

Early Christian Church History #2: Trinity Doctrine **sermonaudio.com**  
Taught Long Before Nicean Council

By Larry Wessels

**Bible Text:** John 14:6; 2 Corinthians 11:4

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Christian Answers of Austin, TX

presents

Church History: What Early Christians Taught

with

Larry Wessels, Director – Christian Answers

Steve Morrison, Research – Christian Answers

Who's Who of Early Church History

part 2

Larry Wessels. Greetings and welcome once again to our program. I'm Larry Wessels, your host, and I want to thank you for joining us for another edition of Christian Answers. I'm the Director of Christian Answers and I'm with our Director of Research for Christian Answers, Steve Morrison. Steve, it's great to have you here as usual.

Steve Morrison. Thank you, Larry.

Larry. You did a lot of hard research, a lot of pain-staking research on early church history. Basically what did that entail, just briefly for our audience?

Steve. Well, there are between 4,100-4,200 pages in English of all of the writings that we have of the early church writers prior to 325 AD. I have read every page of them, some multiple times, and I've cataloged what they believed, what they experienced, and what they practiced during those times and I'm gonna share the summary of the results with the listeners.

Larry. In fact, speaking of all that research, now where do you find...if someone's out there hearing this and they wanted to kind of just verify what you're talking about is true, what are your sources for that? Did you go to some books? Is there a title of a book?

Steve. Well, there are two independent ways of verifying. One is you can go on the website, it's called [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) and they have the text of almost all of the early church writers. A few of them, such as Athenagoras they don't have, but they have the others. If you want to look at it in print, we recommend a book called, actually it's a series, a 10 volume series called "Ante-Nicene Fathers," by Hendrickson Publishers. And also the statistics and summaries and totals are on my website and you can find them at [www.historycart.org/churchhistory](http://www.historycart.org/churchhistory), and you can see all of the graphs that we'll have, the charts we'll have in future shows will be out there.

Larry. Right. So that's just a quick reference for our viewers out there to show that that material is available, it's available right on your computer and you can also get the books in print. You mentioned Hendrickson Publishers which you can go online and find them on the internet just like these other things to get your hands on the books. There's also other big Christian book publishing companies that offer these books for you to get your hands on. What we've done in this series is through Steve's hard work and research, is we're kind of making it easy for you out there to where you can just get this information in a distilled fashion without having to spend all the time like Steve had to do, where it'll be there for you when you're getting into research that deals with all the attacks against Christianity that you're gonna have to deal with as a Christian in this day and age, and that's one reason Christian Answers is here. Basically I'm an evangelist and I go out and preach the Gospel out at university campuses, you know, on television, on the radio, on the internet. Our YouTube videos, I'm debating all types of people but as a Christian in this day and age, you're gonna find that most people just do not accept Christianity. They say it's been changed over the years, it's all messed up, and things of that nature. So a series like this dealing with the early church and what they believed, you as a Christian out there can use this type of material to show that what we believe today here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century actually matches back to the early church fathers, you know, Acts 2, if you really want to go back to the early church, it matches now as then and the evidence is there, and that's what this series is all about and Steve and his research will be showing us just that.

Now this is part 2 in our series on early church and we're sort of doing a who's who in the early church. Steve left off in the last show with some of our early church Christian father writers and, Steve, I'd like you now to pick up where we left off from show #1 on the who's who, you might say, of a roadmap leading through our early church fathers and just take it from there and show us the way, brother.

Steve. Okay. In the early church, there were certain people who excelled at being called apologists and the first apologist when the Christians were being persecuted, they were people like Athenagoras in 177 AD and Quadratus and Aristides whom we don't have as much on, but they would write letters to the emperor and these would be like public letters and they would say why Christianity is reasonable, why Christians shouldn't be persecuted, after all, if they accepted some of the Greek philosophers, some of whom

were atheists, they should accept Christians who believe in one God, and then they also showed why the paganism of Roman and Greek and Egyptian was foolish and silly. Now maybe that didn't score them any points with the pagan emperors but that's what they did and they had some very good arguments that were kind of refined later by later writers.

Another early church father was Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch. Now Theophilus, he wrote, as you can see, he wrote about 166 and he died either 181 AD or 188 AD, we're not sure. He was the first person that we have on record to use the word Trinity and the way he uses it is kind of in an offhand way like he already presumed that his readers were already familiar with the term. So it had been probably used prior to that, it's just he, they weren't, you know, we don't have the records of it. But ever since Ignatius and the earliest fathers who would call Jesus as God and everything, it's like there was no debate about the basic concepts behind the Trinity but the word itself, this is the first use of that.

Irenaeus of Lyon, which is actually kind of an outpost of Christianity you might say in France, he was an extremely influential writer who was quoted by many early ones, and what he set out to do was to write a listing of every single cult and other religion of his time, and it was quite extensive showing all the different groups and what was wrong with them and why Christianity was reasonable. So his basic work is called "Irenaeus Against Heresies."

Larry. So you're basically saying Irenaeus was sort of like a first century Walter Martin?

Steve. Yes.

Larry. With his "Kingdom of the Cults," which became famous in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Steve. Right, and for that time of the manuscripts, Irenaeus' work was pretty massive also and he taught, and some of the groups we only know from what he wrote, and also Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who if you'll remember, was a disciple of John the apostle, and Irenaeus had a disciple named Hippolytus and Hippolytus wrote a refutation of all heresies too, kind of like an updated version of what Irenaeus did, and he wrote about a few other groups such as the Niceni(ph), for example, and they're the ones who liked the, who had the book "The Gospel of Thomas," which some Jesus Seminar people today really like, and they were, Hippolytus was aware of them, Irenaeus was not and so we conjecture that they probably started around that time but not any earlier than that.

Larry. Now it's interesting that you mention all that because, you know, being we're both Christian apologists, apologist is not someone who apologizes for the Christian faith, we're somebody who defends the faith according to Jude 3 in the Bible. But you talk about the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you've got Walter Martin with "The Kingdom of the Cults." He came up with that book in the 1960s but now the book has been revised by Ravi Zacharias with some new input and stuff, here to help the Christians with Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, you know, Armstrongites, Christian Science, New Age, all the things we deal with in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Well, listening to you talk about Irenaeus and then his man that came after him giving, Hippolytus, giving his updated information, it

reminds me of what Christians still to this day do dealing with all the heresies that are out there, all the cultic groups, and so it just shows in another parallel, you might say, with early church history, that we as Christians are doing the same thing here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that they were doing back then in their century dealing with heretical groups by different names. You know, they've got these heretic groups, they don't call them Jehovah's Witnesses, they don't call them Mormons, they call them these other things but they're still...

Steve. Yeah, but they're really different.

Larry. ...they're still refuting them from the word of God just as we do today as Christian apologists with these cults that use different names than they did back then but it's still the same process. You're having to fight against people who would come against the word of God and try to come up with different belief systems which as we know from Galatians 1, if you preach a different Gospel than what the apostles gave you, like Paul said there in Galatians 1, then you'll be accursed, the King James, you'll be cursed of God for going with a different Gospel, a different belief system. That's why these types of things are so important. But anyway, I just had to throw in my not 2 cent's worth but maybe I got in a quarter there, but go ahead.

Steve. Alright, well, the Christians basically had where it had three fronts. They had the cults both that claimed to be Christians and other religions out there. For example, Hippolytus even knew about the what you call the Brockman's(ph) which is really kind of a mispronunciation of Brahman's, and he talked about India and he talked about some others in India that sounded kind of like yogis going around naked and not eating meat and very aesthetic and things like that. So that was one front, now another front is many of them were killed in persecution so just imagine every 10 years or so your whole church leadership basically it's wiped out by being killed by the state authorities and you kind of have to kind of, you know, grow again. And then another problem which we'll get into a little bit later, is people inside the church with some schisms and a schism is like both sides are Christians but they have a disagreement where they divide and separate. We'll talk about some of the maybe a little bit uglier things with that.

But anyway, the next great influential church writer that we're gonna just briefly highlight is Clement of Alexandria and he wrote about 193 to either 217-220 AD. He also used the word Trinity. He also wrote a hymn about Christ, you know, praising him as God. Now he tried to co-opt the term Gnostic. Gnostic means like one in the know, and as we know from our previous program, the Gnostics claimed that salvation was through the secret special knowledge and they had this knowledge and Clement would say, "No, we are the true Gnostics because we're the ones who have the knowledge, not them." So he uses the word Gnostic but he uses it in a totally different sense as to say that the Gnostics were wrong and that we are the Gnostics.

Beginning with Clement of Alexandria, you start to see just a little bit of maybe focus on the church versus maybe a little bit less focus on the Bible and a little bit on the traditions. Some people would find he was maybe a little legalistic with some of his stuff.

If you, you know, with Clement and later with Tertullian, you know, they were against women wearing any jewelry at all, and some of their other idiosyncrasies but they really aren't found in the Bible. So things were just kind of starting to go maybe a tiny bit bad here, though, you know, Clement was a believer and they, you know, were good guys.

Now the next guy is a very interesting guy named Tertullian. He was a lawyer, worked as a lawyer before he became a Christian and perhaps while he was a Christian too, and reading his stuff, you just kind of get the sense that here is a really brilliant guy using his mind for Christ. He is kind of the one most people think of. In fact, one book I read erroneously said that he was the first one to use the word Trinity but he wrote a lot about it. Now the reason he wrote about it is because there was an alternative belief called Sabellianism. Now Sabellians have some similarity in their belief about God, to Oneness Pentecostals today except they're opposite in a few points. But they said that, you know, there's only one God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, are God, so far so good, but then they said that the Father, Son and Spirit, one form of kind of called modalism said that they are the same, there's only one person. There is another variant form called dynamic modalism that says the Father became the Son, became the Spirit, but either way they don't show a distinction and so you just kind of just have to say, you know, at Jesus' baptism what happened, you know, when the Father spoke and the dove came down? You know, Jesus was not a ventriloquist and Jesus was not a magician to like give the appearance of three and deceive all the people, there really are three distinct beings in one inseparable God.

Anyway, Praxius(ph) who was influencing the bishop of Rome was kind of bringing the church that way and Tertullian stood up and said, "No, this is wrong. This is what the Trinity is." And besides, you know, show them from the verses of the Bible, he also had a lot of illustrations. Just for example, basically put in modern terms, "Has anybody seen the sun? Has anybody felt the sun?" No, you really haven't. The sun 93 million miles away but what you have is you've seen the rays from the sun. Okay, you felt the heat from the sun. Okay, so has anybody seen God the Father? Well, directly no but Jesus is the image of the invisible God so just like we see the sun's rays, you know, we see the Father through the Son, and just like we feel the, we can see the effects of God through the Holy Spirit working. And so those are like, you know, three parts. They're not separated from each other but they're actually distinct. So he had some analogies like that.

Now Tertullian, he called himself a catholic because the word catholic meant one or universal prior to the Catholic Church.

Larry. So you're definitely making a distinction between that term catholic and what's now considered Roman Catholic?

Steve. Right.

Larry. Because when you say catholic these days in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, usually people interpret that to mean Roman Catholic.

Steve. Right.

Larry. But you're not, you're not saying that at all when you use that term catholic in this category here.

Steve. Yeah, and it wasn't me that made the distinction. Now Tertullian was not a part of the, under the bishop at Rome. He left that and he joined a different group of Christians who were called Montanists. Now the Montanists were, had a lot of similarities to charismatics today. They believed in prophecy going on then, the other church did not discuss prophecy or tongues or anything at all. But it's curious, though, that back then Tertullian and the Montanists, they were the staunch defenders of the Trinity and while most of the church was kind of silent and didn't say too much, the church of Rome was kind of going the other way toward oneness and so it was kind of the charismatics with Tertullian that kind of came through and helped the orthodoxy there.

Larry. So you're saying the church that was in the city of Rome at that time was actually heading in the wrong direction?

Steve. Right, and Tertullian rebuked that and it was also soon after that time that with the difference in celebration with the time of Easter, the church in Rome was tempted just to excommunicate all the Quartodecimians, that is, the Christians who believed in celebrating Easter when Jews celebrated the Passover. So Hippolytus went and talked to the bishop in Rome to resolve this to say that both groups should accept each other despite that they had different views of when to celebrate Easter and, you know, understand that you can still be Christians and disagree on secondary issues like this one.

Alright, so all wasn't quite rosy back then. They agreed on the primary points but on some of the secondary points they disagreed. After him, probably the most influential person in early church history was a very strange character named Origen, o-r-i-g-e-n. Now Origen, to give you an idea of his commitment to Christ, when he was a teenager, his father was martyred for Christ and as his father was being martyred, he wanted to go outside so he could be martyred too, and his mother hid all his clothes so he couldn't go outside in public so he wouldn't get martyred. Anyway, later on when he was a young man, there was a wealthy woman who wanted to support him because he had such great, you know, he was such a scholarly researcher and she also had some translations in the Greek of the Old Testament that we don't have today and Origen was one that did manuscript studies to try to say, "Okay, we have some variations in manuscripts, which is the right one?" Now he wanted to live with her for some years to do this. Now, of course, if a single man living with a single woman, you know, even if he was, you know, pure, there could be like opportunity for talk and scandal so Origen made absolutely certain there could be no possibility of scandal and...

Larry. I know what he did.

Steve. Yeah, absolutely and surgically certain. So whatever criticism you have of Origen, and I do have some criticism, you can't criticize his commitment to Christ.

Larry. If anyone wants to know more about that issue, they can contact our ministry.

Steve. Yeah. What Origen did is he had something called a Hexapla which means like the six columns and he had six columns for the books of the Old Testament and he had all these markings to show, "Well, this reading is right. This reading is highly suspect." Things like that, just to get everything all straightened out.

Well, in subsequent centuries, people copied the Hexapla but they didn't copy all the markings so a lot of this stuff was lost and we don't have all the columns of it today anyway. So we lost a lot of his research today but at that time, the church in Alexandria especially had the benefits of his research and so when people talk about the Alexandrian family of manuscripts, a lot of them, that family will have the influence of Origen and other people in Alexandria and some of it is kind of like, well, do you think this influence is generally good or generally bad? That might affect your opinion of how much you wanted, you relied on Alexandrian manuscripts.

Origen was extremely influential long after his death. Many Christians, they would consider themselves Origenists or we'd call them Origenists because he had such a grasp of not only the Bible and the original languages but also the Greek philosophy. He would go and talk to some of the Gnostics and some of the heretics out there and they would become orthodox Christians after they would talk to Origen. And they translated his stuff into Latin so that people in the West could get the benefit from it. Unfortunately, some centuries after that, Origen was officially declared a heretic, Origen and all his followers which included a number of people in the early church.

Now some reasons why Origen had strange teaching is that unlike other church leaders before him, he believed in eventual universalism. He believed that Christians who, I'm sorry, that those who died and went to hell, and even the devil himself after they've been in hell for a long enough time, would eventually get to go to heaven. Okay, now this is not scriptural and most people who were Origenists would not hold on to his extreme teachings but they'd say, "Well, he was so good in the other stuff that we'll just like, you know, downplay that and just do the other stuff." Another thing is he also believed in the pre-existence of souls, that he didn't believe in reincarnation but he believed that people existed in heaven before they were born on earth. And he also on the Bible, most Christians wrote in a way consistent with that the Bible would be the inerrant word of God though he didn't actually necessarily use that term. Origen believed that the spiritual sense of the Bible was always inerrant without error, but in a literal sense he said sometimes had error in it. And so in those three ways he was very non-standard and eventually the church declared him a heretic but that was like hundreds of years after he died and he had a lot of influence before that. So some people say, well, the church started to go a little farther off, you know, with Origen and his influence.

So moving on, soon after his death, and by the way, Origen was never made a bishop because of what he did as a young man. They thought it would be such a bad example for others and also he was first ordained in a different bishopry from where he was from and so they were kind of against him for that. But anyway, after his death he was admired

everywhere, including Alexandria, and Gregory Thaumaturgus of Alexandria wrote a panegyric on Origen just kind of praising Origen, and his close friend, Dionysius of Alexandria, was very much an Origen also.

Now Dionysius had a debate and Dionysius was sort of either an amillennialist or there really wasn't much distinction between amillennialism and post-millennialism, and he had a debate with people who were pre-millennialists and back then pre-millennialists were Chiliasts, and Chiliasts were people who said the earth is only going to be around for 6,000 years before the millennium and they said it's probably 5,000+ years old now and so it won't be too long before the millennium comes. And he converted two people, Bishop ?? and ?? to his viewpoint and he also said that the book of Revelation was written by John but he didn't think it was the John the apostle, he thought it might have been someone else named John, and the other writers would, that we have would affirm that it was John the apostle and Dionysius was a little different on this particular point.

Archelaus was a Christian well-versed in the Bible who actually had a debate with ?? and it's called "Disputation with ??" and Manicheism really wasn't a cult that claimed to be Christian, it was, well, it's kind of debatable whether it was. It was almost like another religion but it claimed kind of Christ as a part of it, and it had a lot of Gnostic tendencies in it and we have that preserved, this debate. Now whether this debate, some scholars think that, well, this might be kind of a mock debate where it was just written up later as if it happened or it actually happened exactly as it is said. We don't know but it's interesting to see both the sides.

And after him was another guy named Arnobius and Arnobius, his knowledge of Scripture, he didn't quote from it too much but he really really knew well the Greek and Roman mythology and he used a lot of humor and also some harshness just to show how wrong it was. As an example, if there are three or four different places that say that they are the temple of Athena and they have different conflicting views about where Athena came from and what she was like, when somebody made a sacrifice to Athena, are they going to, are the Athenas all going to come and they're gonna have an argument over which Athena that sacrifice was to?

Methodius wrote extensively and he basically corrected Origen and his followers and showed where they were wrong.

Lactantius was a very eloquent speaker who was a tutor of one of Constantine's sons and he wrote "The Divine Institutes," kind of a very smooth kind of distillation of all.

Athenasius wrote a lot after Nicea but we include just the things that he wrote before Nicea because he was a pretty outstanding person even before the Arian heresy and Nicea.

Larry. I got you, Steve. Well, that was a good run-through but we've run out of time for this segment of this series but we'll continue this series in this roadmap, you might say, through early church history and the writers and the theologians. But for now, if you have



more information that you'd like to acquire about this subject, just contact our address, phone number, email us at the end of this show, check out our websites: biblequery.org, historycart.com to get additional information as well.

Well, I'm Larry Wessels, Director of Christian Answers with Steve Morrison, our Director of Research. Great job as usual, brother. And join us again next time as we continue in this series on early church history as we move through and contrast what early church history tells us compared to what a lot of other strange religions are telling us now. With that said, God bless you all. Join us next time. Bye.

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