



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Tertullian of Carthage, c.160 – c.225 A.D.

“There are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” – Galatians 1:7-8

The Life of Tertullian

- According to Jerome (c. 347 – 420 AD), Tertullian was born in Carthage about 160 AD, and was the son of a Roman centurion. Tertullian was given a good education in grammar, rhetoric, and law. Sometime in the 190s, while in Rome, he was converted to Christianity, although under what circumstances we do not know.
- He returned to Carthage and lived and wrote in Carthage for the rest of his life. He was a prolific writer, and his works bear the clear stamp of a keen legal mind. His style was passionate and deliberate, although at times lengthy and burdensome.
- Tertullian was not fond of philosophy, and detested the speculative flights of the Alexandrians. He sought to defend Christianity from pagan criticism and define orthodox Christianity in the face of errant and heretical teaching. We see in him a rigorous moral stance, and the desire to lead a holy and virtuous life. However, sometime between 202 and 207 he begins to become interested in the Montanist movement and soon fully joins the sect.
- The Montanists were a break away sect which believed that in them a new age had begun. They were founded by a pagan priest named Montanus, who converted to Christianity around 155. Some time later Montanus began prophesying, declaring that he had been possessed by the Holy Spirit. Shortly thereafter, two women in his group (Priscilla and Maximilla) also begin prophesying. Neither of these incidents in and of themselves were new or unique, but what gave the broader church serious concern was the claim that their movement was the beginning of a new age of the Spirit. Just as a new age had dawned with Jesus Christ, so now another new age began with them, characterized by a rigorous moral life and guided by a type of “high-octane Pentecostalism”.
- Why Tertullian joined the Montanists is one of the great mysteries and ironies of the Church, since he never gives any clear explanation in his own writings. It is likely that he was attracted by their moral rigorism and it is possible that at the time of his transition the Montanists were not as clearly defined or distinct from (i.e., rejected by) the wider orthodox church, which does eventually happen.
- Later Christian writers posit that Tertullian eventually despaired of the Montanists and left to found his own movement. We know he died some time after 220 AD and likely no later than 225 AD.

The Times of Tertullian

- Tertullian was a contemporary of Irenaeus, and depended greatly on them in his own writings.
- Carthage was a major city on the North African coast (modern day Tunisia), and originally was a Phoenician city. It became the seat of a major maritime Carthaginian Empire, but in the Third Punic War (149-146 BC) Carthage was sacked by Rome and rebuilt as a ‘second Rome’. By the turning of the era Carthage was “more Roman than Rome” and had a strong pro-Roman vein. Thus Tertullian’s education and heritage bear the influence of Roman organization and legal style.
- Theologically, Tertullian helped to give a significant shape to the Roman school of thought, compared to the Antiochine and Alexandrian schools. Until the 190s, almost all Christian writings were in Greek. Tertullian was really the first major writer to work originally in Latin. It is likely that there existed a Latin translation of the Bible which he used.

Rector's Forum @ St. George

- The challenges posed by gnostics also raised a legitimate, overarching question: What is authentic Christianity? To answer this question required definition of an authoritative source of revelation, to which the early church gives the answer, in a word, *apostolic*. From Jesus Christ came revelation which was given to his apostles, who have passed it on to the church they founded. This revelation is preserved and transmitted in 3 forms:
 1. the writings of the apostles or an immediate associate, which are to be added to the OT as authoritative Scriptures as the New Testament (the formation of a canon of scripture)
 2. the preaching of the apostles (called the *kerygma* by modern scholars) which produced in local apostolic churches/communities a Rule of Faith or Rule of Truth.
 3. the regular, authoritative teaching ministry of an approved leader, ideally one who could trace their learning to the apostles themselves.

Where these three forms of apostolic revelation are found, there you will find an authentic Christian church. While this argument took time to take formal shape, it had really been around since the beginning. Earlier leaders, like Ignatius emphasized the role of bishops in preserving this apostolicity, and while it was Irenaeus who gave great theological weight to this position, it was Tertullian who made it widely known and helped establish it.

The Theology of Tertullian

- Thirty one of Tertullian's works have survived, thirty two if he was the author (and not the editor) of the *Passion of St. Perpetua*. Writings divided into two periods, his early period (c197 to 206) and his Montanist period (from 206 on). His writings cover apologetics (*Apology*, *The Testimony of the Soul*), gnostic polemics (*The Prescription Against the Heretics*; *Against Marcion*), morals and discipline (*On Baptism*; *On Penance*; *On Idolatry*), and general theology (*Against Praxeas*)
- Recall that the Latin/Roman school of Christian thought emphasized sin and guilt vs. righteousness and innocence. Tertullian's writings helped give significant shape to the later medieval doctrines of penance, baptism, confession, and eventually purgatory.
- *The Prescription Against Heretics* – *praescriptio* was a court document that was presented to undo the grounds of an opponent's case before the trial. Tertullian's main point is that since gnostics do not adhere to the apostolic writings, the Rule of Faith, and the historical procession of the Church, they ought not to pay them any attention. Tertullian posits that to understand the Scriptures, and consequently have a true faith in Christ and lead an authentic Christian life, one requires the apostolic teaching (tradition) and the interpretive authority of the church, especially in that of the bishops. This gave rise to the medieval view of the Magisterium, wherein Tradition carries equal footing with Scripture. However, what happened was that Tradition eclipsed Scripture, until the Reformation peeled back to rediscover the Scriptures.
- *Against Praxeas* – Tertullian's very influential work on the Trinity. Praxeas is unknown, but likely he was a fictitious representation of the Bishop of Rome, Calixtus. "Praxeas" taught that God was the One High God who showed different masks when he did different things: one face or mode was the Father, the other the Son, the other the Spirit. This heresy came to be known as "modalism" and was rejected by the church because it failed to respect the distinctiveness of the Persons of the Trinity, and subjects the Father and the Spirit, not just the Son, to the crucifixion. To explain the Trinity, Tertullian uses two terms, *substantia* and *personae*, likening divine nature to a plot of land (*substantia*) jointly owned by three people (*personae*). A rather static view of the Trinity, but helpful.
- *On Baptism*. Tertullian argues that baptism washes away the stain of original sin, but not sins committed after baptism; those are an anomaly and must be 'worked' off through penance. This is terrible theology, but in light of Tertullian's moral rigorism and need to have everything tidy and in its place, we can see why he would want to think this. He struggled to understand the ongoing effects on sin in the Christian's life, and while the church needed to have a strong sense of its own identity in the face of pagan syncretism, his rigorism led him away from the beauty of God's grace. His teaching led to the development of the treasury of merit and purgatory in the medieval church.