



TERTULLIAN c.150 – 229

Tertullian, classified as one of the early church fathers, was a notable early Christian apologist. He was born about 150 A.D. in the city of Carthage in North Africa. Both of his parents were pagan, and his father was a centurion. Tertullian received a thorough education in the knowledge of the Romans and the Greeks, and he apparently practiced law in Rome before his return to Carthage and conversion. His writings indicate that he did not become a Christian until he was in his thirties or forties.

Once Tertullian converted to Christianity, he held nothing back. He used his vast learning in the cause of Christ. At the risk of his life, he wrote several works to the Romans, defending Christianity and attempting to persuade the authorities to halt their senseless persecution.

Tertullian apparently served as an elder or presbyter in Carthage, completely devoting his life to the ministry of Christ. Not only did he write apologetic works to the Romans, but he also composed a considerable number of writings in which he defended orthodox Christianity against various heretics. Tertullian also wrote exhortations for the church itself. He lived during an era in which the church was coming to grips with the reality that Christ had not returned within the expected time frame of the earliest Christians. Tertullian often felt that the leadership of the church was growing complacent as it sought to find its place in a secular world which would be its home for the long haul.

Until the time of Tertullian nearly all Christian works had been written in Greek. Although Tertullian was fluent in Greek and wrote several works in Greek, he penned most of his works in Latin – in order to benefit the growing number of western Christians who knew only Latin. This effort has often earned him the title of “The Father of Latin Christianity.” In this effort Tertullian often developed Latin terminology to express ideas of Christian theology that had previously been unique to the Greek language. He is well known for being the first to use the words “substance” and “person” to define God. It is in Tertullian’s writings that we first find the Latin word “Trinity” to describe the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whom he taught were “one God in three persons.” This remains a classic Trinitarian formula to this day. He also made a great contribution to Christology, the branch of theology which seeks to understand the person of Jesus Christ and how divinity and humanity are related in him. It is Tertullian who gives us the formula later canonized by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, teaching that Christ is “one person in two natures.”

Tertullian is the author of many apologetic and theological works and is one of the most quotable of the Early Church Fathers. His is the famous phrase “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” And criticizing the reliance on pagan philosophy that he detected in many heretics, he coined yet another famous phrase: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” He, who had written so outspokenly about martyrdom and persecution, died peacefully sometime after 229 A.D.