

Early Christian Theology

by Justin McCorkle



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Introduction

What is the nature of God? What is the essence of Christianity? How are we saved? These questions are posed today just as they were 2,000 years ago when the church that Christ built first began.

Without debate early Christianity appears notably different from what is most popularly known as “Christianity” today. Some of these changes are merely cultural, but many of these changes are moral and theological in nature. In this study book we will look back to the writings of these early Christians in order to learn their views on some of the core tenets of the church and faith. While we recognize that these early writers were not inspired by God and can err, we also understand the value of having an early perspective on the word of God. Some of these writers were contemporaries with the apostles themselves and learned the gospel from those holy men. With zeal we seek to learn what they learned and gain a deeper appreciation of the inspired writings.

Understanding the history of Christianity is beneficial to truly understanding ourselves as Christians. The more we learn about the early brethren the more we learn about ourselves. The author hopes that all will be interested to learn from their mistakes lest they be repeated and learn from their triumphs so that they may be imitated. To Jesus be the glory in all things- then, now, and forevermore.



The Godhead

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

FATHOMING
GOD (*1 KINGS*
8:27, ROMANS
11:33)

THREE
DISTINCT
PERSONALITIES
(*MATTHEW*
3:16-17, 28:19,
EPHESIANS 4:4-6)

RISE OF
MONARCHIANISM
(*MATTHEW 26:39,*
1 CORINTHIANS
8:6)

THE NATURE OF
THE GODHEAD
(*PSALM 2:7,*
MICAH 5:2)

Understanding the Father, Son, and Spirit in their relation to one another and shared unity is something that is both a basic teaching of Christianity that is imparted to our youngest students and a thought-provoking conversation for the most advanced scholar. Outside of the rise of a false teaching called Monarchianism in the early 200's, the early Christians shared a universal view concerning the nature of the Godhead.

Fathoming God

God is difficult to even fathom for a human mind. Christians have worded his nature in various ways to attempt an explanation.

“He knows all things beforehand, and He is acquainted with what is in our hearts.” (Second Clement, c. 150. ANF 7.519)

“The appearance of God is ineffable and indescribable, and cannot be seen by eyes of flesh. For in glory He is incomprehensible, in greatness unfathomable, in height inconceivable, in power incomparable, in wisdom unrivalled, in goodness inimitable, in kindness unutterable.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.89-90)

“God is not involuntarily good, the way a fire is involuntarily hot. Rather, in Him, the imparting of good things is voluntary... Therefore, God does not do good by necessity, but He benefits others from His free choice.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.534)

“By His providence, He designed. By His energy, He established. And by His judgment, He completed works that are great and wonderful. Even now He sustains them by His Spirit, and He governs them by His power. He is incomprehensible and unspeakable. He is fully known to no



The Godhead

one other than Himself.” (Lactantius, c. 304-313. ANF 7.18)

3 Distinct Personalities

The early Christians taught that there were three distinct personalities of the Godhead.

“The universal Father is one. The universal word is one. And the Holy Spirit is one.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.220)

“The three days which were before the luminaries are types of the triad of God, His word, and His Wisdom.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.101)

“One God the Father is declared, who is above all, through all, and in all. The Father is indeed above all, and He is the Head of Christ. But the Word is through all things and is Himself the Head of the church. While the Spirit is in us all, and He is the living water.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.546)

“We pray at a minimum not less than three times in the day. For we are debtors to Three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (Tertullian, c. 198. ANF 3.690)

Rise of Monarchianism

In the third century a teaching arose called Monarchianism that claimed that the Father, Son, and Spirit were the same individual. This teaching is very similar to the modern teaching of the Oneness Doctrine. Early Christians were quick to answer this teaching and it all but ceased within a century or two. Tertullian especially dedicated a great deal of energy into overthrowing this false teaching.

“This heresy [Monarchianism] supposes itself to possess the pure truth, in thinking that one cannot believe in only one God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the very selfsame Person.” (Tertullian, c. 213. ANF 3.598)

“However, that there are two Gods or two Lords, is a statement that at no time proceeds out of our mouths.” (Tertullian, c. 213. ANF 3.608)

“He commands them to baptize into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit-- not into a unipersonal God.” (Tertullian, c. 213. ANF 3.623)



The Godhead

The Nature of the Godhead

Whether one has been a Christian for a short time or a long time, the Godhead is still a wonder to consider- insomuch as we understand a human limitation on our ability to understand God. The early Christians explained the Godhead as being three distinct personalities but united in essence. They often used the word “Economy” with reference to the Godhead in order to show the interconnectedness and unity of the three. The Father is the greatest and the Son and Spirit issue forth from Him in order to do His will.

“Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, distinct from one another. These Three are one in essence-- not one in Person. For it is said, ‘I and My Father are One,’ in respect of unity of substance, not singularity of number.” (Tertullian, c. 213. ANF 3.621)

“[T]hese are three Persons. However, if he desires to know how it is shown that there is still one God, let him know that His power is one. As far as regards the power, therefore, God is one. But as far as regards the Economy, there is a threefold manifestation... If, then, the Word was with God and was also God, what follows? Would one say that I speak of two Gods? I will not indeed speak of two Gods, but of one. I speak of two Persons, however, and of a third Economy-- the grace of the Holy Spirit. For the Father indeed is one, but there are two Persons, because there is also the Son. And then there is the third, the Holy Spirit. The Father decrees, the Word executes, and the Son is manifested, through whom the Father is believed on. The Economy of harmony is led back to one God. For God is one. It is the Father who commands, and the Son who obeys, and the Holy Spirit who gives understanding. The Father is above all, the Son is through all, and the Holy Spirit is in all.” (Hippolytus, c. 205. ANF 5.226, 228)

“If anyone, therefore, says to us, ‘How then was the Son produced [begotten] by the Father?’ we reply to him, that no man understands that production, or generation, or calling, or revelation-- or by whatever other name one may describe His generation. For it is in fact altogether indescribable.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.401)



The Godhead

Why is it difficult to explain the nature of God? What were some of the ways early Christians attempted to explain God?

What are some ways the Scriptures reveal three distinct personalities in the Godhead?

What is Monarchianism? What modern teaching does it compare to?

If there are three personalities in the Godhead how is there only one God? How did the early Christians attempt to explain this mystery?



Creation

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

*(GENESIS 1:1-2,
ISAIAH 45:12,
REVELATION 4:11)*

THROUGH JESUS

*(EPHESIANS 3:9,
COLOSSIANS 1:16)*

6 LITERAL DAYS

*(GENESIS 2:3,
EXODUS 20:11)*

GLORY OF CREATION

(PSALM 148)

The creation around us is something to marvel at and has always been a source of wonder to the peoples of the earth. These things show the glory and majesty of the Creator whom we worship. However, there have always been those who seek to rob our God of the credit that He deserves for the things around us. What did our early brethren teach about the creation?

Something From Nothing

Were there super-compressed atoms from which the current structures originated? Was there something that existed before the things we now have? Christians answer in unity.

“Concerning the creation of the world, what portion of Scripture can give us more information regarding it than the account that Moses has transmitted about its origin? It contains matters of profounder significance than the mere historical narrative appears to indicate. Furthermore, it contains very many things that are to be spiritually understood. When discussing profound and mystical subjects, it uses literal language as a type of veil.

Nevertheless, the language of the narrator reveals that all visible things were created at a certain time.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.340-341)

“While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point preeminently superiour to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, who previously it had no existence.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.370)

Through Jesus

What was Jesus' role in creation? Just as we see Scripture teach, so the early Christians understood that Jesus was very



Creation

instrumental in the creation of all there is.

“For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things. He speaks to Him, saying, ‘Let Us make man after Our image and likeness.’” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.488)

“The *immediate* Creator, and, as it were, the very Maker of the world was the Word, the Son of God. By commanding His own Son, the Word, to create the world, the Father of the Word is the *primary* Creator.” (Origen, c. 248. ANF 4.601)

6 Literal Days

It has become a habit of many Christians who seek to appease the world to suggest that, while God is the Creator, the six days of creation are not literal but may be thousands or millions of years. The Scripture does not bear this theory out, but what did our early brothers teach?

“In six days, God made the works of His hands. On the seventh day, he made an end, rested on it, and sanctified it.” (Barnabus, c. 70-130. ANF 1.146)

“How could creation take place in time, seeing time was born along with things that exist.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.513)

“After God had made the world and all the things in it in the span of six days, he rested on the seventh day from all His works.” (Disputation of Archelaus and Manes, c. 320. ANF 6.203)

Glory of Creation

All that God has made is beautiful to behold and sings forth His praises. We see the world with Christians’ eyes in that we know all things are made by Him and show His strength and wonder. We are not the only ones to recognize the marvel of what is seen. The early Christians also appreciated nature and what is revealed about our Maker in His handiwork. Take time to appreciate what your Father has made in order to come to the same wonder as these early Christians.



Creation

“O the great hand of the wise God, which doeth all in all! For a countless multitude of birds have been made by Him, and those various differing in all respects from one another; I mean in respect of their colours, beaks, talons, looks, senses, voices, and all else. And how many different species of plants, distinguished by boundless varieties of colours, qualities, and scents! And how many animals on the land and in the water, of which it were impossible to tell the figures, forms, habitats, colour, food, senses, nature, multitude! Then also the multitude and height of mountains, the varieties of stones, awful caverns, fountains, rivers, marshes, seas, harbours, islands, forests, and all the inhabited world, and places uninhabited!” (Clementine Homilies, date unknown. ANF 8.244)

“The Rule of truth requires that we should first of all things believe on God the Father and Lord Omnipotent; that is, the absolutely perfect Founder of all things, who has suspended the heavens in lofty sublimity, has established the earth with its lower mass, has diffused the seas with their fluent moisture, and has distributed all these things, both adorned and supplied with their appropriate and fitting instruments... And after these things He also placed man at the head of the world, and man, too, made in the image of God, to whom He imparted mind, and reason, and foresight, that he might imitate God; and although the first elements of his body were earthly, yet the substance was inspired by a heavenly and divine breathing.” (Novatian, c. 257. ANF 5.611-612)



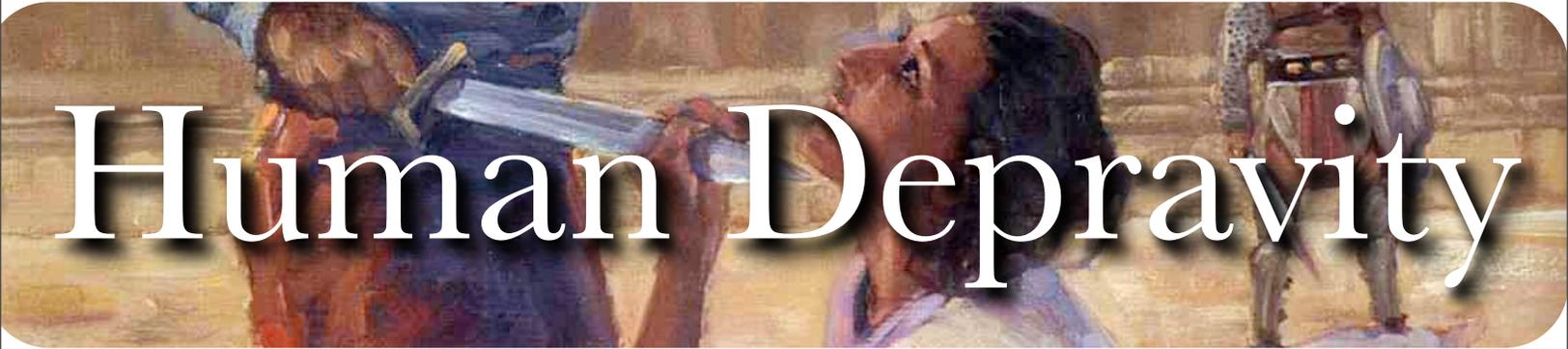
Creation

In scientific terms, can something come from nothing? How does the Bible claim this came about?

How did the early Christians describe the role of Jesus and the Spirit in creation? Do their views harmonize with the Bible?

Was the six days of creation literal or figurative? Prove your answer from scripture.

What are some ways that creation brings glory to God?



Human Depravity

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

CREATED AS
PURE (*GENESIS*
1:26-31, ECCLESIA
STES 7:29)

ALL BORN
INNOCENT
(*ROMANS 9:11,*
7:18, EZEKIEL
18:20)

FREE WILL
(*COLOSSIANS*
1:3-8, 21-23)

The majority of the religious world today teaches that all people are born “depraved,” or sinful. The doctrine says that we inherited sin from Adam and Eve and sin has been passed down through all generations. We are born wicked and unable to know good from evil. It is because of this that all people sin. The early Christians also lived in a world where many religious teachers (among the Gnostics) taught the same thing. In this lesson we seek to know if the early church was caught up in the same teaching.

Created as Pure

Mankind was created by God and it was “good.” His creation was not flawed, yet both Adam and Eve sinned in the garden.

“After His great kindness, He graciously conferred good upon mankind. He created man like Himself-- that is, in their own power. At the same time, through His foreknowledge, He knew the infirmity of human beings and the consequences that would flow from it.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.522)

“God has created us naturally social and just.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.307)

“There is no rational creature that is not capable of both good and evil.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.265)

All Born Innocent

What about after the sin of Adam and Eve? Were their children born with sin because of what they had done? Are our children? Many today would tell you that the most beautiful newborn child is spiritually corrupted. Consider the early Christians’ teachings on the matter.



Human Depravity

“It is evident from all this that no one is pure either by essence or by nature. And no one is polluted by nature. The consequence of this is that it lies within ourselves and in our own actions to either possess happiness and holiness, or by sloth and negligence to fall from happiness into wickedness and ruin.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.260)

“We, however, who know of only one nature in every rational soul, maintain that no one has been created evil by the Author of all things. Rather, many have become wicked through education, perverse example, and surrounding influences.” (Origen, c. 248. ANF 4.491)

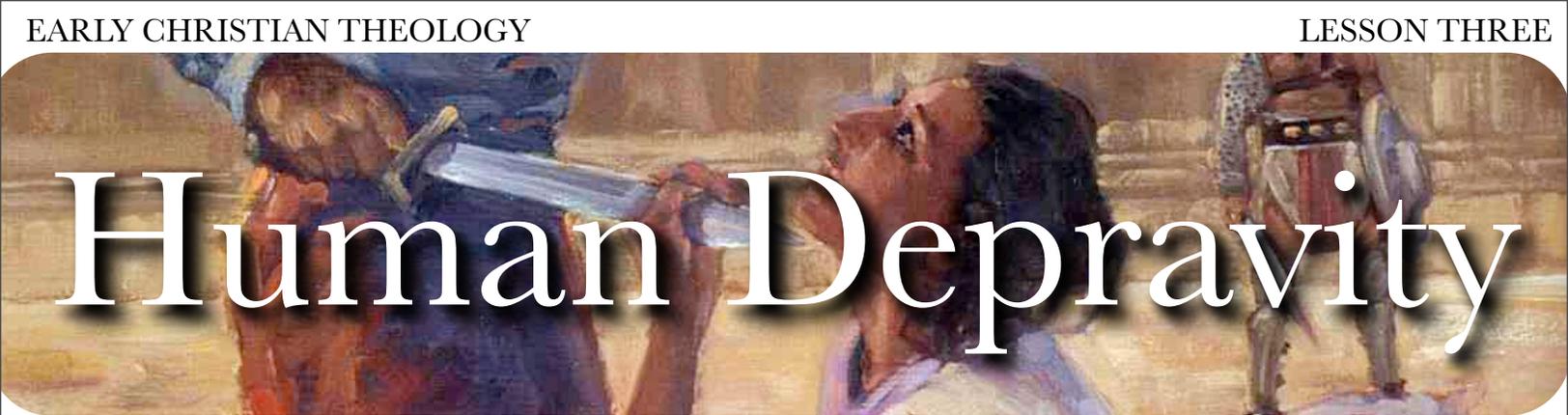
“‘For I know in me-- that is, in my flesh-- no good thing dwells.’ And this is rightly said. For remember how it has been already shown that from the time when man went astray and disobeyed the law, from then on sin dwelled in him. It received its birth from his disobedience. As a result, a commotion was stirred up. We were filled with agitations and foreign imaginations. We were emptied of the divine inspiration and filled with carnal desires, which the cunning serpent infused into us. For that reason, God invented death for our sakes-- that he might destroy sin. Otherwise, if we were immortal and sin rose up in us, sin would be immortal as well.” (Methodius, c. 290. ANF 6.372)

“Nobody can be born vicious. Instead, if we make a bad use of the affections, they become vices. If we use them well, they become virtues.” (Lactantius, c. 304-313. ANF 7.181)

Free Will

This entire theological discussion culminates into an understanding of free will. Do we have the ability to choose good or evil, or are we so depraved that we are incapable of knowing good when we study it? The preaching of the gospel is certainly affected by our understanding of the condition of the people around us to grasp the message. Do we sin because we have to or because we choose to? Let us hear the conclusion of the matter.

“Sin, then, is voluntary on my part.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.362)



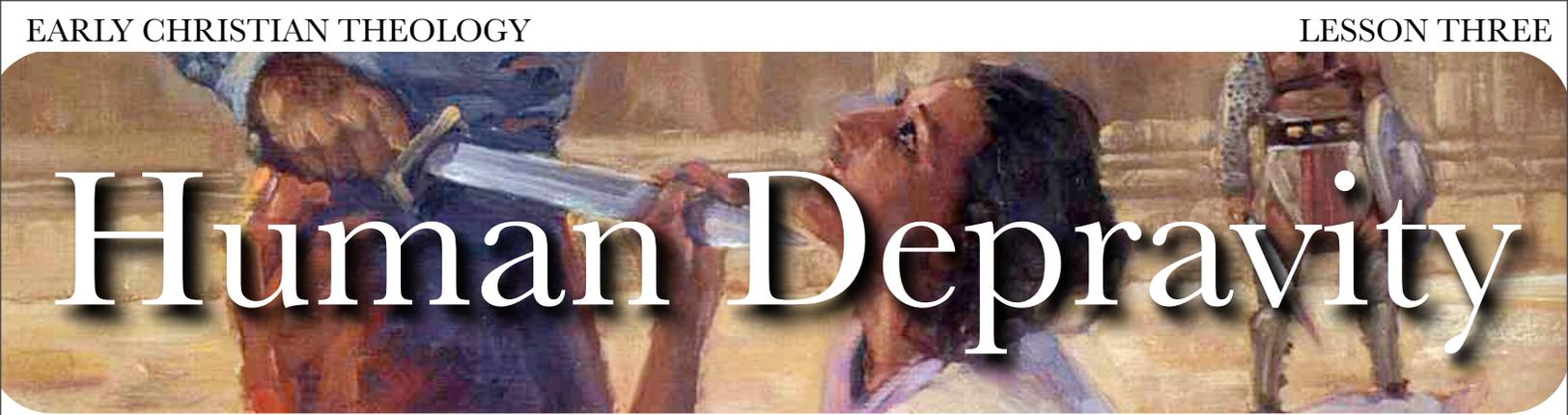
Human Depravity

“Let them not say that he who does wrong and sins, transgresses because of demons. For then he would be guiltless. Instead, a person becomes a demoniac man by choosing the same things as do the demons: by sinning and being unstable, frivolous, and fickle in his desires-- just like a demon. Now he who is bad (having become sinful by nature, because of evil) becomes depraved. He has what he has chosen. And, being sinful, he sins also in his actions. Likewise, the good man does right.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.502)

“Faith admits no plea of necessity. They are under no necessity to sin. Their only necessity is that they must not sin.” (Tertullian, c. 211. ANF 3.100)

“This also is clearly defined in the teaching of the church, that every rational soul is possessed of free will and volition and that it has a struggle to maintain against the devil, his angels, and other opposing powers. For those powers strive to burden it with sins. Yet, if we live rightly and wisely, we can endeavor to shake ourselves free of a burden of that kind.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.240)

“Certain men who hold different opinions [heretics] misuse these passages. They essentially destroy free will by introducing ruined natures incapable of salvation and by introducing others as being saved in such a way that they cannot be lost.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.308)



Human Depravity

Did the early Christians believe that Adam and Eve were created pure or evil? Why do you think Adam and Eve sinned if they were created pure?

Are people born innocent or guilty of inherited sin? Prove your answer with scripture.

Did the early Christians believe in free will to choose good or evil? If so, was it only for Christians or for both believers and unbelievers?

What had the Colossian brethren done to become holy and blameless though they were “hostile in mind”? What had caused them to change?



Inspiration of Scripture

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

CHRISTIAN
SCRIPTURE (1
TIMOTHY 5:17-18,
2 PETER 3:15-16)

AUTHORITY OF
SCRIPTURE (2
TIMOTHY 3:16-17,
1 JOHN 1:3)

STUDYING
SCRIPTURE (2
TIMOTHY 2:15,
HEBREWS
5:12-14)

A popular myth exists that suggests that the canon of the New Testament was not completed until the 300's. This myth suggests that the early Christians did not necessarily believe the 27 books that we now call the New Testament were inspired by God. While there were localized debates concerning one or two books at different times, these 27 books were nearly universally recognized as inspired of God by the early to mid-100's, which is only very shortly after all of the works were completed. In this lesson we seek to allow the early Christians to explain their views on the inspiration of Scripture.

Christian Scripture

Did a council of men 300 years after Christ have to tell the Christians what books were inspired by God? According to the early writers they had a clear understanding of what writings were to be held in esteem for inspiration.

“We have learned the plan of our salvation from no one else other than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us. For they did at one time proclaim the gospel in public. And, at a later period, by the will of God, they handed the gospel down to us in the Scriptures-- to be ‘the ground and pillar of our faith.’” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.414)

“There will be no light punishment upon him who either adds or subtracts anything from the Scripture.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.559)

“We have the Lord as the source of teaching-- both by the Prophets, the Gospel, and the blessed apostles.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.551)



Inspiration of Scripture

“Take up the epistle of the blessed apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached? Truly, he wrote to you under the inspiration of the Spirit.” (Clement of Rome, c. 96. ANF 1.18)

“The object of Christianity is that we should become wise. This can be proved-- not only from the ancient Jewish writings, which we also use-- but particularly from those writings that were composed after the time of Jesus. The churches believe these writings to be divine.” (Origen, c. 248. ANF 4.482)

Authority of Scripture

Having scripture is one thing, but understanding its proper use is another. Scripture is not intended to be somewhat observed or barely heeded. The inspired word is meant to be authoritative in our lives and in our churches.

“In order that we might acquire an ampler and more authoritative knowledge of Himself, His counsels, and His will, God has added a written revelation for the benefit of everyone whose heart is set on seeking Him.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.32)

“[I]t is possible in no other way to explain and bring within the reach of human knowledge this higher and diviner Logos as the Son of God, than by means of those Scriptures, which alone were inspired by the Holy Spirit: the Gospels and Epistles, and the Law and the Prophets, according to the declaration of Christ Himself.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.252)

“The heretics have boldly falsified the sacred Scriptures, rejected the canons of the ancient faith, and ignored Christ.” (Eusebius, quoting Caius, c. 215. ANF 5.602)

“[The church] unites the Law and the Prophets in one volume with the writings of evangelists and apostles, from which she drinks in her faith.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.250)

Studying Scripture

We encourage our brothers and sisters today to make ample time for the study of God’s word. Since it is very important in our lives, homes, and churches, it makes sense that all Christians should have an abiding knowledge of it. Teachers in earlier



Inspiration of Scripture

times might have sought to limit the “average” Christian’s direct contact with the word. The early Christians, though, taught as we do today.

“Beloved, you understand the sacred Scriptures. In fact, you understand them well. You have looked very earnestly into the prophecies of God.” (Clement of Rome, c. 96. ANF 1.19)

“Give reverential attention to the prophetic Scriptures, and they will make your way plainer for escaping the eternal punishments and for obtaining the eternal prizes of God.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.93)

“More strength will be given to you, and the knowledge of the heart will be increased more and more, as you examine more fully the Scriptures, old and new, and read through the complete volumes of the spiritual books.” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.507)

“Let no day pass without reading some portion of the sacred Scriptures-- at such convenient hour as offers. And give some time to meditation. Never cast off the habit of reading in the Holy Scriptures. For nothing feeds the soul and enriches the mind as much as those sacred studies do.” (Theonas of Alexandria, c. 300. ANF 6.161)



Inspiration of Scripture

Did the Christians of the second and third centuries believe they had the completed writings of the New Testament? Does the New Testament support their belief?

Where are we to find authority for our actions? Did the early Christians hold the same belief?

Do the early Christians seem to have believed that more miraculous revelation (and Scripture) was coming to them?

Why is it important to study Scripture regularly?



Purpose and Mode of Baptism

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

PURPOSE OF
BAPTISM (*ACTS*
2:38, 22:16,
ROMANS 6:3-5, 1
PETER 3:21)

MODE OF
BAPTISM (*JOHN*
3:23, ACTS 8:38)

SUBJECT TO
BAPTISM (*MARK*
16:16)

Baptism, biblically speaking, is a very easy subject to grasp if one does not enter the study with preconceived notions concerning its purpose or mode. However, this is hardly the case in the religious world today. The early Christian writers had a great deal to say about baptism and most was very simple and biblical. However, as the years and centuries continued these individuals moved further from the simplicity of the inspired word.

Purpose of Baptism

Universally the early church agreed on the purpose of baptism. A few statements have been chosen to summarize the whole.

“Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water... We indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement. However, we come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and the trust in Jesus in our spirit.” (Barnabus, c. 70-130. ANF 1.144)

“In the same way, therefore, we also repent of our sins, renounce our iniquities, and are purified by baptism. Thereby, we speed back to the eternal light as children of the Father.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.217)

“Now, the teaching is laid down that ‘without baptism, salvation is attainable by no one.’ This is based primarily on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, ‘Unless one is born of water he has not life.’” (Tertullian, c. 198. ANF 3.674-675)

“Unless a man has been baptized and born again, he cannot attain unto the kingdom of God.” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.542)



Purpose and Mode of Baptism

“The blessed apostle sets forth and proves that baptism is that by which the old man dies and the new man is born, saying, ‘He saved us by the washing of regeneration.’” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.388)

Mode of Baptism

In what way should baptism be administered? By immersion or by sprinkling? The early Christians generally agreed that immersion was the acceptable form of baptism. The earliest reference to sprinkling is found in the *Didache*, which is an early gathering of teachings that may be dated around the mid-100s. In this case it was of necessity (the quotation is included below). The earliest author otherwise that advocated for sprinkling as an acceptable form of baptism in the event of life-threatening illness is Cyprian in the mid-200s (not quoted). Also included is a reference to the practice of baptizing a person three times. This was a common practice in the early church but is not found in scripture.

“The apostles themselves also gave them the seal of the preaching [baptism]. Accordingly, they descended with them into the water and ascended again.” (Hermas, c. 150. ANF 2.49)

“With great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty of preparation, and without expense, a man is dipped in water. Amid the utterance of some few words, he is moistened, and then rises up again, not much the [physically] cleaner. Because of that, the consequent attainment of eternity is esteemed the more incredible.” (Tertullian, c. 198. ANF 3.669)

“And, indeed, it is not once-- but three times-- that we are immersed into the three Persons, at the mention of each individual name.” (Tertullian, c. 213. ANF 3.623)

“Concerning baptism, baptize in this manner: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit-- in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water. if you cannot baptize into cold water, baptize in warm. But if you do not have either, pour out water three times upon the person’s head in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (*Didache*, date unknown. ANF 1.379)



Purpose and Mode of Baptism

Subject to Baptism

Lastly, let us consider the question of “who is subject to baptism”? Is it intended for adults alone or also for children and infants? Initially the early Christians only baptized those who were old enough to have and confess faith and repentance. Cyprian emerged as the earliest outspoken proponent of infant baptism. Some of his reasoning is here referenced. His view coincided with a false teaching concerning the inheritance of sins.

“And so, according to the circumstances, disposition, and even the age of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable. This is particularly true in the case of little children... Let the children come, then, while they are growing up. Let them come while they are learning-- while they are learning where to come. Let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the remission of sins?” (Tertullian, c. 198. ANF 3.678)

“Even to the greatest sinners and to those who have sinned much against God, when they subsequently believe, remission of sins is granted. Nobody is hindered from baptism and from grace. How much more should we shrink from hindering an infant. For he, being lately born, has not sinned-- other than, in being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth. For this reason, he more easily approaches the reception of the forgiveness of sins. For to him are remitted-- not his own sins-- but the sins of another.” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.354)



Purpose and Mode of Baptism

Did the early Christians believe baptism was necessary? What was its purpose according to them?

Did the early Christians generally support the use of sprinkling instead of immersing? Who was the earliest vocal proponent we have of its use in difficult circumstances?

How did the Christians typically baptize during the second and third centuries? How does this compare to the biblical examples we have?

What view led to Cyprian's desire for infants to be baptized? Was this view scripturally grounded and typical of early Christians (see Lesson 3)?



The Worship of God

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

WHEN AND HOW TO WORSHIP

(1 CORINTHIANS

11:23-33, 1

CORINTHIANS

16:1-2,

EPHESIANS

5:18-20, 1

TIMOTHY 2:1-2,

COLOSSIANS 4:16)

When and How to Worship

The worship of God has been taking place among the Christians since the first souls were saved in Acts 2. It is a wonderful part of the Christian life when brethren meet and together bring praise to our Creator and Savior. The early Christians also enjoyed this time with one another but, due to persecutions, they often had to meet in secret. Their secrecy caused many lies to abound among the Gentiles concerning what they were doing behind closed doors. The explanations we have concerning early Christian worship comes primarily from sources like these that seek to defend the manner in which Christians worship God.

The reader should note the linguistic differences that exist when the assemblies are described. For instance, the Lord's Supper is often referred to as the "eucharist." This word gained a unique definition in later centuries, but in the antenicene writings the word merely means "thanksgiving." The reader will also note references to the "president" of the assembly. This man was merely the individual responsible for making sure the assembly was orderly on the day in which it was assigned to them. Another word that sometimes appears is "liturgy" from Acts 13:2 (translated at "ministering".) It was used of the Christian worship and so was adopted by the early church. The reader is encouraged to consider the language as indicators of an earlier time rather than a doctrinal departure from the scriptural pattern.

"And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place. And the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the



The Worship of God

president verbally instructs us and exhorts us to imitate these good things. Then we all rise together and pray. And, as we said before, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine are brought. Then, the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability. And the people assent, saying ‘Amen.’ Then, [the eucharist] is distributed to everyone, and everyone participates in [the bread and the wine], over which thanks has been given. And a portion of it is sent by the deacons to those who are absent.” (Justin Martyr, c. 160. ANF 1.186)

“We are body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation so that, offering up prayer to God with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. God delights in this ‘violence.’ We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, and for the delay of the final consummation. We assemble to read our sacred writings.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.46)

“We assemble together with the same quietness with which we live as individuals.” (Mark Minucius Felix, c. 200. ANF 4.192)

“This prophecy refers to the bread which our Christ gave us to eat, in remembrance of His being made flesh for the sake of His believers, for whom also He suffered. And it refers to the cup which He gave us to drink, in remembrance of His own blood, with giving of thanks.” (Justin Martyr, c. 160. ANF 1.234)

“In the middle, let the reader stand up on some high place. Let him read the books of Moses, of Joshua the son of Nun, [etc.]... But when there have been two lessons individually read, let some other person sing the hymns of David... And afterwards, let a deacon or a presbyter read the Gospels... After the prayer is over, let some of the deacons attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord’s body with fear. Let others of them watch the multitude and keep them silent.” (Apostolic Constitutions, c. 390. ANF 7.421-422.)



The Worship of God

“One imitates the hoarse, warlike clanging of the trumpet. Another with his breath blowing into a pipe regulates its mournful sounds... Why should I speak of.. those great tragic vocal ravings? Why should I speak of strings set vibrating with noise? Even if these things were not dedicated to idols, they should not be approached and gazed upon by faithful Christians.” (Novatian, c. 235. ANF 5.578)

“But after you are filled, give thanks in this manner: ‘We thank you, holy Father, for your holy name which you caused to tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality, which you made known to us through Jesus your Servant. To you be the glory forever.’” (Didache, date unknown. ANF 7.380)



The Worship of God

When does the Bible tell us the Christians assembled? Which early Christian quoted said the same?

What activities did the early Christians do when they came together according to the quotations included?

What do the words “eucharist” and “president” refer to in the ante-nicene writings? Why are those words used?

What is your impression of the early Christian assemblies? Do they seem orderly or disorderly? Do they seem spiritually edifying? Give reasons for your answers.



Organization of the Church

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

LOCAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND AUTONOMY

*(TITUS 1:5, ACTS
14:23,
PHILIPPIANS 1:1,
EPHESIANS
4:11-12)*

EXALTED BISHOP (3 JOHN 9-10)

PRIESTS IN THE CHURCH (1 PETER 2:9)

A RISING HIERARCHY *(COLOSSIANS 1:18)*

The Lord built His church and designed the structure in the way He desired it to be. However, just as many today pervert the established order from the Lord so did early Christians begin to change the structure of local churches as the centuries went by. The Ante-Nicene time period reveals the seeds beginning to grow that would give rise to Catholicism and the preeminence of a single man and a single church.

Local Church Leadership and Autonomy

The New Testament knows only of local, autonomous churches with local leadership in place-- besides, of course, for the work of the apostles which had authority in Christ to teach all. This patterned continued for nearly three hundred years but was being challenged by the end of the Ante-Nicene period.

“Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original mold for its classification. Therefore, the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but one primitive church of the apostles-- from which they all [spring]. In this way, all are primitive. And all are apostolic. And they are all proved to be one in unity by their peaceful communion, title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality-- privileges that no other rule directs one than the one same tradition of the selfsame mystery.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.252)

“Therefore, appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord.” (Didache, c. 80-140? ANF 7.381)

“Preaching throughout countries and cities, the apostles appointed the first-fruits of their labors to be bishops and deacons of those who would believe afterwards. However, they first tested them by the Spirit.” (Clement of Rome, c. 96. ANF 1.16)



Organization of the Church

“It is necessary to abstain from all of these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ.” (Polycarp, c 135. ANF 1.34)

“Those square white stones which fitted exactly into each other, are apostles, bishops, teachers, and deacons, who have lived godly purity, and have acted as bishops, teachers, and deacons chastely and reverently.” (Hermas, c 150. ANF 2.14)

Exalted Bishop

Certain churches and individuals began to exalt a single bishop (overseer) over the others. This began in some places early on but became so prolific by the mid-300s that Eusebius calls James the sole elder of Jerusalem-- even though Acts makes clear that he was one of several.

“There is one bishop, along with the presbyters and deacons, my fellow servants.” (Ignatius, c. 105. ANF 1.81)

“To Caecilius Cyprian, bishop of the church of Carthage, Moyses and Maximus, presbyters, and Nicostratus and Rufinius, deacons.” (Letter to Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.366)

Priests in the Church

The New Testament does not know of a distinguished order of priests in the Lord’s church. However, this language and distinction progressed into a clergy-laity distinction over centuries. It began in a seemingly innocent manner, as one writer will explain, but grew into a serious false teaching. This should be a lesson to us to be mindful of the language that we use because language influences perception.

“Those who devote themselves to the divine Word and have no other employment but the service of God may not unnaturally... be called our Levites and priests. And those who fulfill a more distinguished office than their kinsmen will perhaps be high priests, according to the order of Aaron... Here some may object that it is somewhat too bold to apply the name of ‘high priests’ to men.” (Origen, c. 228. ANF 9.298)

“Of giving [baptism], the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right. In the next place, the presbyters and deacons-- yet not without the bishop’s authority, on account of the honor of the church.” (Tertullian, c. 198. ANF 3.677)



Organization of the Church

A Rising Hierarchy

Although the churches were autonomous initially, there was a great esteem given to the apostolic churches-- that is, the churches that were directly founded by the apostles. The church at Rome was given double esteem as they claimed two apostles as their founders (Peter and Paul). Over time, this respect changed into official lines of authority.

“What danger should we not fear from the Lord’s displeasure, when some of the presbyters, remembering neither the Gospel nor their own place... nor the bishop now placed over them, claim to themselves entire authority-- a thing that was never in any way done under our predecessors...?” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.289)

“[We do this] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known church founded and organized at Rome by.. Peter and Paul... For it is a matter of necessity that every church should agree with this church, on account of its preminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere... And this is the most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.415-416)



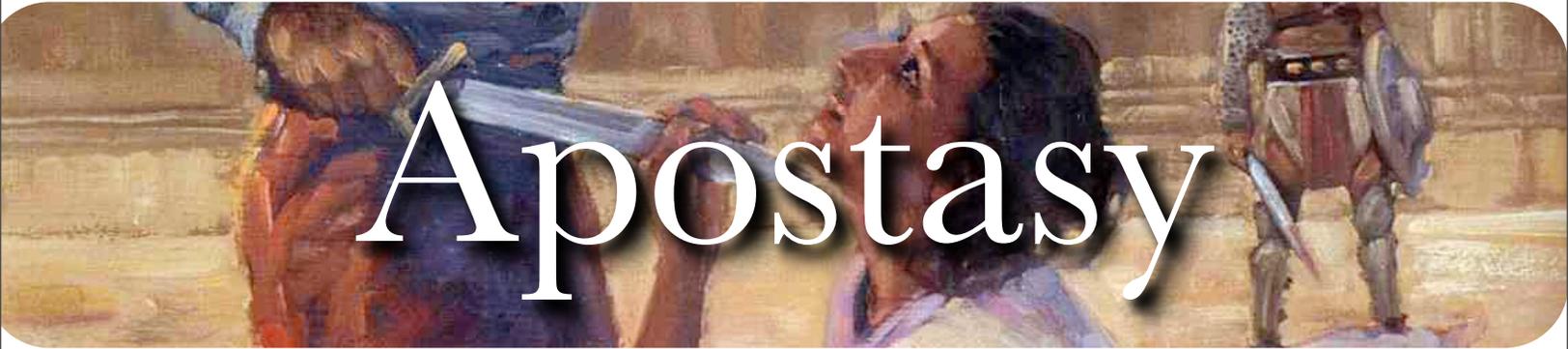
Organization of the Church

How did the apostle Paul organize the churches he established in the New Testament? Is this how the churches were organized during the Ante-Nicene period?

In the New Testament the terms “bishop” (overseer) and “presbyter” (elder) are used interchangeably. How did the early church begin to distinguish the offices?

What was the argument used to justify calling some workers in the church “priests”? What lesson can we learn from the outcome?

How did the church at Rome gain prestige and eventually power over other churches?



Apostasy

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

PREDESTINED
BY GOD
(*DEUTERONOMY*
30:19, JOSHUA
24:15, 2 PETER
3:9)

FALLING AWAY
(*GALATIANS 5:4,*
ROMANS 11:21-22)

Scripture is filled with warnings to the godly not to go back to the things of the world they have left behind. Oftentimes this teaching is brought into question and many are led to believe that a Christian cannot commit apostasy, or 'fall away.' In this lesson we will allow the early Christian to explain the universally held view on the topic of both predestination (which would prohibit the ability to fall away) and apostasy itself.

Predestined by God

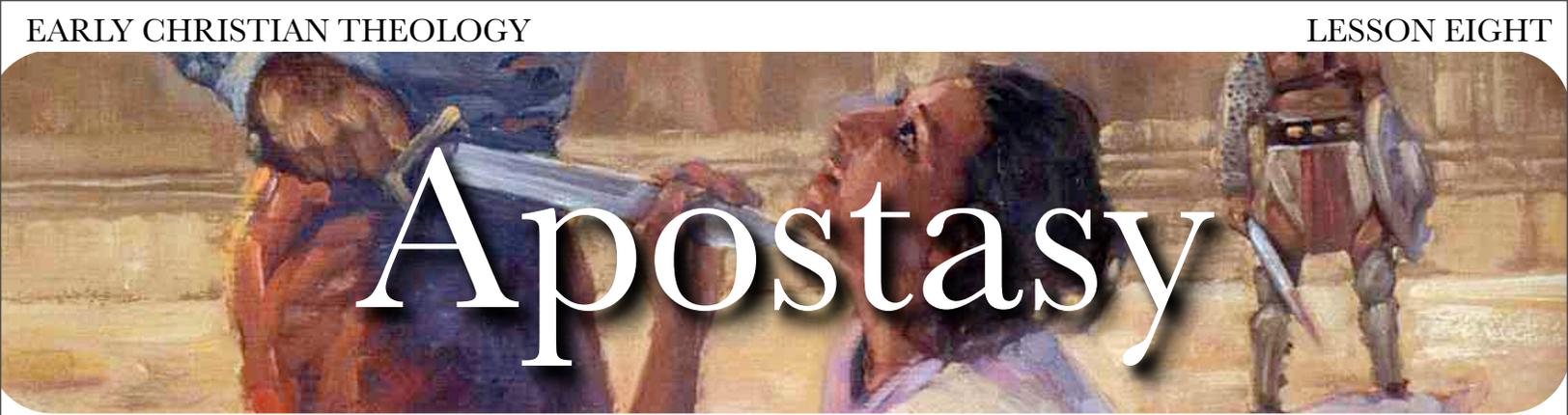
Are we predestined to salvation or condemnation? Many teach that we cannot lose our salvation as Christians because God has predestined us to be saved. The Bible is not silent on this issue and neither were the early Christians.

"In the beginning, He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God." (Justin Martyr, c. 160. ANF 1.172)

"We were not created to die. Rather, we die by our own fault. Our free will has destroyed us. We who were free have become slaves. We have been sold through sin. Nothing evil has been created by God. We ourselves have manifested wickedness. But we, who have manifested it, are able again to reject it." (Tatian, c. 160. ANF 2.69-270)

"To obey or not is in our own power, provided we do not have the excuse of ignorance." (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.353)

"You must necessarily correspond to the seed from which you sprang-- if indeed it is true that the originator of our race and our sin, Adam, will the sin which he committed." (Tertullian, c. 212. ANF 4.51)



Apostasy

“When a malignant power has begun to incite us to evil, it is quite within our power to cast the wicked suggestions away from us... Similarly, when a divine power calls us to better things, it is possible for us not to obey the call. Our freedom of will is preserved in either case.” (Origen, c. 225. ANF 4.332)

“Some persons decide that man is not possessed of free will. Rather, they assert that he is governed by the unavoidable necessities of fate and her unwritten commands. Such persons are guilty of impiety towards God Himself. For they make Him out to be the cause and author of human evils.” (Methodius, c. 290. ANF 6.342)

Falling Away

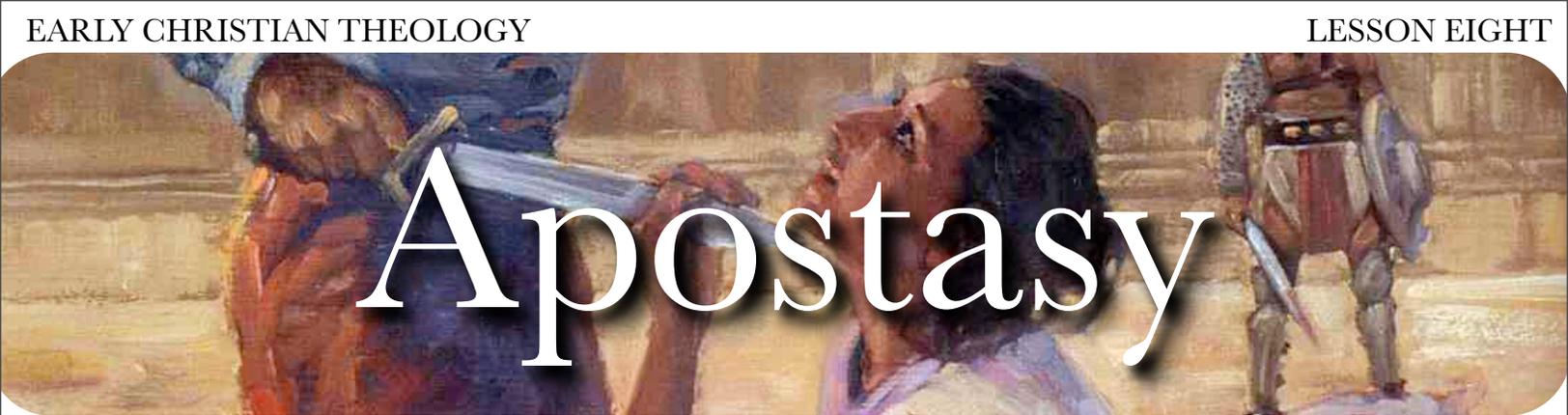
So, can a Christian, once saved, lose his/her salvation? Certainly we would point to many clear passages that repeatedly warn brethren to remain in the truth, but were these passages so clear to the Ante-Nicene believers?

“We ought therefore, brethren, carefully to inquire concerning our salvation. Otherwise, the wicked one, having made his entrance by deceit, may hurl us forth from our life.” (Barnabus, c. 70-130. ANF 1.138)

“The apostates and traitors of the church have blasphemed the Lord in their sins. Moreover, they have been ashamed of the name of the Lord by which they were called. These persons, therefore, at the end were lost unto God.” (Hermas, c. 150. ANF 2.41)

“We should not, therefore, as the presbyter remarks, be puffed up, nor be severe upon those of olden times. Rather, we should fear ourselves, least perchance, after the knowledge of Christ, if we do things displeasing to God, we obtain to further forgiveness of sins, but are shut out from His kingdom. And for that reason, Paul said, ‘For if [God] spared not the natural branches, [take heed] lest he also not spare you.’” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.499)

“The sins committed before faith are accordingly forgiven by the Lord-- not that they may be undone, but as if they had not been done.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.437)

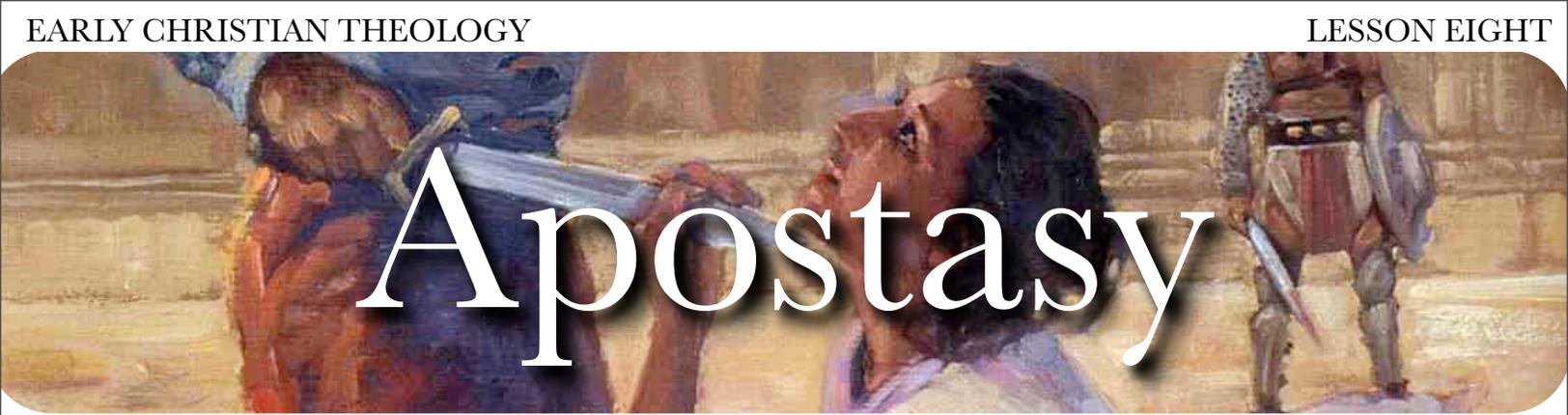


Apostasy

“There remains more than what is yet seen to be accomplished. For it is written, ‘Praise not any man before his death.’ And again, ‘Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.’ And the Lord also says, ‘He that endures to the end, the same will be saved.’” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.283)

“As to one who again denies Christ, no special previous standing can be effective to him for salvation. For anyone of us will hold it necessary that whatever is the last thing to be found in a man in this respect, that is where he will be judged. All of those things that he has previously done are wiped away and obliterated.” (Treatise on Re-Baptism, c. 257. ANF 5.674)

“There is need of continual prayer and supplication so that we do not fall away from the heavenly kingdom, as the Jews fell away, to whom this promise had first been given.” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.451)



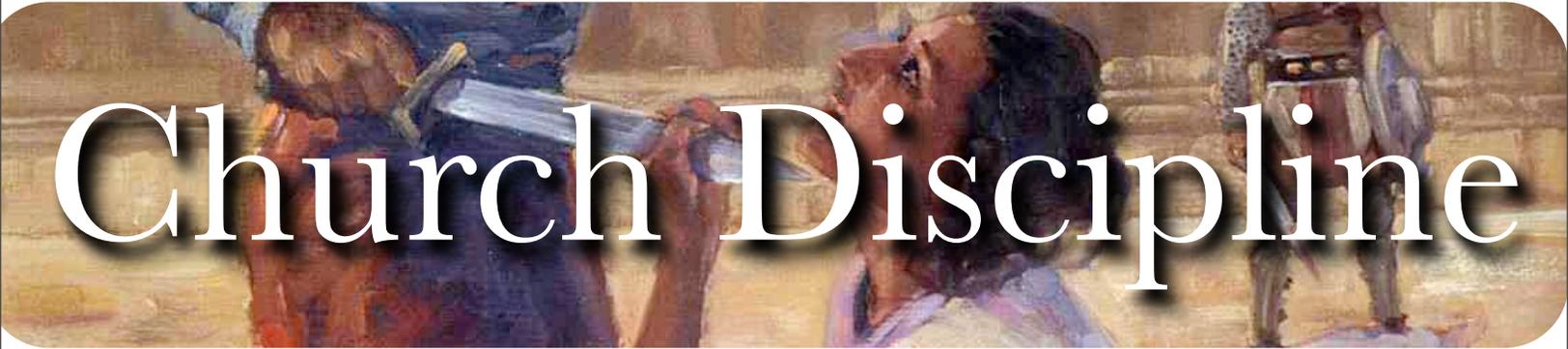
Apostasy

How does the doctrine of predestination affect the discussion of apostasy?

What was the universally held position among the early church concerning predestination of individuals to heaven or hell? Does their teaching reflect the Bible on this issue?

Can a Christian lose their salvation if they turn away from the Lord? Can anything take a Christian's salvation away if they remain faithful? Use your Bible.

What was the universally held position of the early church on the subject of falling away?



Church Discipline

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

WITHDRAWAL (*1
CORINTHIANS
5:1-5, 5:9-13*)

ACCOMPANIED
WITH REBUKE
(*1 TIMOTHY 5:20*)

RECEIVING
PENITENT BACK
(*2 CORINTHIANS
2:5-8*)

PURPOSE OF
CHURCH
DISCIPLINE (*1
CORINTHIANS
5:5-6, 2
THESSALONIANS
3:14-15*)

Church discipline refers to the efforts of churches to bring those of their own number to repentance if they have fallen back into sin. The ultimate form of church discipline is to withdraw from an individual, removing them from the church membership. These efforts are shunned by the religious world today as harsh, although church discipline is done out of love for the salvation of the individual in question. In this lesson we will allow early Christians to explain how they sought to restore one to the faith that had fallen away and compare these things to the teachings of God's word.

Withdrawal

To withdraw from one, or "mark" them, is to remove the person from the number of the church due to their lack of fellowship with God.

"In the same place also, exhortations are made. Rebukes and sacred censures are administered. That is because the work of judging is carried on among us with great seriousness... And you have the most notable example of judgment to come when anyone has sinned so grievously as to require his severance from us in prayer, in the congregation, and in all sacred matters." (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.46)

"Those persons cannot remain in God's church who have not maintained its divine and ecclesiastical discipline-- either in the manner of their life or in the peace of their character." (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.325)

Accompanied with Rebuke

A person who is being withdrawn needs to understand why



Church Discipline

that is the case and exhorted to repent. A person should not find out through a back channel that this has been done (when possible-- some refuse contact!) The early Christians had this desire as well.

“If one must censure, it is necessary also to rebuke. For it is time to wound the apathetic soul. I do not mean mortally, but salutarly, securing exemption from everlasting death by a little pain.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.228)

Receiving Penitent Back

Marking is not a permanent punishment if the individual becomes repentant and turns to the Lord. In general, the early church understood this well. One area where the church debated and struggled was regarding those who had denied the Lord in order to escape persecution. Also this discussion is not included below, the Ante-Nicene student should note that debates took place regarding the faith-deniers quite often, especially during harsh persecutions.

You [the Bishops of the church] reply that communion is indeed denied to sinners-- particularly those who have been polluted by the flesh. But you say it is only for the present. You say they are to be restored as a result of penitential pleading, in accordance with the clemency of God that prefers a sinner's repentance to his death.” (Tertullian, c. 212. ANF 4.94)

“Christians lament as dead those who have been conquered by immorality or any other sin. For they are lost and dead to God. At some future time [if they repent], they receive them as being risen from the dead. However, this is after a greater interval than in the case of those who were admitted at first. However, those who have lapsed and fallen after professing the Gospel are not placed in any office or post of any rank in the church of God.” (Origen, c. 248. ANF 4.485)

Purpose of Church Discipline

The world may struggle to understand why church discipline is necessary and commanded by God. This was also the case during the second and third centuries. The early Christians tried to explain why this procedure is to happen.



Church Discipline

“The physician is not evil to the sick person because he tells him of his fever. For the physician is not the cause of the fever; he only points out the fever. Likewise, he who reproves is not ill-disposed towards him who is diseased in soul. For he is not the cause of the transgressions on him. He only reveals the sins that are there.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.231)

“How can the medicine of permissiveness profit anyone? What if a physician hides the wound and does not all the necessary remedy of time to close the scar? To not require repentance makes the way easy for new dangers. To do that is not curing anyone. If we are honest, it is slaying him.” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.309)

“He forbids us either to salute such persons or to receive them to our hospitality. Yet, this is not harsh in the case of a man of this sort. But he admonishes Christians neither to confer nor dispute with those who are not able to handle divine things with intelligence, let through them they be seduced from the doctrine of truth.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.577)



Church Discipline

What is 'withdrawal' according to the Scriptures?

Why did the early Christians accompany withdrawal with rebuke? Is that a biblical method?

What should be done with a person who is repentant after being withdrawn from? What particular sin caused the early Christians to struggle with this?

What does the Bible say is the purpose of church discipline?



Final Judgment

GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

DESTRUCTION
OF PHYSICAL (2
PETER 3:10)

RESURRECTION
OF THE DEAD (1
THESSALONIANS
4:15-17, 1
CORINTHIANS
15:50-53)

JUDGMENT
SEAT (2
CORINTHIANS
5:10-11)

The Scriptures teach that the world is awaiting a final return of the Lord and the subsequent judgment of all creation. This reality is sometimes lost upon us as we labor and toil in the present realm to provide sustenance for ourselves, but it is nonetheless true that all we see around us will cease to exist. The early Christians also understood these truths. The reader should note that there were debates and lack of agreement concerning the events (or lack thereof) that will take place before the final judgment, but there was a consensus on the Scriptural teachings on the events of that last great day.

Destruction of the Physical

The world and the things in it have an expiration date. The Lord will cause these things to come to an end on the day in which He comes.

“The end of the world comes suddenly.” (Cyprian, c. 250. ANF 5.553)

“The belief that everything was made from nothing will be impressed upon us by that ultimate dispensation of God which will bring back all things to nothing. For ‘the very heavens will be rolled together as a scroll.’ In fact, they will come to nothing, along with the earth itself.” (Tertullian, c. 200. ANF 3.496)

Resurrection of the Dead

The physical body dissolves away at the time of death. It returns to the dust from whence it came in the beginning. It may seem impossible for a human mind to fathom, but our bodies will one day be raised up and given a new form fit for eternity. The Gnostics and others denied the resurrection



Final Judgment

during the Ante-Nicene period, but the Scripture and unity of the church on this issue is clear.

“If we please Him in this present world, we will also inherit the future world. For He promised to us that He will raise us again from the dead.” (Polycarp, c. 135. ANF 1.34)

“God will raise your flesh immortal with your soul; and then, having become immortal, you will see the Immortal, if you now believe on Him.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.91)

“When even the outward fashion of the world itself... passes away, then the whole human race will be raised again. This is in order to have its dues meted out, according to what it has merited in the period of good and evil. Thereafter, it will have these paid out through the immeasurable ages of eternity.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.54)

“By mentioning both the judgment seat and the distinction between good and bad works, he sets before us a Judge who is to award both sentences. He has thereby affirmed that all will have to be present at the tribunal in their bodies.” (Tertullian, c. 207. ANF 3.456)

Judgment Seat

It can be a fearful thing for a worldly one to consider meeting the Lord face to face in order to receive an eternal sentence. For a Christian this should not be a thing to avoid but a thing to grasp for. Through the Lord’s blood and gospel hope we can expect a warm reception. Nevertheless, all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The early church sounded this message forth to all the world.

“The advent of the Son comes indeed alike to all. However, it is for the purpose of judging and separating the believing from the unbelieving.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.556)

“He... will examine all things, and will judge righteous judgment, rendering merited rewards to each one.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.93)



Final Judgment

“We get ourselves laughed at for proclaiming that God will one day judge the world. For, like us, the poets and philosophers set up a judgment seat in the realms below.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.52)

“Everyone-- righteous and unrighteous alike-- will be brought before God the Word. For the Father has committed all judgment to Him... He, in administering the righteous judgment of the Father to everyone, assigns to each person what is righteous according to his works... ‘Righteousness is Your judgment.’ Of which voice the justification will be seen by awarding to each person that which is just. Those who have done good will be justly assigned eternal bliss. To the lovers of wickedness, there will be given eternal punishment.” (Hippolytus, c. 205. ANF 5.222)



Final Judgment

In what manner will the physical creation be destroyed according to Scripture?
How should that reality influence our lives?

Who will be resurrected from the dead? What will the resurrected bodies be like?
Do the early Christians agree with the Scripture on this issue?

Who will sit in the seat of judgment on the final day? How did the early
Christians explain this (from provided quotations)?

There were some in the Ante-Nicene time period who believed that punishment
for some would only be temporary. What Scriptures would you reference to
answer this claim?



GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

WHO GOES THERE?

*(REVELATION
20:15, 21:8)*

WHAT IS IT LIKE? *(MARK 9:42-48)*

HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? *(2 THESSALONIANS 1:9-10)*

OUTSIDE OF SCRIPTURE *(1 CORINTHIANS 4:6)*

Hell, often referred to as Gehenna in the Ante-Nicene writings, is not a topic which is pleasant to discuss in the eyes of the lost. However, this is a topic of eternal importance and it certainly affects one's view of the usage of this life. It is becoming more popular in the religious world today to completely dismiss the teaching of hell and replace it with a teaching of annihilation for sinners or universal salvation. The Scriptures do not teach these doctrines. The early church had detractors in the world as well.

Who Goes There?

Only a fool would desire to go to hell. Most people cannot fathom that they may be destined for that abode, regardless of their choices. An honest Bible student sees the end of those who do not know God and walk in truth. The early Christians saw these things as well.

“Sinners will be consumed because they sinned and did not repent.” (Hermas, c. 150. ANF 7.523)

“Eternal fire was not originally prepared for man, but for him who beguiled man and caused man to sin. I say, it it was prepared for him who is the chief of apostasy, as well as for those angels who became apostates along with him. Indeed, those angels will justly feel that fire, too. For, like him, they continue in works of wickedness, without repentance, and without turning back.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.456)

“The unrighteous, the idolators, and the fornicators all perished. So is it also now. For... the Lord declares that such persons are sent into eternal fire.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.501)



What is it Like?

The Scriptures seek to appease our curiosity concerning the experience of hell by making clear that it is not a place one would desire to be. The early Christians also sought to vividly explain their understanding of the Bible's descriptions.

“You should fear what is truly death, which is reserved for those who will be condemned to the eternal fire. It will afflict those who are committed to it even to the end.” (Letter to Diognetus, c. 125-200. ANF 1.29)

“Eternal fire is prepared for sinners. The Lord has plainly declared this, and the rest of the Scriptures demonstrate it.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.401)

“There is neither limit nor termination of these torments. There, the intelligent fire burns the limbs and restores them. It feeds on them and nourishes them... That penal fire is not fed by the waste of those who burn, but is nourished by the unexhausted eating away of their bodies. However, no one except a profane man hesitates to believe that those who do not know God are deservedly tormented as impious, as unrighteous persons.” (Mark Minucius Felix, c. 200. ANF 4.195)

How Long Will it Last?

Hell is awful. None of us like to consider that our choices could one day lead us there. We may even find ourselves trying to explain away the Scriptures which so clearly depict the duration of this place of punishment for the wicked.

“He goes to the everlasting punishment of fire.” (Justin Martyr, c. 160. ANF 1.166)

“Christ foretold that Satan would be sent into the fire with his host, along with the men who follow him, and they will be punished for an endless duration.” (Justin Martyr, c. 160. ANF 1.172)

“We, however, so understand the soul's immortality as to believe it to be ‘lost’-- not in the sense of destruction-- but of punishment, that is, in Gehenna... If, therefore, anyone will violently suppose that the destruction of the soul and the flesh in Gehenna amounts to a final annihilation of the two substances-- and not to their penal treatment-- let him recollect that the fire of Gehenna is eternal.” (Tertullian, c. 210. ANF 3.569)



Outside of Scripture

We would be remiss if we did not note that many of the Ante-Nicene writers taught some things about hell that were beyond the teachings of Scripture. Some of the opinions expressed reveal a common teaching concerning the varying types of punishments of hell.

“Those who have not know God and do evil are condemned to death. However, those who have known God and have seen His mighty works, but still continue in evil, will be chastised doubly, and will die forever.” (Hermas, c. 150. ANF 2.50)

“He has prepared darkness suitable to persons who oppose the light, and He has inflicted an appropriate punishment upon those who try to avoid being subject to Him... He has prepared the eternal fire for the ringleader of the apostasy-- the devil-- and for those that revolted with him.” (Irenaus, c. 180. ANF 1.523)



Hell

Who will be sent to hell according to the Scriptures?

How did the early Christians describe hell? Do the quotations harmonize with the teachings of Scripture?

Is hell a temporary or permanent abode? Support your answer with Scripture. Did the early Christians teach the same?

How did the early Christians go beyond the teachings of the Bible concerning hell? What are the dangers of going beyond the written word?



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GOD'S WORD ON THIS ISSUE:

WHO GOES THERE?

*(REVELATION
3:20-21, 20:12,
21:7)*

WHAT IS IT LIKE?

*(REVELATION
4:2-11)*

HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? *(1*

JOHN 2:25, 5:13)

OUTSIDE OF SCRIPTURE *(1*

*CORINTHIANS
4:6)*

Heaven. We sing of its glory. We have our citizenship there. We give our lives when necessary to walk its street. The perfect fellowship with God and joy to be found in this home for the soul are worth everything to the Christian. For those who have lived through fiery persecutions and have witness friends and loved ones killed for Christ desire it fervently. In this lesson we will let the early Christians speak of the hope that they longed for after this life ends.

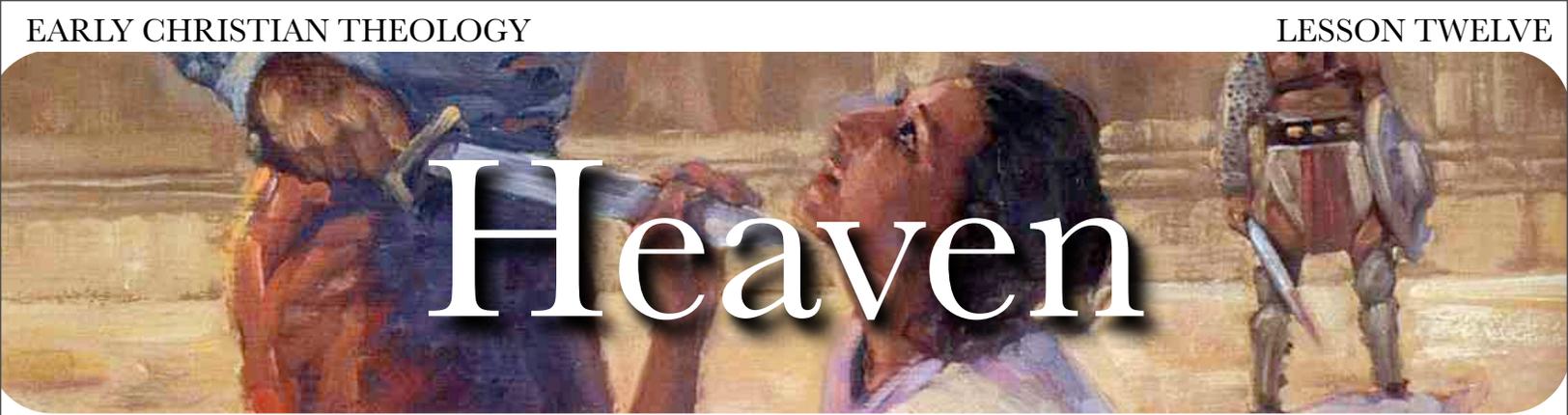
Who goes there?

Heaven is not for everyone. That is to say, God desires all to come to Him there, but most refuse the invitation until it is too late. Who did the early brethren believe would inherit this home?

[Account of Justin Martyr death] “Rusticus the prefect said, ‘Do you suppose, then, that you will ascend into heaven to receive some recompense?’ Justin replied, ‘I do not suppose it, but I know and am fully persuaded of it.’” (Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs, c. 160. ANF 1.306)

“We defend our own procedure when we say that our object is to reform the human race. This can be done either by the threats of punishments (which we are persuaded are necessary for the whole world, and which perhaps are not without use to those who are to endure them) or else by the promises made to those who have lived virtuous lives. In these promises are contained the statements regarding the blessed rest that is to be found in the kingdom of God, reserved for those who are worthy of become His subjects.” (Origen, c. 248. ANF 4.501)

“He... will examine all things, and will judge righteous judgment, rendering merited awards to each. To those who



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seek immortality by patient endurance in well-doing, He will give joy, peace, rest, and an abundance of good things.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.108)

What is it Like?

The hope is almost beyond words. Men attempt feebly to explain the nature of this place and are yet unable to fully capture its glory. Allow the early Christians their attempt at a description.

“There will be no more meat, because there will be no more hunger. There will be no more drinking, for there will be no more thirst. There will be no more marriage, because there will be no more child-bearing. There will be no more eating and drinking, because there will be no more labor and toil. Death, too, will cease. So there will be no more need of the nutriment of food.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.593)

“We are persuaded that when we are removed from the present life we will live another life, better than the present one. It will be a heavenly life, not an earthly one. For we will abide near God, and with God, free from all change or suffering in the soul. We will not abide as flesh (even though we will have flesh), but as heavenly spirit.” (Athenagoras, c. 175. ANF 2.148)

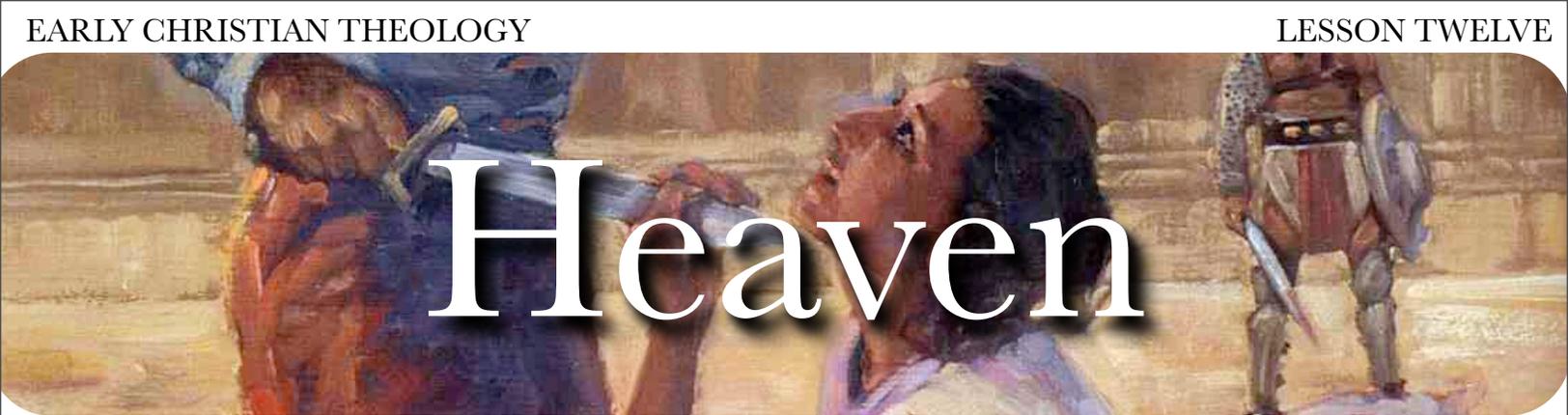
“After the [Last Judgment], there is neither death nor repeated resurrections. But we will be the same as we are now, and still unchanged. That is, we will be the servants of God, ever with God, clothed with the proper substance of eternity.” (Tertullian, c. 197. ANF 3.54)

How Long Will it Last?

Is there a time limit placed on our visit to perfect harmony with God? All Christians have agreed that this is not the case.

“He will enjoy the immortal fruit of the resurrection... A blessed time waits for him. He will be joyful for an eternity without grief, living again above with the fathers.” (Second Clement, c. 150. ANF 7.523)

“But to those who worship the eternal God, they will inherit everlasting life.” (Theophilus, c. 180. ANF 2.108-109)



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Outside of Scripture

Just as many early Christians taught that there would be varying levels of punishment in hell, so many taught varying levels of reward in heaven. Again, it must be noted that these things cannot be found in the Scripture and as such should not be regarded as the word of God. However, since we are studying the early writers it is fitting to allow them to reveal the teachings that often appeared among them.

“The highest heaven is the heaven of wisdom. The second, of understanding. The third, of counsel. The fourth, of might. The fifth, of knowledge. The sixth, of piety. The seventh, of God’s fear.” (Victorinus, c. 280. ANF 7.342)

“The Lord does not profess to give the same honors to all. Rather, to some he promises that they will be numbered in the kingdom of heaven. To others, they are promised the inheritance of the earth. And to still others, there is promised [the privilege] to see the Father.” (Methodius, c. 290. ANF 6.332)

“There are various abodes according to the worth of those who have believed.” (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195. ANF 2.506)



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Who can expect a heavenly home according to the Scriptures?

How did the early Christians describe heaven? Do the quotations harmonize with the teachings of Scripture?

Is heaven a temporary or permanent abode? Support your answer with Scripture. Did the early Christians teach the same?

How did the early Christians go beyond the teachings of the Bible concerning heaven? Even in this there are real dangers in going beyond the written word. What are they?
