT but not the Son of the deity described in the OT. "In a nutshell, Marcion taught that there are two Gods. The Creator God of the OT was cruel, arbitrary, petty, warlike, and stupid. He was more than simply a God of strict

²⁵ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:76

²⁶ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrine*, 1:105

²⁷ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 54

²⁸ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1:231

²⁹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:58

³⁰ William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:122

³¹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 54

³² Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 52

³³ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 88

³⁴ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 53

justice: he was literally a very mean God. In contrast, Jesus came to announce a new God. The Father God was loving, kind, and forgiving" (Litfin).³⁵

(b) Docetism (Doss~eh~tizzum). The Gnostics were docetic (from the Greek *dokeo*, 'to seem'). "Docetic views were widespread in Asia Minor. According to Docetism, Jesus Christ was not a true human being. Christ only *seemed* to be a man; in fact, He was a purely heavenly being, who could not have had any real contact with the inferior world of flesh. Therefore He did not physically suffer or die, and did not physically rise again. We have early signs of Docetism in the NT Scripture (1Jn.1:1-3). The Docetic concept of Christ grew out of the Greek philosophical idea that flesh and physical matter hindered and corrupted the spirit, so that God, the supreme spiritual being, could not have direct involvement in the physical world" (Needham).³⁶ "Since Christ is a heavenly messenger, and since body and matter are evil, most Christian Gnostics rejected the notion that Christ had a body like ours. Some said that his body was an appearance, a sort of ghost that miraculously seemed to be a real body" (Gonzalez).³⁷

(3) Monarchianism. "During the second and third centuries, a new heresy began to trouble the early church. This false teaching was Monarchianism—also known as Sabellianism, after one of its leaders, Sabellius—which first emerged in Asia Minor and flourished in the West. Such error was a frontal assault on two cardinal doctrines of Christianity, namely, the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ" (Lawson).³⁸ It's called Monarchianism as it over stressed the singularity or oneness of God (monarch = one ruler). Thus, historically Monarchianism is usually divided into two categories: Adoptionism and Modalism.

(a) Adoptionism. This view denies the full deity of Christ and describes Him either as a lesser deity or a mere man. "This heresy insinuated that Jesus was only a man who was energized by the Holy Spirit. More specifically, it maintained that Jesus was only a man and that God adopted Him at the time of His baptism. Only then, was Jesus called the Son of God. In short, Adoptionism sought to explain the relationship between the Father and the Son by way of a power that came upon Jesus, a force that infused Him with divinity" (Lawson).³⁹ (b) Modalism. "This is also called *Sabellianism*, named after an obscure Roman theologian called *Sabellius*. According to Sabellians, God's oneness – the fact that there is only one God – required Christians to believe that God was only one person. The Father and the Logos, they claimed were really the same person; it was God the Father who became flesh as Jesus Christ. They argued that God was only one person, who acted now as Father, now as Son, rather like a single human being who has two roles in life, as a parent at home and a business executive at work" (Needham).⁴⁰ Thus, it's called Modalism, because it sees the Son and the Spirit as merely "modes" or ways of the Father's acting, rather than distinct persons.

While the apologists wrote against all three of these errors, in the time remaining I want to limit our consideration to Tertullian's response to Monarchianism. This is found in a work entitled, *Against Praxeas*. "Praxeas was a Roman Christian who was putting forward a Sabellian doctrine of the Trinity. He denied that there was any real personal distinction between, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they were all the same person who simply acted out three different roles" (Needham).⁴¹ While no writings of Praxeas remain, we have excerpts in Tertullian. He quotes Praxeas as saying: "The Father is God as

³⁵ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 89

³⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 71

³⁷ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:59-60

³⁸ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 95

³⁹ Steven Lawson, *Pillars of Grace*, 95-96

⁴⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 135-136

⁴¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 71

Spirit and the Son is God in flesh."⁴² He then summarized the view of Praxeas: "He says that the Father Himself came down into the Virgin, was Himself born of her, Himself suffered, indeed was Himself Jesus Christ."⁴³

First, God is one in essence. Tertullian begins by affirming God is one in essence or substance. "This heresy supposes itself to possess the pure truth, in thinking that one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person. We, say they, maintain the Monarchy."⁴⁴ But Tertullian repeatedly affirms there is only one God. "If we held to a *plurality of gods* and lords, we should quench our torches, and we should become less courageous to endure the martyr's sufferings, from which an easy escape would everywhere lie open to us, as soon as we swore by a *plurality of gods* and lords, as sundry heretics do, who hold more gods than One."⁴⁵

Second, God is three in persons. Tertullian not only affirmed the oneness of God's essence, but he also affirmed a plurality within that single essence. On Genesis 1:26, "Let Us make man in Our image," he said, "He spoke in plural terms because He had already His Son close at His side, as a second Person, and the Spirit as a third Person. With these did He then speak, in the Unity of the Trinity."⁴⁶ He went on to say, later in that same chapter, "I hold one only substance in three coherent and inseparable Persons."⁴⁷ This is a very important statement as we are here introduced to two important terms: substance (*substantia*) and person (*persona*). "It is not by division that the Son differs from the Father, but by distinction; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their existence."⁴⁸

Third, God is unified in persons. By this is meant, Tertullian affirmed that all three persons of the Godhead were unified in a common substance (essence). This means, all three persons are equally God, as they are in equal possession of the same substance. "I derive the Son from no other source but from the substance of the Father, and I believe the Spirit to proceed from no other source than from the Father through the Son."⁴⁹ As a result, there is equality among the persons, each possessing the same substance. "All are of One by Unity of substance; while the mystery of the economy is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."⁵⁰

Fourth, Christ has two natures. In the last 5 chapters, Tertullian "proves the distinction of the two natures, which were, without confusion, united in the person of the Son." "The truth is, He is expressly set forth as both God and Man. In all respects as the Son of God and the Son of Man, being God and Man, differing no doubt according to each substance in its own especial property, inasmuch as the Word is nothing else but God, and the flesh nothing else but Man."⁵¹ Concerning Christ's death, Tertullian said, "When Paul says that it was Christ (that is, the Anointed One) that died, he shows us that that which died was the nature which was anointed; in a word, the flesh, for we do not maintain that He died after the divine nature, but only after the human (3:626)."

⁴² Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:587

⁴³ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:587

⁴⁴ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:598-599

⁴⁵ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:608

⁴⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:606-607

⁴⁷ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:607

⁴⁸ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:603

⁴⁹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:599

⁵⁰ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:598

⁵¹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:624