

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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### #4. Summary of The Church in the Third Century

As the church braced herself against persecution and heresy throughout the second century, a group of writers rose up that we know as Ante-Nicene Apologists (meaning writers who emerged before the Council of Nicea – 325 AD). In our culture, when we think of apologists, or an apology, we think of someone acknowledging an offense or failure. But apologist (from the Greek, apologia) actually refers to a person who offers a defense of something controversial. We see this idea expressed in Peter's writings when he said that we are to give a "reason" (defense) for the hope of the Gospel we embrace. So the apologists wrote in terms of defending Christianity against its many critics. In our present society we might think of people like Ravi Zacharias, Josh McDowell, or C.S. Lewis.

The church responded well to persecution, responding in terms of enduring, embracing, and explaining. They endured well, even unto death. They embraced with their hearts truths that seemed to be counter-intuitive. They explained the intricacies of their faith, and why they were willing to die for it. Justin Martyr is one of the best known apologists of the second century. He was born in 100 AD, right after the death of the Apostle John. He died as a martyr in 165 AD.

He was saved at age 30 and turned from philosopher to Christian teacher. He founded a school, preached the Gospel, and wrote several strong defenses of the faith within the context of the Roman culture. "I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable." When Justin was arrested for his faith in Rome, the prefect asked him to denounce his faith by making a sacrifice to the Roman gods. Justin replied, "No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false."

Another prominent apologist was Irenaeus, who was also an effective writer and defender of the faith. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John the Apostle, so his writings provide a direct connection to apostolic days. It was the work of Justin and Irenaeus

(130-202 AD) that paved the way for two notable apologists of the third century - Origen (185-254 AD) and Tertullian (155-240 AD), both of North Africa.

Origen is probably the most prolific writer of the early church. He was definitely zealous, to the point of imbalance at times. He would be branded a heretic by a later generation, but some of his contributions to the faith were substantive. There is no shortage of critics or defenders when it comes to Origen, so it is difficult to really assess his work today - but he was a huge personality in Christianity of the time.

Tertullian was an eloquent preacher and defender of the faith. He was apparently born and raised in Carthage, and there is evidence he was the son of a Roman centurion. He wrote several works attacking the heresies of his day, writing against Gnosticism and effectively explaining orthodox Christian belief. There are 31 texts by Tertullian that exist in completed form and many other fragments. He solidified our understanding of the Trinity when he wrote against Modalism (the idea that Father, Son, and Spirit are just manifestations of the same person). Though there is some controversy attached to his teaching regarding equality of the Godhead, it appears he is the first church writer to use the word "trinity." Tertullian felt, however, that the "first love" of many Christians was being lost. It had happened before in Ephesus (Revelation 2), and the second and third centuries were very draining on the emotions of the church. He called skeptics to task over their slander, and he called Christians out because of their slumber. In fact, some of his ascetic ideas were later adopted by medieval monasticism.

In the third century, Christianity made an effective stand against the criticisms of pagan society. And it was more than blind faith. It was a faith being well defended, and was growing stronger. However, a new test was about to descend upon the Church. Persecution would grow more intense, and in a surprising turn of events, we see the Church becoming the center of Roman society. That meant an end to the most severe persecution, but could the church endure the strain that popularity would place upon her?