

The Theology of the Church Fathers

Theology part 2: Defining the Faith

The world of the early church was inundated with many struggles. The pagan philosophers dismissed the religions of the world as fables and the hopes of simpletons. The other major world religions fought against the Christians as atheists and antagonists against the common good. Against these major challenges, the Church Fathers fought back with strong defenses of the faith both emphasizing the intellectual side of Christianity but also defending the truths of the faith. These defenses from one side of the theological writings of the early church. The second side focused inward to the Church herself. People external to Christianity were not the only people causing challenges for the church. Those who were inside the church also caused many challenges. Through heretical movements, misinformation, or a lack of good education in the faith, many different ideologies, movements, and ideas spread across the Christian world. Some thought that they needed to be perfect in order to be saved. Others thought that they needed to fight against the pagan religion in order to bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Some thought the best course of action was to remove themselves from the world and become hermits in the desert. Yet, what was true? What was the main message of Christianity? How do we understand this new faith? The Church Fathers spent considerable time and energy defining the faith and clarifying the truths contained in Scripture, tradition, and the councils.

Definitions of the Faith

Through the Church Fathers, Christianity set itself apart from the other world religions as not just a belief system but a rational and educated body of believers. Most other world religions defended their existences through simple adages that emphasized the necessity of belief. The most common element of the religion was simply to believe that it was true. Hinduism was the dominant social structure of India and therefore everyone followed it. Buddhism touted itself as a religion of philosophical ideals that manifested themselves in life teachings. Judaism proved itself by its history, through its stories, and expression of the one God. Christianity was quite the opposite of all these faiths. Although most converts to Christianity understood that their conversation was the result of meeting a person, Jesus, who is God being raised from the dead, even from the start Christianity sought deeper truths than an experience. For both the Church Fathers and the early Christians, faith was a way of understanding both God and the world. Christianity preached truths as well as a person; it claimed a wholistic understanding of the world instead of just belief. Christianity introduced a new type of believing not seen before in the history of world religions.

The Church Fathers understood one central aspect of Christianity that dominated both their writings and purpose: truth. Christianity is about truth: truth about the nature of God, truth about the nature of humanity, truth about the nature of the universe, and truth about religion. Truth is the foundation of the Christian religion and message. Within this strongly held belief in truth was the great desire of the Church Fathers to express these truths and make them available to the

world. The second aspect of their theological writing is the definition of these truths and to express them in such a way as to promote these truths through their writings.

As a new religion, many struggled to understand the basic elements of the faith. For most religions this was not an issue. For the Greeks and Romans, defining the nature of a god or the processes through which we pray or worship a god was not important. Proper worship and belief was all that mattered. Even for Judaism, definitions only applied to the laws. God was unknowable, prayer was communal, and humanity was not a central to the faith as the understanding of identity. Christians had their work cut out for them. Who is God? What is meant by a Trinity of God? How is this monotheism or not polytheism? What should a Christian do? What is the purpose of the Christian life? These questions and many more were given deep and complex answers so as to dismiss confusion and doubt about the truths of Christianity.

Christianity was not limited to theological issues. This new faith encompassed everything. From the nature of the human person to its purpose. From the interworking of Church life to the best form of society. From the proper expression of religion to the social structure. All were available to the Church Fathers. Great writers like St. Augustine wrote the *City of God* to emphasize the best form of government and emphasize the importance and necessity of government. The scope of their writings showed the importance of Christianity as an all-encompassing religion which reflected the truths of the world.

From these early writers comes the foundation of the basics of Christianity. These great thinkers, from reason, Scriptures, tradition, and prayer, formed the basics of Christian thought which would form the core beliefs for the rest of the Christianity. I cannot express enough the power and weight of their writings for our beliefs today.

St. Ambrose of Milan

Around 340 in Rome, Aurelius Ambrosius was born to a good Christian family. During his infancy, the story reported, a group of bees swarmed around him and landed on his face. The bees caused no harm to the infant but left a drop of honey as they left. Those who witnessed this event predicted that this child would become a powerful speaker.

Ambrose grew up around his two siblings Satyrus and Marcellina. Following the death of his father, Ambrose was sent to Rome for his education. He studied law, literature, and rhetoric with the plans of becoming a council man, prefect, or governor like his father. Around 372, Ambrose was made the governor of Liguria and Emilia, which made his headquarters Milan. A place that he would stay for the rest of his life.

In 374, two years later, the Bishop of Milan died leaving the diocese vacant. As governor, Ambrose attended the funeral for both political and social reasons. For social reasons he attended the funeral as a sign of respect to the deceased bishop and the Church. As governor he attended the funeral to keep peace between the Arian Christians and the Nicene Christians. Even though the matter of Christ's humanity and divinity had been settled by the Council of Nicaea about 50 years prior, tensions were still high between the two groups. While at the funeral, he was asked

to give an address. The address he gave so impressed the people that they began calling for him to become bishop. Ambrose had not been baptized. The Nicene Christians liked him for his beliefs and the Arian Christians like him for his charity on theological matters.

Ambrose refused the call to become bishop and ran. He attempted to hide from the crowd who was now chasing after him to make him their bishop. Seeking the refuge of his friend, Ambrose hid in his house. When the order came to his friend calling for Ambrose to become bishop, he gave him up to the crowd. Within 8 days, Ambrose was baptized and consecrated bishop of Milan. A new life had now begun.

Ambrose was plagued with several challenges. Now a new convert, he lacked any training in the faith. Normally the process of conversion took several years with extensive training. He got none of that. A priest of Rome, name Simplician, tutored him on the basics of the Christian faith. Yet, he took to the office with vigor. He began by donating his land and money to the poor, which made him widely popular and, at times, more popular than the emperor. His new education and position led him to spend great amounts of time studying the Old Testament and the Greek writers.

Later in his life as bishop, he met a young wily man named Augustine. Augustine was greatly impressed with his preaching and ability to synthesize the Christian message using the Old and New Testaments. They began long and complex arguments about the nature of faith and the truths of Christianity. Through these conversations, Augustine reevaluated his life and decided to be baptized by Ambrose.

We cannot dismiss both the intelligence and political savvy of Ambrose. During his life as Bishop of Milan, he tried to put an end to Arian Christianity. At first his attempts were philosophical. He started public debated with them to help encourage the truths of the faith and to show the errors of their ways. They thought that they could be one step ahead of him by appealing to those in positions of high authority in Milan to stop him. Yet, Ambrose was always one step ahead of them. As the Arians increased in strength, it looked like Ambrose was going to be defeated in his attempts to rid the city of their teachings. Emperor Valentinian II and his mother, Justine, became strong supporters of the Arians. They demanded that some of the churches in Milan be given to the Arians for their form of worship. Ambrose refused this order and had to appear before a civic council. Defending the faith, he said “if you demand my person, I am ready to submit: carry me to prison or to death, I will not resist; but I will never betray the church of Christ. I will not call upon the people to succor me; I will die at the foot of the altar rather than desert it. The tumult of the people I will not encourage: but God alone can appease it.

The council did not approve of his reasoning and order the churches to be given to the Arians. Ambrose sought some political help who eventually sacked the city instead of helping. Ambrose remained to help the people while the governor fled. A year later, the governor was back and demanded the churches. Bishop Ambrose with his congregation, barricaded themselves in the church to prevent it being confiscated. The order was rescinded.

Ambrose was not out of trouble yet. When Emperor Theodosius married Justine, he excommunicated Theodosius for the massacre of 7000 people. The emperor was then required to do several months of penance showing the incredible power and influence of St. Ambrose.

Coming to the close of his life, he retired to the city of Bologna and assisted the church. Ambrose passed away two years later. He was one of the 1st four men to be named doctors of the Church.

On the Holy Spirit

The nature of the Holy Spirit was as hotly contested as the nature of Jesus. Although Jesus' humanity and divinity usually take center stage in the annals of the issues of the early church, the Holy Spirit was also a central issue. Around 380, this issue hit Milan. During a smaller council called the Council of Damascus, the nature of the Holy Spirit was hotly debated. Some at the council declared that the Holy Spirit is merely an agent of the Father and the Son who manifests the work of them both. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is not divine and only the Son is divine. The Council settled that the Holy Spirit is indeed divine and properly a person of the divine Trinity.

Following the Council of Damascus, Ambrose set out to defend and define the nature of the Holy Spirit. With his mastery of the Greek language, he poured through the writings of the Greek Fathers to get their insights. Although new to the western churches, the nature of the Holy Spirit had already been an issue and resolved in the east. Therefore, reading the Greek Fathers helped to understand their reasoning and their conclusion regarding the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

He finished his work that has several names depending on translation and source, either "on the mysteries of the faith," "on divine mysteries," or "on the Holy Spirit." Regardless of the title, he used this work to promote the truth about the nature of the Holy Spirit. Some commentators chide Ambrose for his circular logic, poor use of reasoning, and misquoting the fathers. Ambrose, however, set out for a different task leading to these criticisms. He was not concerned with the logic and structure of the Greek fathers but instead put into his own logical system. The work has been hailed as one of the great works of the early church on the nature of the Holy Spirit and truths regarding the nature of the Trinity.