

PRESCRIPTION AGAINST HERETICS

TERTULLIAN (c. 160–c. 220)

The early Christians faced a dilemma: Was it permissible, or even desirable, to seek formal education in the schools of the Roman Empire, or should they isolate themselves from the surrounding culture to avoid the dangers to their faith posed by pagan learning? On the one hand, they could more effectively evangelize among the educated classes of the Empire if they could explain the faith in terms familiar to those steeped in Greek philosophy or Latin literature. On the other, however, philosophy promoted argumentation rather than faith; much Greek and Latin literature teemed with immorality and references to pagan gods.

Tertullian, a Carthaginian lawyer, blamed Greek philosophy for the growth of heresy. He saw no need for Christian teaching to be explained rationally; indeed, he argued that he “believed because it was absurd” that God should have redeemed mankind by Christ’s Incarnation as a helpless infant and His death on a Cross.

... These are “the doctrines” of men and “of demons” produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world’s wisdom: this the Lord called “foolishness” and “chose the foolish things of the world”¹ to confound even philosophy itself. For (philosophy) it is which is the material of the world’s wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves 5 instigated by philosophy. From this source came the Aeons, and I know not what infinite forms, and the trinity of man in the system of Valentinus, who was of Plato’s school. From the same source came Marcion’s better god, with all his tranquility; he came of the Stoics. Then, again, the opinion that the soul dies is held by the Epicureans; while the denial of the restoration of the body 10 is taken from the aggregate school of all the philosophers; also, when matter is made equal to God, then you have the teaching of Zeno; and when any doctrine is alleged touching a god of fire, then Heraclitus comes in.

¹I Corinthians 1:27

The Ante-Nicene Fathers, edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), III: 246.

The same subject-matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved. Whence comes evil? Why is it permitted? What is the origin of man? and in what way does he come? Besides the question which Valentinus has very lately proposed—Whence comes
 5 God? Which he settles with the answer, From *enthymesis* and *ectroma*. Unhappy Aristotle! who invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down an art so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh in its arguments, so productive of contentions—embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing. Whence spring
 10 those “fables and endless genealogies”² and “unprofitable questions”³ and “words which spread like a cancer?”⁴ From all these, when the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names *philosophy* as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says, “See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary
 15 to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost.”⁵ He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, whilst it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects.

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy⁶ and the Church; what between heretics and Christians?
 20 Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,”⁷ who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition
 25 after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides....

²I Timothy 1:4

³Titus 3:9

⁴II Timothy 2:17

⁵Colossians 2:8

⁶Plato's school in Athens

⁷The Porch of Solomon referred to a part of the Temple in Jerusalem where the Apostles preached (Acts 3:11).