

Learning from the Church Fathers (8&9)

Origen (c. 185-254): His Life and Character, His Writings and Theology

The ancient world with its plurality of religions and philosophies used a host of weapons in its attempt to destroy the early church. Its greatest minds vehemently attacked the foundational truths of Christianity: revelation, creation, incarnation, and resurrection. Our culture resembles the pagan pluralism of the early church period. But there is a tremendous difference between then and now. Despite fierce opposition and persecution, the Gospel spread and churches grew in size and number. But in our time, Christianity in the West is rapidly becoming a minority view. Our modern pluralistic society has understood Christianity and rejected it.

To meet the onslaught of the anti-Christian "isms" that mark our age, the Church should engage and interact with unbelief and errant philosophies. In the past, the Church's greatest theologians have taken this approach. Therefore, as we seek to bring the Gospel to our society, we do well to consult the great Christian thinkers of bygone times. We are not the first ones to study the Scripture and to defend the faith. It is an illusion to think that we can "leap backward" across the centuries to study the Scriptures as though no one before us was engaged in interpreting the Scripture, theological debate, defending the faith, and in confessional formulation. Therefore, we can learn from the controversial church father Origen in our attempt to reach our generation with the Gospel.

Origen (c. 185-254 A.D.)

Origen (c. 185-254) was one of the most learned and incomparably the greatest scholar and theologian of the Eastern church in the early centuries and his fame as teacher spread far and wide. He was "the genius of the early church." The historian Eusebius said that Origen was worthy of mention "even, so to speak, from his swathing-clothes." Having mastered a full range of pagan philosophy and literature, he could speak as an authority in his own right. No longer pleading for mere toleration by pagan authorities, whether political or intellectual, Origen launched a vigorous counteroffensive. As one of the greatest minds of his age, he debated with pagan philosophers as their superior. He also travelled widely, and became acquainted with Christian leaders throughout the Roman world. His life showed that a brilliant mind and a passionate heart for the Lord do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Origen was born in Alexandria in 185 AD. According to the early church historian Eusebius, he was a son of a devout Christian family. His father, Leonides, was a teacher, and gave the young Origen a thorough grounding in the Greek liberal sciences. But he also taught him the Scriptures, some of which he had to memorize each day. Leonides was martyred during the persecution of Emperor Septimius Severus. Only the intervention of his mother prevented Origen from sharing his father's fate. His mother was able to restrain him from his youthful zeal for martyrdom only by hiding his clothes, so that he was unable to leave the house. This character trait of burning Christian zeal

accompanied Origen throughout his life and plunged him into many difficulties. After the martyrdom of his father, he assumed responsibility for his mother and his six younger brothers. He became a teacher.

Origen became known for his life of austerity and physical renunciation, even castrating himself. He devoted many hours of each day to prayer and Bible study, strenuously forcing himself to almost unending toil, and living with little sleep and food. He fasted regularly and went about barefoot. In the ancient world, his self-denial served as a powerful form of "lifestyle evangelism." His lifestyle earned him the nickname: Adamantius, meaning "unbreakable," or we might say "Iron Man." Why the ascetic lifestyle? For Origen its purpose was to train his body and soul for a life pleasing to God. He considered himself dead to things of this world and alive only to Jesus Christ. In *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen put it this way: "I think God is loved with the whole soul by those whose great longing fellowship with him draw their soul away and separate it not only from their earthly body but also from every corporeal thing...If such a view seems hard to anyone, then he has not [truly] thirsted for the Mighty one, the living God.

Plotinus (c.205-79 A.D.)

Origen praised the Greek philosophers. According to him, they sought to know themselves, to know the things that are good, and which one must pursue, and the things that are evil, and which one must flee. In other words, Origen was strongly influenced by Greek thinkers, specially Plotinus. The latter, who greatly influenced early Christian theology, the founder of Neoplatonism, studied in Alexandria and Persia, settled in Rome (244). He became a popular lecturer, advocating asceticism and contemplative life. He ate no meat and little bread, was simple in his habits. He had no care for his body; indeed, said his pupil and biographer Porphyry, "he was ashamed that his soul had a body." The historian Will Durant called Plotinus "the last of the great pagan philosophers," and "a Christian without Christ." When Origen attended his class, Plotinus wished to end his lecture, saying, "The zest dies down when the speaker feels that his hearers have nothing to learn from him."

Origen: the Teacher

A brilliant student, Origen was given the best education available and was a student of Clement of Alexandria. From his earliest years he was very conversant with the Bible. During the persecution, the catechetical school in Alexandria was disbanded.. In 202 A.D., although he was only eighteen years old, he was appointed by Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria, not only to reopen the disbanded school but to head it. The student succeeded his teacher Clement. His success as a teacher was remarkable and attracted heretics and pagans as well as catechumens.

Origen: the Author

Origen was not only the greatest scholar and theologian of the Eastern Church in the

early centuries but also a prolific writer. He has been called the first "scientific" theologian, a man ahead of his age. He produced not only doctrinal and apologetic works but also commentaries on most of the books of the Bible. His writings often reflect brilliant spiritual insights; at other times, however, they exhibit strained or unsound theological speculations. In 218 A.D., Origen began his written works for Ambrosius, a wealthy friend who provided him with a staff of seven stenographers, seven copy writers and girls to make fair copies. From 233 A.D., there followed an amazing succession of works. He is reputed to have written about 6,000 books. It has been remarked that Origen "wrote more books than others had time to read." Origen commented on his work: "Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, 'My son, beware of making many books. There is no end to it, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.'

However, unless that verse has some hidden meaning that I don't understand, I have directly transgressed that injunction. For I have not guarded myself against making many books."

Origen: A Heretic?

Was Origen excommunicated during his life time from the church as a heretic? This is what some scholars allege today. But the available evidence does not, however, support this view. What happened was that Demetrius (189-c.232), his bishop, expelled Origen from Alexandria, not because Origen taught heresy. According to the historian Eusebius, this was due to the bishop's jealousy. As the most celebrated Christian teacher of his time, Origen was far better known than his bishop. Demetrius's resentment came to a head when Origen travelled through Palestine, and was ordained as a presbyter by the bishop of Caesarea. This was a highly unusual procedure since Origen was a member of the church in Alexandria. When Demetrius heard of this, he was furious. He called a local church council, which decided that Origen could no longer serve in the church in Alexandria. He was deposed because he was irregularly ordained. The council did **not** declare him to be a heretic.

Origen in Caesarea

Origen never returned to Alexandria but made his home in Caesarea in Palestine where he spent the remainder of his life as presbyter. He founded a school of his own, spreading Alexandrian thought, exegesis, and theology in the Near East. He also exercised his preaching ministry almost daily. Only a fraction of the many hundreds sermons he preached are preserved, despite the stenographers who took the sermons in shorthand. He gives us a clear picture of the preaching of the early Christians. He preached through the whole of the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter - a ministry that few other ministers of the Gospel have performed with such singular brilliance.

Origen: the Evangelist

Like Clement of Alexandria before him, Origen also turned to educated pagans with missionary intent. Since he was the first great Christian biblical scholar, his sermons

have been preserved. His effectiveness as a preacher is well recognized, but what is not as well recognized is that he was an accomplished evangelist. Both in Alexandria and in Caesarea a large part of the population was Jewish. Origen's evangelistic efforts were directed to the Jewish population of the those two cities. His evangelistic message was that Christ is the fulfilment of the Scriptures. In Jesus all the promises of God found in the Old Testament are fulfilled, all the mysteries of the universe finally made clear. In the pulpit of Origen the exposition of the Bible, day by day, chapter by chapter, was an effective evangelistic technique. Centuries later the reformer, John Calvin, used the same method of expounding the Scripture as well as the twentieth century English Puritan Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones.

Persecution

In spite of his widespread fame, Origen was imprisoned during the persecution of Emperor Decius and cruelly tortured. Eusebius said that "the demon of evil marshalled all his forces and fought against Origen with his utmost craft and power, assaulting him beyond all others against whom he contented at that time." But Origen was not killed because the authorities wanted to induce him to public recantation, which would have had an immense and widespread impact because he was so popular. He withstood all the agony, however, without bending and was set free again after a relatively brief time. But his health was broken, he died shortly afterward and was buried in Tyre, where his tomb could still be seen by the Crusaders in the twelfth century.

His Writings and Theology

Origen was one of the most monumental figures of the Eastern Church. His influence on Christian theology and spirituality was enormous. But his speculative theology left a legacy, which proved to be a problem for the church. His two major challenges were: the defence of the Christian and how to formulate the doctrine of God in Trinitarian terms. He dealt with these questions from a perspective strongly influenced by the Hellenistic (Greek) culture of his time.

Contra Celsus

Origen's one major work in defence of Christianity against pagan criticism was his *Contra Celsus* (or "Against Celsus"). It has been ranked as one of the classics of Christian apologetics. For the modern reader it remains the most fascinating among early Christian writings.

The Platonist philosopher, Celsus, alleged that Jesus was born of an adulterous union, learned magical arts in Egypt, and invented the story of His own virginal conception. The resurrection of Jesus was a delusion suffered by the Apostles. The fact that Jesus was betrayed by one of His own disciples was taken as proof that He could not have been divine. If Jesus had foreseen His own death, He would have been able to prevent it. In his lengthy *Contra Celsus*, Origen shows how Christianity can withstand the intellectual assault of Celsus' philosophically sophisticated paganism, and how Christian

theology can use the tools of Greek philosophy. To prove that Jesus is the Christ, Origen argued first from the Messianic prophecies, then from the miracles of Jesus, and finally from the traces of miraculous power still to be found among Christians, especially when the minds of those who accept the gospel are marvelously filled with peace and joy. He argued that the resurrection of Jesus could not have been an invention because the disciples devoted themselves to preaching it at the risk of their own lives. He also argued that Jesus, who laid down His life for the flock, is a far more trustworthy guide than the founders of the philosophical sects who enjoy so much authority among the pagans. He also showed that the miracle stories of paganism are far less credible than those of the Gospels.

The Bible

It has been said that Origen lived in the Bible to the extent that no one else before the Reformer Martin Luther rivalled him. Every word he wrote was based on the conviction that the whole Bible was God's revelation to humanity. His biblical scholarship was outstanding. In an age in which versions and translations were multiplying, he saw the pressing need for an accurate text of the Bible. In order to provide this, he constructed the massive *Hexapla*, one of his greatest scholarly works. It was a critical collection and comparison of all the versions of the Old Testament on which he could lay his hand. It was divided into several columns, with the Hebrew original on the left and six different translations into Greek on the right. In order to accomplish this, Origen had to learn Hebrew. He also consulted learned Jewish rabbis. It is probable that many copies were made, but the original remained in the library at Caesarea. Sadly, only a small portion has been preserved up to the present day.

Origen believed in the unity of the Bible. And the key to the unity, linking the Old and New Testaments, is the person of Christ. He also stated that every text needed to be treated in the light of the teaching of the Bible as a whole. He argued powerfully for the inspiration and authority of Scripture. For Origen every text in the Bible could be read at three levels – the literal, the moral, the spiritual level – discovered by the means of allegory, the latter being the most important. For him the primary purpose of the Bible was to convey spiritual truth, He drew here upon his understanding of Platonism which taught that beyond the visible world lay the spiritual world of which all things here are an image and a reflection. Every place in the Bible in a similar way reflected the spiritual order beyond the ordinary material world. Thus, for instance, Jerusalem, Zion, Carmel, and a host of other places ceased to be geographical locations and expressions and became mirrors of heavenly truth. In commentary on the *Song of Songs*, he interpreted the bride as the church, on the one hand, and as the soul of the person uniting with God, on the other – the two fundamental interpretations of the entire era of the church fathers.

Origen's Theology

Origen's most famous book was called *On First Principles*, an appropriate title for this great work which laid out the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Although his

theological views were controversial already in his time, it should be emphasized that he insisted that all knowledge comes from Christ and that the Bible remains all-important for the development of theological thought. But he also believed that certain cardinal principles were clearly laid out in Scripture, while on other matters, Christians were free to speculate.

a. Doctrine of God

Origen's view of God was formed more by the Greek philosopher, Plato, than by the Bible. He wrote that God is "Oneness throughout, and the mind and fount from which originate all intellectual existence." The universe is eternally created. There was no time that the world did not exist. For God is Creator and He cannot change, so there cannot have been a time when He was not Creator. Yet Origen affirmed Christ as eternal Son and Word, and the Holy Spirit – each member distinct from the others yet together forming a unity. Although his doctrine of the Trinity clearly distinguishes between the Father and the Son, it views the Son's authority as subordinate. The Son was preexistent and related to the Father as ever-begotten and co-eternal, yet he occupied a level of being within the Godhead lower than the Father. Origen wrote: "The God and Father, who holds the universe together, is superior to every being that exists...The Son, being less than the Father, is superior to rational creatures alone (for he is second to the Father); the Holy Spirit is still less, and dwells within the saints alone." In his theology there was no adequate or satisfactory place for the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, he recognized that the Holy Spirit has a very important place in baptismal confession and in church worship.

b. Man and the Fall

Among Origen's speculations was the doctrine of the soul's preexistence. He asserted that the souls of humans were created before the creation of the world. In other words, spiritual beings – and not our world – were first created by God. They had a free will and were dependent on God, but became complacent in their adoration of God and turned away from Him. Our material world then was brought into being by the consequence of this fall and not by accident or chaos. Origen rejected the idea that humans are intrinsically embodied, physical beings and accepted instead Plato's belief that the body is simply a temporary container for an eternal, immaterial soul. When the body dies, the soul survives. But it goes the other way too; the soul existed before the body. This life is not the first we have lived.

c. Hell

In Origen's theology there is little room for the genuine Christian view of judgment, sin and forgiveness. Hell is not everlasting punishment. It seems more like purgatory. Origen stated that at death, none is sinless and fit for the presence of divine holiness and love, therefore there will be a purging "fire", purifying the soul of all dross. Hell is the fire of despair which burns our conscience when we are separated from God. For those lost in sin, life is literally hell on earth – and there is hell after death waiting for them too.

But the punishment they receive there is not retribution for their crimes; it is a remedy for their sickness. However unpleasant it is, the divine punishment is intended for the soul's good. Eventually the soul will be cleansed and the punishment will end. However, since the soul's freedom is never cancelled out, there is still a possibility that the whole process will start over again. This teaching is partly the reason why he was later condemned as a heretic.

d. The Atonement

The atoning work of Jesus Christ on Calvary's cross was considered as a ransom paid to Satan. The notion of ransom to the devil remained the customary and orthodox statement of the doctrine of atonement for nearly a thousand years. Ultimately, it was rejected by the church. According to Origen, in final victory of good over evil, all human beings, even the devil and his angels would ultimately be reclaimed and restored by God's grace.

Origen also seemed to give martyrs a redemptive role. He said that martyrdom is the repayment to God for His blessings, and obtains not only eternal bliss for the martyrs but forgiveness for others.

e. The Second Coming

Origen interpreted the doctrine of the second coming of Christ spiritually. He argued that it is the appearance of Christ in the souls of the pious. And Christ will come back to earth again and again within our souls. The resurrection of the body, a fundamental tenet of Christian doctrine, had no place in his system.

Origen: A Heretic?

In the first article on Origen, I mentioned that although he was deposed by his church in Alexandria, he was *not* declared a heretic. But the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527-65) condemned him as a heretic. This decision was published at the Synod of Constantinople in 543. The imperial police confiscated and destroyed all of Origen's writings they were able to secure; this is the reason for the incompleteness of the sources today.

But was Origen a heretic? Origen leaves us with our doubts about his orthodoxy. He had little feeling for history and undervalued the Bible's historical and literal meaning. He failed to trace God's finger through the history of revelation. According to Origen, the historical world of the Bible was a reflection of the spiritual world beyond. This is similar to Platonism which says that the most abstract is the most real. Consequently, Origen's theology is a compromise between the foolishness of the cross and the wisdom of the world. Plato seems to have won out over the Scriptures. Nevertheless, Origen must be chiefly remembered for his great contribution to Biblical studies. He told us how he wanted to be remembered when he wrote, "As for myself, my wish is to be truly a man of the church, to be called by the name of Christ and not of any heretic, to have this

name which is blessed all over the earth; I desire to be, and to be called, a Christian, in my works as in my thoughts."

(To be continued)