

The Ante-Nicene Fathers

In many issues of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, I have quoted various early Christian writers and it occurred to me that I probably should have introduced them some time ago. The term "Ante-Nicene Fathers" refers to Christian leaders who lived prior to the Council of Nicea in 325. In many ways, this council represents the end of the ancient church and its evolution into a highly Romanized state institution. Emperor Constantine changed the official imperial attitude Christianity in 313 with the Edict of Milan following his miraculous victory over Maxentius at Milvian Bridge the year before. Supposedly, Constantine had a vision assuring that victory if he carried the sign of the Christ. Though he was not baptized until shortly before his death in 337, Constantine's "conversion" dramatically changed the status of Christianity.

Then

The Ante-Nicene documents represent the era of the ancient, persecuted church—a time in which the church faced attacks from without (pagans and Gnostics) and within (heretics). Many of the preserved documents were written as defenses (apologies) of Christianity against these forces. Generally speaking, they do not present a systematic theology, although their writings cover many areas of belief and practice. Note: the illustrations that accompany these short profiles are mostly Orthodox icons. There are no actual ancient drawings of these men.

Apostolic Fathers

The Apostolic Fathers is the name given to a group of documents from the period immediately following the Apostolic age. Many of these writers are believed to have had direct, personal relationships with one or more Apostles.



Clement

Clement (d. AD 98) was bishop of Rome (and hence is credited as the fourth pope) late in the first century. Based on the fact that there were many writings later claiming his authorship, he certainly seems to have been a very well-known figure but nothing is known of his life. Despite tradition, he is probably not Paul's fellow-worker mentioned in Philippians 4:3. Only one document—a letter from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth (1 Clement)—is reliably attributed to Clement. The document known as 2 Clement (also in the Apostolic Fathers collection) is an early church sermon that dates to a period after Clement's death in about AD 98.

Mathetes is a title (disciple of the Apostles) rather than a name and nothing is known of him, but his letter to the equally-unknown Diognetus is included in the Apostolic Fathers. It extols the virtues of Christianity over paganism and probably dates to the first half of the second century.



Ignatius

Ignatius (ca 50-117) was bishop of Antioch and may have been a student of the Apostle John. He was carted off to Rome for execution and wrote seven still-extant letters en route (to churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, and an individual letter to Polycarp). His principal contributions were the praise of martyrdom and the separation of the episcopate (bishop) from the presbytery (elders). See [ET&N 10, Church Government](#). A number of other letters connected with Ignatius (to Mary of Cassobola, to Hero a deacon of Antioch, and to churches in Tarsus, Philippi, and Antioch) are considered spurious.

Polycarp (70-155) was bishop of the church in Smyrna in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey) and is said to have been a student of the Apostle John. He was clearly a student of the developing [canon](#) of the New Testament since the one extant document, a letter to the church in Philippi, contains quotations from 17 canonical books. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, contained in a letter from the church in Smyrna to the church in Philomelium in Pisidia, is also included in the Apostolic Fathers collection. He suffered martyrdom by fire after refusing to deny Jesus, saying, "Fourscore and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no harm. How then can I curse my King that saved me?"



Polycarp

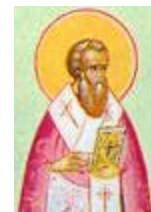
Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (a city in the Lycus valley close to Laodicea and Colossae) and a "companion of Polycarp", was probably born sometime around AD 65 and died between 115 and 140. Only fragments of his five-volume interpretations of Scripture still exist and are sometimes included in collections of the Apostolic Fathers.



Barnabas

Barnabas, the companion of the Apostle Paul, was almost certainly **not** the writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (which is more a tract than a letter) included in the Apostolic Fathers. The document, which probably dates to the early second century, is too late to be the biblical Barnabas, and it also evidenced considerable antipathy toward Mosaic law. Interestingly, the *Epistle of Barnabas* is included in one of the oldest Bible manuscripts, Codex Sinaiticus.

Hermas wrote *The Shepherd* (Pastor) sometime in the first or second century. It was a highly revered work in the early church and was ranked alongside Scripture. Eusebius, the great church historian of the fourth century, claims that it was read in the churches. Like the *Epistle of Barnabas*, it was included in the Codex Sinaiticus.



Hermas

The other work now often included in the Apostolic Fathers is **The Didache** (or **The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles**), an anonymous early church manual discovered in 1873. It has been dated to as early as AD 70.

Major Ante-Nicene Writers



Justin

Justin Martyr (ca 100-165) converted to Christianity about 130 after dabbling in stoicism, peripateticism, pythagoreanism, and platonism. He was struck by the disparity between pagan attitudes toward Christians and the reality he saw in their lives. He was apparently most attracted by the moral beauty and the truth he found in the Christian message. His best known of his many works are two Apologies and the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. He founded a school of Christian philosophy first in Ephesus and later in Rome, where a debate with Cynic philosopher Crescens apparently led to charges that he was practicing an "unauthorized religion." He was convicted and,

along with six of his students (one a woman), was beheaded.

Irenaeus (ca 135-ca 200) was a pupil of Polycarp who moved to Gaul (modern France), where he became bishop of Lyons after the massacre of Christians in 177. Two major works remain—*Against Heresies*, a five-volume exposure and refutation of Gnostic beliefs and practices, and the *Proof of the Apostolic Teaching*, using Old Testament prophesies.



Irenaeus

Tatian was born in Assyria and trained in Greek philosophy and, like many young philosophy students of the age, traveled extensively. Stuck by the hypocrisy of pagan philosophers and the immorality of the pagan lifestyle, he converted to Christianity in Rome in about 150 and became a student of Justin Martyr. Later, he joined ascetic Encratites (abstainers), a Gnostic sect. His majority orthodox literary contribution was the *Diatesseron*, a harmony of the four Gospels.

Theophilus of Antioch (d after 180) described himself as a convert from heathenism, and he wrote refutations of heresies, catechisms, histories, and commentaries, but only his apology, *Ad Autolychum*, has survived.



Athenagoras

Athenagoras (d. after 177) is one of the most sophisticated of pagan-turned-Christian philosophers. In his *Embassy for the Christians*, he defends ably Christianity against the charges of atheism, immorality, and cannibalism. He frequently quotes pagan poets and philosophers in developing his arguments. His only other extant document, a *Treatise on the Resurrection*, is the first complete exposition of the resurrection of the body.

Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens, d. ca 214) spent his most productive years at the great school of Christianity in the culturally-diverse city of Alexandria. He served as head of the school from about 190 until the intense persecutions there in 202, when withdrew to Caesarea in Cappadocia. Among his best known works are *The Instructor (Peдагоgus)*, *The Stromata (or Miscellanies)*, and *Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved?*, an exposition of Mark 10:17-31 in which he shows that the morality of wealth depends on the good made of it.



Clement



Tertullian

Tertullian (ca 160-after 213) is one of the most fascinating Ante-Nicene writers. A pagan lawyer until the age of about 37, he shared the predominant views of Christianity but after his conversion, he turned his impetuous nature to the defense of his new faith. He wrote extensively about Christian disciplines and was a steadfast opponent of Marcionism. But sometime before 206, he joined the Montanists, a charismatic branch of the church that looked for the eminent return of Christ and criticized the increasingly worldly and accommodating nature of the church establishment. Tertullian formally separated from the church (either by excommunication or resignation) in about 213.

Origen (185-254) succeeded Clement as head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. His father, Leonides, was imprisoned and executed during the Alexandrian persecutions of 202, and his fortune was confiscated according to Roman law. Origen, at the age of 17, became the head of his family which included six younger brothers. He supported the family through teaching and the sale of manuscripts, and apparently through the patronage of a wealthy woman. Even while heading the school, he continued his own philosophy studies and visited Rome. He became well known for his commentaries and other writings and was called to travel to other churches (Arabia, Palestine, Antioch, and Greece).



Origen

On the last of these journeys, he was ordained as a priest as the bishop of Caesarea as he passed through. This "unauthorized" ordination apparently led to a falling out with his home bishop, and Origen was forced to leave Alexandria in 231. He returned to Palestine and founded a new school in Caesarea. He died in 253 or 254 as the result of injuries suffered when he was imprisoned and tortured during the Decian persecution (250). His most important extant works are *de Principiis* and *Against Celsus*.

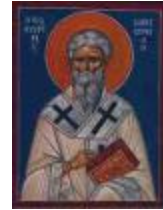
While he is generally revered for his orthodox writings, his legacy is tainted by several questionable doctrines attributed to him, including a tendency to over-allegorize certain passages of Scripture. In addition, some have accused him of subordinating the Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Father in his discussions of the trinity. Finally, he professed universalist beliefs—that somehow, through Christ's sacrifice and mediation, and through successive trials—all people will be saved. These hypotheses led to at least two "Origenist" Controversies in later centuries.



Hippolytus

Hippolytus (d. ca 236) is one of the most controversial figures in the early church, having left communion of the Roman church during the reign of Pope Callistus (217), whom Hippolytus accused on being lax on christological heresy and on penitential discipline. His followers elect him the "true pope," a position he maintains during the reign of the two succeeding popes. He was banished to the island of Sardinia, but he apparently reconciled with Rome soon since he is recognized as a revered martyr by the Church. While Hippolytus is considered the most prolific writer of the Ante-Nicene period, most of most works are either lost or available only in fragments.

Cyprian (d. 257) was a famous and wealthy orator in Carthage prior to his baptism in about 246, at which time he sold his property and gave most of his wealth to the poor. He had the misfortune to be named bishop of Carthage shortly before the Decian persecutions of 250, which ordered the execution of bishops and the torture of other Christians unless they recanted. Cyprian chose to go into hiding, from which he wrote encouragement to the faithful. After the persecutions subsided, the church faced a severe crisis over the fate of those who lapsed in the face of death or punishment. Cyprian strongly supported Pope Cornelius, who readmitted the penitent lapsed, against Novatian, who claimed the lapsed were forever barred from the church and had himself installed as antipope. Eighty-two of Cyprian's letters are preserved, and they give a clear picture of the contemporary concerns of the church. Numerous additional treatises are also preserved, including two which supported the authority of the bishop (and hence, the pope) to readmit the lapsed.



Cyprian



Gregory

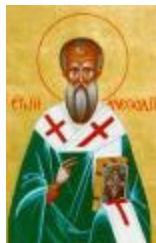
Gregory of Thaumaturgus (ca. 213-ca. 275) was born into a pagan family and upon the death of his father, he and his brother Athenodorus sought to study law at the school in Beirut. They escorted their sister, whose husband had just been appointed Governor of Palestine, to Caesarea, where they were drawn to the school of Origen. Giving up their legal careers, they were both won over to Christianity. Returning to his native Pontus, Gregory was soon named bishop. That his honorific title, Thaumaturgus, means "wonder-worker" suggests that considerable legend grew around this important early church leader. His numerous

preserved writings include four homilies (sermons) and several treatises.

Dionysius (ca 190-ca 264) was another student of Origen and he headed the school for a time. He was named bishop of Alexandria in 247. Like Cyprian, he spent the Decian persecutions in hiding and sided with Pope Cornelius against Novatian, and took an even more lenient stance toward the lapsed than Cyprian did. His works include a number of letters and several commentaries.



Dionysius



Methodios

Methodios (d. ca 311), bishop of Olympus in Lycia in the late third and early fourth century who, according to Jerome, the great Bible translator of the fourth century, died a martyr during the persecution ordered by Emperor Maximinus Daja (311) immediately preceding the ascension of Constantine to the imperium. He wrote treatises against some of Origen's stranger ideas, particularly the notion of the eternity of the earth. Perhaps his most important work, *Discourse on the Resurrection* was written to in support of the doctrine that man's body at the resurrection is the same body as he had in life.

Lacantius (Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, 260-330) was born in Numidia (modern Algeria) and became so famed as rhetorician there that Emperor Diocletian (284-305) installed him as professor of rhetoric in Nicomedia in northwest Asia Minor (Turkey). Clearly, his conversion to Christianity must have come after his relocation to Nicomedia since Diocletian was author of one of the most brutal persecutions of the church. Lacantius suffered considerably for his new faith—he was dismissed from his position and was forced to eke out a meager existence by writing. After Constantine converted to Christianity, he appointed Lacantius Latin tutor for his son. His greatest work, *The Divine Institutions*, is considered the first attempt at a

systematic exposition of Christian theology, although many view him as ignorant of Scripture.

Origins of the Ante-Nicene Fathers



Now

Except among academics, all of these ante-Nicene writings are virtually unknown to most Christians. That's a real shame since they reflect not only the history of the church but also the relative tolerance of the early church toward differences of opinion that would tear churches apart today. In many ways (but not universally to be sure), they seem to be saying "We don't always have to agree, but we do always have to be agreeable."

Collected in a 9- or 10-volume work, these writings are also accessible through several software programs, including [QuickVerse](#), as well as a number of on-line sources, such as [earlychristianwritings.com](#)

Discussion

These comments came in about last week's issue:

What an incredible newsletter you have in Ekklesia Then & Now. I stumbled across it as a network administrator working on some problems on an email server; one of our users subscribe to the newsletter. All work stopped while I read the copy I had come across, and now I subscribe as well. It reminds of the fascination I had as a teenager with my father's copy of [Early Christians Speak](#). Thanks for the newsletter, and keep up the great work! (John S. from Georgia)

Comment: That may be the only book about the early church that I haven't read, but I'm going to pick up a copy. If anyone else wants one, it is now available through my

[bookstore](#). Based on a question from another subscriber, I have also added the nine-volume Ante-Nicene Fathers to my bookstore, but if you want it, buy it from ChristianBook, not Amazon (\$200 price difference).

I believe the insistence upon connecting the mysterious dots is one of the main sources of theological error. It arises from the presumption that, if I cannot reduce a set of truths to a comprehensive model, they cannot be true.

In his excellent book, [The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings](#), Robert H. Stein presents the major themes of Jesus' teachings and then summarizes the various historical interpretations of these themes. When he finally presents his own understanding of the themes (very sound, in my view), it appears that the "correct" view is often largely a compilation of the affirmations contained in the various views--without their denials.

It seems that our systematic models tend to err on the side of excluding truths more often than they include errors. These denials, however, then, become errors. (John G. from Georgia)

Comment: I've also added Stein's book to my [bookstore](#) based on John's recommendation.

Thank you for writing your newsletter. I deeply respect your faith and your search of what Jesus meant when he instituted the Ekklesia! That kind of faith is very rare today when most folks so stubbornly clasp their hearts around tradition and semantics. Including you, these writers have influenced my faith as well: Clement of Alexandria, John Eldridge (www.ransomedheart.com), John Engler (www.barnabasministry.com), Philip Yancey, C.S. Lewis; David Berco; Coleman, Gandhi, MLK, Etc. Thank you so much for devoting so much of your heart into this ministry, it has made such a difference in my life. (Guillermo)

Comment: To be included with this group of thinkers and writers is humbling (and certainly undeserved)..

Thanks for the summary of the Ante-Nicene fathers. With attribution, I would like to make it available to my Western Civilization students... (John from NY)

Comment: Obviously, I was happy to give some permission.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Entertainment (March 30)

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