

FATHERLY CONCERN: A STUDY OF THE ANTE-NICENE CHURCH FATHERS WITH  
EMPHASIS ON CHRISTOLOGY, THE TRINITY, AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

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## **Abstract**

There is a common thread found in writings of the earliest Christian theologians. In the years leading up to the Council of Nicaea in 325 a substantial amount of Christian literature was produced. This paper will look at select writers from the Ante-Nicene period and focus on their Christology, their views on the Trinity, and their approach to Scripture. It will demonstrate that Christ's divinity was consistently taught and defended from the earliest days of Christianity. It will show that the concept of the Trinity was taught and defended even before the term was coined. Finally an analysis of these writers' use and views on Scripture will show that they considered it to be God's word and the final say in matters of the Christian life. This will be done through an examination of primary source material. Thought will be given on their literary characteristics and applications made to the life of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians.

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## Introduction

From the earliest days of Christianity, believers sought to preserve the teaching which Jesus and the apostles gave to them. Interaction with the inspired word of God, the world in which they lived, and challenges to the truth led followers of Jesus to put their thoughts down in writing. Believers today have no shortage of Christian material to choose from in their quest for greater biblical knowledge. New books are published claiming to reveal the “real” Jesus. Television programs claim new discoveries that will challenge everything Christians know about the Bible. One often overlooked source of material is the immense treasury of writings prepared by the earliest theologians, a group known collectively as the church fathers. Definitions and exclusions abound about which people ought to be included in this venerable group. The corpus of solid, orthodox material from the church fathers available to the Christian demands greater attention and appreciation.

What makes a church father? A church father is an orthodox writer within the Christian tradition from the first century up until the early medieval period. Historians refer to one group that holds particular importance and fascination known as the apostolic fathers. This is the first group of Christian writers after the apostolic period and is comprised of writers who either knew the apostles or were taught by those who knew them.

To call a particular church father “orthodox” usually refers to two things. They were in good standing with the bishop (often themselves) and the teachings of the church at large. Some men were orthodox at one point in their career but later slipped into heresy and were no longer considered orthodox by the church at large. Tertullian would be a good example of this, as he became a Montanist later in life. The other major criteria for orthodoxy involves the lifestyle and conduct of the person. Just as a person could be disavowed for false teaching, so too for improper living. An orthodox church father is one whose teaching and actions conformed to the sound teaching of Scripture.

We examine the writings of this group of believers in the same way we would any Christian literature. Remembering that their writings are not inspired, we evaluate their words and ideas according to the norm of Scripture. We must always avoid putting them onto a higher pedestal than they deserve. Their writings do not form doctrine, but they serve only as a witness to the doctrine of Scripture. We must also be careful not to put words in their mouths and make them say what we want them to say.

If they aren't inspired writers and can't establish doctrine, what is the purpose in studying the church fathers? For one, they provide the earliest witness to Christ and his teachings outside of the Scriptures themselves. This provides encouragement to the modern day believer who sees the continuity of the Christian message in their writings. They also provide an example for Christians today by their faith, patient suffering, and by pointing back to Scripture and to Christ himself.

This study examines three doctrines which the fathers uphold in their writings. These three doctrines are essential to the Christian faith and the proper understanding of God. They are Christology, the Trinity, and the authority of Scripture. Analysis of primary material from the fathers will demonstrate how they taught these doctrines. As the fathers have been speaking to the church for centuries, so here they will voice their teachings.

The primary focus of this paper will be the Ante-Nicene church fathers. They demonstrate that these doctrines were present and taught in the church before the Council of Nicaea and were not invented at that assembly. Nicaea attempted to clarify, to summarize, and to bring all of Christendom into using the same language and terms to describe these doctrines. Analysis of church fathers from before the Nicene period will prove this. Not every church father will be examined, but selected fathers were chosen to exemplify their time and circumstance. The Trinity is pervasive. The deity of Christ is extensive. The authority of Scripture is considered a given. Finally applications will be made which demonstrate that careful study of the church fathers is still beneficial today.

As with any subset of imperfect humans, all of the Ante-Nicene fathers possessed different strengths and weaknesses. A man might be strong in one area and weak in another. Some fathers write with more clarity than others. As with the interpretation of any literature, a reader must take great care in representing a writer's position from clear statements taken within their proper context. Misquoting, misrepresenting, and taking words out of context have no business within the study of the church fathers. Yet so many have fallen into this erroneous practice. Particularly during the medieval period, theologians searched the works of the church fathers for support of their own opinions. They would also try to connect their opponent with ancient heresies and heretics, whether the claim was valid or not. This misuse of the fathers is one reason why many Christians are hesitant to read them.

## **Literature Review/Conducting of Research**

Scholars have been interested in the church fathers throughout the course of history. Modern scholarship works to make the church fathers seem more human to the reader. One book that was very useful in this study was *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction* by Hubertus Drobner. This book is intended to be popular more than scholarly, but it still provides a starting point for the study of the church fathers. Drobner does a good job defining and explaining his terms from the outset. His definition of what makes a church father is the one incorporated in this study.

One resource for anyone interested in the study of the church fathers is Johannes Quasten's four volume *Patrology*. It is a classic in the field and even though it is somewhat dated, many other scholars will reference it at least in passing.

James Alexander's article "Interpretation of Scriptures in the ante-Nicene period: a brief conspectus." was very helpful in understanding the various schools of thought which existed among the church fathers. Some of his material extends beyond the scope of this study, but his treatment of the clash of philosophy between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria is worth reading.

One resource that proved useful for understanding the various heresies the church fathers fought against was David Wilhite's *The Gospel According to Heretics: Discovering Orthodoxy through Early Christological Conflicts*. He is very careful to treat the teachings of the heretics as objectively as possible. He laments the loss of most primary source material from these groups because their writings would be destroyed and rarely made it to modern times for evaluation. He draws lessons from the conflicts which a modern Christian can appreciate.

## **Luther on the Fathers**

Lutherans particularly have reason to be cautious when reading the church fathers because many have falsely believed Martin Luther was against the practice. Examination of Luther's writing provides a clearer picture of his actual views. Luther was a member of the medieval theological scene. He came to theological maturity in that atmosphere and was clearly influenced by it. For one thing, Luther's knowledge and grasp of the church fathers was far beyond the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian. Part of his training required him to read the fathers

extensively. When he speaks about a church father, he does so from personal knowledge of that particular theologian's writing. That must be kept in mind during the study of Luther's views on the church fathers.

Luther can speak very critically of the church fathers. In describing John Chrysostom, Luther acknowledges Chrysostom's skill as an orator while also claiming that “he taught without fruit.”<sup>1</sup> Such a critical remark demonstrates that a defining characteristic with which Luther evaluates church fathers is pastoral concern. Chrysostom was supposed to be preaching to God's people and expounding upon Holy Scripture, yet he lacked substance. He lacked what the people needed for spiritual nourishment. This shows that Luther was not uncritical in his evaluation of the church fathers. He was willing to acknowledge where a church father's words were beneficial, but placed them firmly below Scripture.

Luther had to defend himself against the charge that his teaching was innovating, that he was proposing new teachings and new doctrines over against what the church had always taught. Luther would appeal to the fathers to prove that he was not innovating at all. The charge of innovation was better laid against the papacy, and his purpose in reforming the church was to get back the orthodox teachings of the ancient church. Many errors had crept into the church during medieval times, teachings which cannot be found in the pages of Scripture. Luther appealed to the fathers, claiming that they agreed with his teaching over against that of the papacy.

## **Biblical Basis**

*So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament church, right from the time of the apostles, sought to hold onto the doctrines passed down from Jesus to his apostles and then recorded in Scripture. Christians still cling to Christ's teachings and search the Scriptures for the truth about their God. One of these truths found in Scripture is that Jesus is true God. There are several scriptural reasons why Christians believe this. For one, Jesus himself claimed he was God. When Jesus told the Jews, “before Abraham was born, I am,”<sup>3</sup> he was calling to mind the Old Testament name for God

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Tappert ed., *Luther's Works: American Edition* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967) 305.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the NIV 2011.

<sup>3</sup> John 8:58.

commonly denoted in the New International Version as “LORD” with capital letters. The immediate context of the verse shows the Jews preparing to stone Jesus for blasphemy. He was not mistaken. They did not hear him incorrectly or misinterpret his words. Even though the Jews did not believe his assertion, their reaction to his words corroborates the interpretation of Jesus' words as a claim to divinity.

Throughout the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is called God and given the same praise as God. John calls Jesus God in the first chapter of his gospel.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, the divine *logos* took on human flesh and dwelt among mankind. The divine *logos* also participated in creation since he was with God in the beginning. John writes his whole gospel under the presupposition that Jesus is in fact God. Jesus is also given the characteristics and attributes of God. He is eternal,<sup>5</sup> unchangeable,<sup>6</sup> and all-powerful.<sup>7</sup> The divinity of Jesus Christ is a firmly-established, biblical doctrine essential to the faith of all Christians.

The doctrine of the Trinity is an essential doctrine which the church fathers uphold consistently in their writings. While the word “Trinity” is absent from the pages of Scripture, the teaching is clearly there. Trinity is an ecclesiastical term which was developed to describe the teaching. Contrary to the concerns of some critics, the biblical doctrine of the Trinity does not diminish God's essential oneness. There are not three Gods but one. Christianity has always been a monotheistic religion and the biblical doctrine of the Trinity does not change this fact. There are many passages that speak about God's essential oneness. Deuteronomy 6:4 is often cited as proof, “Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The monotheism of the Jewish nation set them apart from the surrounding nations. The Lord's prohibitions in the Old Testament against idolatry also speak to this fact. Christians worship one God in three distinct persons.

Each person of the Trinity possesses the entirety of the divine essence. God describes himself in this way. There are many passages that speak about the Trinity, passages that ascribe personality to each member of the Trinity, that ascribe divine attributes to each member of the Trinity, and passages that ascribe divine worship and glory that only God deserves. The doctrine of the Trinity defies human reason. That's why God had to reveal this truth. Therefore it must be

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:1 ff.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 1:17.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13:8.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:18.

believed by faith. Christians take God at his word and believe it even while they don't fully understand it.

Another doctrine that the early church fathers had to wrestle with revolved around the authority of Scripture. What is the basis of the Christian faith? The answer is the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The church fathers constantly return to Scripture as the basis for their teaching. It is true, however, that the church fathers often appeal to those who went before them as a basis for teaching. Christians do the same thing today when they appeal to Christian authors in support of their teaching.

The foundation of all doctrine must rest on God's inspired Scripture. We have Jesus' own words affirming the canonicity of the Old Testament. Jesus said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses the Prophets and the Psalms."<sup>8</sup> He highlights the three major divisions of the Old Testament. Jesus established the canon of the New Testament by virtue of his apostles. He promised he would send the gift of the Holy Spirit to them.<sup>9</sup> Peter tells us that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Paul tells us that all Scripture is God-breathed and useful.<sup>11</sup> John calls his revelation "the revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place."<sup>12</sup> The writers of the New Testament also considered the Old Testament to be God's word. Paul writes that the Holy Spirit was speaking in Isaiah's prophecy.<sup>13</sup> Peter calls Paul's writing "Scripture."<sup>14</sup> Paul calls both the Old and the New Testaments "Scripture" in his first letter to Timothy.<sup>15</sup> Paul writes that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."<sup>16</sup> The holy Scriptures create the very faith they require to believe that they are from God. They are a means of grace in which God creates and sustains faith. They are self authenticating and therefore unlike any other literature including the literature of the church fathers themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 24:44.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 1:5.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Peter 1:21.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16.

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 1:1.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 28:25.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Peter 3:16.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 5:8.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 1:16.

## Prominent Heresies

When examining the writings of the earliest Christians, a group known as the apostolic fathers, as well as writers of the Ante-Nicene period, it is important to note the historical context in which they lived. The reader must take note of the various heresies with which they had to combat.

One such heresy was supersessionism, a broad term to describe the concept of replacement. One major proponent of this heresy, Marcion, taught that Christ replaced the God of the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup> Marcion was influential in Asia Minor during the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Marcion's concept of replacement led him to reject most of the Old Testament and three of the Gospels.<sup>18</sup> The only gospel he retained was Luke. He also rejected the book of Acts and portions of Paul's letters that contained references to the Old Testament. In response to this heresy the church fathers reaffirmed, as the Scriptures do, that Jesus is the God of the Old Testament. When Jesus said "before Abraham was I am" he was claiming equality with the God of Abraham.<sup>19</sup> Jesus did not replace the God of the Old Testament because he always was.

Another heresy the early church fathers struggled against was docetism. Functionally it serves as a subcategory of Gnosticism, which claimed that all flesh was evil and therefore Jesus could have only appeared to have a body. The implications of such a heresy were known by the church fathers and they strongly opposed it. The importance of the incarnation and Christ's redemptive work could not be denied. If Christ did not have flesh and blood, he could not die and shed his blood for the sins of all mankind.

One heresy, which will receive special attention because of its relation to Christology and the Trinity, is modalism. Sabellius was a major proponent of this heresy from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. He overemphasized the oneness of God at the expense of keeping the three persons distinct. He taught that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were manifestations of the one, singular God. This explanation is easier for human reason to understand, but it fails to uphold the personality and distinctiveness of the three persons.

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<sup>17</sup> Marcion is not the only one to espouse such a thought of replacement, the Mormon church would be a modern-day example, as they claim to be the restored church of Christ.

<sup>18</sup> David Wilhite, *The Gospel According to Heretics: Discovering Orthodoxy through Early Christological Conflicts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) 26.

<sup>19</sup> John 8:58

Finally, there was subordinationism which claimed that the Son was the first creation of the Father. The Son, although superior to every other creature, was inferior to God the Father. One such subordinationist was a man named Arius. This heresy will be discussed further in the discussion of the Council of Nicaea.

These heresies forced the church fathers to shape their writing and refine their exposition of biblical truth. If the writers of the Ante-Nicene period were inexact in their phraseology, it is because they had not fully experienced the crucible that is doctrinal controversy. They were often content with simply describing the Trinity or the deity of Christ using phrasing similar to that of Scripture.

The organization of this paper is chronological rather than synthetic. The church fathers are not arranged from least convincing to most convincing. They are arranged chronologically to show the development which took place over time. Development should be understood in the sense of a "fleshing out" of a doctrine, and not the invention of that doctrine. Subsequent generations enjoyed the benefit and insight of those who went before them and were able to build upon their interpretations, exegesis, and analysis.

The church fathers employed a number of genres in their writing. Stylistically the earliest church fathers preferred to write in the form of an epistle. This mirrored the style of the New Testament where the genre is predominant. The next genre to emerge was the apology, understood in the sense of a formal defense, made popular by Justin Martyr and other Greek apologists. They used this style to defend Christianity from charges such as atheism, cannibalism, and irrationalism. Another important genre during this period was the polemic. Many Christian authors opposed the teachings of heretics by name in their writing. Finally, some authors wrote positively about various doctrines in the form of a treatise in which they went into great detail about various doctrines. The last two are distinguished more by their tone and content. A polemic was often written in the form of a treatise and its distinguishing characteristic is the fact that it is written against something or condemns something. Other styles, a sermon for example, could also serve a polemic function.

## Christology

The first doctrine under examination is that of Christology. The early church was forced to deal with controversies around the person and nature of Christ. As subsequent generations became further removed from 1<sup>st</sup> century Jerusalem, debate arose concerning Christ, his characteristics, and his nature. Errors in Christology arose primarily from an overemphasis of one nature at the expense of the other. Yet throughout this debate and turmoil the church fathers affirmed Christ's deity and his humanity. They properly recognized that the true nature of Christ was of utmost importance. As the mediator of the new covenant, the Savior of all, Christ's full deity and full humanity must be preserved, since they are both taught in Scripture.

One source which will serve well as a starting point is the epistle known as 1 Clement. It was written by one of the first bishops of Rome only a few decades after the time of the apostles. While scholars debate the dating of 1 Clement, traditionally it has been placed as early as the last decade of the first century. However, some suggest it was composed as late as the second century. For the sake of this paper the traditional date is used. Clement implies in his references to Paul's writing that they took place at a time previous to his own. The evidence for the later date is strong enough to stand as plausible based upon internal evidence from the letter itself. Even assuming the latest plausible dating for 1 Clement, it is still an early witness to the New Testament and worth consideration.

Clement's statements on Christ are vague. He calls Christ "Lord," but he does not use the word "God." However, he exhorts his readers to follow the commandments of Christ and in the very next paragraph urges them to obey the commandments of God. They are both God's commandments and Christ's. There is also parallelism in Clement's use of the word "Lord." He refers to Jesus Christ as "Lord" and also uses the word by itself as shorthand for God.

The question remains why does he not explicitly call Jesus "God." One reason could be that he did not think Jesus was God. That he is placing Jesus below God the father which would make him a subordinationist. He considers Jesus to be greater than the angels, and clearly sees Jesus as God's instrument for the salvation of all people. It could be that his usage of phrases such as "our Lord Jesus Christ" are in fact references to Jesus' deity echoing Jesus' own words from John's Gospel. Jesus is Lord in the sense that Jesus is *Yaweh*, the God of the Old Testament and the creator of the world.

Clement speaks of Jesus being the one who illuminates people's hearts.<sup>20</sup> He also calls Jesus, “the scepter of the majesty of God,” which is a symbol of royal power.<sup>21</sup> Even though Clement's words could be misconstrued, his words show that he does not deny the deity of Christ. He upholds Christ as the Savior of all people and gives him glory higher than a mere angel. He calls Jesus his Lord. He looks to Jesus for salvation, and he looks to Jesus as the one who illuminates hearts.

Another influential writer, Ignatius of Antioch,<sup>22</sup> wrote a letter to his contemporary, Polycarp of Smyrna. Ignatius was the bishop at Antioch at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and probably suffered martyrdom during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan. In his closing remarks, Ignatius wrote, “I pray for your happiness for ever in our God, Jesus Christ, by whom continue ye in the unity and under the protection of God.”<sup>23</sup> He placed Jesus in apposition with God. Being “in Jesus” places you under the protection of God because Jesus is God. In his *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, Ignatius calls Jesus the son of God,<sup>24</sup> and states that he was spiritually united to the Father.<sup>25</sup> In this letter he is speaking out against those who would claim that Jesus did not come in the flesh and that he only appeared to be human. Ignatius reaffirms that Jesus was born to the virgin Mary and actually suffered in the flesh. He cites Jesus' words from the Ascension as proof that Jesus still has a body after his resurrection. Ignatius argues that if Jesus didn't have a body then how could the whole world see see him when he comes again.<sup>26</sup> Ignatius had no problem with arguing for the true human nature of Christ in the same letter in which he calls Jesus the Son of God. This shows that he believed Jesus was true God and true man. He didn't try to reconcile or explain how this is possible; but he simply affirms both in his writing.

Justin Martyr was an important voice for the Christian cause from the middle of the second century. He contended for the divine nature of Jesus in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, in

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<sup>20</sup> Clement *Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* 36.1

<sup>21</sup> Clement *Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* 16.1

<sup>22</sup> Among the extant writings of Ignatius there remain several different editions known simply as the short, long, and middle recensions. There is some debate among scholarship over which recension represents the authentic writing of Ignatius. The middle recension is considered the most likely one to represent the actual writing of Ignatius. Seven letters attributed to Ignatius are mentioned by Eusebius and are considered genuine. References from Ignatius will be limited to these seven letters.

<sup>23</sup> Ignatius *Epistle to Polycarp* 8.1

<sup>24</sup> Ignatius *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 1.1

<sup>25</sup> Ignatius *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 3.1

<sup>26</sup> Ignatius *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 3.1

which he debates with an imaginary Jew in an attempt to defend Christianity against Judaism. He argues that Christ is called God and Lord in the Psalms.<sup>27</sup> Jesus is also worshiped as God alone is to be worshiped. He references Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin birth where the child is called *Immanuel*.<sup>28</sup> Isaiah understood there was only one God. He was not advocating polytheism. This person of whom he prophesied could rightly be called “God with us.”

Irenaeus was born around the middle of the second century. He was made bishop of Lyons in his late thirties which indicates the level of respect he already commanded and the capability he possessed. In *Adversus Haereses*, “against heresies,” he called Jesus “our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King.”<sup>29</sup> He described Jesus as having the power and authority to judge people and calls the commandments “his commandments.”<sup>30</sup> Only God has the power to judge all people and to make commandments binding upon all people. Irenaeus acknowledged the incarnation of Christ and affirmed that Christ ascended in the flesh. Since Irenaeus was writing against the Gnostic Valentinus and combating the system of emanations which he proposed, Irenaeus needed to prove that Jesus Christ was unique.<sup>31</sup> Jesus was not just one of many emanations but was in fact the only-begotten Son of the Father. He asserted that Valentinus was misusing Scripture and importing biblical terms into his own system. He was not using the natural meaning of the words as they are found in Scripture.<sup>32</sup> Words like “truth” and “life” take on a new meaning in Valentinus' system. He claimed they are all separate emanations from the father.

Hippolytus was a church official in Rome during the first few decades of the third century. He held the position of “presbyter,” which was lower than the office of bishop, but it was still influential. He wrote against the teachings of a man named Noetus. Not much is known about Noetus or his teachings besides that which is contained in Hippolytus' writing.

Hippolytus called Jesus “the maker of all and illimitable.”<sup>33</sup> He referred to Jesus as the one who gives life to all and who is present everywhere. He described Jesus as containing within

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<sup>27</sup> Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 36.1

<sup>28</sup> Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 36.1

<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 1.10.1

<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 1.10.1

<sup>31</sup> The Gnostic concept of emanations is somewhat convoluted. God created himself and all things through a series of emanations

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 1.10.1

<sup>33</sup> Hippolytus *Discourse on the Holy Theophony* 2.1

himself the authority to judge all people.<sup>34</sup> These are all divine attributes which only God possesses. By ascribing these attributes to the person of Jesus, Hippolytus proclaimed that Jesus was God. Later he asserted that while Jesus was on earth he was not separated from the Father's bosom. Jesus did not cease to be God at his incarnation and was still intimately connected to the Father and the Holy Spirit during the entire time he dwelt on earth.<sup>35</sup>

Hippolytus deduced from Romans chapter 9 that Jesus is called God.<sup>36</sup> He is over all things, and even though he became a man, he did not cease to be God. Noetus' error was a failure to properly distinguish between the person of God the Father and the person of God the Son. His strict monotheism prevented him from acknowledging that Jesus is fully God and a distinct person of the Trinity. Noetus' position led him into patripassianism, the claim that God the Father was also born of the Virgin Mary, also suffered under Pontius Pilate, and also died on the cross. He overemphasized the oneness of God at the expense of the threeness of the Trinity. A Trinitarian Christian must hold these two principles in tension. They are at the heart of the mystery of the Trinity. Noetus erred on the one extreme in an attempt to conceptually understand the true nature of God. Unfortunately his attempt is flawed and fruitless because he contradicts the biblical truth of the Trinity. The Scriptures declare that God is three and one. Noetus mixed the divine natures until they are unrecognizable as two distinct persons. This may have served to ease his rational mind, but it fails to faithfully reflect the teachings of Scripture.

Novatian was a presbyter in Rome from the middle of the third century. He asserted that the Scriptures clearly describe Jesus as God.<sup>37</sup> Jesus was present before the creation of the world and assisted in its creation. Since Jesus is true God, he also has the right to judge all the living and the dead. Novatian also presented a strong argument for the dual nature of Christ. He argues that both Christ's human nature and his divine nature are necessary for him to be the Savior of the world.<sup>38</sup> He denounced anyone who upheld one of the two natures of Christ at the expense of the other. The blindness of unbelief cannot undo the truth about the two natures of Christ found in Scripture.

Little is known about the life of Methodius. He was an outspoken opponent of Origen and

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<sup>34</sup> Hippolytus *Discourse on the Holy Theophany* 3.1

<sup>35</sup> Hippolytus *Discourse on the Holy Theophony* 7.1

<sup>36</sup> Hippolytus *Against the Heresy of One Noetus* 2.1

<sup>37</sup> Novatian *De Trinitate* chapter 11 1

<sup>38</sup> Novatian *De Trinitate* chapter 11 1

might have been a bishop in Philippi. He died just a few years before the Council of Nicaea and explicitly stated that Jesus is God.<sup>39</sup> He is omnipotent, eternal, and sovereign. He is uncreated and without beginning or end. He adjured the heretic to never diminish the kingdom of Christ lest the kingdom of the Father is dishonored.<sup>40</sup> Methodius ascribed Jesus with the same divine attributes as God the Father. His inclusion serves as a final touchstone before Nicaea.

There is a consensus among the Ante-Nicene fathers about Jesus' deity. Whether they call him "Lord" or the "Son of God," it is clear these men believed and taught that Jesus was God. The defense of this truth motivated them to defend their faith in writing.

## **The Trinity**

The next doctrine under examination is that of the Trinity. When considering this doctrine it is important to remember that the New Testament is not a dogmatics textbook. It makes sense that it took time for Christian theologians to develop terminology specific to the nature of the Trinity. Specificity in doctrine is something that must be honed through years of debate and discussion and a thorough search of the Scriptures. God does not answer every question about the inner workings of the Trinity in Scripture. Any endeavor, whether by a church father or a modern theologian, to explain or exposit the Trinity must at its outset recognize the limitations of human reason to comprehend the Triune God. At the same time, the distinctions that theologians make about the Trinity can be helpful in defending the church against error, and teaching the church about their surpassingly great God. These distinctions do not settle the matter to the point of fully describing God so no further illumination is necessary. Because of the very nature of finite man, as opposed to an infinite God, people will always be lacking in their understanding of the Trinity. Even in heaven there will still be things that the creatures will not know about the Creator.<sup>41</sup> None of this stopped the Christian church, from the earliest days of the fathers all the way into modern times, from trying to understand the Triune God of the Bible.

The Apostles' worship of Jesus evidences the early church's understanding of the Trinity. The earliest baptismal formulae demonstrate this as well. It can also be seen from early Christian hymnody which ascribed divine glory and honor to the person of Jesus, as well as to the person

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<sup>39</sup> Methodius *Oration on the Psalms* 5.1

<sup>40</sup> Methodius *Oration on the Psalms* 5.1

<sup>41</sup> Consider 1 Peter 1:12 where angels long to know the details of the Holy Spirit's entire plan of salvation.

of the Holy Spirit. It was only later, after the dimming of memory, the passing of generations, and the rise of heresy, that the church fathers wrote with greater distinction and clarity about the Trinity.

Justin Martyr attempted to prove from Psalm 110 that the Holy Spirit calls some other person the Lord besides the maker of all things.<sup>42</sup> Justin Martyr used this term “maker of all things” to refer to the one true God whom the Jews would have recognized as the God of the Old Testament Scriptures. He wanted to equate Jesus Christ to the “maker of all things.” Even though his argument from the account of Sodom and Gomorrah leaves something to be desired, this section is important because Justin Martyr mentioned all three persons of the Trinity. He did not need to prove to a Jew that God the Father was God. They recognized him as the maker of all things, as the one true God who gave them the Scriptures, and who actually exists and rules all things. He needed only to prove that Jesus was also the maker of all things and equally deserving of being called both God and Lord. It is interesting to note that Justin Martyr for the most part assumed that the Holy Spirit is also God. He did not feel the same need to prove that the Holy Spirit is God. This can be explained by the historical context in which he was writing. Since he was writing to defend the deity of Christ over against Judaism, his only concern was to prove from Scripture, particularly the Old Testament that Jesus is God. There were many Jews who rejected the deity of Christ and rejected him as the Messiah of the Old Testament.

Justin Martyr in his dialogue with Trypho affirmed the unity of Scripture and maintained that Scripture cannot contradict itself. He wrote that when Scripture appears to contradict itself he was the one who had to yield to Scripture and admit that he does not understand.<sup>43</sup> In this section, Trypho attempted to trap him into admitting that Scripture contradicts itself. Trypho cited Isaiah where God refused to give his glory to anyone or anything else. Justin Martyr proved from that very section of Isaiah that God was not contradicting himself because Jesus is God and therefore does deserve the glory due to God alone. That was the whole thrust of Isaiah's prophecy. That was what made the Messiah so special. He was not just any prophet, or any servant, or any King, he was a person deserving God's divine glory.

Irenaeus mentioned that all three persons of the Trinity were present before the creation of the world and participated in the creation of the world. He made a reference to Old Testament

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<sup>42</sup> Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 56.1

<sup>43</sup> Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 65.2

prophecies which predicted the coming of God among men. He showed that God through the person of Jesus Christ allowed men to see him.<sup>44</sup> This calls to mind Jesus' words in the Gospel of John, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the father."<sup>45</sup> He referred to Jesus as the "word" and the Holy Spirit as the "wisdom" of God. He used words such as "by" and "through" to describe the Son and the Spirit's role in creation. Although he did not write as clearly as a modern Trinitarian would like, he made reference to three persons and yet affirmed there was only one God.

Hippolytus affirmed both the deity of Christ and the Trinity. Typical of this period, his writing was not as precise or clear as the writing from the time after Nicaea. It is obvious however that he was describing the Trinity. This section from his work *against the heresy of one Noetus* affirmed the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the virgin birth.

Behold, the word spoken by the prophet is thus made good, "I have raised Him up in righteousness." And in saying, "God is in thee," he referred to the mystery of the economy, because when the Word was made incarnate and became man, the Father was in the Son, and the Son in the Father, while the Son was living among men. This, therefore, was signified, brethren, that in reality the mystery of the economy by the Holy Ghost and the Virgin was this Word, constituting yet one Son to God. And it is not simply that I say this, but He Himself attests it who came down from heaven; for He speaketh thus: "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven." What then can he seek beside what is thus written?<sup>46</sup>

Here Hippolytus made reference to all three persons of the Trinity and even used the word "mystery" to describe it. Hippolytus used the word "economy" as a technical term to describe the inner workings of the Trinity.

Novatian wrote an entire treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity. In this treatise, *Concerning the Trinity*, he gave considerable attention to the Father and the Son and only devoted one chapter to the Holy Spirit. Considering his title, the imbalance in his writing might seem unusual, but it is a testament to the controversies which surrounded the first two persons of the Trinity. Simply put, Novatian did not have to write extensively on the Holy Spirit because the doctrine was not under attack. He clearly attributed the Holy Spirit as dwelling in Christ and

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<sup>44</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 4.2.1

<sup>45</sup> John 14:9

<sup>46</sup> Hippolytus *Against the Heresy of one Noetus* 4.4

speaking through the prophets. Novatian attested to the personality of the Holy Spirit, that he took on the form of a dove, that he placed the prophets in the church, that he orders and arranges gifts for the members of his church, all things that a distinct person would do. This treatment of the Holy Spirit is also consistent with Scripture since the Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity about which we know the least. Although a 21<sup>st</sup> century Trinitarian might prefer him to write more clearly on the subject, his emphasis and focus are consistent with both his historical context and Scripture.

Dionysius, who was Bishop of Rome around the middle of the third century, composed a treatise against adherents of Sabellianism and subordinationism. Those who followed the heresy of Sabellius claimed the persons of the Trinity were just different manifestations or forms of the one true God. According to them, the Father and the Son were not distinct persons. Subordinationism is a form of the Arian heresy which claimed that Jesus was less than the Father and was created by him. Not much of Dionysius' work is extant but some fragments have survived. From that which has survived, he firmly defended both the threeness of God and the oneness of God. He accuses Sabellius of preaching three Gods instead of one.<sup>47</sup> He claimed that a triad, or threeness, is preached by Scripture, but neither the Old or New Testament preaches three gods.<sup>48</sup>

Methodius used phrases very similar to the wording of Nicaea about a generation later. He claimed that the kingdom of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one even as their substance is one.<sup>49</sup> They are worthy of the same adoration and worship. He stated, “we worship the deity in three persons subsisting without being.”<sup>50</sup> He serves as a final touchstone before the Council of Nicaea. His words illustrate the development that has occurred concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Ante-Nicene Church fathers unanimously upheld the doctrine of the the Trinity. The real issue they had to struggle with dwelt in the realm of explaining and defining the doctrine. They had to struggle not to say too much or too little. They struggled at times with emphasizing one aspect or person of the Trinity over another. Through all this they proclaimed the triune God

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<sup>47</sup> Dionysius *Against The Sabellians* quoted in Athanasius *De Decretis Nicaeni Synodi* 26

<sup>48</sup> Dionysius *Against The Sabellians* quoted in Athanasius *De Decretis Nicaeni Synodi* 26

<sup>49</sup> Methodius *Oration on the Psalms* 5.1

<sup>50</sup> Methodius *Oration on the Psalms* 5.1

in their words and lives.

## **The Authority of Scripture**

The final doctrine this study will focus on is that of the authority of Scripture. Where should a theologian turn for the truth about God? For the Ante-Nicene fathers as well as Christians today, the answer is still Scripture.

For a while the writings of the apostolic fathers were considered almost canonical since they were written so closely to the time of the apostles. An examination of their writings reveals a different story. These men were attached to the apostles by either direct instruction from them or were taught by their disciples. None of them claimed inspiration. They were writing as Christian leaders to other Christians who needed guidance. And the source of their guidance came from Scripture. The predominance of Scripture quotations and allusions in the writing of the apostolic fathers demonstrates that they were turning to the same source as Christians today. This may be the reason why some early Christians thought they were canonical. Their early date and frequent use of the canonical Scriptures led some to ask, in the same spirit as the Jews asked John the Baptist whether he was the Christ, if their writing was Scripture.

One issue with which the church fathers had to wrestle was the proper method of biblical interpretation. This issue was complicated by geography and distance. While church fathers in the West adhered to a stricter interpretation based upon the consensus view of the church as a whole, the church in the East, particularly the school centered in Alexandria, favored an allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Both methods have weaknesses since both place too much authority into the hands of imperfect, error-prone human beings. The appeal to the authority of the church and the universality of a particular doctrine is effective as long as the church remains faithful to the truths of Scripture. Once error from within the church becomes accepted over biblical truth, this method becomes untenable. The appeal to ecclesiastical authority is only the first step. It is built upon the assumption that the teaching of the church is predominantly correct and accurate. The allegorical method also relies too much on subjective, human interpretation. The Scriptures become untethered from their natural setting and sense and are subjected to the imagination of the interpreter. The possibilities for interpretation from this method are only limited by the imaginative capacity of the interpreter. It would be an oversimplification to classify anyone writer any one location or anyone theological school to one

method of interpretation. Even the prince of allegory, Origen, still considered the simple meaning of the text to be one of the valid forms of interpretation. He then went on to expand on that simple meaning, but he still recognized that there was a literal meaning to the words of Scripture.

One evidence of the church father's belief in the authority of Scripture is the predominant reference to Scripture passages found within their writing. Another evidence is their incorporation of biblical phraseology and style in their writing. This is to be distinguished from Scripture reference and allusion because it is not used to explain or expound biblical truth, but merely is a reflection of the church father's extensive knowledge of the Scriptures. They were simply so steeped in the literature, expressions, and examples found upon the pages of Scripture that these expressions started to appear in their writing as well.

Clement quoted at length from chapter 53 of Isaiah. He acknowledged the Holy Spirit as the one speaking through Isaiah and considered Jesus Christ the fulfillment of Isaiah's words.<sup>51</sup> Clement has no problem with Isaiah's words applying to Jesus since he recognized the source of the prophecy.

Clement referenced Paul's letter to the Corinthians and claimed that Paul was writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This early and explicit reference to the doctrine of divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit serves to illustrate the gulf between the writings of the apostolic fathers and the inspired writers of the New Testament. Clement acknowledged the inspired nature of Paul's letter and considered it Scripture. This proves the doctrine of inspiration is not a product of the Reformation but rather an ancient doctrine attested within the pages of Scripture and the earliest Christian witnesses.

Clement considered God to be the author of Scripture through the Holy Spirit. He wrote, "the Lord of all things has himself declared,"<sup>52</sup> and then proceeds to quote from Scripture. Ignatius does the same thing in his letter to the Smyrnaeans.<sup>53</sup> He encouraged them to rather "give heed to the prophets, and above all, to the Gospel."<sup>54</sup> False teachers might try to lead them astray but they should listen to Scripture instead.

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<sup>51</sup> Clement *Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* 16.1

<sup>52</sup> Clement *Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* 8.1

<sup>53</sup> Ignatius *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 6.1

<sup>54</sup> Ignatius *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 7.1

Polycarp, in his letter to the Corinthians, urged them to resist false teaching by returning to Scripture which he characterized as “handed down to us from the beginning.”<sup>55</sup> He urged “obedience to the word of righteousness.”<sup>56</sup> Scripture is what Christians use to combat false teaching. He made frequent quotations and allusions to New Testament passages and considered them authoritative. He described false teachers as people who, “pervert the oracles of the Lord.”<sup>57</sup> He viewed the Lord as the author of Scripture. Given his early date he serves as a powerful witness to the early formation of the canon.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr made extensive use of the Old Testament in order to prove to Trypho that Jesus is the Messiah of the Old Testament. He made frequent use of the Psalms in this work, and interpreted them with a Christocentric hermeneutic. He also frequently quoted from Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah.

Irenaeus followed a logical progression of scriptural citation as he attempted to prove the deity of Christ. He reasoned from the Old Testament, then from the synoptic gospels, then from the Gospel of John and finally from the rest of the New Testament.<sup>58</sup> He equated Scripture with the very words of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Ghost, throughout the Old Testament Scriptures made mention of no other God or Lord save him who is the true God. Therefore neither with the Lord, nor the Holy Spirit, nor the apostles, have ever named as God, definitely and absolutely, him was not God, unless he were truly God, nor would they have named anyone, in his own person Lord except God the father ruling overall and his son who has received dominion from his father overall creation,<sup>59</sup>

Hippolytus exemplified proper principles of biblical interpretation as he refuted the claim that Jesus can only be God if he and God the Father are the same person. He considered the immediate context of the passage which Noetus quoted to support his false teaching, and proved that it does not say that which Noetus claimed. He even charged them with mutilating the Scriptures.<sup>60</sup> He stated that the Scriptures themselves speak what is right. He claimed that the proper way to refute such false teachers is to refute their improper interpretation of the passages

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<sup>55</sup> Polycarp *Epistle to the Phillipians* 7.1

<sup>56</sup> Polycarp *Epistle to the Phillipians* 8.1

<sup>57</sup> Polycarp *Epistle to the Phillipians* 7.1

<sup>58</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 3.6-12

<sup>59</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 3.6.1

<sup>60</sup> Hippolytus *Against the Heresy of one Noetus* 4.1

which they cite in defense of their heresy and to give the proper interpretation of the passages.<sup>61</sup> This shows that Hippolytus recognized the authority of Scripture to establish a point of doctrine. Both he and his opponents understood how important Scripture was in the discussion of theology. Hippolytus' charge against them was that they misinterpreted the Scriptures in order to put forth a doctrine that was not actually contained within Scripture. He realized what danger such a teaching could cause in the lives of the everyday Christian. He also realized that the average Christian might be led astray by false teachers since they appear to be quoting from Scripture. This is why he deemed it necessary to refute their interpretation of the Scripture passages. He knew what the Scriptures actually said about the deity of Christ and that Noetus would only be able to misquote and misinterpret Scripture passages in his attempt to prove otherwise.

Novatian equated the writings of Moses with the word of God. As he argued that the Christ is God, he cited Moses' words about the creation account from Genesis prove that only God was present at creation. He argued that since John's Gospel makes it very clear that the Word became flesh, and that the Word was with God in the beginning, Jesus must be God.<sup>62</sup> Novatian was looking at the Old Testament and the New Testament side-by-side and considering them equal. Both are Scripture and both are authoritative for the instruction of the Christian. He was looking at them as one, unified whole and his argument hinges on the authority of both Testaments. Moses established the fact that God was the only one present at creation, and John clearly establishes that Jesus was with God at creation. Novatian considered both true.

Dionysius of Rome considered Scripture to be "divine." He used a similar phrase five times in the short portion of his words quoted by Athanasius.<sup>63</sup> The entire thrust of his argument for both the preservation of the Trinity and the preservation of Christ as uncreated and fully God is based upon his understanding of Scripture. He accused the authors of the Sabellian heresy of missing the truth.<sup>64</sup> He considered God's Word to be truth and the heretics are missing or deliberately misconstruing it. This explains why he cares so much about refuting heresy. He views heresy as an attack on the truth found in Scripture, truth about his Savior which he has

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<sup>61</sup> Hippolytus *Against the Heresy of one Noetus* 4.1

<sup>62</sup> Novatian *De Trinitate* 11.1

<sup>63</sup> Dionysius *Against The Sabellians* quoted in Athanasius *De Decretis Nicaeni Synodi* 26

<sup>64</sup> Dionysius *Against The Sabellians* quoted in Athanasius *De Decretis Nicaeni Synodi* 26

come to believe.

The Ante-Nicene Fathers understood that Scripture is the source from which Christians derive their doctrine and practice. They consistently turned the Scriptures to find the answers to the various controversies they faced. They recognized that God was the author of Scripture and that it was reliable and trustworthy.

## **Nicaea**

The council at Nicaea did not end theological debate nor did it answer every question in the Christian Church. It did serve as watershed moment in the history of the Church. The theological discussion, debate, and controversy of the first few centuries required an answer.

In 325, approximately 300 Christian bishops convened at the city of Nicaea. The primary item on the agenda was a discussion of the Arian controversy. Arius contended that Jesus was less than the Father with respect to his divinity and eternity. Arius taught that God the Father was unique and he alone was truly eternal. Jesus was divine because the Father created him. Arius would claim that there was a time when the Son was not.

One of the results of this council was the production of a creed which would come to be known as the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed helped provide specific terminology and uniform expressions. The Son was described as being of the same “substance” as the father. It clarified that the Son was “begotten, not made” which was aimed against Arius' teaching that the Son was created by the Father. At the end of the original Nicene version several Arian phrases were anathematized. This creed was designed to defend the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity from Arius' teaching.

Arius' teaching was condemned and he was exiled to Illyricum along with two supporters. He was later allowed to return by Constantine. The controversy would continue decades more even after Arius' death in 336. The Nicene creed would be updated and expanded at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The creed commonly known as the “Nicene Creed” and recited in churches across the globe is actually this later creed.

The Council of Nicaea is the result of years of doctrinal controversy and development. The doctrine of the Trinity was practiced and taught by the Christian church long before Nicaea. The fact that some taught falsely about the Trinity does not negate the early and widespread nature of this doctrine. It was taught throughout the Church because it was taught in the Bible,

not because it squared with human reason. It would have been much easier for the Church to abandon this teaching in favor of one which made better sense human reason. Arius' problem was that he struggled with this doctrine. He struggled with the word “begotten” and could not see how the Son could be begotten of the Father and not created. The Church’s response, gathering together and affirming the truth of Scripture, set the tone for future generations.

## Other Early Witnesses

This section focuses on two individuals with significant influence on the Ante-Nicene period, but who don't fit the definition of a church father proposed in this study since they were both guilty of heretical views at some point in their careers. Tertullian and Origen were important voices and serve as early witnesses to the doctrines examined in this study. One could argue for their inclusion in the number of the church father and some scholars do include them. Regardless of whether you call them church fathers or not their work is worth inclusion in this study. Tertullian was from Carthage and he converted to Christianity as an adult. He was a prolific writer and often scathing in his struggle against heretics. He is best known for giving the church much of its terminology for Trinitarian theology.

In his *Adversus Praxeam*, “Against Praxeas,” Tertullian defended the Trinity from Praxeas' claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same person. Tertullian described the Trinity as a mystery and confirmed that all three persons are of one substance, condition, and power. He denied the charge that Trinitarians worship more than one God and claimed that the underlying unity of God did not detract from the Trinity but actually supported it.<sup>65</sup>

Even though he was trying to support the doctrine of the Trinity, some of Tertullian's illustrations and explanations which he used to support the doctrine of the Trinity were not great. He compared the relationship of the Father and the Son to roots and trunks of a tree. In his attempt to prove the essential unity between them, he used an expression that could be construed as partialism. Partialism was a heresy that considered each person of the the Trinity to be only part God. This heresy taught that all three persons of the Trinity together constitute God. He was not advocating partialism, but he did overstate his case.

Origen was from Africa and studied at the school in Alexandria. He is best know for his

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<sup>65</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeam*, 3.1.

allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture. His *De Principiis*, “On the Principles,” was perhaps the first attempt to systematize the Christian faith. Like Tertullian he wrote extensively and a significant amount of his work has survived to modern times.

In book one of his *De Principiis*, Origen examined each member of the Trinity separately. In his first chapter he tries to prove that God is spirit as opposed to body. While this might seem like an unusual place for him to begin his treatment of the Trinity, the point he's making is critical to his argument. Since God is a spiritual being he can not be confined to the same limitations mere humans have.

Some of his statements on Christ are beneficial. Perhaps counter-intuitively, he wrote more clearly on Christ in his chapter on the Holy Spirit than he did in his chapter on Christ. He sees the Trinity in the threefold blessings of the Old Testament.<sup>66</sup> In his chapter on Christ he struggled to explain the relationship between the Father and Son. The closest he came was his explanation about the eternal generation of the Son, “Because His generation is as eternal and everlasting as the brilliancy which is produced from the sun. For it is not by receiving the breath of life that He is made a Son, by any outward act, but by His own nature.”<sup>67</sup>

## **Analysis**

This next section explores some characteristics about the church fathers as literature gleaned over the course of this study.

The first characteristic is historical context. Situations differ across time and geography regardless of the century to which an author belongs. Culture, genre, education, controversy, politics, and personality all influence the final result of a church father's writing. Any analysis of the church fathers must remain anchored in the historical context in question. For example, criticizing Justin Martyr's vocabulary and terms because they do not adequately defend against an Arian interpretation of his Christology would be anachronistic and unreasonable. The Ante-Nicene church fathers, especially the apostolic fathers, should not be expected to speak as if they were present at Nicea. They provided the theological context for Nicea.

One characteristic of the church fathers before Nicea involves the high-context in which

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<sup>66</sup> Origen *De principiis* 1.3.

<sup>67</sup> Origen *De principiis* 1.2.

they are writing. This can be described as a tendency that assumes the reader is familiar with the basic teachings of the Christian church and with the controversies about which they are writing. This is not referring to the historical context, but the assumption of their audiences' knowledge on the part of the church fathers. Higher-context writing places more importance on each individual word. The reader's own background, culture, and Christian education fill in the blanks. Much of Scripture and religious literature in general is high-context. One exception would be outreach materials where a religious group is attempting to acquaint people to their teachings. This higher-context tendency becomes important when analyzing what the fathers do *not* say in their writing. For example in Novatian's treatise, *De Trinitate*, "About the Trinity," he spends considerable time expounding the nature of the first two persons of the Trinity, and includes very little about the Holy Spirit. This could lead someone to question Novatian's respect for the third person of the Trinity. If all three persons of the Trinity are equally deserving of honor, should they not deserve an equal amount of pages in a treatise concerning the Trinity? To come to such a conclusion based upon such an analysis of the structure of his treatise would be neither fair nor factual. The layout of his treatise owes more to the necessity brought on by the controversies in which he took part than some inferior opinion on the third person of the Trinity.

Another characteristic about the writings of the church fathers is consistency. They do not teach or write in the same way. They employ numerous literary styles and genres over the span of centuries. They employ different methods and figures of speech. They differ in ability and emphasis as they write. Yet underneath these different styles and genres doctrinal currents coalesce into a discernible picture. Certain doctrines rise to the top of their priority list and are found in the writings of Christians who lived hundreds or thousands of miles apart and years removed from each other.

There was doctrinal development from the second through the fourth century. Not that the church invented any doctrine, but rather that through the crucible of controversy and contention, the church becomes clearer in its language, terminology, and consistency of expression. The Church benefited from the teachings as well as the failures and mistakes of those who went before them. The challenge posed by heresy forced the church fathers to greater precision in their writing. It exposed weaknesses and issues that needed to be addressed.

A pastoral emphasis can be seen in the writings of the church fathers, particularly in the apostolic fathers. What was their motivation for writing volumes and filling libraries with their

labors? Why were they so determined to refute the false teachings of some? The reason is a pastoral concern for the faith of the Christians under their care. They didn't want false teaching, whether crass or subtle, to shipwreck the faith of their flock.

## Application

There are many reasons that make a study of the church fathers worthwhile for the modern Christian. For one, they provide an early witness to key doctrines of the Church. It can be encouraging to read what a church father wrote more than 1700 years ago and realize that he is teaching the same thing that you learned in Sunday school. They bear witness not only about Christology, or the Trinity, or Scripture, but many other important doctrines of the church. The witness that they provide supplements, but does not replace the witness of Scripture. Christians, including the church fathers, believe what the Bible teaches.

The church fathers support the early practice of infant baptism in the Christian church. Irenaeus speaks of infants who have been reborn in Christ.<sup>68</sup> Since Scripture calls baptism as “a washing of rebirth and renewal,”<sup>69</sup> Irenaeus is clearly referring to baptism. Cyprian sees no reason why “the mercy and Grace of God ought to be denied”<sup>70</sup> to anyone. Even Tertullian, who held some reservations about the practice of infant baptism, bears witness that the practice was common in the early church.<sup>71</sup>

The church fathers also support the real presence in the Lord's Supper. Although they would admit they could not fully understand how the miracle of the real presence was possible, they teach that Christ's body and blood are truly present in the sacrament. Justin Martyr points to the words of institution and claims that the bread and wine are “the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.”<sup>72</sup> The modern-day Christian can take the church father's example to heart, and simply take God at his word.

The true measure of a theologian remains his views on soteriology, namely how people are saved. A theologian must be clear on this issue. The basic message of the Bible reveals a God

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<sup>68</sup> Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* 2.22.4

<sup>69</sup> Titus 3:5

<sup>70</sup> Cyprian *Letter* 64.2

<sup>71</sup> Tertullian *Treatise on Baptism* 18.4

<sup>72</sup> Justin Martyr *1 Apology* 66.1

who is both just and gracious. The Bible reveals sin and its consequences, which God will address however he sees fit. As a just and holy God he cannot abide sin. As a loving God he set forth a plan of salvation which would definitively atone for sin. The Ante-Nicene church fathers pointed to Christ. They attributed the salvation of mankind to the merits of Christ. They excluded good works from the equation. They understood the natural depravity of man, and realize that Jesus was the only solution to it. That is why they so firmly and fiercely defended the truths of Scripture, because they were not willing to give up a single truth about their Savior. They recognized that Scripture was where they learned about what Jesus had done for them. For someone like Justin Martyr the message of Christ was worth defending with all of his intellect and even his life. They are witness to the powerful means of grace which can reform the sinful hearts of man and create such a faith that would face death rather than forsaking Jesus.

Another reason the modern-day Christian should study the church fathers is to be able to refute false teachers who claim the church fathers support their position. Many false teachers claim support from them and without proper knowledge the average Christian could be led astray by such claims.

There are several, potential avenues for a false teacher to claim support from the church fathers without threatening their orthodoxy. The first is to simply misquote the church father or take him out of context. This method could result in the church father seeming to say something completely opposite from his actual position. The only way to combat this is to know what the church fathers actually say. Another method would be to make an argument from silence. A false teacher may claim that a church father was opposed to something since he failed to mention or expressly state it. An example of this fallacy would be someone claiming that Irenaeus must have condoned abortion because he never condemned it. Finally someone could quote from a very ambiguous statement of a church father, and elevate this statement as typical of his position. Perhaps this statement could be interpreted as contradicting an established doctrine. If this statement is then used to prove a church father supports a false doctrine, while ignoring other, clearer statements, such a conclusion would be dubious at best

The issues the fathers wrestled with still exist today. As Solomon stated in Ecclesiastes “there is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>73</sup>The issues, controversies, and heresies with which the

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<sup>73</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9

fathers struggled still threaten the church today. Some deny the deity of Christ and others deny the Trinity. Many people claim that Jesus was just a good man who provided a moral example for others to follow.

One such group that denies the Trinity is a denomination known as the “Oneness Pentecostals.” This is a group, numbering as many as 20 million world-wide, emerged in the early twentieth century.<sup>74</sup> This group teaches a form of modalism very similar to that of Sabellius and other ancient modalists with which the church fathers fought. They teach that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all just modes or ways which God appears to people. They do not baptize using the traditional Trinitarian formula, but baptize into the name of Jesus Christ alone.

There are many today who deny the authority of Scripture. They have no concept of inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Higher critical views of Scripture resulted in many Christians doubting the reliability of the Bible. Being able to point to the testimony of so many church fathers over so many centuries who put their trust in Jesus and in his Word can be a powerful tool. This would be an apologetic use of the church fathers. The goal is to establish the continuity of the Christian faith.

## **Conclusion**

It can be demonstrated that the Christian writers of the Ante-Nicene period taught and believed in the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the authority of Scripture. Their writings are not always as precisely worded as writers after Nicaea, but they still bear witness to the ancient nature of these doctrines. These teachings were not an innovation of Nicaea. Hippolytus occasionally leaves something to be desired in his phraseology and even has some questionable statements. Justin Martyr often leans too much on his own reason to try to convince people of the rational nature of his faith and occasionally he errs in that manner and he overstates his point. Irenaeus has some wonderful passages speaking to the Trinity and the deity of Christ that are worth preserving. An interesting facet of all of these writers is that they speak of Scripture in such high terms. They reference Holy Spirit inspiration even if they do not always espouse the doctrine as clearly as someone from a later time.

The Ante-Nicene church fathers were many things. Some were prolific writers, others wrote very little. They held different positions and offices in the church. They were human and

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<sup>74</sup> David Reed, *In Jesus' Name* (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2008) 223.

subject to all the weaknesses and errors and shortcomings that plague humanity. But they were witnesses to their faith. They cherished this faith and even more so the object of their faith, Jesus. They were Christians. That's what drove them to defend the truth. That's what motivated them to write. They had fatherly concern.

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