



The third century AD saw much turmoil as Anti-Christ continued his persecution of believers in Jesus. The Jews were largely left alone within the Roman Empire even though they did not engage in emperor worship and the worship of the Roman Pantheon. Christians who did not submit to the pagan worship of Rome did not escape so easily. Anti-Christ busied himself with trying to stamp out this ever-growing faith in Christ among the pagan populations of the world. The rest of the nations remained largely enslaved to their heathen gods and continued to war with one another.

Numerous successions to the emperor's throne in Rome ended with murder, several by the emperors' own troops due to discontent with defeats or other causes.

Under the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (146-211), the third century began with severe persecution of Christians.¹ Upholding his predecessors' earlier rulings prohibiting conversion to Christianity, Severus continued the tactic of attacking the leadership of the growing faith community. Christianity's widespread departure from a plurality of elders within the assemblies to the election of primary authorities called "bishops" made it easier for the anti-Christ forces of Rome to target the assemblies within the empire.

Some of those bishops had to flee to avoid capture as persecution under Severus reached Egypt. This illustrates a major problem with the clergy-laity system under which the vast majority of assemblies called "churches" operate: strike the shepherd, and the sheep are scattered. Anti-Christ knows well how to employ this tactic.

All departures from the truth of God's Word are anti-Christ in nature. In this case, Anti-Christ fomented the clergy-laity model, then used it to weaken the assemblies by attacking the clergy. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Christians living under clergy-laity systems throughout the centuries have not recognized the unscriptural nature of that model. Most Christians continue

¹ The word "severe" comes from the Latin, *severus*, coinciding with the name of this Roman emperor. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* says it possibly combines two Latin words, *se vero*, "without kindness."

to subject themselves to it. Even today, wherever the faith is attacked the first to suffer are the clergy.

Those who recognize this chink in the armor of Christianity lament the persecution of pastors and other clergymen, and we must admire them for their willingness to suffer for the faith. Many have paid the ultimate price to protect the Lord's flocks over which they took charge. In some countries devout men take leadership fully aware that they will be the primary targets for persecution. In spite of the unscriptural nature of the clergy-laity system, it's very likely that the Lord has allowed that system to exist in order to protect the congregations at large even though it means suffering by their pastors.

Yet the nobility of such leaders does not fully offset the problems created by the clergy-laity system. It was bound to devolve into authoritarianism simply because of the sin nature of men who seek power over others, and the natural tendency of the average person to look for leadership from others rather than rely upon the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth.

Upon the death of the original apostles, the Anti-Christ saw the opportunity for inroads into leadership over believers in Christ. There was no longer a central authority to which they could go for instruction, and copies of the Gospels and letters they left behind were few and far between. The vast majority of believers were from among the poor and illiterate. In the minds of many the faith was ill-defined. This created fertile ground for men of wealth and education to gain ascendancy within the assemblies and to establish an ungodly authoritarianism. The third century saw strong growth of that authoritarianism as power over the assemblies within the Roman Empire became more and more centralized.

The question arises why the Lord would allow His sheep to come under that authoritarianism. As we continue in this series (if the Lord is willing) we will find that, in spite of the evils that came from it, the Lord used it to accomplish many of His purposes. We must not forget that the Lord uses evil to test His people, and that from the beginning of man's history He has

always retained a small remnant who remained true to His Word and who will inherit His coming Kingdom on the earth.

Just as the Jews fell victim to the religious leaders who usurped power over them, yet a remnant remained, those who have called themselves Christians over the past two thousand years have largely fallen victim to the religious leaders who have usurped power over them. Yet a remnant has remained, and will remain until the Lord returns.

The Jews fell victim to a religious system called “Judaism”—a melding of pagan traditions and the Hebrew Scriptures; Christians fell victim to a religious system called “Christianity”—a melding of Greek pagan philosophy with the writings of the apostles, and with a smaller reliance on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Greek philosophy began to be melded with Scripture to some degree even during the first century, continuing through the second century. The third century saw the Hellenizing of the faith become more aggressive to the point of changing significantly the way in which Christians would from then on understand much of Scripture. In attempts to distance the Body of Christ from its Hebrew roots, partly as a response to the Judaizing of the faith by those insisting on placing it back under the Mosaic Law, some of the bishops began to instill Greek elements of philosophy into their teachings. These bishops became known as “the Church Fathers”² who developed a new discipline based on the integration of Greek philosophy with faith. That new discipline became known as “theology,” and its educated proponents were called “theologians.” It wasn’t long before the theologians became more authoritative in the minds of Christians than the original apostles had been in their day.

Theology is, and has always been, largely anti-Christ because, due to the influence of the “Church Fathers,” it is based mostly on the Greek and Latin philosophies integrated into the institutions that collectively became known as “the Church.” As well, there have developed over the centuries various schools of theology that are at odds with one another (and with Scripture) in many respects. Theologians and clergy learn specific religious traditions according to the particular school of theology under which they study. Each school of theology paints the faith in the light of the theological philosophy that guides it. Anti-Christ has developed many schools of Christian theology started by, and attended by, people whose noble intentions are misdirected into belief systems that pervert Scripture to a lesser or greater degree.

Space does not allow for exhaustive treatment of the subject, so in this installment of our series on the history of Anti-Christ we will deal only briefly with those theologians and Church

Fathers whose influence spanned the third century. I suggest our readers delve further into this subject on their own in order to understand some of the Greek and Latin philosophy that has influenced the teachers who, in turn, may have influenced them. We will see how subtly Anti-Christ has perverted the religious thinking of Christians during that time and afterward.

I must state that although I am focusing on the anti-Christ aspects of these “Church Fathers,” not everything they taught was error. In some cases they came to the defense of some crucial doctrines of the faith, and some paid the ultimate price of martyrdom for their faith. Yet in spite of the noble character displayed in some cases, we cannot ignore the truth that these Church Fathers integrated Greek and Latin philosophy into their teachings, resulting in confusion and the diminishing of the true Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus commanded His disciples to proclaim. That philosophical integrationism would spawn the great apostasy known as Roman Catholicism.

This was also a time when power struggles increased among the newly formed clergy class. Even before Constantine would later solidify the central authority of the churches in Rome, the bishop of Rome was gaining ascendancy as the primary bishop within the Roman Empire, and was even referred to as “the pope,” or “father” of all the faithful. Yet we find that the real power over Christian thought came from outside of Rome as the Church Fathers developed a hybrid pagan/Christian belief system.

Most came from Egypt, which has historically been one of Israel’s greatest enemies. This fact may have played a large part in the developing anti-Semitism among early believers.

THE GREEK FATHERS

Although those considered among the Greek “Church Fathers” were not truly Greek, they wrote in Greek and were influenced by Greek philosophy which they melded with their understanding of Scripture. Short treatises on the two Greek Fathers of the third century follow.

Clement of Alexandria

Titus Flavius Clemens (150-215?) was the second known leader of the catechetical school of Alexandria in Egypt. His birthplace is unknown, but he was the son of wealthy pagans. He was foremost in synthesizing Greek philosophy with Christian teachings, and attempted to mediate Gnostics and Christians. A devotee of Plato, Clement developed a form of Christian Platonism, suggesting that the goal of Christian life is deification, identifying with Plato’s idea of assimilation into God. Having come from a wealthy pagan upbringing, Clement referenced thousands of quotations from pagan sources in his theological writings.

Although Clement wrote most of his theological treatises during the latter part of the second century, his doctrines became most accepted during the third century as his students promoted them in attempts to further define the faith according to the anti-Christ Greek philosophical school of thought.

Origen

One of Clement’s most famous students was Origen Adamantius (184?-254?), an Alexandrian scholar and theologian,

² The title “Church Fathers” is apt because these men begat the institutionalism that formed the basis for “the Church” (Gr., *kyriake oikia*: “the Lord’s House”), as opposed to the true *ecclesia* (the called out, or assembly of believers). God does not dwell in temples (church buildings and “sanctuaries”) made by hands (Acts 7:48; 17:24), but in the bodies of His called out people. The only true Father of the Body of Christ is our Heavenly Father, although Jesus could be called the Father of the New Covenant (this could be one reason He is called “the Everlasting Father” in Isaiah 9:6). If any men were to be called the “Fathers of the Faith,” as opposed to “Fathers of the Church,” they would have to be the original apostles who walked with the Lord, not these come-lately philosophical integrationists. However, because “the Church” refers to the institutionalization of the faith and to the buildings that house them, it’s not altogether inaccurate to call these men “Church Fathers.”

another of the Church Fathers from the Greek school who was Egyptian by birth, but to Christian parents. His father, Leonides, was a man of means, but when he was martyred under the persecution of Severus, his family became impoverished. Origen came under the protection of a wealthy woman for a time, and was able to muster some possessions including an extensive library of Greek philosophy.

Origen is considered the first systematic theologian and philosopher of the Christian Church. In 203 Origen succeeded Clement as leader of the catechetical school of Alexandria. Among other theological/philosophical writings, Origen wrote *De Principiis* (*On First Principles*), what some consider the seminal work of Christian Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism developed from Hellenistic syncretism and spawned movements such as Gnosticism and Hermeticism. Yet a dichotomy existed in that Origen opposed Gnosticism as a philosophy. He did, however, admire Gnosticism's system for reaching others with one's philosophy.

Hermeticism is the basis for much Western esoteric tradition, incorporating three primary disciplines: alchemy, astrology (the operation of the Moon), and Theurgy (the operation of the stars). Neoplatonism can be found as an undercurrent in such occult traditions as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, both of which have ties to ancient Christianity through the Hellenization of the faith.

So although Origen did take a strong stand for the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and opposed much pagan thought, his pagan philosophical background influenced much of his thinking in producing his syncretistic melding of Scripture with pagan philosophy.

Origen taught the preexistence of souls, and that, in the end, all beings, including perhaps even Satan, will be reconciled to God. However, his position on this belief (called *apokatastasis*—"restitution") seemed to vary in different writings. In some cases he stated strongly a case for universalism; in other cases he stated just as strongly that only those who choose God and live according to the virtues of God will enter into Heaven.

Origen's *On First Principles* begins by laying the basis for his understanding of a divine hierarchical triad, or "Trinity." Briefly, Origen posits that the God and Father, who holds the universe together, is superior to all beings; the Son is less than the Father but superior to all other creatures; the Holy Spirit is still less than the Son and lives only within the saints. This theory, called subordinationism, asserts that the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to God the Father not only in position, but in being and nature. The difference between Origen's theory and that of Arianism is that Origen believed that the Son and the Holy Spirit emanated from the Father, and Arianism considered the Son to be a created being. The dispute was settled in the fourth century with the doctrine of the Trinity, which we will address in the next installment of this series.

Origen adopted a rigid ascetic lifestyle, no doubt influenced by the asceticism of various Greek religious sects that demanded purity of life for priests who would offer sacrifices to their gods. According to Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, Origen's asceticism was so severe that he had himself castrated in keeping

with a literal application of Matthew 19:12, which states that there are some who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The asceticism of early Christianity, adapted from Greek and other forms of asceticism, formed the basis for the establishment of monastic communities, and the Roman Catholic religious orders of priests and nuns which would come later.

Other Greek Fathers would be influential during the fourth through eighth centuries in developing Christian doctrine and combating heresies (and perceived heresies) that would arise as struggles for supremacy over an increasingly centralized "church" ensued.

THE LATIN FATHERS

The Latin Fathers are early Christian theologians who wrote in Latin. They continued the clergy-laity model and worked to refine it. Although called the Latin Fathers, their philosophical education was largely based on the Greek tradition, and further contributed to the Hellenization of the faith.

Tertullian

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 225), the son of a Roman centurion, was converted to Christianity a few years prior to the beginning of the third century. He wrote prolifically on theology and apologetics, and promoted asceticism in line with many of the Church Fathers' views on the evil nature of the physical realm, particularly man's flesh. Although Tertullian's and others' understanding of the fallen nature of man was correct, their adoption of asceticism was an overreaction, and intruded greatly on the individual believer's freedom in Christ.

In keeping with his moral rigorism and stand against worldliness, in his later life Tertullian joined the Montanists, a sect that engaged in mystical practices and alleged prophetic utterances by adherents while in a trance (see Part XVII of this series).

Despite his shortcomings Tertullian offered strong resistance to philosophical integrationism. In his writing on *Heretics*, he correctly stated that "philosophy is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and dispensation of God." Charging that heresies are instigated by philosophy, he asked what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, and what the Academy has to do with the Church.

Because of this he has been falsely charged over the centuries as epitomizing the "anti-intellectualism" of the early Church, this in spite of being highly intellectual himself. This charge is an example of how the anti-Christ spirit within the churches has consistently maligned those who object to the influences of the world's philosophies within the Body of Christ.

Yet in spite of his polemic against Greek philosophy Tertullian did integrate Greek thought into his teachings. Thus he represents some of the best and some of the worst among the theologians that arose during the early centuries of faith in Jesus Christ.

Cyprian of Carthage

Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus was born of pagan parents sometime during the early third century. He was known as a

prominent trial lawyer and teacher of rhetoric after the Greek philosophical schools. In the early days of his conversion to Christianity Cyprian was influenced by the writings of Tertullian, prompting him to write *Epistola ad Donatum de gratia Dei* ("Letter to Donatus concerning God's Grace") and the *Testimoniorum adversus Judaeos* ("A Testimony against the Jews"). An apology against the Hebrew roots of the faith, this latter work fueled the anti-Semitism that festered under the continued influence of the Anti-Christ.

Another ploy of Anti-Christ has been to place new converts in positions of authority over the saints. In this case, Cyprian, who was baptized sometime between 245 and 248, was "ordained" a deacon, and soon after that he was "ordained" a presbyter. Sometime between July 248 and April 249 he was chosen bishop of Carthage.

Cyprian's essay, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, was an appeal for unity among Christians and for the importance of bishops to ensure that unity. Although the term "Catholic" at that time did not refer to the institution later formed under Constantine, but merely meant "Universal," Cyprian's idea of unity under the bishops contributed to the increasing move toward centralized institutional authority, with the bishop of Rome holding supremacy. Cyprian offered arguments both for and against such papal authority.

Due to the persecution of Christians within the Roman Empire at the time, many fell away and became known as *lapsi* ("the lapsed"). As many of them asked to be received back into fellowship Cyprian insisted that they demonstrate earnest repentance of their failure. This met with much opposition among the more liberal clergy who were eager to receive them without conditions.

Cyprian himself had fled Carthage to avoid having to either make sacrifice to the emperor or take a public stand against the edict to do so under the Decian persecution. However, he later would die a martyr.

THE DESERT FATHERS

During the third century communities comprised of Christian hermits, ascetics, monks, and women committed to asceticism congregated in the deserts of Egypt. The more prominent of the men who formed and led these communities came to be known as the Desert Fathers. The communities formed by and around these men were the beginnings of monasticism within Christianity. The women formed communities of separation, eventually coming to be known as "nuns."

Although monasticism seems a pious endeavor for holiness, the end result is to cloister Christians away from the general population where they can have little or no influence in spreading the Gospel. This is another of Anti-Christ's ploys to disrupt the Great Commission. On the other hand, monasticism did provide the means by which the Scriptures would be copied and preserved over the centuries, demonstrating how God can use anything, even those things inspired by the anti-Christ spirit, to accomplish His purposes.

Paul of Thebes

Not much is known of this Paul, but legend has it that as a young man he fled to the desert wilderness during the persecu-

tion of Christians by Decius and Valerianus around AD 250. He is said to have lived in a desert cave for almost one hundred years. Although Paul of Thebes is not numbered among the Desert Fathers, his influence on Anthony the Great resulted in the creation of the desert communities, among which Anthony was most prominent. It is said that Anthony the Great visited Paul of Thebes to learn from him. But Paul's self-imposed exile to the desert was not for ascetic reasons as much as it was to avoid persecution, at least initially.

Anthony the Great

What is known of Anthony the Great (ca. 251-356) is found in the *Life of Anthony*, written in Greek around AD 360 by Athanasius of Alexandria. Through Latin translations of the *Life of Anthony* the concept of monasticism spread throughout Western Europe during the fourth century and afterward.

Although there were many ascetics before him, Anthony was considered the first known ascetic to go into the wilderness. Around the age of 19 Anthony heard a sermon on Matthew 19:21, stating that perfection could be achieved by selling all of one's possessions, giving the money to the poor, and following Christ. Around the age of 34 he made the decision to take Jesus' words literally to mean that he should live in solitude, or at least away from the mainstream population. He gave away some of his family's estate to neighbors, sold the rest, and gave the proceeds to the poor. He then submitted himself as a disciple to a local hermit.

Anthony became known as "Father of Monasticism," which wasn't truly accurate because Christian monasticism was already being practiced in the Egyptian deserts by ascetics who lived on the outskirts of cities. But Anthony was known to be one of the first ascetics to live away from the cities, cut off completely from civilization.

Athanasius credits Anthony with suffering persecution directly by Satan, even to the point of being beaten into unconsciousness. Eventually he moved farther into the desert, living in an abandoned Roman fort for some twenty years.

Wishing to become a martyr, he went in 311 to Alexandria and visited those imprisoned for their faith in Christ. Refusing the threats of the governor who ordered him not to appear in the city, Anthony argued with him publicly, hoping to be tortured and martyred for his faith, but the governor did not oblige him.

He then returned to his desert refuge in the old Roman fort where he taught those who came to learn from him. But because these visits pressed upon his time for worship he moved even farther into the Eastern desert of Egypt.

Again we see how a devout believer might be deceived into thinking that solitude is the ideal life for believers in Jesus rather than living and ministering to the lost wherever one may be. Anti-Christ used this pious man to teach others how to shrink from the commandment of the Lord to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the lost. Indeed, Anthony is reported to have availed himself only to those who were spiritually disposed, leaving ministry to the lost to others.

Other Desert Fathers would follow Anthony, but the more prominent of them would be active during the fourth century along with certain Desert Mothers (women who lived ascetic lives in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria).

It was from the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers that ecstatic experiences, contemplative prayer, and other forms of mysticism would become central to the future institutional church that became Roman Catholicism.

It is probably no coincidence that the earliest of these Church Fathers strove to remove the faith from its Hebrew roots.

Many of the Church Fathers who gained ascendancy over the assemblies rejected the idea that Jesus will one day return to establish His millennial Kingdom on the earth and again gather Israel in peace to the Promised Land. They saw the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures as nullified because Israel rejected her Messiah. The only writing of the apostles that details the fulfillment of those promises is the Book of Revelation. But because the Church Fathers largely rejected the millennial Kingdom, they deemed the Book of Revelation too cryptic to understand (as if God gave His Word with the intent that no one understand it—at least no one outside the priests of the hybrid religion of Christianity).

As anti-Semitism grew among the developing clergy class, the “Church” became the fulfillment of the promise—the Kingdom of God on earth, destined to rule the world with a rod of iron. Anti-Christ was setting the stage for centuries of bloodshed at the hands of “the Church” which would soon become consolidated under the bishop of Rome. The military might of Rome would be the instrument through which the rod of iron would be administered.

The third century closed with the reign of Gaius Aurelius Valerius (Diocletian [244-311]), who would abdicate voluntarily in 305.

The most significant birth during the third century would be that of Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus (272-337), who would come to be known as Constantine the Great.