

“Christian History is Black History”



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Samuel Doyle / General Adult

Tertullian of Carthage

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

Born in Carthage Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, Tertullian of Carthage was one of the earliest and most influential Christian writers in the Latin-speaking world, solidifying him as the father of Latin Christianity and a trailblazer for Western theology as a whole. Moreover, this African church father lived from 155 - 220 AD and was known for his fierce defense of Christians against early heresies and common accusations against Christians in his day. In so doing, he gained the reputation of being a sharp thinker and a moral rigorist; advocating in his writing for a Christian theology that produced Christians who lived by high moral standards, not compromising with the worldliness of Roman culture.

The church owes a great debt of gratitude to this African theologian, primarily because he helped shape how Christians talk about God, Christ, sin, and the Church; setting the tone for Christian theology. When an early heretic, Praxeas, taught that the Father, Son and Spirit are mere “modes” of the same person, Tertullian wrote his *Adversus Praxeas*. In this work, he argued that the God we encounter in Scripture is neither three gods nor one person wearing three masks; rather that He is one God, having one *substance* and three *persons*. He formulated the phrase *Trinitas* or “Trinity,” providing us with one of the most important elements of Christian doctrine.

On a personal note, I have found Tertullian’s emphasis on the importance of Scripture over and above human philosophy extremely important for the development of my own theology. In his *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, Tertullian asks, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” By asking this he was pushing back against Christians who leaned too heavily on Greek philosophy (“Athens”) to explain or reshape Christian faith (“Jerusalem”). Tertullian’s point wasn’t that “thinking is bad.” In fact, Tertullian himself was quite competent in philosophical reasoning. His point, then, was that philosophy is not the boss of theology, and that fashionable philosophy should not be used to rewrite the gospel. The fact that a Black Man in the first century insisted on this approach to theology gives indication to us that Black theology has always been Biblical theology.