



BIBLICAL TRAINING CENTER

May 13, 2018

Early Fathers, Theologians and Councils

Reasons to Study Church History

- To understand where **our tradition** came from.
- We can see the ebb and flow of **theological development** (one thought leading to another).
- To see what the **hot issues** were in theology.
- We understand **why good theology is important** in the present by looking at the heresies of the past.
- **Helps us avoid error** in future (“those who don’t know the pasts doomed to repeat it”).

Today’s Class Covers First Five Centuries

1. The Apostolic Fathers.
2. Persecution to Empire’s official religion.
3. Heresies help clarify Christian beliefs.

All **Protestants** and **Roman Catholics** have this same foundation in common.

Part 1 – Apostolic Fathers

The generation of believers who had contact with the apostles.

Clement of Rome (c. AD 30 – c. AD 100; martyred)

- **Earliest writer outside NT** that we have
- Tells readers to “remember the words of the Lord Jesus” twice (cf. Acts 20:35).
- **Refers to OT Scripture** more than a hundred times.
- Recognizes authority in Paul’s letters.
- Could be one mentioned in **Philippians 4:3**.

Ignatius (d. AD 110; martyred)

- Was a **disciple of John**; knew other apostles.
- Loose quotations of gospels and Pauline letters.
- Wrote letters en route to his **martyrdom in Rome**.
- **Joyfully anticipated** his being torn apart by the beasts!
- Sample of Ignatius to the Romans:

“**May I enjoy the beasts** that have been made ready for me, and I pray [they might deal with me speedily]. I will also entice them to devour me quickly... **battles with beasts, mutilation, being torn apart, scattering of bones, mangling of limbs**, grinding of the whole body, cruel tortures of the devil; **let these come upon me**, only that I may reach Jesus Christ.” (5.3)

Papias (c. AD 70-140)

- Was **disciple of John**
- Was **Polycarp’s friend**
- **Knew daughters of Philip** the Evangelist (Acts 21: 8-9)
- Valued written gospels but preferred “the utterances of a living and surviving voice” (Quoted by Eusebius, Hist. eccl. III. xxxix. 4.)
- **Was the scribe for John’s gospel:**
 - “[Papias] wrote down the gospel accurately **at John’s dictation.**” (Tertullian in Anti-Marcionite Prologue c. AD 180)
- Said **Mark’s gospel** was based on **Peter’s words:**
 - “The Elder [John] used to say: Mark became Peter’s interpreter and **wrote accurately** all that he [Peter] remembered...”

Polycarp (c. 69-160; martyred)

- Also knew the Apostle John
- His short **Letter to the Philippians** has **more allusions to NT** than any other Apostolic writing.
 - **100 allusions to NT writings**; dozen to the OT.
 - Well **acquainted** with Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, and 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John
- **Shows 3 primary authorities: Jesus, apostles and OT prophets.**
 - “So then ‘let us serve **him [Christ]** with fear and all reverence’, as he himself commanded us, as did the **apostles**, who preached the gospel to us, and **the prophets**, who proclaimed beforehand the coming of our Lord (vi. 3).”

List of Writings

- 2 letters of Clement to Corinthians
- 7 letters of Ignatius
- 1 from Polycarp

- The Didache (church manual)
- Letter of Barnabas
- Shepherd of Hermas

Overall Focus

- Holy Living.
- Reflections on teachings of Jesus and apostles.
- There's theology but not main concern.
- Martyrdom.

Part 2 – From Persecution to the Empire's Religion

Nero - AD67

- Blamed Christians for AD64 Great Fire of Rome.
- Early traditions say **Peter** was crucified, **Paul** was beheaded under Nero.

Domitian - AD 89-96

- Heavy persecution of Jews and Christians.
- **Rev. 2:13** might refer to his persecution (“Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you...”)
- **John likely banished to Patmos** under him (cf. Victorinus 3rd c. and Eusebius 4th c.)

Trajan - AD 109-111

- Forced Christians **under torture** to **curse Christ** and worship the gods by **offering incense** to idols.
- **Many Christians gave in** under pressure; those who did not were **executed**.
- Pliny asked the emperor (Trajan) if what he was doing was acceptable:

Pliny: “I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment; if they persist I sentence them to death... All who denied that they were or had been Christians I considered should be discharged, because they called upon the gods at my dictation and did reverence, with incense and wine, to your image which I had ordered to be brought forward for this purpose, together with the statues of the deities; and especially because they cursed Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be induced to do.”

Emperor Trajan: “You have taken the right line... if any one denies that he is a Christian, and actually proves it, that is by worshipping our gods, he shall be pardoned as a result of his recantation...”

Hadrian (ruled 117-138)

- Granted more leniency to Christians.
- Being a Christian wasn't enough for them to be executed: they **must have done something illegal** too.

Decius – AD 249

- Issued edict where everyone had to **get a certificate** showing they **performed sacrifice to gods**.
- Many prominent Christian leaders were **martyred**.
- Large number of **Christians apostatized**.
- Many others went into **hiding**.
- After persecution was over church struggled with **how to receive back** those who apostatized.

Valerian – AD 257

- Ordered **clergy to perform sacrifices** to Roman gods.
- Forbade Christians to assemble.
- Christian leaders in government stripped of **titles, lost property**.
- Others were **made slaves**.

Emperors Diocletian and Galerius – AD 303

- **The last and most severe of all persecutions**.
- Removed Christians' **legal rights**.
- Demanded clergy **sacrifice to the gods**.
- Ordered **church to be razed** at Nicomedia.
- Ordered collection and **destruction of Scripture**.

Persecutions End with Constantine

Conversion of Constantine

- His father the Emperor just died.
- Father's troops **declared Constantine next emperor**.
- But another rival to throne; went out to fight.
- The **night before the big battle** (October 26, 312) saw a **flaming cross in the sky** with: "In this Sign Conquer."
- This was followed by a **dream** where Constantine was told by Christ to mark shields with letters *chi* and *rho* (first two letters of Christ).
- He did this, **won the battle**, and became a Christian.
- Mother also became a Christian.
- Many around them "converted" to find favor.

Official Religion of Empire

- Constantine met with Emperor of East to **change policies** towards Christian.

- Granted Christianity **legal status** (Edict of Milan, AD 313).
- **Theodosius I later makes Christianity official religion of Roman Empire (AD 380).**

Part 3 - Heresies Help Clarify Christian Beliefs

There were 4 heresies in the first 5 centuries of the church:

- 1st century – Judaizing
- 2/3rd century — Gnosticism
- 4th — Arianism & Nature of Christ
- 5th — Pelagianism

These are the summary of heresies leading to councils and creeds.

Hersey #1 in Church: Must Keep Law

(Judaizing – 1st century)

- People who said Gentile Christians **needed to be circumcised.**
- Must keep the **Law of Moses** in order to be saved.
- Addressed in Acts 15 and book of Galatians

Hersey #2: Secret Knowledge

Gnosticism – 2nd/3rd century

- Taught a hierarchy of “*Aeons*.”
- At the top of the hierarchy was the **Unknowable Father** (without attributes, perfect).
- Out of this One proceeded a **series of emanations** or *Aeons*.
- **Each Aeon was less perfect** than the previous one (either because of **further remoteness** from the One or **some imperfectness**).
- **Lowest Aeon** produced the world of **evil matter**.
- **Man’s problem** is that we’ve **forgotten we have the “spark of divinity.”**
- Taught we must **realize we are divine** through secret knowledge (gnosis).
- Taught can even see this secret knowledge in the bible if you know how to look for it.
- Said **Jesus was not physical** being but phantasm (docetism).
- Jesus did not suffer, nor did he die.
- After resurrection he gave most mature followers this “**secret knowledge.**”

Hersey #3: Faulty Nature of Christ

Arianism & Nature of Christ – 4th century

- Arius taught that the Son was created.

- **Conflicted with NT and tradition** that Jesus was **not created** but of the same essence as the Father.

Constantine was coming into power

- It threatened to divide his kingdom so called **Council of Nicea (AD 325)**
- Conclusion at Nicea was Jesus Christ is equal, **same substance** as the Father.

They produced the Nicene Creed (A.D. 326)

“We believe in **one God,**
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in **one Lord, Jesus Christ,**
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of **one Being with the Father...**”

First Council of Constantinople (AD 381)

- Clarified that there really was a human mind in Christ
- i.e., **Jesus was fully human**
- (Apollinarianism taught the Logos replaced his mind at baptism).

First Council of Ephesus (AD 431)

- Clarified Jesus was **a single person**
- **Not 2 separate persons** like a God-person and a human-person (i.e., Nestorianism)

The Council of Chalcedon (451)

- Clarified that Christ had two distinct natures.
- Produced the Chalcedonian Creed which can be summarized by saying Jesus has two natures: **full divinity** and **full humanity** and these are **united in one person** forever (called the hypostatic union).

Heresy #4: Man Created Good

Pelagianism – 5th century

- Pelagius (AD 360- 420) taught **God directly creates each soul** in womb as **good** (denied original sin).

- Each person born in **same pure state as Adam** and can chose good/evil.
- Man has **no inclination to sin** but is perfectly free (e.g., can keep all Ten Commandments).
- Augustine wrote against.

Key Theologians

These were the key theologians discussing the above.

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165)

- **First great apologist.**
- Tried to convince Roman emperor to stop **persecution.**
- Very high view of Greek philosophy.
- Argued God was using Greek philosophers like **Plato to prepare world** for Christ.

Irenaeus (c.130–200)

- Heard Polycarp (who heard John).

How he argued against Gnosticism:

- **Bible teaches there is only one God**, not a Pleroma of Gods.
- The Bible says that the **material world is good** (Genesis).
- All people are created **in the image of God** (which went against elitism of Gnostics).
- **There was no secret teaching.**
- The Gospel was transmitted not just orally but in **written form.**
- If Paul taught secret knowledge it **would have been recorded** by Luke in Acts.
- Christians can appeal to the Scriptures and tradition (Rule of Faith) handed down.
- **Unanimity of bishops** stands in contrast to the everchanging beliefs of the Gnostics.
- Gnostics have no way of knowing if their tradition was passed down correctly. But Irenaeus **could name the line of tradition.**

Tertullian (c.160–225)

- First to use term **“trinity.”**
- Strongly opposed to Greek philosophy.
- Also **appealed to tradition** passed down in fight against heresy of Gnosticism.

Athanasius (c.296–c.373)

- Defended Christianity against **Arianism.**
- **Incarnation:** God assumed human nature in person of Jesus Christ.

Augustine (354–430)

- Wrote against Pelagius who said each person was born in same state as Adam (born good).
- Clarified **extent of the Fall** (original sin).
- Man's need for **divine grace** (predestination).

Origen (c.185–254)

- Another worthy mention is the controversial Origen.
- Said to be “the greatest genius” in the early church.
- Wrote 2,000 works.
- One of first to write bible commentaries.
- **Declared a heretic**, writings ordered to be burned.
- Held to allegorical interpretation.
- Believed Jesus was a lesser divinity than Father.
- Preexistence of souls.
- Universalism.

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Class Schedule

Overview of Church History

- May 13: Early Fathers, Theologians and Councils
- May 20: Events of the Reformation
- May 27: Shared Beliefs between Roman Catholics and Protestants
- Jun. 3: Overview of Key Differences
- Jun. 10: Origin of Denominations Since the Reformation

If you know somebody who would be blessed by this class, feel free to invite them; visitors welcome at any time!

Where: Sundays second service (10:45AM) in the upstairs chapel building room C-205B