

1.1 *Introduction to Patristics*

The Apostolic Fathers

PATRISTICS

Who Are They?

The Apostolic Fathers were prominent theologians of the early Christian Church who lived during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. They are contemporaries of the Twelve Apostles and have been deeply influenced by their teachings. Their writings, although widely read and respected within the early Christian community, were ultimately excluded from the official canon of the New Testament.

The Apostolic Fathers lived and wrote during a formative period in Christian history. The church was still in its infancy, and the doctrines and practices of Christianity were still being developed. The Apostolic Fathers played a crucial role in shaping the early church's theological understanding and liturgical practices. Their writings, which include letters, homilies, and treatises, offer valuable insights into the beliefs and practices of the early church. These writings address various theological issues, such as the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the role of the Holy Spirit. They also discuss practical matters related to Christian ethics, church governance, and worship.

Some of the most notable Apostolic Fathers include St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Polycarp of Smyrna. St. Clement was the third bishop of Rome and wrote an influential letter to the church in Corinth. St. Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch and wrote seven letters to various churches while he was being transported to Rome to face martyrdom. St. Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna and was a disciple of the apostle John. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers provide a valuable bridge between the New Testament and the later church fathers. They offer a glimpse into the theological and spiritual world of the early church and shed light on the development of Christian thought and practice.

Although the writings of the Apostolic Fathers were not included in the New Testament canon, they have been treasured and studied by Christians throughout the centuries. Their writings continue

to inspire and challenge believers today, as they offer a glimpse into the faith and practices of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ.

St. Clement of Rome

His Identity and Apostolic Connections

St. Clement of Rome stands among the earliest and most venerated of the Apostolic Fathers. According to Tertullian, the Church of Rome held the tradition that St. Peter himself ordained Clement, and St. Jerome notes that in his time many in the Latin West regarded Clement as the immediate successor of the Apostle Peter.

Early Christian historians, including Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Jerome, also identify him with the “fellow-laborer” of St. Paul mentioned in Philippians 4:3, further underscoring his close connection with the Apostles.

The Letter to the Corinthians

St. Clement is best known for his pastoral letter to the Church of Corinth, traditionally dated to the late first century. The Corinthian community had once again fallen into turmoil: a group of contentious individuals had stirred rebellion against their ordained leaders, jeopardizing the unity of the Church.

Although no formal appeal was made to Rome, St. Clement, writing on behalf of the Church of Rome, sent a letter with the purpose of restoring harmony and guiding the community back into peace.

At the beginning of the letter, St. Clement apologizes for the delay in addressing the matter, explaining that a series of unexpected calamities had recently afflicted the Roman Church. These troubles are widely understood to refer to the persecutions under the Emperor Domitian.

Praise, Reproof, and Exhortation

Clement begins by recalling the Corinthians’ earlier reputation for piety, hospitality, obedience, and good order. He grieves that jealousy has now led to bitter division, reminding them that jealousy was the cause of Cain’s murder of Abel, Esau’s anger, and countless other biblical tragedies. He even notes

that **jealousy and envy contributed to the martyrdom** of St. Peter, St. Paul, and many others in the early Church.

St. Clement calls the Corinthians to **repentance**, drawing upon the examples of the Patriarchs and the righteous from Israel's history. Above all, he urges them to imitate **the humility of Christ**, who came not to exalt Himself but to serve.

The Purpose and Spirit of the Letter

Clement's letter is a work of profound spiritual fatherhood. With both firmness and gentleness, he seeks to heal the wounds of division and reestablish unity within the Church. His counsel is rooted in Scripture, shaped by the apostolic tradition, and suffused with pastoral love.

Through this epistle, one of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, St. Clement of Rome continues to instruct the Church in the way of **peace, humility, and ecclesial harmony**.

St. Ignatius of Antioch

His Life and Apostolic Formation

St. Ignatius of Antioch, called *Theophorus* ("God-bearer"), was born around A.D. 50 in Syria. According to ancient tradition, he was a disciple of **St. John the Beloved** and later became the **third Bishop of Antioch**, succeeding St. Peter and Evodius in that great apostolic see. His life was marked by profound humility, ardent love for Christ, and unwavering fidelity to the Church.

Condemned under the Roman authorities, St. Ignatius was taken in chains from Antioch to Rome to face martyrdom. During this final journey, he composed **seven epistles**, which stand as treasures of early Christian theology and pastoral exhortation.

Themes of His Epistles

- **The Epistle to the Ephesians**

Written from Smyrna, this letter calls the faithful to **unity in love**, obedience to their bishop, and harmony within the Body of Christ.

- **The Epistle to the Magnesians**

Here St. Ignatius urges the believers to live in peace and to guard themselves against false doctrines, reminding them that true discipleship is expressed through humility and fidelity.

- **The Epistle to the Trallians**

He emphasizes the centrality of the **Eucharist** as the bond of unity and the mystery through which the faithful are nourished with the life of Christ.

- **The Epistle to the Romans**

This epistle is unique in tone and purpose. Ignatius pleads with the Christians in Rome not to interfere with his approaching martyrdom, longing to imitate Christ through his death. In one of the most famous lines of early Christian literature, he writes:

“I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”

His words reveal a soul wholly consumed with love for the Lord.

- **The Epistle to the Philadelphians**

St. Ignatius exhorts the faithful to remain steadfast, holding firmly to the apostolic traditions, which safeguard the unity of the Church.

- **The Epistle to the Smyrnaeans**

Here he warns strongly against false teachers, affirming both the reality of Christ’s incarnation and the truth of His bodily presence in the Eucharist. He also provides early testimony to the structure of Church order—bishop, presbyters, and deacons.

- **The Epistle to St. Polycarp**

Addressed to his beloved friend and fellow bishop, this letter offers counsel on pastoral leadership, endurance, and the care of souls entrusted to the shepherd of the Church.

His Legacy and Witness

The epistles of St. Ignatius are among the earliest and clearest testimonies to the Church's faith in the Eucharist, apostolic succession, and ecclesial unity. They radiate the spirit of a man whose entire life was conformed to Christ, and whose approaching martyrdom was embraced as the ultimate act of love.

St. Ignatius's writings reveal not only theological depth but also profound pastoral warmth. They remain a timeless witness to the courage, sacrifice, and spiritual wisdom of one who bore the name *Theophorus*, a true God-bearer who sealed his confession of Christ with his life.

St. Polycarp of Smyrna

His Life and Apostolic Formation

St. Polycarp, one of the most beloved figures of the early Church, was born around A.D. 69 and became the long-standing Bishop of Smyrna. He was formed at the feet of St. John the Theologian, inheriting from him both the purity of doctrine and the spirit of apostolic love. St. Polycarp also maintained a close friendship with St. Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote to him during his final journey to martyrdom.

In A.D. 155, Polycarp himself sealed his confession of Christ by a cruel martyrdom. Bound and set aflame, he remained unharmed by the fire, which, according to the account, arched around him like a sheltering wind. He was then pierced with a dagger, offering his life as a final testimony to Christ. His martyrdom became one of the earliest, most detailed, and most cherished accounts of early Christian witness.

The Epistle to the Philippians

Although only a few of his writings survive, St. Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians shines as a work of pastoral warmth and theological clarity. Written in response to the Philippians' request for guidance, the letter addresses various disorders troubling the community and exhorts the faithful to persevere in virtue.

He encourages them to remain steadfast in the apostolic faith and in love for one another:

“Stand fast, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm and unchangeable in the faith, loving the brotherhood, and being attached to one another, joined together in the truth, exhibiting the meekness of the Lord in your intercourse with one another, and despising no one.”

Here Polycarp’s pastoral voice echoes the very spirit of the Apostles, calling the Church to humility, unity, and Christian endurance. One that he himself displayed in the days of his martyrdom.

The Letter to Diognetus

A second work, the Letter to Diognetus, has long been associated with St. Polycarp. While the true authorship remains uncertain, some traditions hold that it may have been written by him or by a disciple under his guidance. It is one of the most elegant and profound apologetic writings of the early Church, addressing themes such as:

- the vanity of idolatry,
- the limitations of Jewish ritualism when divorced from Christ,
- the distinctive life of Christians in the world,
- the revelation of Christ,
- the transformation brought by divine grace, and
- the blessings of faith and true knowledge.

Its chapters systematically present a luminous portrait of the early Christian worldview, revealing how believers lived as **“the soul of the world,”** set apart yet fully present within society.

Influence on St. Irenaeus

St. Polycarp’s legacy is further preserved through his disciple St. Irenaeus of Lyons, who frequently recalled the teachings and example of his mentor. Irenaeus describes how Polycarp spoke of his conversations with St. John and others who had seen the Lord, thus linking Irenaeus—and the generations after him—directly to the apostolic age.

Through Irenaeus’s testimony, we gain invaluable insight into Polycarp’s doctrine, character, and spiritual authority.

The Enduring Legacy of St. Polycarp

St. Polycarp remains a model of steadfast faith, pastoral charity, and courage in the face of suffering. His life reflects the continuity of the apostolic tradition, preserved not through speculation but through living holiness. His epistle, his martyrdom, and his influence on the next generation of Fathers continue to inspire the Church.

In St. Polycarp, the Church beholds a shepherd whose constancy and love remain a timeless call to perseverance, faithfulness, and unity in Christ.

The Didache

The Didache, also known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, is an early Christian text that provides instructions on Christian living, moral conduct, and church organization. It is considered to be the oldest known manual of the early church. It has been revered throughout the ages, particularly in Egypt, where it was highly esteemed and often quoted by prominent figures such as St. Clement of Alexandria and St. Athanasius the Apostolic.

The Didache is divided into four main sections:

1. **The Two Ways:** This section presents two contrasting ways of life, one that leads to life and one that leads to death. It emphasizes the importance of choosing the way of life and following the teachings of Jesus.
2. **Moral Instructions:** This section provides practical guidance on various aspects of Christian living, such as prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and avoiding slander and hypocrisy. It also includes instructions on how to treat others, including widows, orphans, and the poor.
3. **Church Organization:** This section describes the structure and roles within the early Christian community. It discusses the roles of apostles, prophets, teachers, and deacons, as well as the importance of submission to leaders and maintaining unity within the church.
4. **Eucharist and Baptism:** This section provides instructions on the celebration of the Eucharist (communion) and baptism. It describes the proper procedures for these sacraments and emphasizes their significance for Christian worship and discipleship.

The Didache is a valuable resource for understanding the beliefs and practices of the early Christian church. It offers insights into the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus, the structure of early Christian communities, and the importance of following a Christ-centered way of life.

One of the notable practices described in the Didache is the act of baptism. It emphasizes the practice of baptism by immersion, suggesting that it was the preferred method in the early church. The Didache encourages immersion in running water in rivers, which signifies the complete submersion of the individual being baptized. However, it recognizes that in cases of water scarcity or for individuals who are unable to leave their beds due to illness, baptism by pouring water from a vessel or from the hand is permissible. This accommodation demonstrates the Didache's understanding of practical considerations while upholding the spiritual significance of baptism.

Another essential aspect of Christian life highlighted in the Didache is fasting. It advocates for regular fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. These days were dedicated to prayer and reflection, as a means of spiritual purification and preparation for the celebration of the Lord's Day (Sunday). Fasting was believed to enhance one's spiritual receptivity and deepen their relationship with God.

Furthermore, the Didache emphasizes the importance of receiving the Holy Eucharist regularly. It considers the Eucharist to be a central act of worship and a source of spiritual nourishment for believers. By partaking in the Eucharist, Christians are united with Christ and with one another, forming a community of faith and love.

The Didache serves as a valuable window into the beliefs and practices of the early church, providing insights into the spiritual lives of the first Christians. Its teachings on baptism, fasting, and the Holy Eucharist continue to shape Christian traditions and practices to this day.

The Shepherd of Hermas

The Shepherd of Hermas, often simply known as "The Shepherd," holds a significant place in Christian history as a literary work dating back to the late first half of the second century. It is recognized as a valuable book by many Christians and was even considered canonical scripture by some early Church fathers, including the esteemed Irenaeus.

The popularity of "The Shepherd" flourished among Christians during the second and third centuries. Its inclusion in the Codex Sinaiticus, an ancient manuscript of the Bible, further emphasizes its importance. Furthermore, its listing between the Acts of the Apostles and the Acts of Paul in the

Codex Claromontanus, another significant manuscript, speaks to its esteemed position within the early Christian canon.

The Shepherd is a multi-faceted work, consisting of five visions, twelve mandates, and ten parables. These components combine to create a rich tapestry of spiritual teachings and ethical guidance. Allegory plays a central role, providing symbolic representations of deeper spiritual truths.

One of the distinctive features of "The Shepherd" is its emphasis on the Church. It addresses the faithful directly, calling them to a profound repentance for the sins that have harmed the Church. This theme underscores the importance of personal accountability and the need for communal healing and reconciliation.

The Shepherd's enduring appeal lies in its timeless wisdom and practical insights. It invites readers to reflect on their spiritual journeys, confront their shortcomings, and embrace the transformative power of repentance. By embracing the messages found within "The Shepherd," Christians throughout history have found encouragement, hope, and guidance for their faith.

Papias of Hierapolis

Papias, a significant figure in early Christianity, flourished as a Greek Apostolic Father during the later half of the first century and the first half of the second century. He held the position of Bishop in Hierapolis, a city that is now known as Pamukkale in modern-day Turkey. Papias's contributions to Christian literature include the authorship of a seminal work titled "Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord," which consisted of five books. Unfortunately, the entirety of this work has been lost to time, except for brief fragments preserved through the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, who lived approximately 180 AD, and Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived around 320 AD. Nevertheless, these fragments offer invaluable insights into Christian oral tradition and play a crucial role in shedding light on the origins of the canonical Gospels.

In his writings, Papias emphasized the importance of seeking truth and accuracy in religious teachings. He expressed his preference for learning from individuals who personally knew the apostles or were in direct contact with them, rather than relying solely on secondhand accounts or written records. Papias sought out firsthand information from those who had been in the presence of the apostles, including Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, and Matthew. He also sought the wisdom of Aristion and John the Elder, both of whom were disciples of the Lord.

"I shall not hesitate also to put into ordered form for you, along with the interpretations,

everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down carefully, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I took no pleasure in those who told many different stories, but only in those who taught the truth. Nor did I take pleasure in those who reported their memory of someone else's commandments, but only in those who reported their memory of the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the Truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on the elders arrived, I made enquiries about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and John the Elder, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from the books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice."

Papias's approach to gathering knowledge reflects his deep commitment to the authenticity and reliability of Christian tradition. He believed that personal encounters with those who had witnessed the teachings of Jesus Christ provided a more accurate and trustworthy source of information than written accounts alone. Papias's work serves as a valuable resource for understanding the early development of Christian doctrine and the formation of the New Testament canon. His emphasis on oral tradition and his dedication to preserving the teachings of the apostles continue to influence biblical scholarship and contribute to the ongoing study of early Christianity.



Review Questions

1. What is St. Clement famous for? (A: He is famous for his letter to the Corinthians.)
2. Who was St. Polycarp a teacher of? (A: He was the teacher of St. Irenaeus.)
3. Who are the Apostolic Fathers? (A: The Apostolic Fathers were core Christian theologians among the Church Fathers who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.)
4. True or False? The Shepherd was written in the first half of the second century. (A: True)
5. True or False? Papias was a bishop in Turkey. (A: True)



Books & References

4.  Early-Christian-Writings-The-Apostolic-Fathers-by-Maxwell-Staniforth-Andrew-Louth.pdf ,

accessed 2 April 2024, ...



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