

FORERUNNERS
OF THE
FAITH

Lesson 4



Contending for the Faith

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

John 15:18 – If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

2 Timothy 3:12 – Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

1 Peter 3:14–5 – Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.

HISTORIC ACCUSATIONS

Early Christians were accused of:

1. Atheism
2. Insurrection
3. Immorality
4. Cannibalism

HISTORIC ACCUSATIONS

- In response to these false rumors, a group of Christian writers called “apologists” wrote to defend the faith from outside attackers.
- The most well-known apologist was a man named Justin Martyr.

JUSTIN MARTYR

(c. 100–165)



JUSTIN MARTYR

- Embraced Christianity as the true philosophy
- Used the concept of the divine Logos to converse with those in Greek philosophy
- Important works include *Dialogue with Trypho* and two *Apologies*

JUSTIN MARTYR

First Apology, 67: 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 [pastor] in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers. →

JUSTIN MARTYR

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. →

JUSTIN MARTYR

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. →

JUSTIN MARTYR

But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. →

JUSTIN MARTYR

For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn; and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

(First Apology, 67, ~ AD 150)

JUSTIN MARTYR

- Started a training school in Rome.
- After debating a Roman philosopher named Crescens, Justin was denounced to authorities as a Christian.
- He was beheaded around the year 165.

CONTENDING
FOR THE TRUTH:

THE POLEMICISTS

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

The New Testament warns about the reality of false teachers:

Acts 20:29–30 – I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

Titus 1:9 – [An elder must hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

Jude 3 – Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

- From the earliest stages of church history, we see both the rise of false teachers (who seek to distort the truth) and the resolve of genuine believers (who are zealous to defend the truth).

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

- In response to the errors of false teaching, the church carefully articulated its own doctrinal convictions.
- Those theological convictions were grounded in the authority of Scripture; yet the articulation of those convictions was often clarified in the face of heretical attack.

ANCIENT HERESIES

THE EBIONITES

- **The Savior:** They denied the deity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the death of Jesus as an atonement for original sin; taught a form of adoptionism.
- **The Scriptures:** They rejected Paul's epistles and also held to a redacted version of the gospel of Matthew.
- **Salvation:** As descendants of the Judaizers, they insisted that the Mosaic Law was necessary for salvation and was, therefore, obligatory for all Christians.

THE GNOSTICS

- A diverse spectrum of groups that claimed to have access to the “secret knowledge” of salvation (enlightenment).
- They generally held that matter was evil (having been created by an evil demiurge), and that only the spiritual realm was good.
- Salvation included an escape from one’s physical body through ascension into the spiritual realm.

THE GNOSTICS

Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 85: What exactly did the Gnostics believe? Their myths seem so ridiculous to us today that we can scarcely believe anyone would ever have embraced them. But we must acknowledge that for many ancient people, Gnosticism offered an attractive alternative to orthodox Christianity.



THE GNOSTICS

(Litfin cont.): Spiritual seekers were drawn to its seeming intellectualism and mysterious insights into the cosmos. [For example,] the Valentinian Gnostics believed there was a heavenly “Fullness” which consisted of thirty angelic beings called Aeons. The Aeons always came in male-female pairs. . . .



THE GNOSTICS

(Litfin cont.): These conjugal pairs emitted lower Aeons, and the last of these emissions was Sophia (Wisdom). But Sophia became passionate, and wickedly longed for the highest Father apart from her own consort. Though she was eventually healed from her grievous action, her evil “Thought,” which had given rise to her sin, was cast out of the Fullness like an aborted fetus.



THE GNOSTICS

(Litfin cont.): This shapeless Thought took on a personified form named Mother Achamoth. She was in a hopeless state until the “Christ” came to her and enabled Achamoth to bring forth substances from within herself. One of the beings she brought forth was the Demiurge. He was the ignorant creator of the entire physical world in which we live.



THE GNOSTICS

(Litfin cont.): In many Gnostic accounts, the Demiurge was equated with Yahweh, the Jewish God of the Old Testament, who foolishly thought he was the one true God. Only the enlightened Gnostics “knew” he was actually a corrupted being, far inferior to the goddess Sophia. . . . In order to give secret wisdom to the spiritual Gnostics, the Demiurge is said to have given birth



THE GNOSTICS

(Litfin cont.): to a son who was filled with the spiritual seed of Mother Achamoth. This son was the “Christ” who passed through Mary without taking a body from her. He was just like water flowing through a tube. The Gnostics often said the “Christ” inhabited the body of the man Jesus of Nazareth, but his body was not made of real flesh. . . .



THE GNOSTICS

(Litfin cont.): The docetic Christ who possessed the illusion of a body came into the world to teach spiritual precepts that only the enlightened Gnostics would be able to comprehend. Through the purging action of his revealed knowledge, the Gnostics would eventually make their way up into the Fullness as purified spirits.

THE GNOSTICS

- **The Savior:** They denied both the full humanity and the unique deity of Jesus Christ.
- **The Scriptures:** Created their own scriptures, including the so-called “Gnostic Gospels.” These writings date from the 2nd to the 4th centuries.
- **Salvation:** Generally portrayed as ascension to the spiritual realm through gnostic enlightenment.



IRENÆUS
(c. 130–202)



Wrote a 5-volume work
Against Heresies

Noted that Scripture is
the “pillar and ground of
our faith”

Martyred in France
around the year 200

MARCIONISM

- **The Savior:** Taught that the God of the Old Testament was actually an evil demiurge who created the material universe. Christ came to save people from that God.
- **The Scriptures:** Rejected all of the NT except for 10 of Paul's epistles and a redacted version of Luke's gospel.
- **Salvation:** Marcion's "gospel" rejected a biblical understanding of sin, promoted antinomianism, and denied the hope of a physical resurrection.

MANICHAISM

- **The Savior:** Evil caused by the force of darkness (Satan) fighting against the force of good (God). Jesus sent to awaken humans to the inner light inside them.
- **The Scriptures:** Mani wrote six sacred books that contained the teachings of Manichaeism.
- **Salvation:** Salvation came from identifying oneself with the good soul of light and not the evil body of darkness.

MONARCHISM

- Limited the Godhead to one person.
- **Adoptionism** taught that God was so impressed with Jesus that He adopted Him as His Son (at His baptism or ascension).
- **Modalism** taught that God manifested Himself in the mode of the Father in the Old Testament, in the mode of the Son during Jesus' earthly ministry, and in the mode of the Holy Spirit during the church age.



TERTULLIAN

(c. 155–240)



From Carthage

Lawyer by training

Father of Latin Theology

Opposed heresies like
Modalism



Coined the term
“Trinity”

Opposed Greek
philosophy

Defected to
Montanism at the end
of his life

MONTANISM

- The “New Prophecy” was advocated by Montanus and two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla, who claimed the Holy Spirit was giving new revelation to the church through them.
- They insisted on a strict form of asceticism, and taught that the world was about to end.
- Their movement was characterized by ecstatic “charismatic” phenomena, like prophecy and dreams.

MONTANISM

- They were rejected by the mainstream church because:
 1. The church was suspicious of their ecstatic behavior and extreme asceticism.
 2. By declaring himself to be the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit, Montanus elevated himself to a position of authority that challenged the authority of Scripture.

MONTANISM

- They were rejected by the mainstream church because:
 3. Many of the predictive prophecies made by the Montantists did not come to pass.
 4. Montanist prophets were seemingly “taken over” or “possessed” by the spirit through which they prophesied. They no longer exhibited self-control.

MONTANISM

- They were rejected by the mainstream church because:
 5. The Montanists condemned any Christian (as being carnal) who refused to accept their prophecies as true.
 6. Some Montanists embraced modalism.

Cf. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 109–110



ORIGEN

(c. 184–253)



From Alexandria

Promoted an allegorical
hermeneutic centering
on Christ

Organized the first
systematic approach to
theology in *On the First
Principles*



Taught some strange doctrines, like annihilationism and the pre-existence of the soul

In later history, his teachings (especially related to subordinationism) were denounced as heretical

ADDITIONAL HERESIES

- Novatianism and Donatism (3rd/4th centuries)
 - Should those who denied Christ be allowed back into the church?
- Arianism (4th century) – Is the Son of God equal to the Father?

CYPRIAN

(c. 200–258)



Responded to the
Novatianist crisis

Emphasized the unity
of the church

Taught that one
cannot have God as
his Father, who does
not have the true
church as his mother



ADDITIONAL HERESIES

- Pelagianism (early 5th century) – Are sinners born with a depraved nature? Is salvation wholly by grace or is it possible to gain heaven by good works?
- Nestorianism/Eutychianism (5th century) – How do the two natures of Christ relate to one another?

JUDE 3-4

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

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