

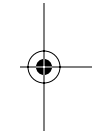
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## On the Heels of the Apostles



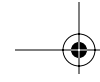
**W**ITH THE DEATH OF THE APOSTLES, the early church faced with enhanced concern the questions of unity, authority, persecution and the measure of truth. The New Testament books had not yet been collected. Various interpretations of the apostles' teaching and the Old Testament were rampant and in some cases were seductive and dangerous. False teachers continued to threaten the faith of believers as they had done in the days of Paul, Peter and John (1 Tim 1:3-7; 2 Pet 2:1-3; 1 Jn 2:18-19, 26). Factious envy and pride within communities of Christians continued to divide the churches (compare 1 Cor 3:1-4). And the persecution of Christians so common in the earliest days of Christianity bled into the second century (Acts 8:1; 1 Cor 4:9-13; Gal 1:13; 2 Thess 1:4 and 2 Tim 3:12).



### **The Apostolic Fathers**

Worship and discipleship as Christ's community in humble unity, doctrinal truth and self-denial—this theme held captive



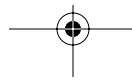


the pens of the earliest Christian writers outside the Bible. These Christians are known as the “apostolic fathers” to indicate their close connection to the times of the apostles. Though some of their documents evidence a lengthy process of composition, involving perhaps different authors and editors, the versions we may read today seem to be dated to between A.D. 90 and 174. They are small yet precious gems that glitter with the features of Christianity immediately after the New Testament, from the close of the first century to the latter part of the second. Of these writings, especially noteworthy are the following: (1) the letter of *1 Clement* (A.D. 96–98), written by the bishop of Rome to the Christians of Corinth; (2) the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (ca. A.D. 110), written to several churches, including the Ephesians, Romans, Magnesians and Philadelphians; and (3) the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, an account of the death of Polycarp (A.D. 155), bishop of Smyrna, sent in the form of a letter from the church of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium of Phrygia in what is today southern Turkey.



One particular occurrence of the disruption of Christian peace and unity was the division of the Corinthian church at the end of the first century, some forty years after Paul had written 1 Corinthians. Apparently younger, insolent members of the church had challenged and deposed honored bishops (presbyters) within the community for illegitimate reasons. So it is no surprise that Clement, in his letter to the Christians in Corinth, exhorted them to embrace humility: “Let us therefore be humble, brothers, laying aside all arrogance and conceit and foolishness and anger, and let us do what is written. For the Holy Spirit says: ‘Let not the wise man boast about his wisdom, nor the strong about his strength, nor the rich about his wealth; but let him who boast, boast in the Lord, that he may seek him out, and do justice and righteousness.’”<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Clement reminded his readers about the nature of the presbyter’s or bishop’s office (there was as yet no



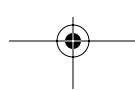


distinction between a presbyter and a bishop) and about its relationship to Christ and the apostles. For Clement, bishops were holders of a permanent office instituted by the apostles. The apostles had appointed the first bishops and they had intended the office to continue after their deaths. After the apostles, bishops were to be appointed by other reputable leaders with the church's consent. Such men were not to be removed unjustly. In Clement's letter the word *bishops* always occurs in the plural, so we assume that a plurality of bishops existed in both Rome and Corinth. Since the first ones had connections to the apostles, and since the apostles had connections to Christ, the bishop's office was viewed seriously. Humility was required of those in this office. In this light, addressing the arrogant ones, Clement commanded, "You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the revolt, must submit to the presbyters and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart."<sup>2</sup>

Clement's particular interest was the Corinthian church's humility before their church leaders. But this was just one aspect of his larger concern for the great Christian virtue of submissiveness. It was this virtue, he said, that would lead to unity within the church.

Clement's epistle reminds us that one of the essential components of Christianity is humility. He provides an Old Testament theology of the virtue. In *1 Clement* 13 he cites Jeremiah 9:23-24:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom  
or the strong man boast of his strength  
or the rich man boast of his riches,  
but let him who boasts boast about this:  
that he understands and knows me,  
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,  
justice and righteousness on the earth,  
for in these I delight," declares the LORD.





At the end of the same chapter Clement quotes Isaiah 66:2:

This is the one I esteem:  
he who is humble and contrite in spirit,  
and trembles at my word.

And *1 Clement* 18 includes a quotation of Psalm 51:17:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise.

Clement's emphases run parallel with those of Peter and Paul: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21). "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble' " (1 Pet 5:5). "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17).

According to the letters of Ignatius, leadership played a critical role in establishing church unity and correct doctrine. However, his letters reflect a situation in which, instead of there being several bishops in a location, there was a single bishop. Ignatius wrote his letters while he was being taken to Rome to be martyred. Arrested in Antioch because of his leadership in an "illegal" religion (Christianity), Ignatius composed epistles that continued to influence the Christian communities of Asia Minor and Rome. He had these special concerns:

- the false doctrines that were entering these communities
- the temptation, because of persecution, for believers to blend Jewish traditions with their Christian faith or to depart to Judaism
- the need for unity among the believers in light of these two dangers

The one doctrinal aberration that seemed especially to capture Ignatius's attention pertained to the person of Christ.



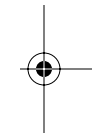


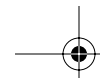
Some false teachers were promoting Docetism, the belief that Christ only seemed or appeared to be human and to possess actual flesh. The apostle John had already encountered a similar denial of Christ's flesh in the communities to which he had written his first epistle. He had dealt with it seriously: "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God," he told his readers as he warned them about false prophets. "Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus [as having come in the flesh] is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist" (1 Jn 4:2-3). Earlier, at the very beginning of the same letter, John had emphasized the importance of Christ's real flesh. The apostles had "heard . . . seen . . . looked at . . . [and] touched . . . the Word of life" (Jesus), whom they preached (1:1). Christians emphasize the reality and fullness of Jesus Christ's physical human flesh as well as his full deity.

Taking the threat of Docetism just as seriously as John did, Ignatius emphasized both Christ's deity and Christ's humanity. "There is only one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering and then beyond it, Jesus Christ our Lord" (*Ephesians* 7.2).<sup>3</sup>

Ignatius also spoke directly of Christ's humanity, as seen in his death and resurrection. Writing to the Smyrnaeans (1.2—3.1), Ignatius said that Jesus was "truly nailed in the flesh for us under Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch . . . and he truly suffered just as he truly raised himself—not as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered in appearance only. . . . For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to being influenced by false teachers who were spreading heresies about Christ's person, the churches of Asia Minor were also being influenced by Judaizers. The apostle Paul had been concerned that some Christians were interested

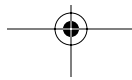




in returning to the traditions of Judaism (Gal 4:8-11). Ignatius, too, was concerned that Judaizers would lead believers to depart from grace and Christ. Like Paul, Ignatius believed that a return to the Jewish communal legislation would be a return to practices now superseded by Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. Ignatius wrote, "Do not be deceived by strange doctrines or antiquated myths, since they are worthless. For if we continue to live in accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace. . . . How can we possibly live without him [Jesus], whom even the prophets, who were his disciples in the Spirit, were expecting as their teacher? . . . Therefore, having become his disciples, let us learn to live in accordance with Christianity. . . . It is utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism" (*Magnesians* 8.1—10.3).<sup>5</sup>

Against these threats to the Christian community fostered by the Docetists and Judaizers, Ignatius emphasized the need for unity. For him, division within the community of believers resulted from a failure to maintain a belief in the unity of Christ's two natures, the unity of God and the unity of the church around the Lord's Table. He said that believing that Christ was both human and divine was basic to unity in Christian communities. The unity of these two natures in Jesus was a model for unity in the church. If one denied the unity of Christ, as the Docetists did, he or she could also deny the oneness of Christ's body.

Ignatius also believed that faith in the unity of God was another essential component of oneness in Christian community. This meant believing that the one true God was perfectly revealed in Jesus. It meant holding to the oneness between Jesus and the Father, between Jesus and the God of the Old Testament. Denial of the intimate relationship between Father and Son—a denial fostered by the Judaizers' attempt to return Christians to the legislation of the Old Testament and thereby to diminish the revelation of Jesus—ultimately led to division





in the church. If the Father and Son are not one, then brothers and sisters in Christ have little basis for unity. In Ignatius's emphasis on the connection between the unity of Father and Son and the church's unity one can almost hear an echo of the Lord's prayer in John 17:20-23:

My prayer is not for them [the apostles] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In Ignatius's emphasis on the importance of a common faith we can also sense Paul's words. Paul reminded the Ephesian church of the "one faith" (Eph 4:5) and taught them that the purpose of the diverse gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (or pastor-teachers) was to build the church up "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (4:13).

To this same end (unity in faith) Ignatius pleaded for the unity of believers around submission to the bishop. But where Clement of Rome had defended the authority of a plurality of bishops on the grounds of apostolic succession, Ignatius viewed the authority of the single bishop on other grounds. For him the authority of the bishop was modeled after the authority of God the Father, "the Bishop of all" (*Magnesians* 3.1).<sup>6</sup> Believers, he said, are to show their devotion to God by their submission to the bishop (*Magnesians* 5). Since a bishop is a representative of truth, godliness is shown through submission to the bishop and through a common belief with other Christians. Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, "Focus on unity, for there is nothing better" (1.2).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, to the Ephesians he said, "There is nothing better than peace" (13.2).<sup>8</sup> Also

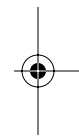
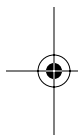




he urged the Philadelphians, “Do nothing without the bishop . . . love unity. Flee from divisions. Become imitators of Jesus Christ, just as he is of his Father” (7.2).<sup>9</sup> And to the Magnesians he wrote, “Do not attempt to convince yourselves that anything done apart from the others is right, but gathering together, let there be one prayer, one petition, one mind, one hope, with love and blameless joy, which is Jesus Christ, than whom nothing is better” (7.1).<sup>10</sup>

Some Protestants tend to see in Ignatius’s writings an emphasis on a domineering bishop, which later led to certain abuses by the Roman papacy in the Middle Ages. In Clement’s and Ignatius’s writing we see steppingstones that led to an emphasis later on the Roman bishop and eventually the papacy. But Ignatius’s interest was the unity of the believing community in the apostles’ doctrine. The bishop was the truth’s guardian, for he knew the true meaning of Jesus’ life, death, burial, resurrection, appearances, ascension and eventual return. He stood in contrast to the Docetists and Judaizers, who were seducing young Christians by means of doctrinal error. Ignatius’s heartbeat was a concern that believers be united in common submission to apostolic doctrine. When they agreed with the bishop, they agreed with the apostles and with God.

Furthermore, formal agreement with the apostle’s teaching took place not privately in isolation from the community but rather occurred when the individuals came together in one place for the Lord’s Supper. The meal signified the church’s center around the actual fleshly, bloody death of Christ, a center that opposed the false teaching of both Docetists and Judaizers. Sharing the Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist) demonstrated the church’s unity under the bishop: “Take care, therefore, to participate in one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup which leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow ser-



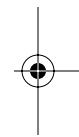


vants), in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God" (*Philadelphians* 4).

Ignatius's emphasis on Christian unity based on the apostles' doctrine and the Lord's Supper parallels the New Testament. The early Jerusalem church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Paul had no praise for the Corinthians' selfish, divisive conduct when they came together for the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34), conduct that made one "guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27). Many were failing to wait for all believers to gather together before they ate. Thus they failed to honor the meaning of the *common* meal and were experiencing judgments including sickness and death. Paul pleaded with the Philippians to "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil 2:2-3). And to Titus, the apostle wrote, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Tit 3:10-11).

In addition to the concerns for unity and truth in community shared by Clement and Ignatius, the apostolic fathers shared an additional feature: persecution and martyrdom. We have already noted that Ignatius penned his letters as he was on the road to martyrdom. We pause now to consider his perspective on that impending eventuality and to, with awe, observe a record of the martyrdom of one faithful Christian, the bishop Polycarp.

For Ignatius, as for many early Christians, martyrdom was discipleship. When modern eyes read his statement about his favorable anticipation of death at Roman hands, a common response is to suggest that he had a serious neurotic dysfunc-





tion. But this response fails to understand how the second-century church viewed itself in relation to Jesus' death. We must try to understand the early Christians. After the Lord had predicted his own shame and suffering, he taught the crowds and disciples that Christianity involved imitating him:

If anyone would *come after* me, he must *deny* himself and take up his *cross* and *follow* me. For whoever wants to save his life will *lose* it, but whoever *loses his life* for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is *ashamed* of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be *ashamed* of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. (Mk 8:34-38, italics added)



For the second-century believer, since discipleship meant following Christ, then being his disciple may very well involve stepping into the blood-soaked footprints left by Jesus under the cross. To rebel against martyrdom—that is, to retreat—would be a failure to imitate Jesus in his quiet submission to death (Is 53:7; Mt 27:14; Mk 15:5; Lk 23:9; Jn 19:9). Cowardice would mean a believer was disobedient to the words Peter penned years after his own shameful failure in discipleship: “To this *you were called*, because Christ suffered for you, *leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps*. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth’ [Is 53:9]. When they hurled their insults at him, *he did not retaliate*; when he suffered, *he made no threats*. Instead, *he entrusted himself* to him who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:21-23, italics added).



Self-pity in the face of martyrdom would be a failure to imitate Jesus in his words to the women who mourned for him on his way to be crucified: “Daughters of Jerusalem,” Jesus said, “do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children” (Lk 23:28).

Ignatius's arrest and sure death were God's call to his next

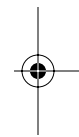
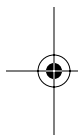




footstep in Christlike discipleship. If the just Father had so willed that he would die as his Lord had done, not asking for release and not arguing his defense, then he was willing to die. For this reason Ignatius wrote in his letter to the Romans, “I am writing to all the churches and am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I implore you: do not be ‘unseasonably kind’ to me. Let me be food for the wild beast. . . . Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body” (4.1-2).<sup>11</sup>

Such accounts leave us stunned, perplexed and almost incredulous. How, we demand, could a Christian be a masochist? How could a mature believer, a bishop, a church leader hold such a bizarre view of death? In our culture—even our *Christian* culture, which underscores self-fulfillment and self-preservation—such statements appear grotesque, even repulsive. This view, however, may say more about the oddity of modern Christianity and its view of what constitutes discipleship than about the eccentricity of Ignatius. He would not embrace self-preservation at the expense of not imitating Christ. He was willing to surrender to the Father’s will because he was not greater than his Master.

Though we have records of Ignatius’s perspective on his own martyrdom, we lack an account of his actual death. But we do have the martyrdom account of the apostolic father Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (ca. 155/156?). The account, written by the church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium (and other Christian communities) honored Polycarp as one who was noble, patient in endurance and loyal to the Master (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.2). He was passive and compliant in his arrest, even setting a table of refreshment for the arresting officials. He prayed two hours for all those he knew personally and for the church spread throughout the world before he was taken to the stadium. Brought before the proconsul, who attempted to persuade him to recant his Christianity, Polycarp replied, “For



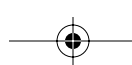


eighty-six years I have been a servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"<sup>12</sup> So the proconsul said, "I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind." But Polycarp said, "Call for them! For the repentance from better to worse is a change impossible for us; but it is a noble thing to change from that which is evil to righteousness." Then the proconsul announced, "I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind." But Polycarp replied, "You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish."<sup>13</sup>

From the beginning of the third century, and also from around the middle of the fourth century, we have other stunning accounts of Christian martyrdom. One records the faithfulness of a young mother, Perpetua, who was arrested along with five friends and martyred in 203.<sup>14</sup> Although she had an infant son and her pagan father tried desperately to convince her to deny that she was a Christian, she remained firm in her conviction. She insisted that she admit to being what she was—a Christian. Another account is one of several texts recording the martyrdom of Persian Christians. It tells us of the trial and execution of Martha, who followed her father, Posi, in martyrdom and who in the last words of her final prayer petitioned God to preserve the faith of the believers in her community and to strengthen them in a true trinitarian worship and confession.<sup>15</sup> Here again is the remarkable perspective on discipleship by the early church.

### The Apologists

As the second century progressed, Roman criticism of Christianity continued to grow. However, this criticism was not





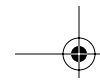
unique to the apostolic fathers and the apologists. Already in the first century Suetonius, a Roman historian, had recorded that in Nero's reign Christians had been punished because they held to a novel, superstitious religion (*Lives of Caesars* 16.2). The Romans said the religions of many people were superstitious, including the Christians, the Egyptians and the Jews.<sup>16</sup> The Romans' polytheistic religion was central to their way of life, and all social events were religious in nature. If a religion (like Christianity) did not join hand in hand with Roman pagan society, it was often doomed to persecution. This happened because the Romans feared the punishment of their gods. If the Christians were allowed to disrupt the unity of Roman religion and society, the gods (the Romans believed) would bring curses on Rome.

Roman religion also was intimately related to the past. Greco-Roman society held that the rites of the ancients were more harmonious with the gods than the newer rites. That is, the past was closer to the ancient gods. For Roman society, only one ancient religious doctrine existed, and it was expressed and maintained in a variety of traditional forms by various nations. Abandonment of these variant but traditional forms and customs was wicked. Novelty in religions, they thought, was irreligious. Therefore, because Christians were seen as antisocial and "new," they were viewed as a danger to Rome. The gods were unhappy and had to be pacified.

When Christians worshiped only one God, their polytheistic Roman neighbors viewed them as atheistic. When Christians gathered in worship, separate from Roman life, they were seen as destructive to the social structure of the empire. In their refusal to confess the emperor's deity they were viewed as wicked. This refusal to engage in civic religion led the Christian apologist Tertullian to write that the Romans considered Christians "public enemies" and "enemies of Rome."<sup>17</sup>

But the Romans did not end their criticism of Christianity



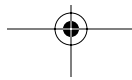
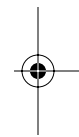
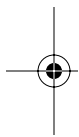


with reference to what they viewed as irreligious. They also criticized Christianity for being irrational. Christians seemed to receive their teachings by faith rather than by rational examination of the evidence or critical thinking. According to the Christian theologian Origen, one Roman, Celsus, wrote that some Christians said, "Do not ask questions, only believe."<sup>18</sup>

Also, the Romans interpreted some Christian practices as deplorable because of what seemed to be a secretiveness, a ridiculous perspective of life, death and future judgment, an arrogant haughtiness toward Roman religion and a lifestyle of perversity. Minucius Felix, a Latin Christian apologist of the third century, recorded some early Roman understandings of Christian rites and beliefs. Many unbelievers thought that Christians were "a people skulking and shunning the light, silent in public but garrulous in corners. They despise the temples as dead-houses, they reject the gods, they laugh at sacred things. . . . They know one another by secret marks and insignia, and they love one another almost before they know one another. Everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call one another promiscuously brothers and sisters."<sup>19</sup>

The belief that Christians were clandestine in their gatherings because of their shameful "incest" (because they married those they called "brother" and "sister") was common, as was the charge that they were cannibalistic (they ate the body of Christ and drank his blood). Because of the secret nature of their rites, and also because some groups claiming association with Christianity were reported to have engaged in acts of perversity, the rumors grew to absurd proportions. Christians were even accused of eating infants. The Christian apologist Athanagoras was accurate when he said, "Three charges are brought against us: atheism, Thyestean feasts [cannibalistic banquets] and Oedipean intercourse [incestuous unions]."<sup>20</sup>

As strange as it may sound to modern Christian ears, the

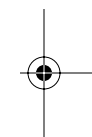




Romans were appalled at the supposed wickedness, social rebellion, irrationality and impiety of the Christians. The “popular and uncritical rumor” about Christians, to use the language of Athenagoras, set the tone for how the Romans responded. Of course, we ought not think that early Christianity was perfect or without blame. Many Christians did not balance their faith in the one true God through Jesus Christ with a biblical call to morality and state loyalty. In addition, some non-Christians who associated with believers were said to have practiced their Roman religion in feasts that *did* involve promiscuous rites.<sup>21</sup> On the whole, though, the charges of rampant perversity in Christ’s body within the Roman Empire were false.

The apologists of the second century took it on themselves to defend the church against such charges. And though their work was done honorably, we should never forget that such accusations against the church motivated by hatred for Christ are not to be seen as strange or odd. Rather, they are to be taken as blessings, after the words of our Lord: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:11-12; see also Lk 6:22). What the second-century believers endured was fully in line with Jesus’ promise. Erroneous views about Christianity that led to believers being marginalized socially, and incarcerated, tortured and killed, was consistent with what Jesus had said they could expect. Persecution is a blessing with reward (Jas 1:5, 12). As R. T. France, meditating on Jesus’ promise of recompense for suffering, reminds us, “no-one will be a loser in any ultimate sense, by becoming a disciple of Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

In their defense of Christianity before the Roman emperors the second-century apologists did not try to argue that suffering was harmful to the growth of Christianity. In fact they pointed





out the opposite. Justin Martyr, a major apologist writing around 150-160, insisted that as Christians were tortured they did not renounce their confession in Christ (*Dialog with [the Jew] Trypho* 110-14). Instead large numbers of people were converted to Christianity because believers did not renounce their faith in the face of suffering. The *Letter to Diognetus*, an anonymous Christian apology of the second century, also stated that “Christians, when punished day by day increase more and more. It is to no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try and evade it.”<sup>23</sup>

Neither did the apologists seek to justify any wickedness present in Christianity. Instead, they sought to explain what Christians really believed and what they really practiced. Persecution was the result, they believed, of uninvestigated charges, unreasonable emotions and demonic persecution (Justin, *First Apology* 5). They appealed for justice against slander, hopeful that an explanation of Christianity as reasonable, thoughtful, moral, civic-minded and ancient would result in toleration of their religion. Such appeals were made to the emperor’s own sense of justice.

Two apologists, Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, are noted for the way they stood in the gap to defend Christianity. Of concern to both of them was that Christian morality be portrayed. In his *First Apology* (ca. 150) Justin described the lives of Christians this way:

Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in continence alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into common fund and share with everybody in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of [their different] customs, now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies.<sup>24</sup>





Athenagoras wrote similarly in his *Plea for Christians* (ca. 177), as he contrasted Christian conduct with the conduct of those who were accepted and even honored by Rome: “When struck, they do not strike back; when robbed, they do not sue; to those who ask, they give; and they love their neighbors as themselves. If we did not think that a God ruled over the human race, would we live in such purity? The idea is impossible. But since we are persuaded that we must give an account of all our life here to God who made us and the world, we adopt a temperate, generous, and despised way of life.”<sup>25</sup> Athenagoras also wrote, “We, however, cannot refrain from turning the cheek when we are struck, nor from blessing when we are reviled. For it is not enough to be just—justice consisting in returning blows—but we have to be generous and to put up with evil.”<sup>26</sup> These challenging writings echo Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-48.

This second-century apologetic anticipated a small book written by Francis Schaeffer. In *The Mark of the Christian* he wrote on the basis of John 17:21 that the “final apologetic” was the love of Christians for each other. (John 17:21 records that Jesus prayed that the church may be in unity so that the world would believe that he is from the Father.) Schaeffer said, “We cannot expect the world to believe that the Father sent the Son, that Jesus’ claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians.”<sup>27</sup> The Christian ethic is always the first line of defense, whether in the second century or the twenty-first.

Justin and Athenagoras also informed the emperors about their civic loyalties, which they understood in good Roman fashion to be a constituent part of Christianity as well as Roman religion. For the apologists, being obedient to Christ and Paul’s teachings included civic loyalty. Listen to Justin’s words, written in times of persecution:





More even than others we try to pay the taxes and assessments to those whom you appoint, as we have been taught by him [Christ]. For once in his time some came to him and asked whether it were right to pay taxes to Caesar. And he answered, "Tell me, whose image is on the coin." They said, "Caesar's." And he answered them again, "Then give what is Caesar's to Caesar and what is God's to God" [Mt 22:20-21; Mk 2:14-17; Lk 20:22-25]. So we worship God only, but in other matters we gladly serve you.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to explaining Christian ethics and civic-mindedness, the apologists were also concerned with defending their monotheism against the charge of atheism. Athenagoras went to great length in arguing the reasonableness and the propriety of faith in only one God. He did so by appealing to the universe's order, to pagan poets and philosophers who were also monotheists, and to the rational argument that points up the implausibility of the existence of two or more sovereign, competing deities. Ultimately, however, he confessed that belief in the one true God on these bases would be merely human. The monotheistic faith of Christians is confirmed not by rational argumentation but by the ancient testimonies of the Spirit-inspired prophets, whom he cited (Ex 20:2-20; Is 43:10-11; 44:6; 66:1).<sup>29</sup>

In their effort to dispel charges of Christianity's offensive peculiarity, these second-century apologists helped build bridges between Christian thought and practice and the culture of Rome. In many ways their method was one of asking for toleration by demonstrating how similar they were to the tolerated mainstream or even to Rome's highest values. In a time when guilt by association with the name "Christian," fueled by paranoia and false understandings, led to persecution, such bridges were wise, could soothe fiery tempers and could give opportunity for further dialogue. The apologists knew the philosophy of the day and exploited it in communicating the reasonable-





ness and acceptability of Christianity within their culture. But as has been shown, their faith and practice did not constitute a surrender to that culture but rather were a submission to the teachings of the prophets, the Lord and his disciples. In obeying the Scriptures they were saying, "We're not bad citizens. Nor are we bad Romans. Therefore don't believe the prejudiced crowds and persecute us. We're different but tolerable."

For the apologists the central Christian task had become one of explaining what Christianity actually was in the face of persecution. This is always a Christian task.

#### **Irenaeus and the Heretics**

The paranoia, hatred and misunderstanding of the Romans were not the only threats facing the church. The problem of Roman persecution came from *outside* the community, but the problem of heresy arose from *within* the church, from those who falsely claimed to be Christians. Though several groups of unorthodox people could be discussed, we will focus on two, the Gnostics and the Marcionites, and on one great churchman, Irenaeus of Lyon, who labored diligently to protect the church from their harmful teachings.

Around 180, Irenaeus wrote five books against the heresies that were threatening his people. The most prevalent heresy was Gnosticism. The Gnostics taught that salvation was based on a secret knowledge to which only they were privy. These false teachers were seducing members of Irenaeus's parish.

Come back with me to a marketplace in the center of the ancient city of Lugdunum, Gaul (now called Lyon, France). You and your spouse are shopping for fresh vegetables, the fish catch of the day and some oil for your household lamps. As you pause before the tomatoes and carrots displayed by the merchant Cletus, his nephew Marcus, a confessing Christian not part of Irenaeus's congregation, engages you in conversation. "So, I understand that you two regard yourselves as





believers in Christ,” he says with a smile.

“Yes,” you respond. “We follow the teachings of our bishop, Irenaeus.”

“Oh,” he says sharply. “I’m a believer in Christ, who came to us in Jesus from the Father in order to reveal the truth about God to us. Is this what your community believes?”

“Yes, of course,” you insist. “We’re Christians.”

“Well, I am not sure that Irenaeus has told you everything that’s involved in truly being Christian.”

You look at him curiously and ask, “What do you mean, ‘not everything’? We believe exactly what you said you believe!”

“Oh, really,” he replies with a smirk. “Let’s go somewhere where we can talk—shall we?—and let me explain exactly what I believe and what your ‘trustworthy’ bishop Irenaeus is keeping from you. He wants to control you and prevent you from having what he can’t have.”

You follow Marcus through a dark doorway behind the vegetable stand where he begins to explain his “Christian” faith. When he finishes, you and your spouse are stunned. You look at each other open-mouthed. He had used the Old Testament and the writings of the Evangelists and Paul. He had spoken with such conviction and sincerity. He had used all the phrases, catchwords and Bible verses that you hear at your Lord’s Supper and Scripture reading services. But although he sounded just like you, he hadn’t meant the same thing. You and your spouse, having been under Irenaeus’s teaching for several years, quickly thank Marcus and leave without another word. The newly baptized couple from your congregation who arrive at the vegetable stand as you leave, however, will not be as fortunate. Following is what Marcus the Gnostic had explained to you. It is one version of various forms of the Gnostic myth.

The “Father” whom Marcus had spoken of was the eternal, unknowable, spiritual, supreme deity. This Father had issued forth from himself spiritual beings known as Aeons. They had





names like “Christ,” “Logos,” “Savior” and “Sophia.” At some point “Sophia” decided inappropriately, with pride and arrogance, that she could and would arrive at a knowledge of the unknowable, highest Father. Her pride and arrogance resulted in her begetting another being named Yaldabaoth, who was known as the Demiurge, or Creator. He inherited his mother’s faults of sin, pride, arrogance and evil. It was this being, not the highest Father, who created the physical world. For Marcus, then, the Creator—the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh of Israel—is *not* the supreme Father. He is an evil, arrogant, lower being. When he explained a prophetic passage such as Isaiah 46:9, in which God announced his exclusivity by saying, “I am God and there is no other,” Marcus said this was the Demiurge pridefully asserting his uniqueness out of ignorance of the true Father. As a consequence the material world created by the Demiurge has the characteristics of the Creator. Everything physical, the earth and particularly the human body, is seen as evil, bad, even putrid.



Marcus then explained that there was an attempt by the good spiritual beings to correct the perversion of the creation of a physical world. But Yaldabaoth was able to capture some of the heavenly, spiritual elements and hold them captive within some *bad* physical bodies. Marcus called these spiritual elements “seeds of light,” “the inner person,” or most often, “the spirits.” “So,” Marcus had summarized, “*some* human bodies, putrid as they are, house the only valuable eternal element we call the spirit. There are two kinds of humans: those who have the seed or spirit (the elect) and those who don’t. The ultimate goal, what I regard as *salvation*, is the release of the *real me*, my *spirit*, from my worthless body so that I can ascend back to the spiritual world. Ultimate salvation is my spirit flying away from this shell, this tomb, of the body.”

“I suppose you are interested in how one can be saved,” he asked slyly. Both of you had nodded yes, with eyes big as sau-

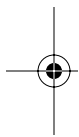


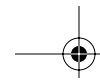


cers. "Well, I believe that the spiritual being 'Christ' came from the Father to redeem the spirits imprisoned by the wicked Creator. He did this by revealing the true knowledge of the Father to us. Now, this 'Christ' being could not, of course, become a human, because that would entail having a putrid body. So either he merely appeared to be human or he simply indwelt a human named 'Jesus' by adopting him as his 'carrier,' his vehicle. So, you see, there are really two and not one. There is the human being, 'Jesus' (or merely the appearance of a human) and the spiritual being, 'Christ.' This Christ revealed to his disciples the *knowledge* that the Creator of the Old Testament is *not* the true God. The true God is the Father of Christ. It is this knowledge that saves and that releases my spirit from my body."

Such Gnostic theology was quite prominent in the second century and was a serious threat to the church. It employed the language of Christianity and even misused the Scriptures of Christianity to develop its system of belief. In essence it was *dualistic*. That is, it assigned extreme, opposite values to differing realities and utterly distinguished things that the Bible holds together: Spirit is good, but the body and other physical things are bad; the spiritual Father is the true, good God, but the Creator is a bad impostor; the spirit Christ is the true Savior, but the human Jesus is only a shell; elect humans are good, but other humans are dispensable; the New Testament is the good news of salvation, but the Old Testament is a record of false religion.

One tricky thing about Gnostics, Irenaeus thought, was that before they explained their system they *sounded* so orthodox, so biblical. Referring to Jesus' warning about false prophets in Matthew 7:15, Irenaeus frequently thought of them as "wolves in sheep's clothing." He wrote, "Such men are to outward appearance sheep; for they appear to be like us by what they say in public, repeating the same words as we do; but inwardly they are wolves."<sup>30</sup> He described them as those who have mixed





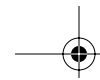
up a poison and passed it off as a refreshing drink.<sup>31</sup>

The other tricky thing about Gnostics, for Irenaeus, was that they used the Scriptures to support their system. But *using* the Scripture, he pointed out, meant nothing. Anyone can use the Bible to support his or her position. Anyone can manipulate the Scriptures in an attempt to make them fit his or her views. All you need to do is pay attention to some parts, ignore other parts, take a sentence or a word here, connect that to a sentence or word there, and you have rewritten Scripture into a pattern that fits what you want it to say.

Irenaeus opposed the Gnostics by explaining to his Christian community the proper “fit” of Scripture in light of the traditional teachings of the church passed down from the apostles to the bishops. Irenaeus taught his congregation what the church had taught before the Gnostics showed up. He appreciated the strength that resulted from a healthy union between Scripture and tradition. The interpretation of Scripture passed down by the apostles and preserved by the bishops was a safeguard in the face of heretics who also appealed to Scripture. The issue brought to the foreground by the Gnostics was that anybody can appeal to Scripture. Anybody can “use” the Bible, but the question is, how are they interpreting the Bible?

Against the dualistic theology of the Gnostics, Irenaeus emphasized several doctrines. First, there exists only one God, who is both the Creator, the God of the Old Testament, and the Father of Jesus Christ. Second, Jesus is the incarnate, eternal Son and Word of the Father. Third, although there is some difference between the Old and New Testaments (before and after the incarnation), they are both parts of the one history of redemption. Fourth, since the Father, through his Son, is the Creator of the physical body and of the earth, the physical world has value. The body will be raised incorruptible and reunited with the immaterial part of the human (spirit, soul), and the earth, purified by fire, will be refash-





ioned or renewed. Fifth, there is only one humanity, all of which is fallen and in need of redemption. There is no elitism in humanity, such as a distinction between the “spiritual ones” of the Father and the “material ones” of the Creator. Redemption is accomplished by the eternal Son of God, who became human and thereby through his incarnation united God with humanity. Jesus Christ as God *who is human* introduces into humanity’s sad, decaying history a hope for humanity’s immortality. As “the last Adam,” Christ began a new line of humanity destined for eternal glory, and he reversed the cause and effect of the first Adam.

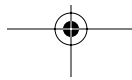
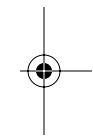
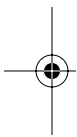
Most pointedly, what distinguished Irenaeus from the heretics was his theme of unity and his commitment to interpreting Scripture within the parameters of the faith passed down from apostle to bishop. What has been entrusted from one faithful Christian to another always plays an important role in interpretation.

To Irenaeus, tradition was an important source of information on what the Bible taught. It’s not strange that we find the Bible itself speaking about the importance of heeding those faithful ones who have gone before us and passing on to others what we receive. Four times Paul wrote about this to Timothy:

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. (1 Tim 6:20-21)

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Tim 1:13-14)

The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Tim 2:2)





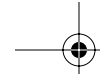
Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it. (2 Tim 3:14)

As we saw in Gnosticism, some people exploit Scripture for their own ends. Therefore, what faithful Christians through the years have been saying Scripture means can be helpful in preventing our own misinterpretations. In Irenaeus's day the central function of church leaders was to explain what the prophets, the Lord and the apostles had meant by what they had said. What Scripture said was given a formal interpretation, which set the apostolic teaching apart from that of the heretics. Anybody, it had become clear, could *say* they believed in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior sent by the Father. But what did they *mean* by terms like "Jesus Christ," "personal Savior" and "Father"? Church leaders like Irenaeus explained the ways those words and phrases were to be understood properly. I like what Martin Marty says about Gnosticism: "Fusing a pagan ancestry with Christian deviations, it knew many of the words but little of the music of the song of Christian redemption."<sup>32</sup>

Another heresy that threatened the second century church was Marcionism. Named after its founder, Marcion, it too held that there are two Gods: a wrathful, judgmental one of the Old Testament and a gracious, good one of the New. Marcion viewed the Jews, their Scriptures and their religion as of no value because of their association with the "old God." His Bible, therefore, included only New Testament books that in his judgment were antithetical to the "Law-oriented" religion of the Jews. These books included only Luke's Gospel and ten of Paul's Epistles. Irenaeus opposed Marcion in his *Against Heresies*, as did Tertullian in his *Against Marcion*. Again, these theologians emphasized the unity between the Testaments, which reveals the unity of the one God and Father of both Israel and the church.

Although Marcion answered the question incorrectly, the





question he asked is a pivotal one in Christian thinking: What is the relationship of the Old Testament, the law, and the religious faith and practice of Israel to the church? Marcion's answer was that there is no relationship.

Christians today still debate the relationship of the Old Testament law to believers. The Old Testament still struggles in many pulpits for equal time with the New. Certain pocket editions of the Bible can give believers the impression that only two Old Testament books—Psalms and Proverbs—are critical to their growth in Christ. The church as a whole has not reached a consensus on how to view the relationship between the two Testaments. However, early on the church dispensed quickly and firmly with Marcion's answer. Under the New Covenant, the church has an intimate connection to the history of salvation in the Old Covenant. The Old Testament anticipates the New; the New Testament fulfills, interprets and complements the Old. When Paul wrote "All Scripture is profitable" (2 Tim 3:16 KJV), he was thinking mainly of the Old Testament.

Heresy did not go away as the church matured. In the fourth and fifth centuries it would struggle with delineating properly the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ's person. Thankfully, gifted theologians would guide the church into the safety of the one true faith. This story awaits us in the next chapter.

