

# CHURCH HISTORY 2: THE PATRISTIC CHURCH

## Part 2 of Church History. Lunch & Learn.

Peter Foxwell. The Cornerstone Church. October 19, 2025.

### A TIME OF DEVELOPMENT

The Patristic era (200-500 AD) was a time of significant ecclesial and theological development. The Christian movement transitioned from a persecuted minority to the official religion of the Roman Empire; church government evolved from its primitive state, theological councils codified key doctrines, and worship practices shifted from informal, home-based gatherings to formalized ceremonial rites in public buildings.

### THEOLOGICAL ISSUES AND ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

The most significant theological issue during the Patristic era was the understanding of the nature of the Holy Trinity, particularly the Person of Jesus Christ and his Incarnation.

Heresy Name	Definition	Proponents	Opponents
Arianism	Denied full divinity of Christ, claimed created being	Arius	Athanasius, Nicaea Council
Apollinarianism	Denied Christ had human rational mind	Apollinaris of Laodicea	Gregory Nazianzus, Constantinople 381
Nestorianism	Divided Christ humanity & divinity into 2 persons	Nestorius	Cyril Alexandria, Ephesus Council
Eutychianism	Christ has only 1 nature, fusion of divine & human	Eutyches	Chalcedon Council
Docetism	Claimed Christ's physical body was illusion	Gnostic groups	Ignatius Antioch, Early Fathers
Adoptionism	Christ merely man adopted as God's Son	Theodotus Byzantium	Hippolytus Rome, Tertullian

## **Arius and Arianism**

## **Athanasius and Orthodox Christology**

### **The Ecumenical Councils**

Ecumenical councils are official gatherings of bishops and church leaders from the entire Christian Church, convened to rule on significant matters of Christian doctrine and church practice that affect the universal Church.

- First Council of Nicaea, 325 AD. Condemned Arianism; defined the divinity of Christ as "of one substance" (*homoousios*) with the Father; produced the original Nicene Creed; and set the date for Easter.
- First Council of Constantinople, 381 AD. Expanded Nicene Creed, including divinity of the Holy Spirit..
- Council of Ephesus, 431 AD. Affirmed Mary as Theotokos ("God-bearer"); condemned Nestorianism (which taught that Jesus Christ consisted of two separate persons—one divine and one human—rather than a single person with both divine and human natures united); defended the unity of Christ's person.
- Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD. Defined the two natures of Christ (divine and human) in one person; rejected Monophysitism (Jesus Christ has only one nature, which is divine); issued canons on episcopal authority.

# **THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE**

Which books belong in the New Testament?.

The universal church came to accept the 27 NT books because they met specific criteria such as apostolic authorship, doctrinal consistency, and widespread acceptance within the church.

- AD 45-96: The books and letters of the NT were written.
- AD 250: The theologian, Origen, made a list of the 27 NT books.
- AD 393: The Council of Hippo formally endorsed the NT canon found in Athanasius's festal letter written in AD 367.

## **SIGNIFICANT PATRISTIC ERA CHURCH LEADERS**

### **Origen of Alexandria**

### **The Cappadocian Fathers**

The three fathers were:

- Basil the Great (AD 330–379). Bishop of Caesarea.
- Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335–c. 395). Bishop of Nyssa.
- Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389): Bishop of Constantinople.

### **John Chrysostom**

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) was Archbishop of Constantinople, renowned for his powerful preaching and public speaking, which earned him the Greek surname "Chrysostom," meaning "golden-mouthed."

## **Jerome**

St. Jerome, born around 342-347 AD in Stridon (in present-day Croatia), was a highly learned early Christian priest, theologian, and biblical scholar.

## **Augustine of Hippo**

St. Augustine (354–430) served as the bishop of Hippo (modern Annaba, Algeria) and is one of the most influential theologians and philosophers.

# **ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP**

In the Patristic era (ca. 200–500 AD), Christian ecclesial leadership evolved from New Testament patterns into a more formalized threefold hierarchy.

Initially, the church was led by elders (also known as presbyters/overseers) and deacons, who served within local congregations.

By the early 2nd century, a single bishop began to preside over a city or major church, with elders/presbyters and deacons serving alongside him.

## **Patriarchal Sees**

Patriarchal sees were the chief episcopal (bishop-led) centers, led by prominent bishops (patriarchs), who exercised authority over large regions.

By the mid-5th century, five primary patriarchal sees (the Pentarchy) were recognized due to their direct links to an apostle: Rome (founded by Peter), Constantinople (founded by Andrew), Alexandria (founded by Mark), Antioch (founded by Peter), and Jerusalem (led by James, the brother of Jesus).

The Patriarchy of Rome was recognized as preeminent due to its connection to the apostle Peter and the city's historical and political significance.

## **LITURGY FOR WORSHIP**

As gathered worship evolved, it became more formal, and liturgies evolved for use in local churches.

The following works contain examples of liturgical practices:

- The Didache (1st–2nd century).
- Justin Martyr's First Apology (mid-2nd century).
- The Apostolic Tradition (attributed to Hippolytus, c. 215).
- The Liturgy of St. James (developed by the 4th century).
- The Liturgies of St. Basil and St. Chrysostom (late Patristic era).

## **MONASTICISM**

The origins of Christian monasticism can be traced to the late third and early fourth centuries AD, with foundational figures and practices emerging primarily in Egypt and eventually spreading to the broader Christian world.

- Withdrawal from Society
- Asceticism
- Seeking Perfection