

## The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

# PROGRAM 4 PERSECUTION

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RUSSELL: There is no choice when you are asked to deny the One.

NIGEL: It turned into the prolonged battle . . . the might of the Roman Empire against the unarmed, fledgling Christian church.

STEVE: It was a conflict that lasted for almost 300 years, and the results of this struggle have done more to shape our Western civilization and way of life and thinking than any other single force or influence.

SERIES LOGO

1:42

NIGEL: It started with a peasant Galilean carpenter who told his unlettered group of followers to go out into the all the world, make disciples, and spread the word of the coming Kingdom of God.

STEVE: A key development took place here in the Garden of Gethesmane. Here, Jesus had to decide if He would go forward and face the cross or turn back. He went forward. Later his followers, too, would have to decide if they were willing to bear their crosses as followers of Christ. In this program, we'll be looking at the persecution of the early centuries of the church, and we will try to understand why this group, whose motto was love posed such a threat to the power of Rome. My colleagues, Russell, Jane and Nigel join us now from Lyon in France, a notable site of persecution for the early church.

RUSSELL: Now, let's set the record straight on one count. The Christians were not under constant persecution everywhere and all the time.

JANE: No, the persecutions were sporadic and there were intervals in between.

NIGEL: They varied in their intensity.

JANE: And they were not all empire-wide. In fact, most of them were localized. The first-empire wide persecution did not begin until the year 250.

RUSSELL: Many did pay with their lives. And some sought out what they considered to be the privilege of martyrdom—to give their lives for the Lord who had given his life for them.

NIGEL: The early church taught that Christians were not to seek out martyrdom, nor was it to be glamorized.

RUSSELL: But neither should it be avoided, if it meant denying the faith.

JANE: And there were those who decided it was better to deny their faith than to lose their lives.

NIGEL: The early church father Tertullian exclaimed: “All your cruelties can accomplish nothing. Our number increases the more you destroy us. The blood of the Christians is their seed.”

JANE: We don’t actually know if that was correct. Yes, it’s true, a few people did become Christians when they saw how the believers were prepared to endure horrible torture and death for their faith. But most of the population saw these executions as public entertainment and looked upon Christians as just weird and misguided. Remember, this was a society that loved its violent and bloody sports.

RUSSELL: But we are probably safe in saying that if it weren’t for these persecutions the church may never have survived, and the very measures that were used to try to exterminate the new faith simply provided the very basis for its ultimate triumph.

4:21

STEVE: Jesus was a Jew, and so were his earliest disciples. Thus, Christianity started off as a sect within Judaism. But the radical teachings of the “Followers of the way,” as they were first called, caused deep division and hostilities.

The followers of Jesus made no effort to be subtle. They proclaimed Him to be the promised Jewish Messiah, and they regarded themselves as the new Israel, indeed, the true Israel.

In fact, in the first three centuries it was, first and foremost, the power of Rome that threatened the survival of the small but energetic Christian movement.

So, right from the beginning, becoming a Christian was a risky business, a step that almost certainly meant harsh social disapproval—and it could mean arrest, loss of property, torture, even death.

Paradoxically, even as this was expected by Christians, it was unusual for the Roman Empire--unusual to have religious martyrs, because most religions were simply tolerated, and most people kept their religion in its place. Most important for Christians was the awareness that Jesus Christ had endured cruelty, insult, torture and the shameful criminal’s death of crucifixion. He had given clear warning to his first followers that to come after him as a disciple meant to bear a cross, that if they attacked the master they also would attack his servants.

(NERO 54-68)

The first persecution came under the vicious and perhaps insane emperor Nero. The Great Fire of Rome swept through ten of the city's fourteen wards in 64 AD. The rumor circulated that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. And he was even suspected of being responsible for the awful fire. Thus, Nero needed someone to deflect the blame, and he chose the Christians.

The secular historian Tacitus, who had no personal sympathy for the Christians and considered their faith a "deadly superstition" gives us a report in his Annals:

6:14

RUSSELL as TACITUS: There were various attempts at a cover up. They could not extinguish the idea that behind the great fire stood Nero himself. He needed a scapegoat. So he chose a group well-known for their abominations. The Christians, followers of a deadly superstition. Those who claimed to be Christians were arrested, thousands of them. They were convicted, not so much for the crime of arson, but of hatred toward the human race. They were mocked, torn by dogs and nailed to crosses. Nero even used them as human torches to illumine his gardens. Now while these people were deserving of harsh and public punishment, one could not help but feel compassion for them. The punishment was out of all proportion to the crime. They were mercilessly destroyed to glut one man's cruelty.

(DOMITIAN 81-96)

STEVE: Domitian took seriously the idea of the divinity of the emperor. He was happy to be addressed as "our Lord and God" and used the expression to refer to himself.

During his reign, it was expected that citizens would offer incense to the "genius of the emperor." But because it was cast so clearly in religious terms, Christians refused to offer the incense. This time the resulting persecution was selective and mostly confined to Asia Minor and Rome.

(TRAJAN 98-117)

STEVE: Trajan was a respected ruler, considered one of the best emperors. And we get a valuable and interesting insight into the life of the church during his reign from correspondence between Trajan and Pliny. Here is their interchange summarized as if it had been a personal report rather than correspondence.

9:03

RUSSELL as messenger from PLINY: My lord emperor, I bring you a message from governor Pliny, who earnestly seeks your decision on an urgent matter.

NIGEL as TRAJAN: Yes, what is it specifically?

MESSENGER: The governor seeks your pleasure how he should deal with Christians.

TRAJAN: What has been the governor's practice until now?

MESSENGER: If they acknowledge that they are Christians, he threatens them with punishment, gives them two, maybe three, chances to change their minds, and if they don't, they are sentenced to be executed.

TRAJAN: So what is the problem?

MESSENGER: The governor is concerned because of the increasing volume of cases against Christians. Many strong accusations without signature naming many Christians are now submitted. So we arrest them. If they are willing to curse Christ—for we are told that no real Christian will do that—and if they're willing to say a prayer to the gods and worship your statue, we will let them go free. The accused are from all ages, every rank and both sexes. We have to stop them now before they get out of hand.

TRAJAN: Get out of hand?

MESSENGER: They want to reclaim them before their number gets too large. Already the temples are almost deserted. The religion of our ancestors is in decline. The income related to our ceremonies is shrinking. If we move now, we can stop these Christians, but the governor seeks only to act in accord with your wishes.

TRAJAN: Oh, very well. Here is my reply. Commend the faithful Pliny for the way he has acted in the right course. Tell him we cannot lay down specific rules in the matter, but there is one thing. Don't let him admit any accusations where the accuser is not himself present.

MESSENGER: Yes, lord emperor.

TRAJAN: And don't go seeking out Christians. If any are accused of being Christians, then they must be convicted and punished. And also make clear: those accused of being Christians, if they deny it, if they are willing to bow down and worship our gods, then set them free.

11:03

CARSTEN THIEDE: Trajan's letter to Pliny was an attempt to protect Christians from over-zealous procurators and governors like Pliny himself. Do not seek them out. Do not persecute them. Do not punish them unless they are proven to be criminals, criminals against the Roman state. Do not torture them. And, above all, do not follow up anonymous information. Do what is correct according to Roman law. But do not do anything beyond that. It was a kind of protection for the Christians.

(HADRIAN 117-138)

STEVE: Hadrian was one of the most capable of the Roman emperors, and he carried on the policy established by Trajan. Persecution was only occasional and in response to local pressure. Hadrian may even have served as a restraining influence on those zealous to have Christians attacked. A document known as the "Rescript of Hadrian" dating from around the year 125, ordered that an accuser must submit proof against the Christians before any punishment could be exercised. And accusers who brought empty and frivolous charges were to receive even greater punishment.

(ANTONINUS PIUS 138-161)

Antoninus Pius may have provided a degree of protection for the Christians, at least in some instances. However, it was under his reign that a martyrdom occurred that

left one of the most indelible memories in all of church history. That was the burning of the venerable 86-year-old Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, in Smyrna of Asia Minor.

12:30

(MARCUS AURELIUS 161-181)

Marcus Aurelius was another of the good emperors and a distinguished Stoic philosopher, but he had no use for Christianity and regarded it with contempt. Under his leadership the empire experienced a series of natural disasters—floods, fires, earthquakes, and pestilence. There was a popular outcry for Christian blood to be sacrificed to propitiate the gods. So Marcus approved a horrible persecution that occurred in the year 177 in the cities of Lyon and Vienne in southern France.

NIGEL: One of their victims was Blandina. Another was the bishop of Lyon, Pothinus. He was 92 years of age. He was brutally beaten and kicked and then brought in here, where two days later he died.

STEVE: Father Jean Comby is an historian at the University of Lyon.

13:31

JEAN COMBY: What does it mean to be a martyr? The word “martyr” in Greek means “witness.” A martyr is a witness for Christ. The martyr is one who follows Christ and wants to follow Him to the end and imitate Him in everything He did. The high point of martyrdom, of course, is when a Christian, because of closeness to Christ, is willing to die as Christ did in His passion, in His death, in hope of rising again with Him. It is significant that in the letter from Christians at Lyon—which tells us about the death and martyrdom of Christians at this place—they report that quite often, through the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, they saw Christ.

(SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS 202-211)

STEVE: Under Septimus Severus, a further step was taken in opposition to the church. Conversion to Christianity was specifically forbidden, even though Septimius had some Christians in his own household. Another martyrdom that left a lasting impact on the church occurred during his reign. It took place in North Africa, where Perpetua, a young mother nursing her infant, and her servant Felicitas, pregnant and close to delivery, were arrested. They were then mangled by hungry beasts before a cheering crowd in the amphitheater and finally stabbed to death by soldiers.

Then came another interlude of relative peace, breathing space marked by rapid expansion of the church, with thousands of new believers coming into the faith.

14:59

(DECIUS 249-251, VALERIAN 253-260)

But the generation of peace and healthy growth was not to last. Under the emperors Decius and Valerian, the most ominous level of persecution thus far came with a vengeance.

If before the church had been seen as an irritant and a nuisance, now it was being seen as an actual threat that had to be wiped out. Thus, we move into the period of the first official empire-wide persecution.

Christians were denied the right to meet together and were threatened with death

if they did. They were even forbidden to visit their cemeteries and burial places. Their property was confiscated. The bishops were made a special target. The strategy was to cut off the leadership so the followers would fall away.

15:42

RUSSELL: All citizens were commanded to sacrifice to the gods, and proof was required that they had complied.

NIGEL: Those who obeyed were given a certificate as evidence. A copy was given to the individual, and there is evidence that duplicates for verification were found at the town hall.

JANE: This is all it is. It was a little certificate like this. Just like a social security card. Get one and you were safe. They discovered about forty of these in Egypt.

NIGEL: Nobody knows exactly how many, but there were more martyrs under Decius and Valerian than any of the other persecutions.

JANE: We need to emphasize that from the emperor's point of view, this was not malicious tyranny or mindless cruelty. No, he would see it as efficient leadership in difficult days. A typical emperor's reasoning might go something like this:

16:44

RUSSELL (as hypothetical emperor): The people look to me to maintain peace and prosperity. It is my responsibility to see that civic unity is preserved across the empire so that we are strong against the threat of invasion.

That is why it is so very important that we expect from everyone a clear expression of loyalty, unity, and patriotism—both to me and the great office that I hold, and the gods that made us great.

Now the Christians need not die. Do you hear me? I take no pleasure in their deaths. Indeed, I wish more of them were willing to join the army. If they did, we wouldn't have to hire so many German mercenaries to fight the other Germans trying to invade us. No, I have given the Christians every opportunity to show their loyalty and devotion. I don't need any martyrs. I don't want any martyrs.

A little certificate is all they need—and no questions asked. It is to be obtained by everyone—yes, everyone—no discrimination here.

18:14

STEVE: This first empire-wide persecution ended rather abruptly in 260 when the emperor Valerian was captured during a war with the Persians.

In the general peace that followed, the churches grew rapidly in numbers, wealth and influence. Many Christians rose to important positions. And in the latter half of the third century, church buildings began to be erected. Some of them were magnificent, with gold and silver vessels for the eucharistic services.

Thus, the first decades of the church's existence, up to the year 300, saw an ebb and flow of persecution. But now came a last great wave of repression that represented nothing less than a life-and-death struggle between Christianity and paganism.

18:55

(DIOCLETIAN 284-305)

NIGEL: The emperor was Diocletian. He was another of the more able emperors. He worked hard to re-establish the strength and unity of the perceptibly weakening empire.

JANE: For the first twenty years of his reign, Diocletian left the Christians alone. His wife Prisca, daughter Valeria, and many of his administration were Christians or at least supportive of them.

NIGEL: He appointed three assistants to rule with him: Maximian Galerius and Constantius Chlorus.

RUSSELL: But Diocletian got carried away with the idea of the divinity of the emperor, and so everyone who approached him had to do so on bended knee, forehead touching the ground.

NIGEL: Paganism was tired, its appeal waning, steadily losing ground to Christianity. To halt the decline something must be done soon and decisively.

JANE: This was one of those cases where a very determined woman got her way with a very susceptible man.

RUSSELL: Diocletian knew the risks involved putting the Christians to the fire again, and apparently he had little stomach for it. But he was swayed otherwise.

NIGEL: Remember Galerius, who was appointed by Diocletian? Well, Galerius's mother was quite a superstitious lady and very devoted to the the gods of the mountains, in whose honor she held sacred banquets daily and served meat offered to the idols to her servants.

RUSSELL: But the Christians would not partake. They fasted and prayed instead.

JANE: This made her mad. So, with some persistent nagging, she pressured her son Galerius to destroy the Christians. This meant that Galerius and Diocletian met alone for extended periods during the winter of the year 302.

NIGEL: No one else was admitted to their meetings so that everyone knew that something was brewing.

RUSSELL: But Diocletian was hesitant, sensing that a vigorous persecution against the Christians could backfire and simply serve to strengthen them.

JANE: But Galerius was by now obsessive and persisted. So Diocletian sought advice from others. He sent a soothsayer to inquire of the god Apollo.

NIGEL: The advice came back against the Christians.

21:18

STEVE: This one they would call "The Great Persecution."

February 23, 303, the festival of the god Terminus, was the date chosen to commence the termination of Christianity. Edicts were published, decreeing that:

Christians holding public office were to be put out;



All accusations against Christians were to be received;  
They were to be tortured;  
Their scriptures confiscated and burned;  
The church buildings to be destroyed;  
Their civil rights of Christians denied;  
Presidents, bishops and leaders of churches were to be arrested and  
compelled to sacrifice to the gods.

Wild beasts, burnings, stabbings, crucifixions, the rack—all the reliable methods of torture were mercilessly employed.

Many Christians gave in. Yet, many others refused. We don't know how many, but can safely say that multiple thousands were killed or permanently maimed. And in some areas the persecution lasted eight years.

22:16

RUSSELL: It was a life and death struggle of Christianity versus paganism. Yet the carnage was so great and so ineffective that both people and rulers just seemed to sicken of this prolonged massacre.

JANE: They had used all their might against an unarmed opponent that simply refused to die. And this opponent was not an outside invader trying to conquer them. No, it was just their own people trying to live in quietness.

NIGEL: Tired of it all, on April 30, 311, shortly before his death, weak and diseased, none other than Galerius, the instigator, issued an Edict of Toleration. In it he declared: "Christians may exist again, and may establish their meeting houses." And he added that because of his gracious indulgence, it was the duty of the Christians "to pray to their god for our good estate, and that of the state . . . that the commonwealth may endure on every side unharmed."

23:23

STEVE: That was the turning point. Constantine came to the throne. Under him, in 313, the Edict of Milan was sent forth to " . . . grant both the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired."

In the decades that followed, Christianity would gradually become established as the official faith of the Roman Empire, and that would bring challenges and temptations of a different kind. I'm back now in the Garden of Gethsemane, and look at this. From here you're able to see the pinnacle of the temple wall. That's where Jesus at the beginning of His ministry, was tempted by Satan to cast himself down and be miraculously delivered. To do that would have been to build his ministry on the spectacular, on demonstrations of human power. But he chose instead to build his ministry on love, sacrifice, and service. In the generations since, the church has been faced with the same choice. And the question always is the same. Will the church follow the path of worldly power and influence, or will it say, as Jesus said to His Father in this quiet place: "Not my will but thine be done."

In our next episode, we will take a look at the outstanding examples of those in the early church who followed the way of Christ.



## The Trial and Testimony of the Early Church

# PROGRAM 5 TESTIMONY

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NIGEL: These early Christians would have a difficult time understanding our modern Christmas and all the fanfare we make over it.

STEVE: This is the Church of the Nativity in the little town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. More than any other site, we associate Bethlehem with the celebration of Christmas. Yet, it may surprise you to hear that Christmas and the birthday of Christ were not even celebrated in the first 300 years of the church.

### SERIES LOGO

1:21

STEVE: Since the early Christians did not celebrate the birth of Christ, they did not preserve for us the exact date when Jesus was born. Scholars are agreed it had to be sometime between 4 and 7 BC. But the December 25 date was not introduced until the mid 300s. And the celebration of Christmas itself was introduced late in the fourth century to adapt and replace Roman pagan festivals.

It's Easter that was the important time for the early church, but the "birthdays" that were celebrated were those of the great martyrs that died for their faith. And why birthdays? For the early church, the day of martyrdom was the birthday of entering the presence of God.

NIGEL: Here some of their names are recorded: Pothinus, Zacharias, Sanctus, Epagathus, Attalus, Maturus, Alexander, Ponticus, Asclibiades, Macarius, Sylvius, Primus.

We know so little about that vast anonymous army that joined the ranks of the early Christians and spread the message to the far corners of the empire. But perhaps indirectly, we can get a better feeling for them by looking at the stories that they treasured and the models that they sought to emulate.

2:51 STEVE: With the help of my three colleagues, Nigel, Jane and Russell, we'll now look at two of the most noteworthy and influential martyrs, Polycarp and Perpetua. Their stories were recorded, circulated, and celebrated by those who shared their faith and the threat of their fate.

RUSSELL: One of the most cherished stories of martyrdom in the early church comes from the city of Smyrna and tells of the experience and martyrdom of the aged and beloved bishop Polycarp. Polycarp was considered of exceptional importance in the early church because he had been a personal disciple of the apostle John. Right after his death a letter was written to be circulated among the churches in the region. The churches needed to know of the sufferings and the persecution in Smyrna-and how the church there and its leaders were responding to the martyrdoms.

3:41 NIGEL: The letter tells how some believers were fed to the beasts in an arena like this one, dying a horrible death as they were chewed up limb by limb. Then the crowds cried for the leader, the bishop Polycarp.

The record states that their leaders taught that Christians were not to make themselves available for martyrdom nor to seek it out, but neither were they to avoid it when there was no choice. So Polycarp went and hid on a farm. A while later he moved to a second location. The authorities arrived at the first location and, finding that Polycarp had left, arrested two slaveboys, torturing one of them into telling them where Polycarp had gone. Then they moved on to the second location, taking the slaveboy with him.

Polycarp welcomed his captors as if they were friends, talked with them, and ordered that food and drink be served to them. Then he requested that he be given one hour before they took him away so that he might pray. The officers, overhearing his prayers that went on for two hours, began to have second thoughts. What were they doing, coming and arresting an old man like this?

He was brought before the proconsul and, here again, we see the tendency of the Roman authorities to prefer that the accused renounce their faith rather than to have to put them to death. So they did their best to reason with him.

5:35 RUSSELL as PROCONSUL: Consider your age, old man. Just swear by the genius of Caesar. Just change your mind. Say, "Away with the atheists."

NIGEL as POLYCARP: "Away with the atheists."

PROCONSUL: Swear as I have said. Just curse Christ and I will release you.

POLYCARP: Eighty-six years I have served him. He has never done me any wrong. How then shall I blaspheme my King who has saved me?

PROCONSUL: Then do this. Just swear by the genius of the emperor, and that will be sufficient.

POLYCARP: If you imagine I would do that, then you pretend that you don't know who I am. Let me speak plainly. I am a Christian. If you are willing to learn of the teachings of Christianity, then appoint a time to hear.

PROCONSUL: Then why don't you persuade the crowds gathered here?

POLYCARP: I will not even try. In their present frenzied mood, they are neither worthy nor interested to hear of my defense.

PROCONSUL: You stretch my patience very thin. I have the wild beasts ready. I will have them set upon you if you do not do as I require.

POLYCARP: Bring them forth, if that is your decision. I would change my mind if it were a matter of going from wrong to right but not if it means going from the better to the worse.

PROCONSUL: I have other methods. If the wild beasts do not persuade you, I will have you burned alive, slowly roasted, so you will soon wish that you had the good sense to accept my mercy.

POLYCARP: Your fire may last for an hour, then it is over. But do you not know of the judgment to come, the punishment that is forever. Have you not thought of that Mr. Proconsul? Oh, you may do with me as you wish, but one day you will stand before the judge of heaven and earth.

8:40

NIGEL: As they went back and forth, observers said that the aged Polycarp seemed to gain strength and courage so that his face seemed to glow. The proconsul was amazed. He sent his herald into the middle of the stadium to announce three times to the crowd that Polycarp had confessed to being a Christian. Maybe he thought that the confession would satisfy the mob. But it didn't. They were hungry for his blood and screamed forth their accusations: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians. He is the destroyer of our gods. He leads many away from our sacrifice and worship."

So with one voice the crowd cried for him to be burned. They began to nail him to the pyre, but Polycarp said no, that the one who would allow him to endure the flames would strengthen him to stay put without being nailed. He began to pray aloud, thanking God for his goodness and for the privilege of being counted among the martyrs, to partake of the cup of Christ, and to offer himself up as a sacrifice to God.

The fire was lit, and those believers present reported how they could detect a fragrant aroma. They said it was like a loaf of bread being baked. The fire did not consume him. The executioner had to stab him with a dagger to snuff out his life, and when he was stabbed, the blood gushing forth put out the fire. Then he died.

There was resistance to allowing the Christians to gather Polycarp's remains but they were finally permitted to do so and gathered them up like precious jewels. They buried him on February 22, probably in the year 155. Polycarp was the twelfth to be martyred at Smyrna, they reported. They set aside the anniversary of his martyrdom as a day to remember. It was celebrated like a birthday in memory of those who had died for their faith and for the strengthening and preparation of those who would one day have to.

11:28 | RUSSELL: It was very important to his followers that the details of these events be carefully written down. So a report was prepared, copied, and circulated among the churches, offering them an important link back to the apostles because of Polycarp's association with the apostle John.

Now we don't know how many people were actually martyred here in the Roman Colosseum, but we do know that across the empire there were many instances of the Christians thrust into these public arenas to do battle for their faith, and on this site, a memorial cross still stands as a kind of silent reminder of how, even in their deaths, they achieved a kind of victory.

12:09 | STEVE : In the early church, women assumed a very important role. Many of them were numbered among the martyrs. Women often were central to the life and faith of the church, and they probably constituted the majority of its members. For example, after the church in the town of Cirta in North Africa was seized in the year 303, only sixteen men's tunics were found, but there were eighty-two women's tunics. The women in the early church came from all social classes, and that was illustrated well by a martyrdom account that ranks with Polycarp's as one of the most cherished by the churches. When persecution broke out around the year 200 under the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus, a young Christian woman named Perpetua was arrested in the North African city of Carthage. Also arrested were her friends, Satyrus, Saturninus, her slave girl, Felicitas, also a second slave Revocatus. Perpetua, who was fluent in Latin and Greek, kept a diary of her prison experience right up to the day of her execution. And it was carefully preserved by her fellow Christians. In fact, it may be the first document we have from the pen of a Christian woman. Let's pick up her account as Perpetua tells how her father visited her in prison, trying to convince her to renounce her faith.

13:24 | JANE as PERPETUA: "Father," I said, "do you see this water pot here?" "Yes, of course," he replied. "Well, that's just what it is. It isn't something else, like a necklace. Can it be called by anything other than what it is?" "Of course not," he replied. "Then, I can't be called anything other than what I am and I am a Christian." At that, my father was angered and rushed towards me as if to attack me. But he composed himself quickly and left. Then two of the deacons in our church, Tertius and Pomponius, who were especially concerned about us, bribed some of the guards and had us moved to a nicer part of the prison to refresh ourselves.

I was allowed to hold and nurse my baby. The poor little thing was faint from hunger. I was anxious and spoke to my mother and my brother about my little boy and gave the baby into their charge. How difficult it was to see how they suffered in their pity for me. But very soon I was allowed to have my baby stay with me in prison and then it seemed like all at once I felt much better. Relieved of the worry about the child, I regained my health. Now my prison seemed to me like a palace, and I was content to stay here.

Well, the date was set when we were to go before the governor. So my father, who was so worried about me, was allowed to visit me again. "My daughter," he said, "think of me, your father, and my gray hair. Do not bring this great disgrace upon me. I will be held in contempt by everyone. And think of your mother, your aunt, your baby. Most of all think of your baby. Give up your pride-it will destroy us all. None of us will ever be able to hold our head up in public again."

I could see that my father loved me as he spoke. I tried to comfort him. "It will be in the prisoner's dock as God wills," I said. "He will not leave us to ourselves. We are all kept in his power." My father left in great sorrow.

Then one morning at breakfast time we were suddenly rushed before the governor. The rest of our company were questioned and each admitted in turn that they were guilty of being Christians. Then when it came to my turn, my father rushed forward, pulled me from the step, and insisted: "Offer up the sacrifice—have pity on your baby." "I will not sacrifice," I said. "Are you a Christian?" Hilarius asked. "Yes, I am," I answered. My father kept trying to persuade me, and then Hilarius ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. Oh, how that hurt to see my father beaten! I felt the pain as if they were beating me. Then sentence was passed, condemning us to be thrown to the beasts, but first we were returned to this prison. We were in high spirits.

My dear Felicitas was eight months pregnant when we were arrested. We were so concerned about her because it was illegal for pregnant women to be executed. She would have to wait until after the baby was delivered. She wouldn't have the company of the rest of us in her death. So in one outpouring of common grief, we prayed for Felicitas. And two days before we were due to be taken to the amphitheater, she delivered her baby. One of the Christian women promised that, if Felicitas were not allowed to live, she would take care of the baby and bring it up as her own. How Felicitas rejoiced that she had been safely delivered and could now go and face the wild beasts! She said she was ready to go from the blood of childbirth to the blood of the gladiator to wash after childbirth with a second baptism.

19:56

RUSSELL: That's as far as Perpetua could take the story in her diary. The events that followed were carefully written down by her fellow Christians and saved with her account.

The day arrived. Satyrus, Saturninus, Revocatus, Felicitas, and Perpetua were taken from the prison to the amphitheater. There the Roman officers prepared to dress them in the pagan religious costumes. This was the practice to signify that they were being offered as a sacrifice to the gods. Perpetua strongly objected, saying, "We came here of our own free will, so that our liberty would not be violated. We pledged our lives in order not to sacrifice to these gods. And you agreed with us about this!" So the officer relented, and they were allowed into the arena in their own clothes.

They were brought before the waiting mob. As they approached the Governor Hilarius they gestured to him, saying, "You have condemned us, but God will condemn you." At this the crowd was enraged and ordered that they be scourged before a whole line of gladiators. They simply rejoiced that they obtained a share in the Lord's sufferings.

For the women, a mad heifer was brought forth. They stripped Felicitas and Perpetua naked, placed them in nets and dragged them to the center of the arena. Even the crowd was appeased when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other fresh from childbirth with milk dripping from her breasts, so they were taken back and given unbelted tunics to wear.

Then they were set before the heifer, who threw Perpetua to the ground, and she tore her tunic. She quickly covered herself, as much for her modesty as for her pain. Then she asked for a pin to fasten her hair, for she did not see it fitting to die with her hair unkempt and miss her hour of triumph.

She had seen that Felicitas had been thrown to the ground. She ran to her, picked her up, and the two stood together side by side. The crowd was appeased, and she was taken back to the gate where she spoke to her brother and the other catechumens, saying, "Be strong in the faith, stand firm, love one another. Do not be weakened by what you have seen us going through." Then, as the contest came to a close a leopard was brought forward. It bit Satyrus and, drenched in his own blood, he was taken to the usual spot to have his throat cut. Then all the other martyrs went to that spot of their own accord. Then they took the sword silently without moving. Then Perpetua was struck to the bone and she screamed out, but then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided the sword to her own throat. It was as if she could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

23:16 KEN CURTIS: It was these stories of Polycarp and Perpetua and others that played such an important role in the early church. For they found strength in these stories to meet the later times of persecution. As a result, we have a movement that could not be intimidated. It seemed that no torture could be developed, no threat devised that could break the resolution of those who were determined to stand firm for their faith. How many died in the persecutions up to the year 312 when Constantine made the faith legal? We really don't know. But we do know that the church would not have been the same kind of church without its martyrs. Indeed, the church may not have even survived without its martyrs. And keep this in mind, too: martyrdom was not something that was confined to the early centuries and years of the church. In every single period, there have been those courageous men and women who have been willing to surrender their lives rather than deny their faith.

24:09 STEVE: In fact in our own 20th century there have been far more martyrs for the Christian faith than in the first 300 years.

Today in at least dozens of nations, Christian believers are prohibited from propagating their beliefs, and in many of these countries they face persecution, imprisonment, and even death.

STEVE: In our next and final program we will look at the great transition that took place under the emperor Constantine. It was the period when the church went from being the persecuted to becoming the privileged and the favored faith of the empire. We will also see what it was about the life and faith of the early Christians that enabled them to survive and to thrive.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## In the Know

The Gnostics believed that knowledge is the key to salvation--for a select few.

David M. Scholer

**Amazing but true: Second-century Gnosticism** is a "big ticket" item today. TV feature programs, popular books and novels, and a flood of scholarly literature are discussing it. The recent unveiling of the thoroughly Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* caused quite a sensation, primarily because Judas is the "hero" of the story. Various groups and scholars have touted the spiritual wisdom of Gnostic movements and a few have even suggested that some Gnostic documents were unfairly prevented from entering the New Testament canon. The latest, complete, and authoritative translation of the major ancient Gnostic texts discovered in 1945 is entitled *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. Even though the authors nuance the term "Scriptures," the book title makes an appeal to lay Christians that raises many questions and concerns.

The current hoopla over ancient Christian Gnosticism has led to many misleading claims. It is vitally important for Christians to understand the Gnostic movements as accurately as possible, both for the sake of grasping the realities of the second-century church and for our own theological reflection. Gnosticism appealed to people then because it presented new, often creative, responses to the major questions of existence, buttressed by claims of secret, special revelation. In today's religious climate, suppressed literature offering an alternative to established orthodox tradition has an irresistible appeal. These old texts also seem to resonate with some people's spiritual quests.

### The knowing ones

"Gnosticism" is a modern term (first used in 1669) to describe a complex of movements in the ancient church. People who belonged to these sects believed they possessed secret knowledge; therefore, the second-century church father Irenaeus and the third-century Neoplatonist philosophers called them "Gnostics" (gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge). The church fathers also referred to Gnostics by the names of their leaders. When describing themselves, the Gnostics used phrases like "offspring of Seth," "the elect," "enlightened ones," "immovable race," and "the perfect."

Because of the problem of how to label the Gnostics, some modern scholars argue that the term Gnosticism should no longer be used. They point out, correctly, that the movement was diverse, with many different sub-groups emphasizing different ideas. But other historians argue that, as long as this diversity is recognized, Gnosticism is still a legitimate generic term to talk about the family resemblances between these different groups (just as we use the terms "Christianity" or "evangelical").

The origins of Gnosticism are, like so much else we want to know about antiquity, shrouded in mystery and a subject of debate. Most Christians throughout history—and many today—have argued that the Gnostics were a heretical offshoot of the church in the second century. All the Gnostic writings we know of are from the second and third centuries A.D. However, there is substantial indirect evidence that the movement pre-dated Christianity (for example, an early tradition says that Simon Magus, mentioned in Acts 8, was the "father" of Gnosticism). It may have originated in Alexandria, Egypt, in the first century B. C. as an aberrant form of Judaism, combined with certain ideas about divine reality drawn from the Platonism of the time (which had developed beyond the philosophical ideas of Plato). This movement then found its "home" in early Christianity, understanding Jesus Christ as the true Revealer of the true God within the emerging Gnostic worldview.



The evidence we have suggests that the Gnostic movements formed various, but related, schools of thought sometime slightly before A.D. 150. Earlier in the 20th century, some scholars (notably Walter Bauer) argued that in some places Gnostic Christians were the majority. It now seems clear, however, that Gnostics constituted a minority of Christians in the second century yet were strong enough to cause concern and alarm to various church fathers.

Two very important second-century Gnostic leaders were Basilides and Valentinus. Basilides was a teacher in Alexandria, Egypt, before 150. According to the church fathers, he had been taught by Menander, who in turn had been taught by Simon Magus. Valentinus, who emerged in Alexandria and went to Rome around 140, was a brilliant Gnostic thinker. He wrote extensively and, according to Tertullian, was for a brief time a candidate for bishop of Rome. Some fragments of his writings have survived in short quotations in the church fathers. In addition to the schools of thought that formed around these two major teachers, other Gnostics focused special attention on the apostle Thomas (the famous *Gospel of Thomas* reflects this stream of thought) and others (called Sethians) focused on Seth as the "perfect" son of Adam and Eve and a Gnostic redeemer figure (sometimes subsumed under Christ).

### Good God, bad god

Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection in the 1940s (see "The Secret is Out"), virtually all we knew about ancient Gnosticism came from the anti-Gnostic writings of the church fathers (which occasionally quoted a few Gnostic texts), a pagan Neoplatonic work against the Gnostics, and a couple of later Gnostic works, *The Two Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia*. Today, we possess many more Gnostic books that give us a fairly reliable picture of how the Gnostics understood the world and salvation. Though there was great variety among the different streams of thought, there were a number of characteristic beliefs.

All ancient Western cultures during the time of the early church were dualistic to some degree, due in part to the influence of Plato and his followers. Such dualism was so prevalent that the famous German scholar Hans Jonas once quipped that gnosis was the common bond of all religious cultures at that time. Gnostic dualism was distinguished by its absolute, radical character: All matter (the world and the body) is evil and has its source in an evil creator who fell from and betrayed the true God. This lesser, inferior divine being arose through some mysterious tragic split with the ultimate realm (the Pleroma or "fullness") of the ultimate God, who is often called the Father of All.

Some forms of Gnosticism believed that this split in the deity produced an extensive array of intermediary beings (archons, principalities, and powers, many of whom are given names like Yaldabaoth, Sakla[s], and Barbelo) who inhabit the cosmos between the Pleroma and the earthly realm.

Gnostics believed that humanity is trapped in the material world/human body. The creator seeks to mislead humans by keeping them blind to the spiritual reality of the ultimate Father of All. In order to provide salvation, the ultimate God sent a redeemer, who navigated the journey from the Pleroma through the intermediary beings to earth. In some Gnostic texts this redeemer is Seth (drawing on the positive presentation in Genesis 4:25, 5:3, and 6:2-3), but the majority of Gnostic texts have Christ as the redeemer. Because the material world is evil, Christ only appeared to be human (this belief is called docetism and is condemned in 1 John 4:2). Gnostic books like *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* therefore deny that Christ died on the cross.

Christ provides salvation by delivering secret revelations/discourses to his true followers; it is this knowledge that is crucial. The saved are a special spiritual group of humanity (the Pneumatics) who "know" the folly of the material world/body and understand that in a "spiritual resurrection" they will be united with the Father of All. These "elect" have a divine spark (or spirit) of the ultimate God inside them, which is rescued through the secret revelations given by the redeemer. In many Gnostic texts, the salvation of the true spark is an ascent through the intermediary beings back to the Pleroma.

## Turning the Bible upside-down

Gnostics identified the evil god/creator with the God of the Old Testament; this had profound implications for their understanding of Scripture and the history of Israel. All Christians in the second century were struggling with their identity in relation to Judaism. For example, Justin Martyr, writing around 150, declared that the Jewish Scripture was actually a Christian book, since the Jews did not know how to understand it. And in 165, Melito, the bishop of Sardis, preached a Good Friday sermon on the death of Christ that accused the Jews of killing God.

But the Gnostic approach was far more denigrating of the Jewish heritage. In fact, one classic passage in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* uses Isaiah 45:5-6 to show that the God of Israel is inferior; a true God would never need to declare that he was the only God. This text also includes a fascinating litany that states, in parallel fashion, that "Adam was a joke," followed by naming Abraham, David, Solomon, the 12 prophets, and Moses also as jokes! The capstone is the declaration that the God of the Jewish Scripture is also a joke. Each litany ends with the words "we have not sinned," referring to the Gnostics' claim to proper spiritual understanding. (This is an interesting declaration in light of 1 John 1:8-2:2, which clearly states that those who claim not to have sinned are in error.)

Gnostic interpretation of Scripture, therefore, often made the villains into heroes and the heroes into villains. For example, Eve and the serpent in the garden were the ones really in touch with the knowledge of the ultimate God; the inferior creator misled humanity. (In fact, some Gnostic groups were known as the Naassenes or Ophites, from the Hebrew and Greek words for "serpent.") The 20th-century classics scholar Arthur Darby Nock once quipped that all one needed to do to create Gnosticism was to turn Genesis upside down and do inverse interpretation!

In Gnostic texts, the recipients of "revelation" are usually various followers of Jesus (e.g., Thomas, Peter, Philip, John, Mary of Magdala). In the *Gospel of Judas*, the recipient is Judas, which comes as quite a surprise to readers of the canonical Gospels. Here it is Judas who delivers Jesus from his evil human body, thus achieving a major Gnostic goal. Just as with Eve and the serpent, a person who seems "evil" in the traditional texts is, in fact, the one in touch with the true Gnostic revelation. In the *Gospel of Judas*, the other disciples of Jesus are said to serve the lesser god, while Judas is open to the true God.

## Physical matters

Apart from the radical dualism noted earlier, the most common theme in Gnostic texts is asceticism, or a denial of the importance of the body. This may be one reason why some later Christian monastics found these documents attractive. However, various church fathers (for example, Irenaeus in the second century and Epiphanius in the fourth century) described the Gnostics as immoral libertines who grossly indulged the body and its passions. The church fathers appear to be indulging in polemical exaggeration, yet it is possible for ascetics to become libertines. (Various movements in church history certainly demonstrate this—the Oneida Community in 19th-century America, for example.)

This Gnostic rejection of the body had many implications. One was their attitude towards martyrdom. Second-century Christians debated whether or not people ought to seek martyrdom, but most held up their martyrs as heroes of the faith who had shared in Christ's suffering and death. The Gnostics, on the other hand, seem to have completely rejected the idea that dying for one's faith had value. The Nag Hammadi text *Testimony of Truth* states, "Foolish people have it in their minds that if they simply make the confession, 'We are Christians,' in words but not with power, and ignorantly give themselves up to a human death, they will live. But they are in error and do not know where they are going or who Christ really is. Instead, they are hastening toward the principalities and the authorities."

## The status of women

Another implication of the Gnostics' asceticism and rejection of the body—and a subject of much modern debate—is their view of women. Gnostic texts are replete with sexual imagery, including feminine terms and images, yet they state over and over again the goal of sexual renunciation. The well-known ***Gospel of Thomas*** says, "For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom." This most likely means, in context, that renouncing worldly, physical existence is what prepares one for true salvation. Thus, male and female Gnostics are spiritual equals.

Women seem to have had a prominent place in some Gnostic streams of thought. Mary of Magdala, for example, is a person of great significance in various Gnostic texts, such as the ***Gospel of Thomas*** and the ***Gospel of Philip***. The ***Gospel of Philip*** states that the Savior loved Mary more than all of the other disciples and often kissed her. The ***Gospel of Mary*** presents Mary as the recipient of the Savior's true revelation, much to the disgust of Peter.

These texts probably indicate some degree of Gnostic protest against the limitation of women's roles in the majority church, and they may suggest female leadership in at least some Gnostic circles. Yet many scholars are cautious; the texts we have do not clearly show that Gnostic movements were egalitarian or significantly dominated by female leaders.

### Gnostic "churches"?

Because of their view of the physical world, it is unclear what role ritual practices played for Gnostics. Did they form churches? Did they celebrate the sacraments? We have very little evidence. But it does seem quite clear that many Gnostics embraced a set of sacramental rituals. For example, the Valentinian ***Gospel of Philip*** names five "mysteries": baptism, chrism, eucharist, redemption, and bridal chamber. (There is a major debate among scholars about whether the bridal chamber refers to literal sexual activity; more likely it is symbolic, given the Gnostic rejection of the body.) The ***Testimony of Truth*** contrasts false baptism (that of the majority church leaders, perhaps?) with true baptism, which is the renunciation of the world.

The church fathers imply that the Gnostics had their own secret meetings. One theory is that Gnostic Christians may have attended both the majority church and the secret gatherings of true (spiritual) persons (i.e., the Gnostics). The ***Revelation of Peter*** appears to attack the church leaders, saying that they lead people astray: "And there are others among those outside our number who call themselves bishops and deacons, as if they had received authority from God, but they bow before the judgment of the leaders. These people are dry canals."

Although no text speaks of Gnostics "evangelizing," their writings may have been used to attract followers, and Gnostic teachers certainly took the opportunity to speak with other Christians about their "misunderstandings." Through whatever means, the movement grew.

### What's the attraction?

Many aspects of Gnosticism seem rather strange to us today. For example, in one Gnostic text, Jesus laughs during the crucifixion, because the person on the cross is only a material being created by the lesser god. Yet despite its "weirdness," the early church fathers considered it a major threat to the church. How could such a movement have attracted any followers of Christ? What made Gnostic beliefs so appealing?

Gnostics, like all other Christians in the second century, were attempting to answer the basic theological questions that confront human existence: What is the relationship between God and the created world? Why is there evil and how does that affect one's understanding of God? How should the Old Testament be interpreted in light of Christ? Who is Christ, and what is the salvation he offers? Given the spiritual

realities of salvation, how should one regard the physical body? Is there a resurrection from the dead, and what does that mean?

Gnostics were offering creative answers to these questions that many people found compelling and attractive. To many in the Greco-Roman world, Gnostic dualism may have seemed to provide very tidy solutions to thorny issues like the Incarnation. A person in that culture knew one thing for sure: The ultimate God would never be revealed in actual human form. Gnosticism was ultimately a "spiritual" movement.

But to the majority of Christians, Gnostic answers about God, creation, and Christ were theologically inadequate. Gnostic groups remained strong through the second and third centuries, but then they began to lose ground significantly and by the fifth century were virtually extinct. Other issues such as Manichaeism (a derivative movement from Gnosticism) became the focus of debate, prompting the criticisms of Augustine of Hippo, for example. By this time, the church had gained the position and power to set and enforce the standards of orthodoxy.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## Gnosticism Unmasked

by D. Jeffrey Bingham

*The label "Gnosticism" is a fuzzy one, describing diverse sects and ideas in the ancient world. This chart summarizes those elements within various Gnostic groups that the majority of Christians found especially troublesome. A particular Gnostic sect would not necessarily have held all of the following beliefs.*

### GNOSTIC VIEW

**GOD** - There are two opposing Gods: the supreme, spiritual, unknown Father who is distant from the world and revealed only by Christ; and the subordinate, ignorant, and evil creator of the world (Demiurge).

**WORLD** - The material world crafted by the Demiurge is evil and keeps the spiritual ones from perfection. It must perish and be escaped.

**HUMANITY** - The Gnostics are by nature the elite, spiritual ones, for they have the "seed" of the spiritual realm inside them. This divine spark (the spirit) is trapped within the material, fleshly body and yearns for release from this evil dungeon.

**SALVATION** Only the immortal spirit of the Gnostic is saved as it gains release from material captivity and returns to the Father's spiritual realm. Salvation is by knowledge (*gnosis*)—by knowing that the true God is the Father, not the Demiurge, and that the true home of the spirit is its place of origin, the Father's realm, not the material world with its bodies of flesh.

**CHRIST** Christ is a spiritual, divine being from the Father's realm who comes to the world to reveal the Father and the true identity of the spiritual ones, the Gnostics. Christ did not become incarnate or suffer on the cross. Instead, he either merely seemed to be human or temporarily inhabited a human being named "Jesus."

**CANON and HISTORY** There are gospels and testimonies of the apostles that convey the perfect revelation of Christ in addition to (and in some ways superior to) the church's four gospels. This revelation brought by Christ manifests the true knowledge of the Father and the Gnostics, while the Law and the Prophets manifest the Demiurge.

### ORTHODOX VIEW (as expressed by Irenaeus of Lyons)

**GOD** - There is only one true God who is the Creator of the world and the Father of Jesus Christ.

**WORLD** - The material world was created good by God. It will someday be renewed and made into a fit home for the redeemed.

**HUMANITY** - God created all human beings as a union of body and spirit. We are not spiritual by nature—this is a gift available to all by faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

**SALVATION** Both the immaterial and material aspects of God's creation are saved. By faith in Jesus Christ, a person receives the Holy Spirit who provides spiritual life, resurrects their flesh to eternal life, and redeems the created world.

**CHRIST** Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior, the eternal Son of God made flesh, who truly suffered for the sins of humanity and was truly raised in immortal, incorruptible flesh for their resurrection to eternal life.

**CANON and HISTORY** The church recognizes only four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and believes that these four, along with the rest of the New Testament, are in harmony with the Law and the Prophets. All witness to the one true Creator and Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

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## One God, One Christ, One Salvation

Irenaeus the "peacemaker" was the early church's best warrior against Gnostic heresy.

D. Jeffrey Bingham

*[The Gnostics] wander from the truth, because their doctrine departs from Him who is truly God, being ignorant that His only-begotten Word, who is always present with the human race, united to and mingled with His own creation, according to the Father's pleasure, and who became flesh, is Himself Jesus Christ our Lord, who did also suffer for us, and rose again on our behalf, and who will come again in the glory of His Father, to raise up all flesh, and for the manifestation of salvation, and to apply the rule of just judgment to all who were made by Him. —Irenaeus, Against Heresies*

In the year 177, Pothinus, the 90-year-old bishop of Lyons (in modern France), died after Romans beat him for two days. Pothinus' crime: insisting that Christ was the Christian God. Terrible persecution had come upon the Christians of Lyons and the neighboring city of Vienne, some 16 miles south on the east bank of the Rhone River. Christians were burned alive in the amphitheater. The young servant girl Blandina, after many tortures, was finally gored to death by a bull. Each martyr sacrificed himself or herself in imitation of the passion of Christ, their Incarnate God, in the hope of resurrection. So fundamental and pervasive was their resurrection-faith that the Romans cremated the martyrs' corpses and dispersed the ashes in the river to defeat any notion that the Christians would be raised bodily from their graves.

Pothinus's successor was named Irenaeus, meaning "man of peace," and the early Christian historian Eusebius honored Irenaeus as a peacemaker in keeping with his name. But this irenic pastor and diplomat was also the second-century church's most informed, prolific, and theologically profound opponent of Gnosticism.

Earlier Christian leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr had argued against false teachings that resembled Gnosticism, but Irenaeus was unique in his careful study of Gnostic myths (especially those taught by Valentinus) and in his immense, tireless reply.

### Apostolic pedigree

Irenaeus was born sometime between 130 and 140 in Smyrna—today the city of Izmir in Turkey. As one strolls through the ruins of the ancient marketplace with its impressive colonnades, it is not hard to imagine the boy Irenaeus skipping by the altar of Zeus or observing Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, in theological discussion with the future Roman presbyter, Florinus, who later embraced the Gnostic ideas of Valentinus. In his youth, Irenaeus learned the key components of the Christian faith under Polycarp, who had been taught by the apostle John and others who had seen Christ.

Martyrdom was never far from Irenaeus. Polycarp was killed in February of 155/56. An account left by the church of Smyrna, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, provides a window into the faithfulness of an old man who saw himself as sharing in the sufferings of Christ and hoped for the resurrection of the body.

Irenaeus moved from Smyrna to Lyons (then called Lugdunum) and became a presbyter there. He was a trusted emissary of peace and on at least two occasions represented the church in doctrinal and



liturgical controversies. The great persecution of Christians in Lyons occurred during one of his diplomatic missions to Rome, and so, when he returned, he became bishop in Pothinus' place.

Irenaeus wrote a number of books in his pastoral role, including *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a short presentation of Christian faith. But his greatest literary work was the five-volume *Against Heresies*, written around 180 in response to the Gnostics and also the heretic Marcion. It is still valued today, not only because it is an early example of Christian biblical interpretation and theology, but also because it gives a careful account of a variety of Gnostic beliefs. Irenaeus broke new ground by consulting the Gnostic teachers and reading their literature in order to understand their teachings. He occasionally exaggerated his descriptions for the sake of argument, but now that we have access to many Gnostic writings from the Nag Hammadi collection, we know that his representations of Gnosticism were generally quite accurate.

### **Wolves in sheep's clothing**

With his heart for peace, Irenaeus opposed the Gnostics not out of desire for power but out of concern for their salvation. He wanted, he said, to "turn them back to the truth" and "to bring them to a saving knowledge of the one true God."

Furthermore, he was a pastor with a responsibility to care for his flock. His opponents were enticing members of his community away from apostolic faith with a message that sounded true but wasn't. He therefore saw the Gnostics as false teachers who had cleverly and artfully clothed an unorthodox theological system in a deceitful, seductive costume. "Error," he noted, "indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced ... more true than the truth itself."

As he wrote these words, Irenaeus had in mind Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:15 about false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves. The Gnostics sounded, and frequently acted, just like orthodox Christians. They read the Bible, used the Bible, and cited the Bible. But the way they understood the Bible, the way they put its pieces together, differed dramatically from the perspectives of Irenaeus, Pothinus, Polycarp, and John.

Irenaeus believed there was an unbroken line of tradition from the apostles, to those they mentored, and eventually down to himself and other Christian leaders. The Gnostics interpreted the Scriptures according to their own tradition. "In doing so, however," Irenaeus warned, "they disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures and ... dismember and destroy the truth." So while their biblical theology may at first appear to be the precious jewel of orthodoxy, it was actually an imitation in glass. Put together properly, Irenaeus said, the parts of Scripture were like a mosaic in which the gems or tiles form the portrait of a king. But the Gnostics rearranged the tiles into the form of a dog or fox.

As a pastor, then, Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* in order to describe the heresies that were threatening his congregation and to present the apostolic interpretation of the Scriptures. He revealed the cloaked deception for what it was and displayed the apostolic tradition as a saving reminder to the faithful.

### **God became flesh**

The Gnostics who threatened Irenaeus's community tended to divide things into two realities—one good, the other bad. In response to such dualism, Irenaeus presented the unity of apostolic faith.

For example, Irenaeus' opponents divided "Christ" from "Jesus." Christ, they said, was a divine spirit-being from the heavenly realm (the Pleroma, or "fullness") who did not become really incarnate, so

he could not really suffer. He was not truly human, but either only seemed to be human or temporarily inhabited a human named "Jesus."

But Irenaeus was too familiar with the constant threat of martyrdom to let such dualism deceive his flock. The real, bloody passion and death of Christ was a fundamental element of Christian faith. Martyrdom imitated it, and Christians confessed it in baptism and worship. Irenaeus responded with a strong biblical statement that Jesus Christ was one person, both divine and human, and that he really was crucified.

This is what gave comfort to those who were martyred: "[Christ] knew, therefore, both those who should suffer persecution, and he knew those who should have to be scourged and slain because of Him; and He did not speak of any other cross, but of the suffering which He should Himself undergo first, and His disciples afterward."

At the root of the Valentinian Gnostic myth known by Irenaeus was a division between two Gods: the supreme, transcendent Father revealed by Christ, and the arrogant Demiurge, the creator of the physical world, who was identified with the Old Testament God of the Jews. Therefore, the Gnostics divided reality into two opposing realms—the heavenly world of spiritual beings (named "Aeons") and the material world of trees, rocks, earth, flesh, and blood.

In contrast to this, Irenaeus declared: "But there is one only God ... He is Father, He is God, He the founder, He the Maker, He the Creator, ... He it is whom the law proclaims, whom the prophets preach, whom Christ reveals, whom the Apostles make known to us, and in whom the church believes." These words reveal another important theme for Irenaeus: the harmony between the Old Testament and the emerging New Testament, between the prophets and apostles. The Creator spoken of by Moses is the Father revealed in Christ. His redemptive plan has been the same throughout history.

The Valentinian Gnostics also taught that, since the material world was created by an imposter, an ignorant deity, it had no value and must perish. The human body, as part of the material world, could never be immortal. This is why Christ could not have been truly human and why, the Gnostics believed, there would be no bodily resurrection or redemption of the created order. Salvation was purely spiritual.

But according to Irenaeus, the "spiritual" person is made up of the "the union of [material] flesh and [the human] spirit, receiving the Spirit of God." God created the physical world, and so that world has value and will be redeemed and renewed someday. God created the human body, and the body will be raised again incorruptible and immortal.

Against the Valentinians, Irenaeus emphasized the supernatural, redemptive ministry of the Holy Spirit who renews both the body and the spirit. This ministry of the Holy Spirit strengthened the martyrs to bear witness unto death in hope of bodily resurrection. This promise was based on the reality of Christ's incarnation: "For if the flesh were not in a position to be saved, the Word of God would in no wise have become flesh."

### **The faith that saves**

The Gnostics had an elitist understanding of salvation; they divided humanity into two categories, the "spiritual ones" who belong to the Father and the "material ones" who belong to the Demiurge. As the "spiritual ones," the Gnostic believed, they were destined for salvation because of the divine spark within them (unlike the rest of humanity, who are asleep and have no hope).

Not so for Irenaeus. All humans are fallen—dead in their sins—and in need of redemption. Salvation is

not a matter of destiny but of faith. The eternal Son of God, who became human, reunited God with humanity. Those who believe in him have the life of the Holy Spirit in them—and only they can be called "spiritual": "as many as fear God and trust in His Son's advent, and who through faith do establish the Spirit of God in their hearts—such men as these shall be properly called both 'pure,' and 'spiritual,' and 'those living to God,' because they possess the Spirit of the Father, who purifies man, and raises him up to the life of God."

So we see in Irenaeus the great orthodox doctrines of unity: One God, who is the Father and Creator of all things, immaterial and material, and who orchestrates one harmonious history of revelation and redemption; one Savior, who is both divine spirit and human flesh, both Christ and Jesus; one human nature, which is both spiritual and fleshly; one salvation of both the spiritual and material realms, which is by faith.

These were the doctrines Irenaeus received from those who had passed the apostolic teaching down to him. This was the orthodoxy that protected his flock against the wolves of heresy and that gave Polycarp and the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne the faith to endure even to the end.

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## Midwife of the Christian Bible

Irenaeus identified the books of the New Testament, then showed the church how they fit with the Old.

Fr. John Behr

Irenaeus was a living link to the apostles. Although he became bishop of Lyons, in France, he was originally from the East. He was probably born in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) around A.D. 130-140. As a youth he had seen and heard Polycarp of Smyrna, who, as Irenaeus put it, had received the things concerning the Lord from "the eyewitnesses of the Word of Life" (the name of John the disciple is often mentioned as one of these).

Irenaeus used these reports of Jesus, given "according to the Scriptures," delivered in the beginning by the apostles, to defend the truth of Christianity against a bewildering variety of early anti-Christian and heretical groups. As he did so, he gave the church a clear vision of the scriptural framework of its faith.

At the heart of this vision was Irenaeus's teaching of the right use of both the New Testament and the Old. Before Irenaeus, there was no New Testament. He is the first Christian writer to use, as Scripture, almost all the books that are in our New Testament today. And he insisted that these books could be properly used only by those people who accepted four authorities:

1. The "rule [*canon*] of truth"; that is, the belief in one God, one Son, and one Holy Spirit—the basis of the later creeds.
2. The whole canonical body of Scripture, Old and New.
3. The apostolic tradition; that is, the deposit handed down, once for all, by the apostles and preserved intact in the church to the present—referring to the contemplation of Christ according to the Scriptures.
4. The bishops whose very lives—as direct successors to the apostles—provided the church with a visible witness that the Gospel was preached.

For all his decisive importance, we know very little about the life of Irenaeus. On his journey westward he probably visited Rome, where he would have encountered teachers such as the apologist Justin Martyr.

He also probably led the church in Vienne (near Lyons) during a violent persecution in 177, and then he assumed responsibility for the community in Lyons when its bishop, Pothinus, was imprisoned awaiting martyrdom.

Irenaeus is remembered as a martyr—though the claim dates from long after his death, which cannot be dated precisely. Only two of his written works have survived. The first is the collection of five books entitled *The Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-called*, also known as *Against the Heresies*. The other, the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, was discovered only at the beginning of the twentieth century.

## Rightly uniting the Word

***The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*** provides the best insight into Irenaeus' vision. Here he links the preaching of the apostles—the New Testament writers—to its source in the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets.

First he outlines the faith handed down by the elders, who had known the apostles, epitomized in the three articles of the "canon of faith"—the one God and Father; the one Lord, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ; and the one Holy Spirit.

Then he recounts, in the manner of the great apostolic speeches in Acts, the scriptural narrative of God's work of salvation culminating in Christ. Finally, he demonstrates that what the apostles proclaimed as fulfilled in Christ, shaped as it is by Scripture, was indeed foretold in Scripture.

Irenaeus stresses the way the apostles themselves used Scripture: following Paul's proclamation that Christ died and rose according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-5), the four canonical Gospels focus their accounts of Jesus on the Passion, and they always tell the story with references to Hebrew Scripture. Neither Marcion nor Gnostic writings like the ***Gospel of Thomas*** use Scripture like this in proclaiming Christ.

Irenaeus criticizes the heretics on the grounds that they have "disregarded the order and connection of the Scriptures." They have, he charges, rearranged the members of the body of truth, much as do those who take a mosaic of a king and rearrange the stones to form a picture of a dog or fox, claiming that this is the original picture. Those who know the "canon of truth," delivered in baptism, will be able to restore the passages to their proper order, so revealing the image of the King.

The "canon of truth" functions very much like the "pattern of sound words" to which Paul urged Timothy to hold firm (2 Tim. 1:13). By holding to this canon, Christians can proclaim in a continually changing context the same gospel—the "tradition" preserved in the Church.

In this way, Christ is, for Irenaeus, the subject of Scripture throughout. The apostles proclaimed him by reference to the Scriptures. The prophets saw "the Son of God as man conversing with men; they prophesied what was to happen ... declaring that the one in the heavens had descended into the 'dust of death'" (Ps. 21.16; Septuagint). Christ was not yet present, but his saving Passion was already the subject of the prophets' words and visions.

## Jesus wrote it all

Not only is Jesus Christ the subject of Scripture, from beginning to end, but he is also its ultimate author: Irenaeus takes Jesus' statement that "Moses wrote of me" (John 5.46) to mean, "the writings of Moses are his words," and then extends this to include "the words of the other prophets." So, Irenaeus urges Marcion, "read with earnest care that Gospel which has been given to us by the apostles, and read with earnest care the prophets, and you will find that the whole conduct, and all the doctrine and all the sufferings of our Lord, were predicted through them."

"If anyone reads the Scriptures in this way," Irenaeus argues, "he will find in them the Word concerning Christ and a foreshadowing of the new calling." Using Christ's image of a treasure hidden in a field (Matt. 13:44), where the disciples are sent to reap what others have sown (John 4:35-8), Irenaeus suggests that Christ himself is the treasure, hidden in Scripture, in the types and parables, the words and actions of the patriarchs and prophets, which prefigure what was to happen in and through Christ in his human advent as contained in the Gospel. By their writings, the patriarchs and prophets have prepared the world for the advent of Christ, so that the field is ready for harvest.

Before their consummation in the Christ's advent, these types and prophecies could not be understood.

But the cross now sheds light on these writings, revealing what they in fact mean and how they are thus the Word of God. For those who read Scripture without knowing the "explanation" (literally "exegesis") of those things pertaining to Christ, the Scriptures remain only fables. However, those who read Scripture with understanding will be illumined and shine as the stars of heaven.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## Defining the Faith

Gnosticism emerged during a time when Christians faced an identity crisis.

Everett Ferguson

**A Christian walking the streets of Ephesus** in the mid-second century would have seen signs of material splendor and prosperity—the recently built Library of Celsus at the entrance to the commercial agora, the temples and other building projects initiated under the emperor Hadrian, the Roman remodeling of the great theater, the new Vedius Gymnasium and baths, and other amenities of a flourishing urban life. He could have conversed about current philosophical interests—Middle Platonic metaphysics, Stoic ethics, Aristotelian science. He may have been aware of flourishing literary activity from authors such as the clever satirist Lucian of Samosata.

The religious, political, economic, and cultural life of Ephesus was dominated by the cult of Artemis, whose magnificent temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World, though other cults flourished as well. The association of the imperial cult with Artemis testified to the pervasive presence of the Roman Empire.

During the second century, the empire reached its height geographically (under Emperor Trajan) and economically (under Hadrian and the Antonines). Underneath this success, however, were reasons for uneasiness. Emperor Marcus Aurelius struggled mightily against barbarians on the frontiers. Books about history by Pausanias, Plutarch, Athenaeus, and others reflected a general feeling that the older customs were better and that something had been lost in the new Roman age. Movements such as the Neopythagoreans and Christian Encratites took a negative view of the material world. The question of the origin of evil troubled many, especially Jews and Christians who believed in a good Creator. Undercurrents pulled toward another, spiritual world.

Christians shared in this vibrant, troubled culture. They wrestled with how to relate to the overarching Roman political, economic, and religious authority. They moved up the economic ladder. They engaged the philosophical issues of the time, produced their own abundant literature, and clarified doctrines. Above all, now that the last of the apostles had died, Christians wrestled with their own identity: Who are we? What does it really mean to be a "Christian"?

### A persecuted race

Christians faced this question within the context of uneasy relations with the Roman state. Religious acts permeated all aspects of society—athletics, dramatic entertainments, commercial activities, civil oaths, and political functions. The Roman government co-opted local cults as part of the state religion. The ultimate test of political loyalty was sacrifice to the "divine spirit" of the emperor, represented by his statues and pictures.

Some Christians reasoned that bodily actions are irrelevant to spirituality and therefore going through the motions of sacrifice does not matter morally. Most Christians, however, rejected pagan religions as idolatrous and refused to participate in acts of sacrifice, even in civil and social contexts. This refusal led to sporadic outbursts of persecution. Those who steadfastly resisted any temptation to compromise were considered the heroes of the church. Some who volunteered for martyrdom yielded under pressure, so the church discouraged voluntary martyrdom and held up the example of Polycarp of Smyrna as martyrdom "according to the Gospel." Polycarp withdrew to a country house until the authorities arrested



him. His confession is classic: "For 86 years I have served Christ; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Persecutions underlined the communal aspect of Christian faith. Narratives of the martyrs' trials recorded that, when commanded to sacrifice to the gods in obedience to the emperor, the martyrs repeatedly confessed, "I am a Christian." Christians were condemned "for the name," that is, for being members of the group that was considered subversive. The apologist Justin Martyr argued that this legal practice was unfair: People should be punished for their own crimes, not for those suspected of an entire group.

But such experiences strengthened the consciousness of a special identity. In their written defenses of their faith, Christians spoke of themselves as a "third [or fourth] race." The *Epistle to Diognetus* says of Christians, "They neither esteem those to be gods that are reckoned such by the Greeks [Romans included] nor hold to the superstition of the Jews." And Aristides' Apology states, "There are four classes of people in this world: Barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and Christians."

## Jesus and Moses

Rome recognized Jews as an ancient people, and as long as Christians were considered a branch of Judaism they enjoyed a certain protection. But this situation was ambiguous, for there was popular animosity against Jews, especially after the Jewish revolts against Rome (the latest in the 130s during the reign of Hadrian). Also, Jews removed the legal cover provided by Judaism by excluding Christians from their communities.

Relations between Jews and Christians were ambivalent. Jesus and his earliest disciples were Jews, but by the second century the churches were composed mostly of Gentiles. The question of Christianity's relation to Judaism and the Old Testament was a very important part of Christians' efforts to define their identity.

The longest surviving second-century work illustrating this Christian-Jewish discussion is Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Trypho, a Jew, was puzzled that Christians "professing to be pious" did not "alter [their] mode of living from that of the Gentiles" or observe "festivals or sabbaths and do not have the rite of circumcision" required in the Law of Moses. Justin distinguished between the Old and the New Covenants. The Old Covenant given to Moses was valid for Jews, but the prophets predicted a "new law" and "eternal covenant" in Christ that is for all peoples.

Others expressed different answers to the question of Christianity's relation to Judaism. Some (for example the *Epistle of Barnabas*) allegorized the Law, so that its "spiritual" meaning belonged to Christians. Some, like the heretic Marcion, wanted to sever Christians' association with Judaism and rejected the Old Testament altogether (an approach his opponent Tertullian said "gnawed the Gospels to pieces"). The Gnostic teacher Ptolemy made distinctions in the Law between what was fulfilled by Christ, what was abrogated by him, and what was transformed by him.

But most Christians held fast to their Jewish heritage. It showed that Christianity was not something novel (a major pagan criticism against Christians) but had ancient historic roots—an important fact in a culture that valued the oldest as the best and the truest. Jewish Christians maintained various aspects of Judaism along with their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Gentile Christians, although they did not observe the ceremonial aspects of the Law, continued to consider the Jewish Bible in its Greek translation as their Scripture.

Christians' use of some Jewish books not found in the Hebrew Bible (still included in Roman Catholic editions today) made the limits of the Old Testament canon a concern already in the second century. Melito, the bishop of Sardis, journeyed to Palestine to learn the exact contents of the "Old Covenant" from Jews there, and he recorded a list agreeing with the Jewish and Protestant Bibles except for the

absence of Esther.

## **Doctrinal dilemmas**

An essential aspect of the question "Who are we?" was the related question "What do we believe?" As Christians prayed, sang, taught the gospel message to converts, and confessed their faith in baptism, they were forced to think deeply about how Jesus related to God and what the limits of true doctrine were.

For one thing, there was considerable pressure within the culture to modify or compromise monotheism. Christians shared with Judaism the belief in the one Creator God, and the philosophers of that age were moving towards an affirmation of one Supreme Principle. But the currents of thought also found a place for multiple subordinate divine beings, much like multiple governors under one supreme emperor. Even some forms of Judaism reflected this trend.

Also, those who affirmed Jesus as Savior interpreted the nature of salvation differently. Was he a teacher who brought enlightenment or a healer who brought wholeness? A spirit who brought eternal life or a real human being who brought a resurrection of the body? A conqueror who brought deliverance from fate or demons, or a redeemer who brought forgiveness of sins?

Those we now call "Gnostics," who combined elements of Greek philosophy, Jewish speculation, and Christian belief, had various perspectives on these and other options—as did the Gnostics' orthodox opponents. Moreover, the church's proclamations about Jesus—his virgin birth, ministry of teaching and healing, crucifixion, bodily resurrection, and future coming as a judge—were questioned by those who discounted the historicity of these events.

A diversity of viewpoints emerged, expressed in various forms of Christianity. Common to nearly all Christian groups, as far as we can tell, was baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as the central act of initiation and a weekly communion on the first day of the week.

## **Holding on to the apostles**

In the midst of all of these challenges from within and without, Christians tried to maintain a sense of unity and theological clarity by strengthening the organization of local communities and keeping up constant communication between these communities. As the second century went on, there were fewer and fewer "apostles, prophets, and teachers"—as well as fewer evangelists who circulated among the churches and carried the gospel to new areas—and more bishops (or pastors) who emerged out of the council of elders as the main leaders of the Christians in each city. "Let the congregation be wherever the bishop is," wrote Ignatius of Antioch, concerned that doctrinal divisions would tear apart local churches.

Not all Christians liked the growing organizational structures. The Montanist movement revived the practice of prophecy in reaction against what they perceived to be the church's weakening separation from the surrounding world and against the greater authority exercised by bishops. Teachers continued to function, sometimes only loosely connected with the local leadership. Some, like Justin Martyr, were orthodox, while others, like the Gnostics, promoted their own esoteric speculations and formed independent schools of thought.

At the core of all these developments was one central concern: Where can we find the apostolic message? Christians clung to the apostles' teaching about Jesus as the standard for determining what was true and what was not. Those who taught a different message from what the local bishop and elders taught appealed to a secret tradition going back to one of the apostles. Over against this claim to "secret teaching," their opponents pointed to the public succession of leaders and teaching in the established churches. The theologian Tertullian summarized this argument: Truth is what "the churches received

from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God," and all other doctrine is false. Such concerns led to a "canon" of accepted apostolic writings (the New Testament), a summary of the message these writings contained (the Rule of Faith), a confession of faith (the Apostles' Creed), and an apostolic succession of bishops and elders.

At the intersection of Greek philosophy, Jewish interpretation of Scripture, and Christian affirmations of a divine Redeemer who appeared on earth, various teachers formulated their views of material and spiritual reality and sought a firm place to stand. Except for physical persecution, the situation of Christianity in the West today has a lot in common with the second century. And on the worldwide scene, the question "What is a Christian?" remains a central issue.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 37: Worship in the Early Church

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## How We Christians Worship

From about the year 150, perhaps the most complete early description

Justin Martyr was a philosopher and defender of Christianity who was martyred in Rome in about 165. He was the author of First Apology, Second Apology, and Dialogue with Trypho the Jew.

Translation and Commentary by EVERETT FERGUSON *Dr. Everett Ferguson is professor of Bible at Abilene Christian University and editor of Encyclopedia of Early Christianity (Gardland, 1990).*

***On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers.***

***When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the "Amen." A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons.***

***Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need.***

***We all make our assembly in common on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God changed the darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior arose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturn's day, and on the day after (which is the day of the Sun) he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught these things, which we have offered for your consideration.***

—First Apology, 67

There is no better place to begin studying early Christian worship than with this account of Justin Martyr. Justin knew Christianity in Asia as well as Rome, perhaps in Palestine also. And in one of his writings, his Apology, he left us this description of a typical worship service of the second century. Justin may not tell all, but where he can be checked by other second-century sources, those sources accord with his account. Justin was not a leader of the assembly, so he wrote his account as an active layperson.

**"On a day called Sunday, there is a gathering together."**

"Sunday" was the pagan name for the day of the week, used because Justin was addressing a pagan audience. "First day of the week" was the Jewish name; the "Lord's day" was the peculiarly Christian designation. In the earliest Christian references to this day, the final assembling of the saints at the Lord's coming is in mind.

Here Justin connects Sunday with Creation and Redemption: "... the first day, on which God changed the darkness and matter and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior arose from the dead on the same day." Thus, the Christian day of assembly was connected by Justin with the beginning of the physical creation and with the beginning of the new creation at the Resurrection.

**"The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read."**

The Scripture reading was from either the writings that became the New Testament, or the Old Testament, or both. The "memoirs of the apostles" would be particularly the gospels. The "prophets" was a standing designation among Christians for the entirety of the Old Testament. But the prophetic books in the narrower sense had special meaning for the early Christians, since they pointed to Christ's coming, and they may well have been the part most frequently read.

Justin does not say whether the reading was part of a continuous cycle of readings (a lectionary) or was chosen specifically for the day. The phrase "as long as time permits" implies that the reading was not of a fixed length, but it does not have to mean a random selection.

There is a third possibility: the reading may have been continuous from Sunday to Sunday, with each reading taking up where the reading last left off—but not of a predetermined length. The readings appear to be rather lengthy. In that day, these readings provided the principal opportunity for the average person to become familiar with the Scriptures.

**"The president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things."**

The sermon was given by the "president." The word need mean no more than "presiding brother," but it can also mean "ruler," and there seems no reason to doubt that this individual was the functionary we know elsewhere under the title bishop. In Justin's time, he was a congregational overseer or pastor, not a diocesan bishop. He presided at the liturgy and administered the finances of the church as well as preached. He was a different person than the reader.

The sermon was expository in nature, based on the Scripture reading of the day, and made a practical application. As an apologist (someone who defends Christianity to pagan readers), Justin stresses the moral content of the preaching; "The president ... urges the imitation of these good things." That accords with much of the preaching in the early church.

**"We all rise together and send up prayers."**

Justin tells us the congregation stood for prayer. Other sources tell us about the significance of this posture: A person kneeled or prostrated himself to express humility, contrition, repentance, confession of sin. Standing, on the other hand, was a sign of joy and boldness, showing the freedom of God's children to come boldly into his presence.

On the first day of the week, standing had a special reference also to the Resurrection. This was the characteristic Christian attitude in prayer, as other texts and archaeological findings confirm. For early Christians, standing meant one had special privileges to come to God as Father, through Christ. To stand in the presence of God meant to be accepted by him and to have the right to speak freely.

The prayer referred to at this point in the assembly was the corporate or common prayer. It was evidently a free prayer. Justin may give some idea of the typical content earlier in his *Apology*:

"We praise the Maker of the universe as much as we are able by the word of prayer and thanksgiving for all the things with which we are supplied.... Being thankful in word, we send up to him honors and hymns

for our coming into existence, for all the means of health, for the various qualities of the different classes of things, and for the changes of the seasons, while making petitions for our coming into existence again in incorruption by reason of faith in him.”

This summary statement accords with the general pattern that is found elsewhere: it begins with an address to God as Father and Creator, praises him for his mighty acts, moves from thanksgiving to petition, and closes with a doxology—all being done with reference to Christ.

### **“Bread is presented and wine and water.”**

The bread and wine may have been ordinary, but they had no ordinary significance to Christians. The two highlights of the eucharistic celebration for Justin were the consecration and the Communion.

According to Judaism, something was dedicated to a proper purpose “by the Word of God and prayer.” The president’s thanksgiving, Justin notes earlier, made the bread and mixed wine no longer “common bread and common drink.”

We need not debate the exact import of Justin’s words connecting the bread and wine with the body and blood of Jesus. It is sufficient to note that, according to Justin, by the Word of God (Jesus) and by prayer (of thanksgiving) the bread and wine were now set apart consecrated, given a new significance.

When Justin mentions “wine and water,” I believe he’s loosely referring to the practice of mixing wine and water. The common table beverage of the ancient world was wine diluted with water. Justin thus counters wild pagan stories about the Christian meal by saying that Christians ate ordinary bread and drank the common table beverage (not something more intoxicating).

### **“The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings.”**

Earlier Justin specifically called the food *Eucharist*. The word means “thanksgiving” and points to the most important feature of second-century Communion: it was a thank offering. Although the New Testament usually calls it “the breaking of bread,” second-century Christian writers adopted the name *Eucharist*.

Throughout his writings, Justin makes much of thanksgiving. This was the Christian sacrifice. Unlike the bloody offerings of paganism, Christians offered to God the pure spiritual sacrifice of prayer and thanksgivings. A quote from the Gnostic writer Ptolemy probably expresses Justin’s thoughts on this: “The Savior commanded us to offer oblations, but not those of irrational animals or incense, but of spiritual praises, gloryings, and thanksgiving, and of fellowship and doing good to our neighbors.”

The president made this prayer “according to his ability.” The idea seems to be that human thanksgiving is inadequate to the greatness of God’s goodness, but all, insofar as they are able, try to express their gratitude.

In Justin’s day the prayer was extemporaneous. But we can’t rule out the presence of some formulae recurring frequently. For example, elsewhere in Justin’s writings we read that the president “sends up praise and glory to the Father of all through the name of his Son and of the Holy Spirit and makes thanksgiving at length for the gifts we were counted worthy to receive from him” and “We thank God for having created the world with all things in it on behalf of man, and for having delivered us from the evil in which we were and completely overthrowing the principalities and powers by the one who suffered according to his will.”

The main theme, therefore, was praise and thanksgiving to God for his gifts, and these included both

Creation and Redemption, but especially Redemption.

**"The people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' "**

The word *amen* is Hebrew and is explained earlier by Justin as meaning "may it be so." The congregational *amen* at the conclusion of prayer or in response to a doxology was taken over from the synagogue in the earliest days of the church. By the *amen*, the congregation confirmed what had been said, and so made the prayer pronounced by one person the joint prayer of the whole people.

Justin seems to have been much impressed with this element of congregational participation. He describes its rendition with a word that has a double meaning: to make acclamation, or to sing. I have tried to bring out both meanings in the translation "sing out their assent." We should think of a chant-like, unison acclamation. It was shouted out, not mumbled.

**"A distribution and participation of the elements ... is made to each person."**

The elements consecrated by prayer were then distributed by the deacons for the communion of the members. Each person received both the bread and mixed wine.

One was either in communion, or one was not. Sharing the bread and wine expressed the fellowship of the believing community. The deacons even carried the consecrated elements to those who were sick and unable to be present physically, preserving a sense of corporate fellowship among those confined to their homes or beds.

Justin mentions earlier (in describing a baptismal Eucharist) that following the common prayers, and before bread and wine were brought forward, "we salute one another with a kiss." The "holy kiss" or "kiss of love" was particularly appropriate in a baptismal context, but it may have been employed at other observances of the Eucharist. It was an expression of brotherly love; it welcomed the newly baptized into the family of God. Justin had emphasized that "it is not lawful for any other one to partake" of the Eucharist than one in the full fellowship of the church.

The exchange of the kiss was the sign of being in that fellowship.

**"Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills."**

Although other sources describe offerings of produce, Justin describes a contribution of money. He emphasizes the voluntary nature of the gifts. The money deposited with the president was not an assessment. The congregational contribution, therefore, was unlike the "dues" of the clubs and private associations that were so common in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. It was a freewill gift.

The persons who benefited from the almsgiving—orphans, widows, sick, prisoners, and strangers—are often mentioned in Christian texts.

**Balanced Fundamentals**

These activities of Sunday assembly in Justin's day have remained through the ages:

- the Word of God (both read and preached)
- corporate prayer (including the psalms)

- Communion of the bread and wine
- offering of one's possessions.

Justin describes a liturgy, then, in which there are two balanced pairs of activity. In the service of the Word, God speaks to human beings. In prayer, human beings speak to God. The Word of God to us calls forth the response of our words to him.

In the second pair, the Eucharist represents God's gift to us—spiritual life through Christ. The offering or contribution represents the gifts of his people to God. God gives, and we give in return.

The modern liturgical movement has said much about "primitive wholeness." That describes Justin's account. It is commonly said that in the medieval church the Mass was emphasized at the expense of other activities of worship, and that in the Reformation, preaching was highlighted at the expense of the rest of worship.

The worship described by Justin calls us back to fundamentals.

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## **The World-Changer**

### **By David Feddes**

How much influence can one person have? Suppose I told you of someone who influenced music more than anyone else in music history. That would be impressive, wouldn't it? Now suppose I told you that this same person also knew sculpture, painting, architecture, and literature more than anyone else? That might sound like too much to be true.

But suppose I went further and told you that if this person had never lived, there would probably be no computers, no airplanes, no telephones, and no electricity in your home. Would you believe such a thing? What person could possibly have such influence in music, art, and architecture, while at the same time providing the basis for scientific research and invention? Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Would anyone except an insane person—or perhaps a politician who doesn't know when to stop bragging—dare to claim so much influence?

Actually, though, I've barely started listing all the areas this person has influenced. Without his influence there might be no freely elected governments and no constitutions that place limits on government power. Ordinary people would have very few rights and freedoms, very little educational opportunity, and very little economic opportunity. Without his influence, slavery would be common. Women would be viewed more as property than as persons. Family life would be much worse than it is.

It would be common to kill widows when a husband died. It would be common for female babies and handicapped babies to be abandoned to starve or be eaten by wild animals. It would be common to kill old people or let them starve to death if they could no longer care for themselves.

Without this person's influence, few, if any, hospitals would exist. Few, if any, colleges and universities would exist. Billions fewer people would be able to read and write. In fact, billions fewer people would be alive at all.

Could any one person be such a world changer? Could the same man change the fine arts, science, government, economics, education, family relationships, and every sphere of civilization? It sounds crazy, almost as crazy as a man claiming to be God. But as a matter of fact, that's who I'm talking about: Jesus Christ, the man who claimed to be God.

You might not be aware of the impact Jesus has had on the things I've mentioned. But these things are not just far-out fantasy; they are firm fact. Even thinkers and scholars who don't believe in Jesus as God recognize that Christ changed the world more than anyone who ever lived and that Christianity has decisively influenced all the things I've mentioned and more besides. In this article and others to follow, we'll examine the facts about areas transformed by Christ, the world-changer.

### **How Did He Do It?**

Before we get into details, let's first ask the general question: how did he do it?

During Jesus' time on earth, he didn't produce any grand art or architecture. He didn't compose any music or write any books. He didn't hold any government position. He didn't propose any new scientific theory or invent any new technology. Jesus didn't start any hospital or university. He didn't start a literacy program. He didn't lead a

political movement to free slaves and improve women's status. He didn't have a wife or children.

And yet this man who never headed a family of his own transformed family life for billions. This man who never led a slave revolt or a women's rally brought dignity and liberty to countless women and former slaves. This man who never published a page of his own writing produced the most literate, educated civilizations in the world. This man who was never a professor, researcher, or inventor spread a way of thinking that enabled science to flourish. This man, who was never a lawyer and never held a government post, set the framework for just laws and human freedom. This man, who produced no artistic masterpieces, became the inspiration for the finest art and literature on Earth.

How did Jesus do it? How did he change so many different areas of human life and culture? He did it without making any of these things his main focus. He did it by connecting people to God, the source of all human flourishing. He did it by bringing God's reign of love, truth, beauty, and power to bear on the lives of one person after another. He did it by changing people from the inside out: he changed their hearts, and they changed their culture. Jesus didn't change the world all at once. He changed it through small beginnings and steady growth, through the hidden but ever-spreading influence of God's kingship, which was embodied in Jesus' own person and spread from him to others.

Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches."

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Luke 13:18-21).

When Jesus compared God's kingdom to a small seed, he was a penniless wanderer in a poverty-stricken area of a weak country occupied by a foreign army. Jesus was unknown to the world's ruling powers and leading thinkers, and his followers were lower class nobodies. Jesus and his band seemed as small and insignificant as a tiny seed lying unseen in the dirt. But Jesus declared that this seed of God's kingdom would grow and branch out, becoming so big and beneficial that countless people and entire nations could nest and find shelter in its branches. It seemed unlikely at the time, but that's exactly what happened.

The comparison to yeast makes a similar point: a little bit makes a big difference. When a woman makes dough for bread, she uses lots of flour and only a little yeast. When the yeast is tucked into the flour, it's no longer visible. Yet somehow that yeast affects the entire lump of dough. In the same way, God's reign in Christ starts out small, invisible. It works gradually, secretly, seldom in the headlines. But the invisible turns out to be invincible. Nothing can stop it from fermenting and spreading into more and more areas of life, more and more spheres of culture. When God became a man in the person of Jesus, the yeast of God's life and power entered the dough of this world. The yeast of the Christ-life has been spreading through the loaf of humanity ever since. When the yeast of Christ's gospel gets into your life, it affects every part of your life. When the yeast of Christ's gospel gets into a country and civilization, it affects every sphere of culture. It does so not instantly or violently, but gradually and quietly. It takes

time for bread to rise, and it takes time for Christianity to transform culture. But over time the world-changing yeast of Christ has shown its power.

### **Cultural Credit**

Jesus deserves credit for all sorts of things that many people aren't aware of. What would this world be like without Christ? *What if Jesus had never been born?* That's a fascinating question, and it's the title of a fascinating book by D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe. The book describes "the positive impact of Christianity in history" and shows that "had Jesus never been born, this world would be far more miserable than it is." Another helpful book for understanding Christ's impact on the world is *Christianity on Trial: Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry* by Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett. A third book, the most detailed of all, is titled *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, by long-time sociology professor Alvin J. Schmidt. All three books describe the huge impact of Christ the world-changer in one sphere of life after another, and all three books have contributed a great deal to the articles I've written on this subject.

Noted historian Paul Maier, after reading Alvin Schmidt's book on how Christianity transformed civilization, was deeply impressed and said other readers would "be amazed at how many of our present institutions and values reflect a Christian origin."

Not only countless individual lives but civilization itself was transformed by Jesus Christ. In the ancient world, his teachings elevated brutish standards of morality, halted infanticide, enhanced human life, emancipated women, abolished slavery, inspired charities and relief organizations, created hospitals, established orphanages and founded schools.

In medieval times, Christianity almost single-handedly kept classical culture alive through recopying manuscripts, building libraries, moderating warfare through truce days, and providing dispute arbitration. It was Christians who invented colleges and universities, dignified labor as a divine vocation, and extended the light of civilization to barbarians on the frontiers.

In the modern era, Christian teaching properly expressed advanced science, instilled concepts of political and social and economic freedom, fostered justice, and provided the greatest single source of inspiration for the magnificent achievements in art, architecture, music, and literature that we treasure to the present day...

In a climate of multiculturalism and its mandate to "find the truths in all world religions," it is hardly politically correct to say this, yet after reading this book, I must: No other religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement—whatever—has changed the world for the better as Christianity has done.

Not all cultures are equal. Some cultures are better than others, and the best cultures on earth are those that have been most influenced by Christ and the Bible. If that sounds arrogant, I'm sorry, but it's a fact. Multiculturalism pretends all cultures are equal, regardless of what religion has shaped the culture. But, says economist Thomas Sowell,

Those who say that all cultures are equal never explain why the results of those cultures are so grossly unequal. When some cultures have achieved

much greater prosperity, better health, longer life, more advanced technology, more stable government, and greater personal safety than others, has all this been just coincidence?

If all cultures are equal, why do so many people leave countries dominated by non-Christian religions in order to live in countries where Christianity has historically had the greatest influence? If all cultures are equal, why did communist countries built on atheism have to build walls to keep people from leaving for other countries? No country on earth is perfect and no culture is completely Christian, but it's a fact that those cultures are best where the seed of Christ's kingdom has been growing the longest and where the yeast of Christianity has worked its way most thoroughly into all aspects of the culture.

There's a story about an American soldier during World War II who met a native on a remote island. The native could read and was holding a Bible. When the American soldier saw the Bible, he said, "We educated people no longer put much faith in that book." The native, who was from a tribe of former cannibals, replied, "Well, it's good that we do, or you would have been eaten by my people today." Not all cultures are equal.

### **Who Did It?**

In other parts of this series, we'll have more in-depth descriptions of various areas of culture where Christ changed the world for the better. (You can order free printed copies for yourself or read them online at [BacktoGod.net](http://BacktoGod.net).) For now let's just look at a quick sample of major advances and ask who did it.

People in the Roman Empire entertained themselves by watching gladiators fight and kill each other. A brave man, at the cost of his own life, brought the butchery to an end. Who did it? A Christian monk named Telemachus.

It was common throughout the ancient world to abort unwanted babies or, if the abortion failed, to abandon the babies in out-of-the-way places to die of exposure or be eaten by animals. But a group of people searched out many of these babies, took them home, cared for them, loved them, and raised them as their own children. Who did it? The Christians. And still today Christians are leaders in respect for unborn babies and in adopting babies other people don't want.

Who drafted the Magna Carta, the great document limiting royal powers and establishing basic rights? The Archbishop of Canterbury was a major influence. Who wrote the Mayflower Compact, America's first written constitution? Christian Pilgrims, eager to serve Christ in freedom. Who was the teacher of James Madison, the main author of the U.S. Constitution? John Witherspoon, a Christian pastor. Who laid down principles of economic free enterprise? A Christian named Adam Smith.

Most public schools no longer teach such facts to students, but facts are still facts. Despite political correctness and multiculturalism, it remains true that freedom and human rights have flourished most in countries influenced by Christianity. No nation is perfect, and no political or economic system is totally Christian--but the seed and yeast of Christ certainly have made some nations better places to live in than others.

Who started the first hospitals? Christians did. Who was the pioneer of modern nursing? A Christian named Florence Nightingale. Who started the International Red Cross? A Christian named Henry Dunant. Whose discoveries about bacteria opened the

way for major medical advances? A Christian named Louis Pasteur. Who pioneered safer surgery with sterile instruments? A Christian named Joseph Lister.

Who invented a printing press and made books available to masses of people? A Christian named Johannes Gutenberg--and the first book he printed was the Bible. Who started the world's great universities, such as Oxford, Paris, Heidelberg? Christians did. Who started America's great universities, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton? Christians did. Who promoted schools that gave educational opportunities to all children and not just to the elite? Christians did. Who invented sign language for deaf people? A French priest. Who developed the standard alphabet of raised dots that enables blind people to read? A Christian named Louis Braille.

Who pioneered the greatest advances in scientific discovery? People who were themselves Christians, or whose view of reality had been shaped by Christian concepts. People who believed in many gods didn't look for a rational order in the world. People whose religion taught that physical things are unreal or bad wouldn't bother studying physical reality. But people who believed that one God created and ordered the universe believed they could learn something of that order, and people who believed that Christ himself became physical knew that the physical world must be real and valuable. Without such confidence, there would be no Copernicus, no Galileo, no Newton, no Pascal. We would not have modern science as we know it, and the many amazing inventions we enjoy would never have come into being.

Who invented four-part musical harmony? Christian choirs. Who was the first man to play keyboard instruments with all five fingers? A Christian named Johann Sebastian Bach, who is also considered by many to be the greatest musician of all time.

As for literature, I can hardly begin to tell of the influence of Christ and the Bible. Let's just say that without Christ, we would not have the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, or Tolkien. Charles Dickens declared that the greatest story in all of world literature is Christ's parable of the prodigal son. Whether others would agree with that, the fact remains that without Christ, much of the world's greatest literature would simply not exist.

That's just a quick sample of Christ's impact on culture and civilization. Christ changes people, and his people change the world. Minds guided by Christ's truth and hearts motivated by Christ's love have grown like seed and spread like yeast, so that there is no other person in history whose influence can begin to compare with the influence of Christ the world changer. As someone once wrote, "All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life."

### **Seek First His Kingdom**

Those of us in places that have inherited the cultural blessings of Jesus' influence should honor and thank Christ for these blessings. We must seek the personal transformation and relationship to God that is the secret power behind these blessings. And in a time when many individuals and cultures are walking away from their Christian heritage, we must beware of a new barbarianism which loses the cultural blessings of Christianity and loses the eternal blessings of salvation.

There have been people who recognize that a Christian influence greatly improves people and cultures but who don't trust in Christ or submit to him in their own life. For example, in the 1800s a British newspaper was harshly criticizing Christian missionaries overseas for trying to change people of other cultures. In response to the criticism, Charles Darwin wrote a letter to the editor in favor of the missionaries. Darwin said that if a voyager was cast ashore on some uncharted island, he would wish that missionaries had been there first. Still, although Darwin recognized the civilizing power of Christianity, but he did not personally believe in Jesus as the Son of God and did not take the Bible as God's Word.

It's a tragedy to know the many benefits of faith in Christ and yet not trust Christ yourself. We live in a world that is far better than it would have been if Jesus had never come, but as Jesus himself once asked, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul?" The cultural benefits of Christ are only hints of the perfect new world he will bring when he comes again with power and glory. We will never enter that perfect world unless we turn to Christ in this world. Jesus says, "I am making everything new" (Revelation 21:5). But before you can forever enjoy everything made new, Christ must make *you* new.

The only way you can be made new is not first of all by trying to improve this or that aspect of the world but by repenting of your sins, giving up on your own ability to save yourself or change the world, and instead trust in Jesus' death to pay for your sins, count on his life to give you eternal life, seek his guidance to direct your conduct, and seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. And as Christ the world changer makes you new, he can also renew the world through you.

Much of modern culture is cutting itself off from the life of Christ. We think we can have compassion, freedom, and progress, and beauty without a connection with Christ and without the Bible's guidance. And it turns out that not every good thing in culture withers away the instant people cut themselves off from Christ. Cut flowers look lovely and lively for awhile before they start to wither. But the withering will eventually come. Where fewer people follow Christ, eventually sexual immorality rises, abortion increases, family life falters, economies are hampered by corruption, science and technology become dehumanizing and dangerous, art and literature get uglier. Some of this we see taking place already.

For cultural renewal and for personal salvation, we need Christ the world-changer. The world changer's kingdom is like a growing seed. For you to be part of that growth, his life must be in you. The world changer's kingdom is like yeast spreading through the loaf. For you to be a leavening influence on others, the yeast must be at work in you. Personal salvation and cultural transformation go together, and Christ is the source of both.