

Chapter 38 Addendum – Nero to Emperor Constantine

Nero was simply the first of a long string of emperors of persecution. Emperor Domitian was the first to issue the order that Christians be brought before the tribunal to be questioned about their faith. “All” they had to do to escape horrific execution was to renounce their faith. Again, Christians stood strong, willingly facing death instead of renouncing Christ. Among those martyred during this time was Paul’s dear friend Timothy (1 Cor. 4:17).

Emperor Trajan continued the practice of forcing Christians to renounce their faith, however he added the twist that they also had to bow down to a statue of Trajan and worship him to be set free. Christians continued to choose death.

Trajan was succeeded by Adrian who was responsible for some 10,000 martyrs. He was especially known for placing crowns of thorns on Christians heads, crucifying them and thrusting spears in their sides in a cruel, mock display of Jesus’ crucifixion. *This practice, however corroborated the written account of Christ’s final days.* In one case a Roman commander was asked by Adrian to join in idolatrous sacrifice to celebrate his victories. When the commander refused due to his faith in Christ, Adrian had him and his family put to death.

The list goes on and on. Simply believing in Jesus’ resurrection was enough to warrant execution. Just owning a Bible was enough to be put to death. Perhaps most important to us today is the vast number of martyrs who died during the early years after Jesus. Some would have been in a position to ascertain the truth.

Important Information

The crux of Christian martyrdom is that it was for a historical event, not merely some philosophical idea like martyrs in other religions.

Even knowing the truth, one has to wonder how many of us today would willingly face a horrible execution when a “simple renunciation” would forestall it. Certainly the early martyrs had incredible conviction. Fortunately for us, the early martyrs provide compelling evidence that those closest to resurrection--and most likely to know the truth--died because it was of utmost importance to them.

The Church Fathers and Canonization

The term “father” was used in reference to church leaders as early as about 95 AD because of the esteem that they held early in the development of the Church. Of tremendous importance is the fact that we have surviving records from early church fathers that overlap the lives of the Apostles themselves, and continue in a steady chronology forward to the present day. Hence, there is an unbroken line of communication from the first century—even from the eyewitnesses of the resurrection and from those who would have corroborated the New Testament—to the teaching of the current church. Since the message is consistent throughout that period of time, we can have assurance that it is accurate.

Important Information:

The early Church fathers start an unbroken line of communication from the eyewitness Apostles themselves to present day—with a consistent message throughout, regarding the essentials of the events of the crucifixion and resurrection. This provides assurance regarding the accuracy of the original message.

Polycarp (65-155 AD), ministered in Asia Minor and became the bishop of Smyrna. He is of special interest because he was a disciple of the apostle John. Hence, he emphasized faith in Christ in his writings and the exemplification of that faith in daily living. Unlike other apostolic fathers of the day, he did not deal to any great degree with issues of church organization and discipline.

Polycarp wrote several items, however only one letter to Philippians remains. In it, he quoted from thirteen New Testament books and indicated he “knew of Paul’s letters.” Polycarp

claims to have followed Christ for eighty-six years before he was martyred in Smyrna in 155 or 156 AD. He spent most of his life defending orthodoxy and combating heretics.

At the same time the apostle John was writing Revelation on the island of Patmos (about 95 AD), Clement was serving as the bishop of the church in Rome (c. 90 AD). As such, he had responsibilities to deal with issues affecting local churches—such as the church in Corinth—as Paul did some thirty years earlier (1 Cor 7:1). In 95 AD he sent a letter to the Corinthians urging a demonstration of grace in daily living and obedience to church elders. This letter became known as 1 Clement, and due to the importance of the message, the early writing of the letter and the relationship with the apostles, the letter achieved near-canonical status in the early church.

Perhaps the most famous of the group of apostolic fathers was Ignatius (born about 50 AD), bishop of Antioch. When he was imprisoned for his faith and was sent to Rome for judgment, he expected to be sent there for martyrdom in the arena. In transit, he wrote letters to seven churches in which he stressed unity in rooting out heresies that denied Christ his humanity and deity. He also emphasized the importance of subjugation of leaders in local churches to a ruling bishop.

The above three (and other) apostolic fathers demonstrated a noticeable missionary zeal. As such, there was at times a difference of opinion on certain church doctrines. We should also recognize that at this early point in Church development, during a high period of persecution, there was little organization and attempt to define doctrine—apart from the essentials of the gospel. Despite the fact that the apostolic fathers might have represented only a small part of clergy or public opinion, the essentials of their teaching clearly reflected the New Testament documents that were frequently quoted. Moreover, later counsels that used a more disciplined approach to development of doctrine generally agreed with earlier leadership.

The apologists, or defenders of the faith, followed the early apostolic fathers. At this point in time (c. 130 – 200 AD) a generation of a higher social class and level of education had developed among Christians and in their efforts to develop a superior position for Christianity (both spiritually and temporally), they (1) had to demonstrate why it made more sense than paganism, and (2) defend it from a variety of attacks.

Justin Martyr (born c. 100 AD) argued that Moses wrote the Torah (first five books of the Bible) long before the Trojan War (c. 1250 BC) therefore antedating both Greek and Roman history. He and other apologists, tied much of the gospel message to prophecy in an attempt to show that it was not a new religion, but was directly tied to its Hebrew heritage. Justin defended the faith to emperor Antoninus Pius and his adopted son, and also to Trypho the Jew. He countered the charges that Christianity was an atheistic, immoral religion.

Tatian was a convert of Justin's in Rome. He sharply criticized pagan practices. Philosophically, he argued that since Christianity was superior to Greek religion and thought, it deserved to be tolerated. Tatian is best known for his writing of the *Diatessaron* which was the earliest known harmony of the gospels (c. 150-160 AD).

Tertullian became a Christian in the area of north Africa in the late second century. In *Apologeticus* (c. 197) he wrote to the Roman governor of Carthage arguing that persecution of Christians was somewhat foolish, because they always multiplied where persecuted anyway. In the same work, he refuted many common charges made against Christians and noted their loyalty to the Empire.

As Christianity continued to develop, as might be expected, there were challenges to specific doctrine, and in certain areas errors arose. During this time Christian leaders (known as Polemicists) introduced the concept of an orthodox catholic church to oppose heresy.

Irenaeus was one of the earliest Polemicists, and worked out of Lyons, France. His major writing was entitled, *Against Heresies* (c. 185 AD) and was focused primarily against the heresy of Gnosticism (a heresy believed to have been started by Simon the Sorcerer--Acts 8--that attempted to combine elements of Christianity with a myriad of beliefs). Irenaeus is often referred to as the "Father of Church Dogmatics" due to his attempt to organize principles of Christian theology.

Tertullian (160 – 225 AD) is known as the founder of Roman Catholic theology. He was known to be intensely opposed to Judaism, paganism, Gnosticism, and early Unitarianism. He shared the same viewpoint as Irenaeus that the correct interpretation of scripture, and the true message of Christ, came through apostolic succession.

Hippolytus, like Irenaeus and Tertullian, attacked Gnosticism as well as other heresies. He was also critical of the dominant party in Rome regarding their disciplinary laxity and doctrinal unsoundness. His work, *Apostolic Tradition*, reviews Roman church order and worship for the period of about 200 AD.

Development of theology followed the period of the Polemists. The approaches to scientific theology generally were either allegorical (writers from **Alexandria**), traditional (writers from the **West**) or literal (writers from the East—**Syria and Asia Minor**).

Clement was one of the leaders from **Alexandria** who led the school there until about 190 AD. Clement won converts from heathenism and provided them with instructions on how to lead a Christian life. Throughout his writings, Clement attempts to blend Greek philosophy with Christianity. Because of his blending of beliefs, Clement borders on what might be considered Gnosticism, although he is not classified as a Gnostic. He also is known as the “inventor” of the concept of purgatory (a “pre-heaven” place in the spiritual realm where deceased people are punished for unresolved sin), which is held by the Roman Catholic church even today. There is no scriptural basis for purgatory, and it is flatly denied by Protestantism.

Origin was the most famous of all Alexandrian theological scientists. He led the school there from 202 to 232 AD and is often referred to as the “first great theologian.” A classical allegorical writer, he attempted to reconcile Greek philosophy with Jewish thought by searching for hidden meanings in the Old Testament. Thusly, he stressed that the literal meaning of Scripture concealed a deeper meaning available only to mature believers. Since the allegorical “deeper meaning” often bore little resemblance to the literal meaning, Origin justified the concealment by saying it was God’s way of preventing pearls from being cast before swine—borrowing from Jesus’ words (Matt. 7:6).

Origin’s writings number in the thousands and discuss issues throughout the Bible. They include textual studies, commentaries, and writings regarding dogma and apologetics. Origin made countless positive contributions to Church theology.

Unfortunately this is often overlooked because Origin is better known for several unpopular positions held. For example, he taught that human beings existed as fallen spirits before birth; that Christ’s atonement paid a ransom to Satan (giving Satan undue status), and that Christ was subordinate to the Father. Many feel that many supposed heretical aspects of Origin’s work have been grossly misinterpreted. In life, he was dedicated to Christ, and endured prolonged imprisonment and extensive torture while remaining true to Jesus during the reign of Emperor Decius (c. 250 AD).

The End of Christian Persecution (312/313)

On October 28, 312 AD, Constantine, emperor of Rome, was encamped a few miles north of Rome, about to meet his enemy—Maxentius. Suddenly, writes ancient historian Eusebius, a Christ-inspired vision of a “cross of light” bearing an inscription “conquer by this” appeared to Constantine and his army. Later that evening, Constantine received a second vision of a Christ-inspired symbol with which he adorned his battle standards. The ensuing battle resulted in a tremendous rout of Maxentius and within a few months (313 AD) Constantine announced the end of Christian persecution.

Although the change immediately stopped most atrocities and restored rights that had been denied Christians, it took many decades for persecution to have its full effect, and for Christianity to become the dominant religion throughout the Roman Empire.

The Alexandrian leader Athanasius (c. 293-373 AD) was a primary leader in establishing the orthodox view of Christ over Arianism at the Council of Nicea in 325. Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicea, which was intended to resolve a schism that had occurred between Arianism—named after Arius, a North African priest; and Bishop Alexander who supported more orthodox Christian views. Arian theology (Arianism) held that the Father was, of necessity, a singular, divine being (not the triune God of orthodox Christianity). In Arian theology, Christ, was subordinate to the Father, and was a created being.

Cyril (376-444 AD) was a great theologian that put into systematic form, the doctrine of the trinity and the person of Christ. He also advanced the veneration of Mary.

Jerome (c. 345-420), one of the Western church fathers, was one of the most influential fathers of all. He became fluent in both Greek and Hebrew, and settled in Bethlehem in 386 to follow a monastic lifestyle. Jerome wrote commentaries on almost all books of the Bible, and his interpretation of non-literal portions of it are considered unsurpassed amongst early scholars. His study was based on the assumption that only the original manuscripts of the Bible were error-free, and he spent substantial time determining which, among various readings of the Bible, should be considered to be the original, true text. Jerome is best known for his translation of the Bible from the original languages into Latin, known as the Vulgate.

Important Information:

Jerome authored the Vulgate – a translation of the Bible from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew into Latin. This was the prominent Bible used in the later King James (English) translation of the Bible.

Ambrose, another Western church father, was bishop of Milan from 374 to 397 AD. He was the official spokesperson to the teachings of the Roman church at the time, and some time to come. Because of this, his writings, more than half of which are commentaries on Scripture, have been referenced by many popes and theologians.

Ambrose also was a leader in development of music within worship services. Apart from introduction of psalms and hymns, Ambrose, himself, wrote music for worship.

Augustine (354-430 AD), bishop of Hippo in North Africa, is one of the most influential theologians of all time. He emphasized the necessity of God's grace for salvation, hence endearing him to Protestants as a forerunner to the reformation. Yet his emphasis on the church, the creeds, and sacraments has appealed to Roman Catholics. Augustine modeled, in large part, the theology of the middle ages in Europe until the thirteenth century. Martin Luther quoted Augustine over 100 times in his commentary of Romans alone.

Formation of the Canon

The word "canon" literally means "standardized." However, when applied to the Bible, "canon" refers to books that are believed to be "God-breathed" or inspired by God.

Important Information:

The definition of biblical canon means that the words of the Bible are "God-breathed" or inspired by God.

The canon of the Bible was essentially developed in six phases:

1. The popular acceptance of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible).
2. The formal acceptance of the Torah
3. The popular acceptance of the Old Testament
4. The formal acceptance of the Old Testament (including the Torah)
5. The popular acceptance of the New Testament
6. The formal acceptance of the New Testament (including the Old Testament)

The popular acceptance of the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—was accepted at the time of the writing by Moses. This would not be surprising since the people at the time were observing many spectacular fiat miracles by God including such things as the parting of the Red Sea, the provision of daily manna, and displays of the glory of God that he has not chosen to reveal since.

Formal acceptance of the Torah, however, did not occur until shortly after the first exile of the Jews to Babylon (ultimately ending in 517 BC when the Temple was completed).

The remaining books of the Old Testament were gradually accepted over time, and all were considered canonical by about 167 AD by the populous. The scripture that Jesus accepted as canonical, which was commonly used at the time, was identical to the Jewish Tanack (or the Protestant Old Testament) today. Due to Jesus' approval of the Jewish Tanack, which is identical (except in configuration) to the Christian Old Testament, there is little question amongst Christians that it is canonical.

Formal designation of the Old Testament canon was not made, however, until about 70 AD, just prior to the second exile of the Jews.

The need for a New Testament biblical canon was recognized as early as the beginning of the second century as the eyewitnesses to the gospel message, and those in direct contact with the apostles, were dying out. There was a danger, for corruption to creep into oral tradition, or for questionable writings to gain in popularity as generations passed. Hence, the early church fathers that had contact with the apostles were identifying books of canon as early as the end of the first century.

All of the four gospels and the book of Acts were considered canonical virtually immediately. Since they were available and widely circulated at the time of the eyewitnesses, there was little doubt in the mind of the Church that they were “God-breathed.” The writings of Paul, also, were circulated amongst many churches while he was still alive, and virtually all early church leaders accepted these writings as canonical also—essentially by the end of the first century, during the lifetime of many who had contact with the apostles.

The non-Pauline letters and the book of Revelation, took more time to be accepted. However the few disputes that existed on various books of the New Testament were soon worked out.

The church had essentially determined a canon (the final accepted collection of books) for the entire Bible by A.D. 200. Early church fathers Irenaeus (c. 130 A.D.) and Origin (c. 180 A.D.) both listed all 27 books of the New Testament (although some were listed as suspect: 6 by Irenaeus, and 5 by Origin)¹.

The final confirmation of the canon of the entire Bible was believed to be recognized at the council of Hippo (393 AD), yet it was not until the third Council of Carthage (397 AD) that it was proclaimed that the canon was closed.

Memorize This:

Torah canonization – About 500 BC

Old Testament canonization – About 70 AD

Entire Bible canonization – About 397 AD

It is significant that the canon was scrutinized shortly after the time of the writing of the books of the New Testament and remained under scrutiny for many years before its final approval (this is also true of each of the Old Testament canons). This way, the books of the New Testament had substantial time for critics to voice potential concerns and for those that had the best, closest knowledge to present it.

Jesus Pre-Confirmed the Gospel

Jesus actually “pre-confirmed” the development of the New Testament and its inspiration by the Holy Spirit. While on earth, He gave the apostles the authority to write it. He then, further prophesied and confirmed it.

First, authority was granted. The Holy Spirit was to guide the very words of the apostles: (Luke 12:12; John 14:26; 16:13-14)

Second, the gospel was prophesied—17 times Jesus prophesied that the apostles would provide the gospel. Examples include: (Matt 24:13-14; 26:13; Mark 8:35-36; Luke 21:33)

Third, Jesus actually confirmed the gospel during the period in which it was being preached on three separate occasions: (Acts 18:9-10; 22:18; 23:11)

Thusly, we find that while the New Testament was written after the extensive appearance of Jesus on earth prior to the resurrection, we find that He foretold of its coming. Furthermore, He confirmed the writing of the New Testament during the period in which it was being told and later compiled.

Important Information:

¹ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/canon3.html>

Jesus confirmed the Old Testament and pre-confirmed the New Testament.

Fascinating Facts:

Key events during the church father's period are:

50 AD – Ignatius born

69 – 155 AD – Polycarp ministry

88 AD – Clement becomes fourth bishop of the church in Rome

95 AD – The Apostle John writes the book of Revelation

100 AD – Justin Martyr born

150 AD – Tatian writes *Diatessaron* (a harmony of the gospels)

185 AD – Irenaeus writes *Against Heresies*

197 AD – Tertullian writes *Aplogeticus*

200 AD – Hippolytus writes *Apostolic Tradition*

202 – 232 AD – Origin led school in Alexandria

263 - 339 AD – Eusebius writes history

313 AD – Constantine ends persecution

325 AD – Council of Nicea

345 – 420 AD – Jerome translates Vulgate

397 AD – Council of Carthage

354 - 430 AD – Augustine