

FORERUNNERS OF THE FAITH

Lesson 4

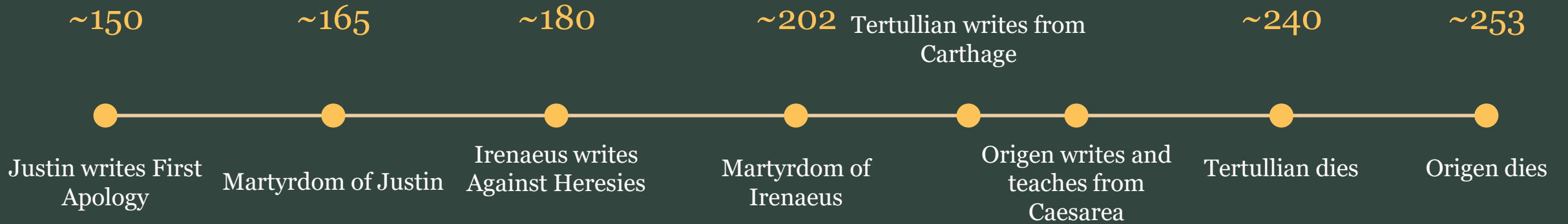


Contending for the Faith

Key Passage: Jude 3–4

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Timeline



I. Introduction

KEY TERMS

- *Apologetics* — from a Greek word meaning “legal defense.” Refers to a defense of the faith in the face of external attack.
- *Polemics* — from a Greek word meaning “war.” Refers to theological disputation or debate. It speaks of contending for the truth against false teaching from within the church (2 Corinthians 10:3–5).
- *Pre-Nicene* (or “Ante-Nicene”) — refers to the time period before the Council of Nicaea in 325.

II. The Apologists

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

John 15:18 — If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.

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2 Timothy 3:12 — Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

HISTORIC ACCUSATIONS

As Rome moved into the second century, Christians were increasingly viewed as troublemakers and a public nuisance. Early Christians were accused of:

1. **Atheism**
2. **Insurrection**
3. **Immorality**
4. **Cannibalism**

THE ACCUSATIONS EXPLAINED

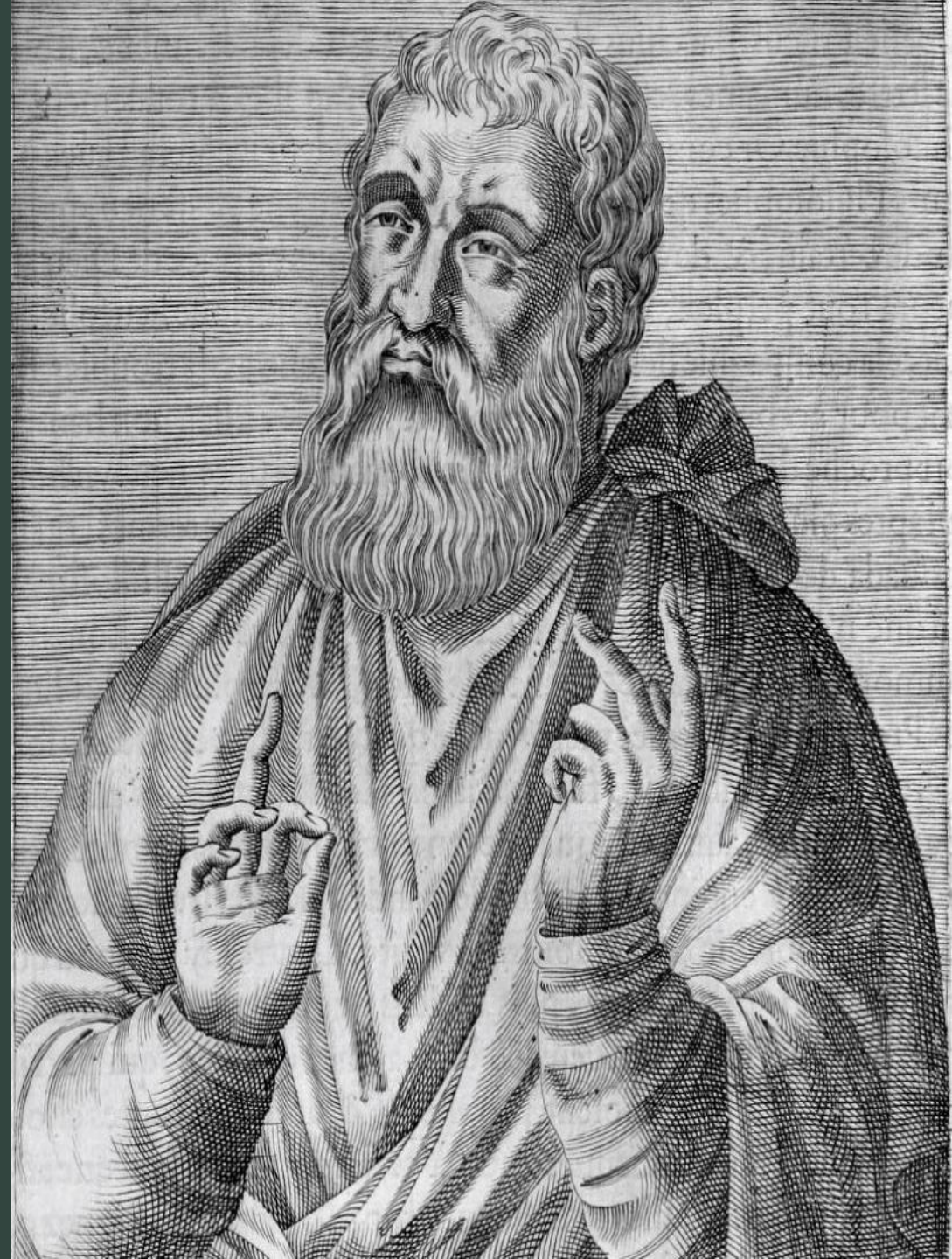
- **Atheism** — Christians were accused of being atheists because they flatly rejected the Roman pantheon of gods, refusing to be part of the society around them.
- **Insurrection** — Christians were also suspected of sedition and accused of being seditious because they refused to participate in the worship of Caesar. They would not declare, “Caesar is Lord,” insisting that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9)
- **Immorality** — A rumor suggested that Christians participated in sexual immorality at their secret meetings. The “love feast” (Jude 12) was misconstrued by the imaginations of a pagan society.
- **Cannibalism** — This rumor was sparked by a misunderstanding of the Lord’s Table. When outsiders heard the phrase, “This is My body” and “This is My blood,” they failed to understand its symbolic meaning.

THE APOLOGISTS ARISE

- In response to these false rumors, a group of Christian writers called “apologists” wrote to defend the faith from outside attackers.
- The most well-known apologist was a man named Justin Martyr.

III. Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr
(died c. 165)



JUSTIN MARTYR

- Justin was born around 100 into a non-Christian family.
- As a young man, he searched through various philosophical systems, but was never satisfied until he met an elderly Christian man who explained the gospel to him.
- After becoming a Christian, Justin moved to Rome, where he started a training school.

JUSTIN MARTYR — HIS BELIEFS

- Embraced Christianity as the true philosophy
- Use the concept of the divine Logos (or Word from John 1) as a way to build bridges to those steeped in Greek philosophy. The concept of the eternal Logos (or “eternal Word”) was prominent in certain Greek philosophical systems.

JUSTIN MARTYR — HIS WRITINGS

- ***First Apology*** — a defense of the Christian faith, addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and the Roman Senate.
- ***Second Apology*** — a further defense, also addressed to the Roman Senate.
- ***Dialogue with Trypho*** — records his conversation with a Jewish man about whether Jesus truly is the Messiah. Justin makes his case from the Old Testament.

JUSTIN MARTYR

First Apology, 67: On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president [pastor] in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers. Then we all rise together and pray. When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the 'Amen.' A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons. Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, gives what he wills, and what is collected is deposited with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.

COMPONENTS OF WORSHIP

1. Scripture was read, from both the New Testament (“the memoirs of the apostles”) and the Old Testament (“the writings of the prophets”).
2. The pastor preached a message (“discourse”), exhorting the people to obey the things they had just heard from the Scripture.
3. The congregation prayed together.
4. The congregation participated in commemorating the Lord’s Supper.
5. A free-will offering was collected to meet the needs of fellow saints.
6. The service took place on Sunday, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead.

JUSTIN MARTYR — HIS DEATH

- After debating a Roman philosopher named Crescens, Justin was denounced to authorities as a Christian.
- He was beheaded around the year 165.

Believers today can be encouraged when they participate in those same activities at their local church. Faithful churches from the second century to today have been characterized by these Bible-based practices.

Contending for the Truth: The Polemicists

BIBLICAL BACKDROP

In addition to persecution, the New Testament also warns Christians about the reality of **false teachers**.

Acts 20:29–30 — I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

THE RISE OF FALSE TEACHERS

- From the earliest stages of church history, we see both the rise of false teachers (who seek to distort the truth) and the resolve of genuine believers (who are zealous to defend the truth).
- In response to the errors of false teaching, the church carefully articulated its own doctrinal convictions, grounded in the authority of Scripture — convictions that were often clarified in the face of heretical attack.

GNOSTICISM

- A diverse spectrum of groups that claimed to have access to the “secret knowledge” of salvation (enlightenment).
- They generally held that matter was evil (having been created by an evil demiurge), and that only the spiritual realm was good.
- Salvation included an escape from one’s physical body through ascension into the spiritual realm.

GNOSTICISM

- Denied that Jesus had a real, physical body.
- Wrongly claimed Jesus only had the appearance of a body.
- Portrayed salvation as an ascension to the spiritual realm through gnostic enlightenment.

MARCIONISM

- Taught that the God of the Old Testament was actually an evil demiurge who created the material universe. Claimed that Christ came to save people from that God.
- Rejected all of the Old Testament and most of the New Testament.

MODALISM

- Modalism rejected the Trinity.
- Taught that God manifested Himself in the mode of the Father in the Old Testament, in the mode of the Son during Jesus' earthly ministry, and in the mode of the Holy Spirit during the church age — rather than as three distinct, eternally-existing Persons.

MONTANISM

- This “New Prophecy” was advocated by Montanus and two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla, who claimed the Holy Spirit was giving new revelation to the church through them.
- They insisted on a strict form of asceticism, and predicted that Jesus would return shortly to set up the New Jerusalem in the region of Phrygia.
- Their movement was characterized by ecstatic “charismatic” phenomena, like prophecy and dreams.
- By declaring himself to be a prophet, Montanus elevated himself to a position of authority that challenged the authority of Scripture. Was rejected as a heretic by the church.

Irenaeus of Lyons



Irenaeus
(died 202)

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

- Irenaeus (pronounced “ear-wren-NAY-us”) was born around the year **130**.
- As a young man, he heard Polycarp of Smyrna, thereby linking him to the apostolic fathers.
- He became the bishop of a church in Lyons, in what is now France.

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

His most famous work, known as *Against Heresies*, was written to defend the truth and also to refute the false teachings of Gnosticism.

IRENÆUS

Irenaeus: “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.”

IRENÆUS

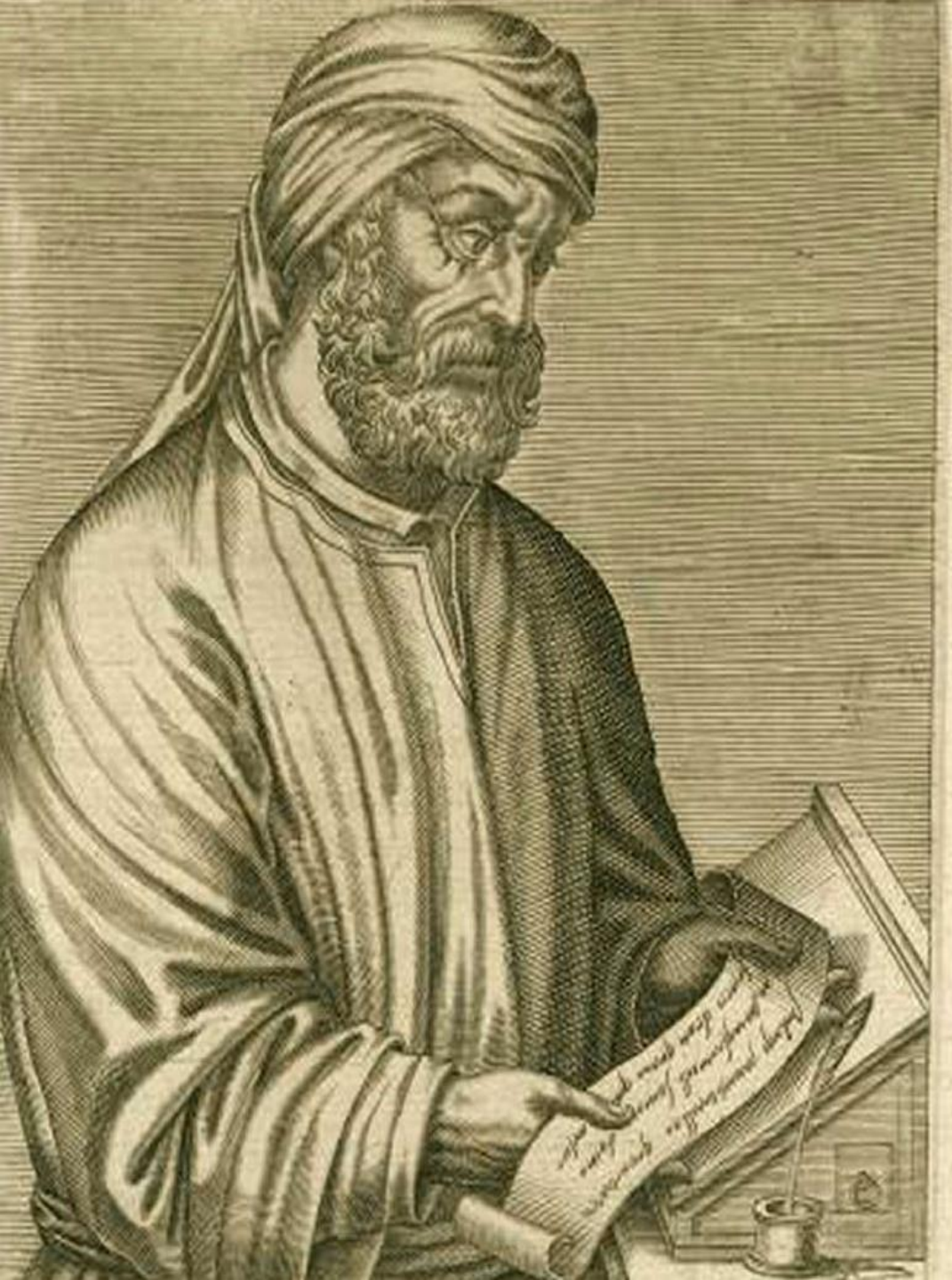
Irenaeus also identified the basic Christian beliefs that had been handed down from the time of the apostles. Here is how he described those theological truths:

Irenaeus: “[The] ancient tradition of the apostles [is] believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendor, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire the transformers of the truth, and the despisers of His Father and His advent.”

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

- Believers today should be encouraged to see those core Christian doctrines articulated with clarity and defended with boldness by this second-century church leader.
- Speaking of boldness, Irenaeus was martyred around the year 202 when persecution erupted in the region of Gaul.

Tertullian of Carthage



Tertullian
(c. 155–240)

TERTULLIAN OF CARTHAGE

- Born in North Africa, in the city of Carthage.
- Tertullian is traditionally thought to have been trained as a lawyer. Whether or not he received such training, he exhibits a high degree of education and rhetorical ability in his writings.

TERTULLIAN OF CARTHAGE

- He was the first major Christian author to write predominantly in Latin rather than Greek. Consequently, he is known as the “**Father of Latin (or Western) Theology**.”
- In describing the reality of God’s three-in-oneness, Tertullian was the first person to use the Latin term “**Trinity**”. He firmly upheld the truth that there is only one God. Yet, he also recognized that the Trinity consists of three Persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Tertullian wrote an *Apology* (Defense) as well as a number of polemical works, including *Against Marcion*.

TERTULLIAN

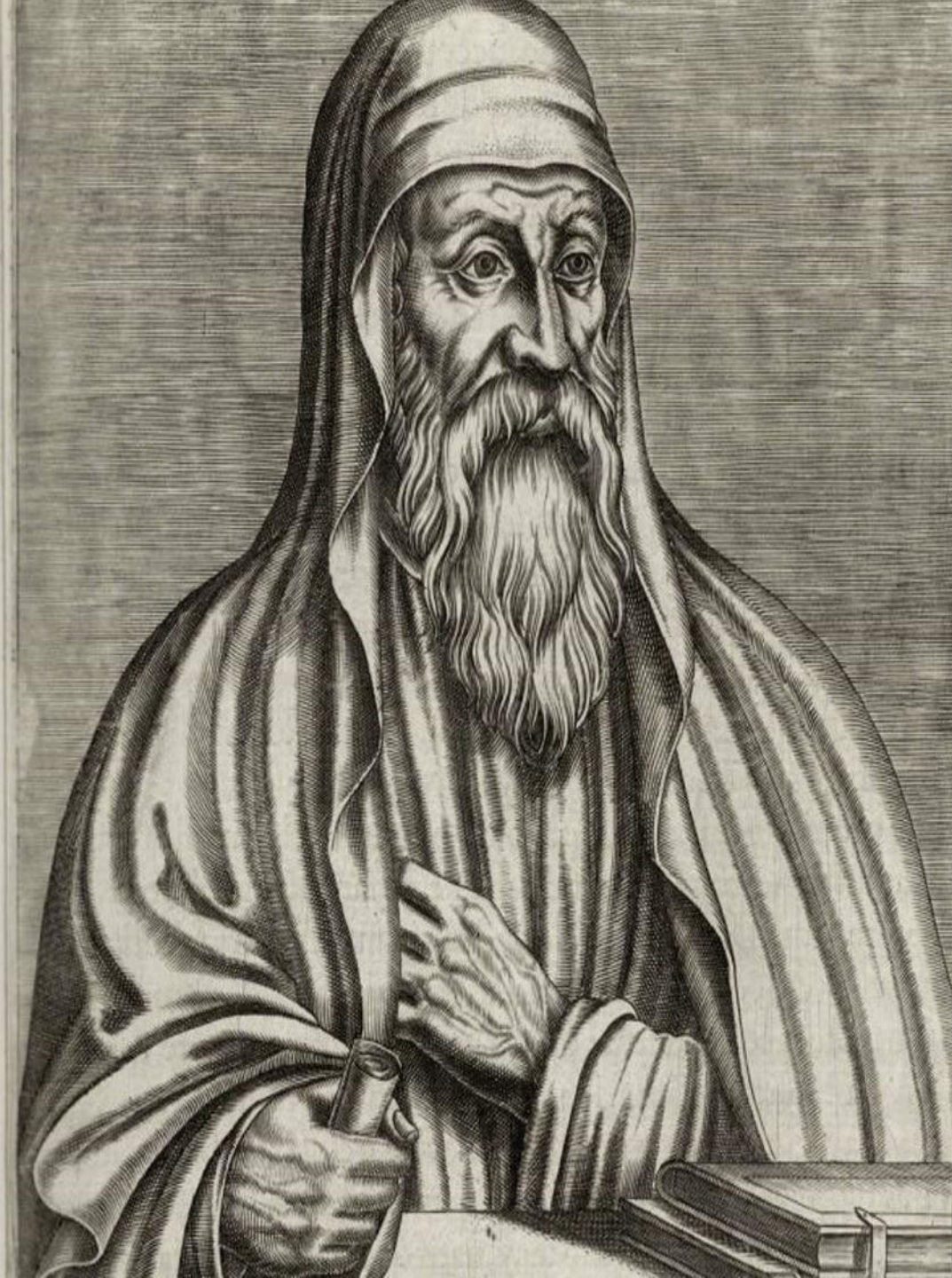
Tertullian was also strongly opposed to the idea that Christianity should be influenced by Greek philosophy. Identifying Christianity by its birthplace (Jerusalem), and Greek philosophy by its birthplace (Athens), Tertullian asked the rhetorical question:

Tertullian: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from ‘the porch of Solomon,’ who had himself taught that ‘the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.’ Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! . . . For this is our [honorable] faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides [the gospel].”

TERTULLIAN OF CARTHAGE

- Coined the term “Trinity”
- Opposed Greek philosophy
- In spite of his theological precision in some areas, Tertullian eventually defected to the Montanist movement at the end of his life. His association with that movement has made him a somewhat controversial figure in subsequent church history.

Origen of Alexandria



Origen
(c. 184–253)

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

- No survey of the Pre-Nicene church would be complete without mentioning Origen.
- Origen was born in Alexandria, Egypt. As a young man, his father was martyred for being a Christian. Origen wanted to go with him to be martyred, but was prevented by his mother, who hid his clothes so he could not leave the house.

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

- He attended a Christian training school in Alexandria, and was part of the church there until he came into conflict with the bishop.
- Origen moved to Caesarea, where he became a well-known teacher and prolific writer.

ORIGEN — POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

- Origen was one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the early church, producing roughly 2,000 treatises on various theological subjects.
- He organized the first systematic approach to theology in a work called *On First Principles*. He also wrote commentaries on a number of the books of the Bible, and defended the Christian faith against a pagan philosopher named Celsus.

ORIGEN — THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD

Origen also promoted an allegorical approach to the interpretation of the Bible, already used in Alexandria, that would continue to be popularized.

According to Origen's allegorical method, each text of Scripture has three levels of meaning, corresponding to the body, soul, and spirit:

- **The body:** the literal meaning focused on what the text says if taken at face value. This meaning was regarded as the least helpful.
- **The soul:** the ethical meaning involved the moral truth being taught by the text.
- **The spirit:** the spiritual meaning allowed the interpreter to turn the text into a series of symbols or metaphors, which were generally interpreted in way that pointed to Jesus.

ORIGEN — NEGATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

- On the negative side, Origen taught some strange doctrines, such as the pre-existence of the human soul. Though his allegorical approach to interpretation was undoubtedly well-intentioned, it opened the door to all sorts of imaginative and fanciful interpretations.
- During the persecution of Christianity under Emperor Decius, Origen was tortured for his faith. Those injuries permanently damaged his health and he died several years later.
- Because of some of Origen's controversial teachings, he was condemned by a sixth-century church council: the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.

V. Standing for Truth

STANDING FOR TRUTH

- The Christian leaders of the second and third centuries faced unique challenges.
- Faithfulness to Christ required the courage to stand firm, even in the face of severe opposition, violent persecution, and possibly even execution. Men like Justin and Irenaeus gave their lives as martyrs for Christ, even in the face of death. Their resolve did not waver even in the face of error.
- Within the church, faithfulness to Christ also presented a constant threat. In response, other church leaders presented a constant defense on the teaching of God's Word.
- *As we consider their examples, let's stop to consider what faithfulness to God's Word looks like in our own lives, both inside and outside the church.*