The Church Fathers

Part 2

The Ante-Nicene Fathers

The Church Fathers who fall into the Ante-Nicene period are those who have no direct link to the apostles themselves, but who were instrumental in the work of the early church from the middle of the second century until the beginning of the fourth century. One of the greatest features of Ante-Nicene writing is its reliance on Holy Scripture. Already at this early date we can find the inspired New Testament writings widespread and in great use.

Irenaeus (120-202) - Irenaeus, though not as early as some of the other Ante-Nicene Fathers we will study, makes an important connection between the Apostolic Fathers and the Ante-Nicene Fathers, being a student of Polycarp. Irenaeus is also considered by many to be the most important of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, due to the soundness of his Christian teaching, and for the battles he fought against heresy and division in the early church.

After studying under Polycarp, Irenaeus was sent as a missionary into southern Gaul, where he was a presbyter in the city of Lyons. During the persecution under Marcus Aurelius in 177-178, Bishop Pothinus was martyred, and Irenaeus became his successor, and worked for the evangelization of the people living in Gaul (France).

But Irenaeus is best known as a great champion of orthodoxy, against many heresies which were then entering the church. The Apostle Peter had warned, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:1-2). These words were fulfilled very early in the Christian church, and here we find Irenaeus setting out to study these false teachings, describe them, and refute them through his firm grasp of the doctrines of Scripture, so that he might enable others to withstand and overcome them. His greatest work, Against Heresies, is considered one of the most important documents of early Christian history, and contains a great deal of sound exposition of the Scriptures.

Justin Martyr (100-166) - Justin was born in the area of Samaria, and being the son of heathen parents received a Hellenistic education, and sought truth among the current systems of philosophy. Justin was a devoted follower of Plato until being converted to Christianity. From that time on Justin became an evangelist, taking every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel as the only certain philosophy, and the only way of salvation. Justin finally came to Rome where he sealed his testimony to the truth by martyrdom under Marcus Aurelius.

Again, the writings of Justin Martyr are some of the most important from the second century. While he was not the first Christian apologist, Justin’s are the earliest whose writings have been preserved to our day. He also wrote the Dialogue with Trypho, which lays out the reasons for regarding Jesus as the Messiah of the Old Testament, and is the first systematic attempt to describe the false position of the Jews in connection with Christianity. While a great defender of Christianity, Justin does not display a proper understanding of sin and grace, and his teaching tends to be legalistic rather than evangelical.

Tatian (110-172) - Tatian was also a heathen convert to Christianity, an Assyrian from Mesopotamia. Like Justin, he sought to know the truth which the heathen religions could not offer, and his search brought him to Rome where he met Justin Martyr. There Tatian embraced Christianity and studied under Justin for some time.

We are familiar with only two writings of this Christian apologist and philosopher: His Address to the Greeks is a scathing denunciation of Greek mythology and philosophy. His greatest work was the Diatessaron (Harmony of the Four Gospels) which is no longer extant. Even though this great work has been lost, it reveals that the four canonical Gospels were widely known and in use in the middle of the second century. Sadly, after the death of Justin, and near the end of his own life, Tatian fell under the influence of the
Gnostic heresy, and has become better known for the heresy he supported than for his orthodoxy.

Tertullian (145-220) - Tertullian was born into heathenism, in Carthage, and became the father of Latin theology. At about forty years old he was brought to faith, and by 190 became a presbyter. With his work, Tertullian paved the way for other Latin Fathers such as Cyprian and Augustine who followed in his footsteps at Carthage, as well as Jerome. The theology of Tertullian centered on the Pauline doctrine of sin and grace, and during those years did much for the cause of Christian orthodoxy. Much of Tertullian’s work was again directed against heretics such as Marcion (who denied Jesus’ humanity) and Valentinus (a Gnostic). His works can be divided into three groups: Apologetic - describing the church’s position toward the outside world; Polemic - contending against internal differences and heresies; and Ethical - reflecting the morals and manners of Christians. Later in his life Tertullian joined the Montanists, possibly because of a quarrel he had with the clergy in Rome, so his later works are marred by ascetic and legalistic teaching.

Clement of Alexandria (153-217) - Like so many other Church Fathers in this era, Clement was born to heathen parents, and was originally a pagan philosopher. But hearing and learning about Christianity, he sought instruction from many great Christian teachers, the most influential of which was Pantaenus at the catechetical school in Alexandria (which had at this time replaced Jerusalem and Antioch as the center of Christian learning). About 189 Clement succeeded his teacher Pantaenus as teacher in the school, and later was also made presbyter of the church there. During the persecution under Severus (202) Clement was forced to leave Alexandria, and seems to have spent the rest of his years in Jerusalem and Antioch.

Clement wrote a great deal, but his three greatest works are: *The Exhortation to the Heathen* - the object of which was to win pagans to the Christian faith; *The Paedagogus* - an encouragement to Christians to live a Christian life; and *The Stromata* - written in opposition to Gnosticism and full of quotations from Scripture, with which Clement lays the foundation for true knowledge.

Origen (185-254) - was born in Alexandria to Christian parents who helped him come to have a great appreciation for Holy Scripture. Origen studied under Clement during his years in Alexandria, and when Clement left, Origen was asked to take his place as teacher at the young age of 17. Origen had an inexhaustible drive and a great desire to study Scripture, working by day teaching at the catechetical school in Alexandria, and spending most of the night studying Scripture. His desire to know and understand Scripture led him to study the Hebrew language, the result of which can be seen in his greatest work, the *Hexapla*, which was a six columned Bible.

Origen was excommunicated by the bishop of Alexandria, and left Alexandria to go to Caesarea, where he opened a new theological school and produced a great amount of his life’s work. In 249 he was imprisoned during the persecution of Decius, and though he was released, died not much later.

It is said that Origen wrote more than any individual could read, amounting to some 6,000 volumes. His works include commentaries on most every book in both the Old and New Testaments, apologetical works, studies in Christian theology, and much, much more. Yet Origen’s theology was not without error. He denied the physical resurrection, and taught the final restoration of all people as well as the evil angels, and much more. After years of debate and argument, the church condemned Origen as a heretic at the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 553.

Cyprian (200-258) - This Church Father was another who was born to heathen parents and was converted to Christianity at about forty years of age. Within a few years he was made bishop of Carthage. He fled Carthage during the Decian persecution, but was condemned and martyred by Emperor Valerian. In some ways, Cyprian led the way for the papacy and some of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Cyprian was a “high church” Church Father. He taught that the bishops were the successors of the apostles and like them were specially endowed with the Holy Spirit. He taught that they had divine authority, and that through them the church was united. He also taught that outside the outward organization of the church there was no salvation.