

## Adult Sunday School Class “Our Christian Heritage” - Lesson 4

We have learned in previous lessons that the time period while the apostles were alive is called the “apostolic age.” The time period right after their deaths is called the “post apostolic age.” The apostles warned that there would be false teachers of false doctrines:

**2 Peter 2:1 (NLT)** But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and even deny the Master who bought them... **2** Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of these teachers, the way of truth will be slandered.

The next time period is the age of the Apologists (130 to 180 A.D.), Gentile Christian writers who tried to convince the Roman government that the Christian church was no threat to them. We learned that in their zeal to do this, the Apologists did not use Scriptural terminology in their explanations, but they began to use pagan terms or made-up terms. Thus began a collection of words and terms that would inundate Christianity and almost choke out the simplicity of the Scriptures. During this time period we see the beginning of changes in apostolic doctrine by a few writers, although the vast majority of the church still held solidly to the same doctrine given by the apostles.

### The Greek “Logos” Doctrine

In this Age of the Apologists we see the pure monotheism (belief in one God) of the Bible compromised. *Logos* is a Greek term translated as “Word,” and it represented a very popular Greek philosophical concept at the time. To the Greeks, the *Logos* was the reason of God or the reason by which the universe was sustained. It was not a god, rather it referred to the principles by which the universe operated.

But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle John used this term in his gospel:

**John 1:1** In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . **14** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

John was a one-God Jew, and he used this term, *Logos*, to be a contrast to the pagan teachings, stating that God’s Word was God Himself in action.

To explain the *Logos* of John 1, in the beginning God existed alone. At the same time, His Word (His plan, thought, mind, reason and expression) was with Him and was Him. In the fullness of time God manifested Himself in flesh (the Son of God). Through this, His Word was expressed or uttered. God revealed Himself, and John identified Jesus as the God of eternity. Jesus was God in flesh - planned as the revelation of Himself from eternity past.

To help picture this, before someone can speak a word or a message, the mind must first think it. First it is unexpressed words. Then, at the right time, it is

said or expressed. Similarly, God's plan or Word was unexpressed in times past. The Incarnation (when God dwelt in human flesh) was God's plan from the beginning, but it did not actually take place until "*the fullness of time.*"

Unfortunately, the apologists did not use John's explanation of the Logos to make Christianity acceptable to the pagans. Instead, they went to Greek philosophy - not the Scriptures.

The Greek mind understood the teachings of Plato which said that there are two worlds: the good, real world of ideas or "forms," and the "bad," imperfect, physical world that only *reflects* the "real world." The Greek couldn't wrap his mind around the concept that Jesus Christ is the supreme God who Himself came in flesh to suffer and die for the redemption of fallen humanity. This concept was beyond them who thought that God was uninvolved with the real world of things and was incapable of suffering.

So what would eventually become the doctrine of the Trinity started with the apologists who felt they must reconcile Christianity with the pagan Greek/Roman mind. They thought that since God was incapable of suffering, He must have sent another to do His work. However, Paul stated that there is only one person in the godhead:

**Hebrews 1:1 (NKJV)** God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, **2** has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; **3** who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . .

The apologists in their era introduced the idea that God exists as two persons, and then later as three. Justin Martry stated, ". . . *Jesus Christ . . . we reasonably worship Him, having learned He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third . . .* First Apology by Justin Martyr.

## **Greek Philosophy Influences Christianity**

This kind of talk among the Apologists was new in Christianity. We find no hint of it before this time among Christian writers. The gnostics (remember this heretical group?) had allowed Greek philosophy to shape their thinking, but the idea of different persons in the Godhead was totally new to mainstream Christianity.

Remember, this new concept was not at all the belief of the majority of Christians at the time. When this belief first surfaced, it was accepted by very few Christians. Over time (and this mean over centuries), as this new doctrine was discussed and thrown around Christian circles, it became more and more acceptable and prominent. Yet, the Christianity of the majority continued to be One God, Jesus' name, Holy Spirit filled, holiness Christianity. There were millions in the Roman Empire who believed the apostolic doctrine.

The Apologists introduced a two-person Godhead. What they taught is not the same as modern trinitarianism which states that there are three divine persons that are coequal. That belief would evolve over the centuries. The Apologists taught

that a second person (the Son) is subordinate to the first person. For example, the most well-known Apologist, Justin Martyr, said the Logos is “*another God and Lord subject to the maker of all things . . . He . . . is distinct from Him who made all things - numerically, I mean, not [distinct] in will.*” Justin wrote in another place, “*You must not imagine that the unbegotten God Himself came down or went up from any place. For the ineffable [not to be spoken because of its sacredness] Father and Lord of all . . . remains in His own place, wherever that is.*”

The Apologists did not use Scriptural terminology in their explanations, but they began to use pagan terms or made-up terms. Thus began a collection of words and terms that would inundate Christianity and almost choke out the simplicity of the Scriptures.

To the credit of the Apologists, their writings indicate that they held onto the Bible truth that salvation comes through the blood of Jesus shed for our sins. They stressed that we have a free will to respond to God’s offer of salvation. They taught the importance of faith, repentance, and water baptism, proclaiming them to be necessary for salvation. They believed in the infilling of the Holy Spirit (at least for awhile). They believed in miracles and healing. They taught holiness in living. However, we find a shift in the baptismal formula that aligns with the shift of the doctrine of God. At the beginning of this age, the church still baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Around 150, however, Justin Martyr recited a threefold baptismal formula: “*in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.*” This was not the formula to be adopted by the church later. So we see a gradual moving away from the apostolic doctrine of the One God in Jesus Christ and water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.

**Colossians 2:8** Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

**1 Timothy 6:20-21** O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane *and* idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge— **21** by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.

## **The Old Catholic Age**

Now we will continue down the timeline of Christian history and discuss the time period from 170-325 A.D. One writer calls this period “The Old Catholic Age,” so we will, too. This is the time period leading up to the first Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) which helped to bring about a fusion between church and state.

The word *Catholic* means “universal,” and there was only one church in that day so we can use the term in the purest sense of the word. During this time, there was only one church (no divisions or “denominations”). Groups teaching heresy simply left the church and started their own thing. All local churches were part of the same group, although there were some differences in teaching from place to place.

The Old Catholic Age is known for an evolution of the Bible teachings of God and Christ. Many doctrines that were later adopted by the future Roman Catholic Church made their first appearance during this age. In this age, we find:

- the first real teaching of the doctrine of the trinity (by Tertullian, 210 A.D.).
- the first mention of infant baptism
- the construction of the earliest known public church building (230 A.D.)
- the first endorsement of baptism by sprinkling (Cyprian, 250 A.D.)
- the first mention of using Matthew 28:19 as a baptismal formula
- the first Christian hermits who paved the way for future monasteries and convents (Anthony, 270 A.D.)

Christians during this age endured the greatest persecution of all by the Roman government. The Romans allowed each nation in the empire to worship its own gods as long as no one interfered with the worship of others. Also, as a matter of civic duty, patriotism, and loyalty to the empire, everybody had to participate in the worship of Roman deities and later, worship of the emperor. Except for Jews and Christians, most people had no problem adding the Roman gods to their own group of gods. Christians were not only seen as religious heretics, but as political subversives. They were considered intolerant because they refused to accept other religions as valid. They were supposed to confess Caesar as Lord, but that title was reserved for Jesus Christ alone.

Before this time, most persecution came against the Christian leadership. Beginning in 250 A.D. under Emperor Decius until the year 313, many Christians, including the laity, were martyred and thousands of others fell away from the church. One writer (Gregory of Tours, 594 A.D.) said those who were martyred during this time "*could not be numbered.*" In 312, there was great debate over how to treat people who had "apostatized," or renounced the faith but later repented - especially in regard to the church leaders who did this.

Under Emperor Valerian, Christian leaders were required to sacrifice to the Roman gods. The punishment for refusing was at first exile, then later death. According to a letter written by Dionysus during this time, "*men and women, young and old, maidens and matrons, soldiers and civilians, of every age and race, some by scourging and fire, others by the sword, have conquered in the strife and won their crowns.*"

## The Institutional Church (Catholic or “universal”)

### POST APOSTOLIC AGE 90 - 140 A.D.

Mostly biblical and apostolic, emphasis on one God, Jesus as the true God and true man, repentance, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as part of the salvation experience, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, and holiness in life.

Believers as a whole still embraced the message and experience of the apostles.

### CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS 130 - 180 A.D.

Presented Christianity as a philosophy.  
Introduced pagan terms and ways of thought to Christian doctrine.  
Baptism in Jesus name dominant, but Justin’s formula enters scene.  
Holy Spirit baptism still prominent.  
Though the Christian Apologists were in the minority, their ideas greatly affected Christianity over time. Christianity and paganism began to be mixed.  
Holy lifestyle taught and practiced.

### OLD CATHOLIC AGE 170 - 325 A.D.

Catholic or “universal” because there was still one church.  
Known for being a period of the evolution of the doctrine of God and Christ.  
Baptism in Jesus name declining.  
A decline of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit during this age.  
A holy lifestyle taught, practiced.  
The first use of the word “trinity,” the first explicit teaching of this new doctrine during this age.

## The Progression of Change During the Old Catholic Age

During this period from 170 to 325 A.D., there were several writers whose writings remain today that give us a picture of the condition of the church. Let’s learn about the most influential ones.

### *Iranaeus and Hippolytus in Western Europe*

*Iranaeus* (died 200 A.D.) started his teaching with the Scriptures, emphasizing the apostolic traditions. However, some of his later writings sound like Justin Martyr who was influenced by Greek philosophy. Iranaeus taught that God is one, Jesus is truly God and truly man. He taught that God was revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Iranaeus taught that we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. He taught that faith, repentance, and water baptism are all essential to salvation. He said of some heretics:

*“This class of men have been instigated by Satan to a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God [being born again], and thus to a renunciation of the whole (Christian) faith.”*

In this, Iranaeus stated what was practically the universal teaching of the first five centuries - that water baptism is necessary for salvation because it is the washing away, remission, and forgiveness of sins. However, later in his writings we see him adopting the formula of Justin. Iranaeus emphasized receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit and asserted that speaking in tongues is the sign that a person has been filled with the Spirit. He wrote about the gifts of the Spirit in the churches and miracles and healings.

*Hippolytus* (died 236 A.D.) was a student of Iranaeus who developed his own doctrinal views, adopting trinitarianism that was developed by Tertullian whom we shall discuss next.

## *Tertullian and Cyprian in North Africa*

Tertullian (150 - 225) was a lawyer and teacher who converted to Christianity in 195. He became a local minister in Carthage, North Africa, and began writing. About forty of his books exist today. In about 207 he joined the Montanists, a group that had been expelled by the church, mainly known for extreme asceticism .

Tertullian was the first Christian writer to call God a trinity, and the first one to speak of God as three persons in one substance. Therefore, he is considered to be the father of Christian trinitarianism. His form of trinitarianism is not the same as what is commonly believed today. He believed that God existed alone in eternity past. Then sometime before the creation of the world, God beget the Word (Logos) or Son as a distinct person, and thereby became “the Father.” To Tertullian, this second person is not as “noble” or as “powerful” as the Father. He described the Holy Spirit as emerging from the Father, being subordinate to the Father and the Son. He believed that just as the Son and the Spirit came out of the Father, they would eventually go back into the Father. Therefore, his teaching was not like modern trinity teaching which states that the persons of the trinity are coequal and coeternal.

Tertullian’s opponents accused him of believing in three gods because he taught that each person of the trinity has his own body. Tertullian wrote that “the majority of believers” rejected his doctrine of the trinity on the ground that it denied the cardinal Christian doctrine that God is one. Tertullian responded by saying that his opponents were “simple,” as the majority “always” is, insinuating that they were unlearned and ignorant. Tertullian described his opponents as affirming the oneness of God and the deity of Jesus Christ. The fact of the matter is that the majority did not reject his doctrine because they were simple minded, but because it contradicted Scripture, apostolic teaching, and common sense.

Following his trinitarian teaching, Tertullian baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and was the first known writer to cite Matthew 28:19 as giving the actual formula to use.

Tertullian believed in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues and exercising the spiritual gifts. He regarded them as a sign of the true church and stated that they were normal for his day. In his writings, he challenged those groups who did not have the operation of the Spirit among them, saying that his group had it.

Cyprian, like Tertullian, strongly advocated trinitarianism, necessity of water baptism, and a conservative lifestyle. However, he remained in the institutional church of the day and became a bishop. Cyprian taught that baptism in the name of Jesus was for Jews only, and that Gentiles should be baptized with the trinitarian formula.

There is an anonymous writing from the era of Cyprian called the *Treatise on Re-baptism* that strongly affirms water baptism in the name of Jesus. The author was writing about the problem of whether people from heretical groups should be re-baptized if they joined the mainstream, institutional church. He maintained that the name of Jesus is so powerful, they did not need to be re-baptized. He stated, “Heretics who are already baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ must only

be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” He claimed that his position had the support of “the most ancient custom and ecclesiastical tradition” and “the authority of so many years, and so many churches and apostles and bishops.” Moreover, not only heretics, but many people in the church, both “Jews and Gentiles, fully believing as they ought, are in like manner baptized” by “invoking the name of the Lord Jesus.” Water baptism in Jesus’ name, as stated in Scripture, is the original baptismal formula of the apostles and continued to be used by the majority of Christians for at least 200 years.

Cyprian confirmed that baptism by immersion was the normal practice of his day, but he also advocated baptism by sprinkling for the sick. He also advocated infant baptism on the grounds that all are born in sin.

*Clement of Alexandria* - (died 215) He was a pagan philosopher before converting to Christianity, and Greek philosophy affected his teaching greatly. He combined biblical revelation with philosophical concepts.

*Origen* - was a famous disciple of Clement of Alexandria. He spoke of Christianity as the highest philosophy and stated that his purpose was to blend together the Bible and Greek philosophy. There are many, many writings of his available today.

Origen and his school in Alexandria had their own way of interpreting the Bible. Instead of reading Scripture according to the ordinary and apparent meaning, he typically sought for a hidden, deeper, “spiritual” meaning. For example, Origen doubted that the story of Christ purging the Temple really happened. Instead he said that the point of the story is that the words of Jesus will drive away “earthly and senseless and dangerous” tendencies in “the natural temple,” which is “the soul skilled in reason.” The money in the story represents one thing, the sheep and doves another. The trouble with this kind of thinking is that a person can support any doctrine he wants, because his interpretation is not tied to the apparent meaning of the Scripture. Instead of bringing meaning out of Scripture, Origen tried to put meaning into it.

Origen’s method of interpreting Scripture came from his view that knowledge is superior to faith. Origen did retain enough Christian elements in his teaching to be accepted by many Christians.

Origen taught that God is a trinity of persons. He introduced two related concepts that were important as the trinity doctrine formed over the next centuries. These were the doctrine of the eternal Son, and the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Origen reasoned that if the Son is truly God, He must be eternal - coeternal with the Father. Therefore, he said the Son’s begetting was an eternal process. Origen said that the Son is always being begotten (generated) by the Father. He said the Son “is a separate being and has a separate essence of His own,” is “a second God,” was “created” by the Father, is “inferior” to the Father, and is not, “the Most High God.”