

## **Learning from the Church Fathers (10) Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian** (c. 160 to 240 A.D.) (Part 1 & 2) The Father of Western Christianity

Tertullian was born about 160 A.D. in Carthage in what is now modern Tunisia and Algeria. His father was an officer in the Roman army with a corresponding societal standing and a good income. In his youth, he was surrounded by the household gods or deities of Rome. His father provided him with a good education. He studied rhetoric, the poets, and philosophy in Carthage and then went to Rome where he read law. We may well believe that he was one of the most distinguished lawyers in the Roman empire. He was also a prolific writer, a man of immense learning, and a born debater. His biting wit was unmatched by the church fathers.

When Tertullian was converted, he turned his genius for debate and argument to the service of the church. He sometimes wrote in Latin and is regarded as the first of the Latin fathers. He was peculiarly apt at pithy sayings, the famous of which is "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In theology and apologetics, Tertullian may be called the father of Western Christianity. He set the concepts of Scripture in new language, and much of it became the norm in the theological discussions of the Western church. Yet, his work is also still important for our knowledge of the time, society, culture, and theology of North Africa.

### **Jerusalem versus Athens**

Tertullian rejected any accommodation between philosophy and the gospel. Philosophy, he argued, was pagan in its outlook, and its use in theology could only lead to heresy within the church. He insisted that the Christian "will have nothing to do with pagan literature and teaching, which is perverted in its best results." He was the unrelenting foe of any reconciliation between Christ and the traditions of an older world. He argued that true wisdom is to be gauged, not by the writings of the philosophers, but by the word of the prophets. Furthermore, the philosophers are distinguished more by diversity than by agreement. Some of his words are famous: "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, the Academy with the Church?"

Why did Tertullian reject philosophy? It was not a rejection of logic, critical reasoning, or of the consideration of philosophical issues, but of the pagan philosophies that took their point of departure in human speculations. What he rejected was syncretism - the attempt to combine or mix together Christianity with pagan philosophers to make Christianity more acceptable.

### **Combating Heresy**

The early Church was exposed to dangers from all sides. The same is true in the 21st century church. It is not only suffering from persecution, but heresy is also rearing its ugly head in many different places. Thus we can learn from Tertullian's battles against heresy. In *Prescription against Heresies*, which bears the imprint of sharp logic, and polemic throughout, he exposes and combats heresy. He stated that heresies are new. He called the conduct of heretics frivolous, worldly, merely human, without seriousness, without authority, without discipline, as suits their creed. He argued that it is not possible to dispute with heretics "because a controversy over the Scriptures can, clearly, produce no other effect than help to upset either the stomach or the brain."

Tertullian put considerable emphasis on the importance of historical continuity. He stressed the argument that the "Catholic" church had received its Scripture and its teaching directly from the apostles. Thus he said, "What in so many congregations is always recognizable as the very same cannot be erroneous: it must be tradition." The heretics, he maintained, had no right to the Scripture. It is not permitted to enter into a discussion with them with regard to substance because any dispute with them was to be established upon the Scripture and the tradition of the church. The heretics have no claim to either of these, however, because they falsify the Scripture. And they are in not good standing with the tradition of the church. Tertullian's admonition to the church of his time should be taken to heart in our age. "Let us..be mindful of the sayings of our Lord, and of the letters of the apostles. For they have all told us beforehand that there will be heresies. And, in anticipation, they have given us warnings to avoid them."

From 207 A.D. onwards, one of Tertullian main opponents was Marcion. He regarded him as the most dangerous enemy of the church and wrote his longest single work against him.

### **Marcion (d. c.160)**

Marcion was a native of Sinope, a town on the southeastern coast of the Black Sea, and a wealthy shipowner. Since nothing has been preserved of Marcion's work, nor of the writings of his immediate followers, we are indebted to the works of his opponent for any knowledge about him and his teachings. Marcion left his home after being excommunicated from the church. In 138 he went to Rome, following rejection by the church in Asia Minor. In Rome he donated a large sum of money to the church and became a member, only to be excommunicated again in July 144 because of his unorthodox teachings. His money was returned to him. He established a church of his own, which spread throughout the Roman empire with its own clergy, forms of worship and scripture. The Marcion church continued until the fifth century.

Why did Marcion's teaching represent the most dangerous of all heresies for Tertullian? Marcion did more than Scripture twisting to suit his beliefs. He pruned the Scriptures. "A heretic is so fond of his pruning-knife," wrote Tertullian, "I do not wonder when syllables are expunged by his hand, seeing that entire pages are usually the matter on which he practices his effacing practice." Marcion could not understand how a good God, whom Jesus Christ proclaimed, could be identified as the God who is just and punishes, as we encounter Him in the Old Testament. Consequently, he rejected the God of the Old Testament and thereby the Old Testament as a whole. He also rejected all of the New Testament passages referring to the Old Testament. Therefore, he reduced the Bible to the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul (without Hebrews and the Pastoral Letters), and even these with appropriate abridgements. He also taught that both the world and human beings were not created by the good God but – as in Gnosticism – by a wicked demiurge, so that the latter, together with the world, must be rejected. According to him, Christ offers humanity the message of the God who has been unknown hitherto and who has nothing to do with the world. Christ's actual birth by Mary is denied, since this would defile the Son of God with the world.

Tertullian refuted Marcion's heresy by showing from the Old Testament itself that the Creator

is perfectly identical to the God of Jesus. He is by no means only a God who punishes, but He also is righteousness and goodness. Tertullian's most important contribution to church history was his portrayal of God's work as a single narrative of divine redemption. He believed there was a single and indivisible salvation history in which the seed planted in the Old Testament bore fruit in the coming of Christ. As a result, he could show clearly that Jesus is the Son of this one God of the Old Testament. He became human in order to redeem Adam's sin and did not merely assume a phantom body. He demonstrated with detailed comparisons that the history of Jesus' biography completely agrees with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, including His second coming.

## **Montanism**

Montanus (ca. 170), a controversial figure and a schismatic, gave his name to a charismatic and apocalyptic movement called Montanism, which lasted until the 4th or 5th century. Our understanding of Montanism is largely based on the writings against him and the writings of Tertullian. Montanus declared himself the mouthpiece of the Paraclete, who was promised in the Gospel (John 14:26; 16:7). He was joined by two prophetesses, Prisc(ill)a and Maximilla. They taught that the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete) continues to give His people new commandments and teachings. Consequently, the messages of Montanus and his prophetesses were considered more authoritative than Scripture. Their followers believed that their leaders were receiving new prophecies from the Holy Spirit about church discipline and Christian morality. They wished to recapture glossalia (speaking in tongues), the gift of prophecy and a restoration of ethical standards, including disallowing second marriages in expectation of an early second coming of Christ. They proclaimed the imminent end of the world and called upon Christians to prepare for it by turning away from the world. They believed that the Holy Spirit was perpetually active and His manifestation through the prophetesses was a further evidence that the end was imminent. When the end of the world was not realized after the death of Maximilla in 179, the imminent expectation of the new Jerusalem suffered a severe setback. After this disappointment, Montanism began to focus single-mindedly on its rigorist moral demands. It is wrong to flee persecution. It is wrong to remarry for any reason, including the death of a spouse. Tertullian seemed to agree with the Montanists. "Neither in the Gospels nor in Paul's own Epistles will you find a commandment of God as the source from which repetition of marriage is permitted," wrote Tertullian, "That which is not found to be *permitted* by the Lord is acknowledged to be *forbidden*." Beginning in 207, he increasingly sympathized with the rigours of Montanism until he severed his ties with the Catholic Church ca. 213 because he accused it of laxity, especially in the matter of repentance. However, his turning to Montanism did not mean the abandonment of his previously held convictions.

## **Tertullian's theology and practice**

Tertullian was one of the earliest Christians who strongly stressed that the church must be "without spot or wrinkle" and separated from the world. He represented a Church ready to challenge and defy the pagan world. He admonished Christians to shun much of its life, especially any association with the Roman gods and lack of ethic values. Although Christians should accept the duties of the society in which they lived, they should not feel themselves to be members of it. He warned them not to attend public games or contests, which originated

from idolatry. He admonished them, "It is not asked who is ready to follow the broad way, but who the narrow." He commended Christian patience, while honestly admitting he lacked the virtue himself.

The principle to derive from Tertullian is that Christianity is anti-establishment; it contains the seeds of a counter cultural movement, which stands against the powers of evil wherever they may be found. He said of the Church: "She knows that her part is that of a foreigner upon earth, that amongst aliens she easily finds enemies, while she has her race, her home, her hope, her welcome and honour in heaven."

### **Apologeticus (Apology)**

Tertullian wrote his *Apology* about 197 AD. It may well be identified as the greatest of his works. It was addressed to the magistrates of the Roman Empire, particularly the proconsul of Carthage. In his *Apology*, Tertullian's aim was to explain the reason for the persecution of the Christians. He showed that Christians suffered from the ignorant prejudice of their neighbours: "Because they were already disliked, they want to know no more." He exposed the folly of persecution. He argued that a Christian was not a criminal and that, apart from being a Christian, he had committed no criminal offence. He skilfully ridiculed the way magistrates tried to persecute Christians. He argued that a magistrate would judge a common criminal and a Christian differently when both denied the charges brought against them, keeping an open mind for the former but allowing his bias to convince him of the latter's guilt. He stated that as a citizen a Christian had the right to know what the law required of him. He contended that generally the law called for adequate proof of guilt, yet Christians were being persecuted without any concrete proof. He demonstrated with irresistible logic how repugnant the persecutions are to the traditions of Roman law. Among all criminals, he asked, why are Christians alone convicted for their name with no investigation of their deeds? He pointed out that the mob was always ready to believe that catastrophes like floods or bad harvests or barbarian invasions were a sign of the gods' displeasure at their neglect under the influence of Christian "atheism". And he sarcastically commented, "if the Tiber rises too high or the Nile too low, the cry is 'the Christian to the lions'." And he challenged the magistrate to carry on with persecuting Christians. "You will become much better in the eyes of the people if you will sacrifice the Christians for them. Torture us! Your iniquity is the proof of our innocence. For this reason God permits us to suffer these things... Yet your tortures accomplish nothing, though each is more refined than the last; rather they are an enticement to our religion. We became more every time we are hewn down by you: *the blood of Christians is seed*." He also noted that pagans themselves perpetrated what they accused Christians of doing, namely, the murder of children and incest. "The laws," he said, "forbid you taking the lives of your newly-born children, but never was law so little heeded, or set aside with such indifference."

Tertullian was anxious to demonstrate that Christians were in a class set apart. To counter the strong feeling against Christianity which led to the Edict of the Emperor in 202 A.D. to persecute those refusing to worship the emperor and to sacrifice to idols was sacrilege, he showed that Christians were law-abiding citizens and that in fact the Christian Bible enjoined Christians to pray for the emperor. He assured the Romans that Christians "are always praying for all emperors, for ...a safe dynasty, brave armies, a faithful Senate, and a quiet world." Christians, therefore, are most useful to the emperor and the state by means of their

prayers to the true God and their loyal civic conduct. They do not commit crimes; indeed their faith obligates them to virtuous behaviour. Christians also care for each other's well being by looking after orphans, widows and giving voluntary offerings for the poor, the slaves, the prisoners. And the accusation that Christians were useless in the affairs of the state, Tertullian asked, "How can this be? We live among you, eat among you, eat the same food, wear the same clothes, etc. Our compassion spreads more in the street than yours does in the temples."

Concerning the charge that Christians worshipped novel (new) and strange gods, Tertullian traced the origins of such beliefs and maintained that pagans themselves ridiculed and despised their gods or deities. Since gods are merely humans or demons, the refusal to sacrifice does not represent atheism at all; on the contrary, it is in fact the only correct and useful conduct. The only One worthy of worship is the Triune God revealed in the Bible. The pagans are wrong in their ideas about God.

For Tertullian, reflections on martyrdom was a favourite theme. Christians did not will to suffer, but they accepted suffering willingly. If they are denounced as Christians, they glory in it. If they are accused, they do not defend themselves. When they are questioned, they confess without any pressure. "The Christian," said Tertullian, "even when condemned to die, gives thanks." In going to their death, Christians show their supreme freedom. For Tertullian, a Christian's destiny was to be a martyr. By this he would win forgiveness of his sins and spread the Kingdom of Christ. This view of the Christian life in the midst of anti-Christian pagan society led him to the conviction that the last days were at hand: "What we await is the trumpet of the Angel."

### **Christology (the doctrine of Christ)**

Who is the Christ of the Scriptures? How do you reconcile the divinity of Christ with the unity of God? To answer these questions Tertullian had to define the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ against pagan polytheism (many gods). He first clarified the Christian concept of God by pointing to the historical revelation of God which the Jews had received; the advent of the Son of God which had been prophesied and which, for the Christians, had taken place in Christ. And he had to explain two things if he was not to give assistance to pagan polytheism: How this Son of God does not, as the Son, destroy the singleness of God and how it happened that he could become man in a way different from pagan mythologies. He said that the exaltation by the Father, the sitting at the right hand of God, the sending of the Spirit from the Father through the Son – all this points to the differentiation between Father and Son. He commented, "We see plainly the twofold state, which is not confounded but conjoined in one person – Jesus, God and man."

Tertullian gave one of the earliest formulations of the one person of Christ. He is wholly God and also wholly human. He is one Person with two substances. These two substances remain distinct from each other and are not mixed, since otherwise Christ would be neither properly divine nor properly human but sort of half-and-half mixture. He is one person, not two; and moreover, that one person is identical with the divine Word who existed with the Father before the incarnation. Yet we must stress His humanity and His divinity equally. Tertullian asked those who forgot this, "Why do you halve Christ with a lie?"

## **The Trinity**

Tertullian was the first one who applied to God the word "Trinity" [trinitas in Latin] for the first time. And he was the first author to devote a whole treatise to the subject. He was also the first to describe as "persons" the three members of the Trinity and the first to talk of their unity of "substance." He described God as "one substance consisting in three persons." To say that the three persons share one substance is to say that they share the same essential qualities – they are essentially the same kind of thing. They are all God. Tertullian said that the Trinity and unity of God are to be compared to the Roman emperor, who governs the empire with his sons as co-regents; this does not divide the unity of the empire, however. His favourite image of the Trinity was a tree and its roots, the sun and its rays, and a spring and its stream. The tri-personality of one God, therefore, is an unconditional presupposition for his understanding of the mystery of the incarnation.

H. Bavinck noted that Tertullian is so important for theology as he introduced terms such as Trinity and one substance and three persons, which do not occur in Scripture. But they are foundational for the faith of the church. That's why classical theology has always resisted the temptation to reduce the distinction of the divine persons to their respective functions, as if the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit could be replaced by Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, or some equivalent terms. The doctrine of the Trinity defines the uniqueness of the Christian faith. It does not only exclude traditional Unitarians, but also Jews, Muslims, Hindus and followers of other faiths who do not share the centrality of the Trinity for their faith and practice.

## **Conclusion**

Tertullian left a lasting mark on the Church. After 220 we lose track of him. We do not know when and where he died. It may be assumed that he died in Carthage, since apart from a brief trip to Rome in his younger years, he did not leave the city.

(To be continued)