



THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS OF CHURCHMEN WHO
WROTE ABOUT CHRISTIANITY IN THE LATE FIRST
AND EARLY SECOND CENTURIES



The Early Church: *The 1st Century* *Apostolic Fathers*

The Voice Calling in the Wilderness

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“The Apostolic Fathers”

- ▶ The Apostolic Fathers, also known as the Ante-Nicene Fathers, were core Christian theologians among the Church Fathers who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD who are believed to have personally known some of the Twelve Apostles or to have been significantly influenced by them.
- ▶ The label Apostolic Fathers has been applied to these writers only since the 17th century, to indicate that they were thought of as representing the generation that had personal contact with the Twelve Apostles.



- ▶ Clement of Rome
- ▶ Ignatius of Antioch
- ▶ Polycarp of Smyrna
- ▶ Papias of Hierapolis
- ▶ Quadratus of Athens*

Key Writings of the Apostolic Fathers

- ▶ Letters attributed to Clement of Rome
- ▶ Seven epistles of Ignatius of Antioch
- ▶ The Martyrium Ignatii
- ▶ The Epistle of Polycarp
- ▶ The Martyrdom of Polycarp
- ▶ Fragments of the writings of Papias of Hierapolis, which have survived as quotations in later writers
- ▶ One short fragment of the Apology of Quadratus of Athens
- ▶ The Didache
- ▶ The Epistle of Barnabas
- ▶ The Epistle to Diognetus
- ▶ The Shepherd of Hermas

A Brief Glimpse of their Significance

- ▶ The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are the earliest examples of patristic literature. The Didachē, the Letter of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas all hovered at times on the fringe of the New Testament canon in that they were used as sacred Scripture by some local churches.
- ▶ Given that he wrote in the early 2nd century, St. Quadratus is sometimes included with the Apostolic Fathers, but his apology for the faith to the emperor Hadrian more properly places him with the Apologists of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. His work, apart from a single fragment, is now lost.

Addressing Ecclesiology & Organization

- ▶ The writings of the Apostolic Fathers illustrate the difficult doctrinal and organizational problems with which the church grappled in those transitional generations.
- ▶ Important among these problems were the creation of a ministerial hierarchy and of an accepted structure of ecclesiastical authority.
- ▶ The Didachē, which is Syrian in background and possibly the oldest of these documents, suggests a phase when Apostles and prophets were still active but when the routine ministry of bishops and deacons was already winning recognition.
- ▶ The First Letter of Clement, an official letter from the Roman to the Corinthian church, reflects the more advanced state of a collegiate episcopate, with its shared authority among an assembly of bishops. This view of authority was supported by an emergent theory of apostolic succession in which bishops were regarded as jurisdictional heirs of the Apostles.

Addressing Doctrine & Practice

- ▶ Almost all the Apostolic Fathers throw light on primitive doctrine and practice.
- ▶ The Didachē, for example, presents the Eucharist as a sacrifice, and the First Letter of Clement incorporates contemporary prayers. The Second Letter of Clement invites its readers to think of Christ as of God and of the church as a preexistent reality.
- ▶ The Shepherd of Hermas seeks to modify the rigorist view that sin committed after baptism cannot be forgiven. But the real key to the theology of the Apostolic Fathers, which also explains its often curious imagery, is that it is Jewish-Christian through and through...

St Clement of Rome

- Clement is the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th Bishop of Rome
- Clement is known for his epistle to the church in Corinth (c. 96), in which he asserts the apostolic authority of the bishops/presbyters as rulers of the church.[2] The epistle mentions episkopoi (overseers, bishops) or presbyteroi (elders, presbyters) as the upper class of minister, served by the deacons
- Clement was banished from Rome to the Chersonesus during the reign of the Emperor Trajan and was set to work in a stone quarry. Finding on his arrival that the prisoners were suffering from lack of water, he knelt down in prayer. Looking up, he saw a lamb on a hill, went to where the lamb had stood and struck the ground with his pickaxe, releasing a gushing stream of clear water. This miracle resulted in the conversion of large numbers of the local pagans and his fellow prisoners to Christianity. As punishment, Clement was martyred by being tied to an anchor and thrown from a boat into the Black Sea.



St Ignatius of Antioch

- It is said Ignatius converted to Christianity at a young age. Tradition identifies him and his friend Polycarp as disciples of John the Apostle.
- Later, Ignatius was chosen to serve as Bishop of Antioch. A tradition arose that he was one of the children whom Jesus Christ took in his arms and blessed.
- The Epistle to the Ephesians,
- The Epistle to the Magnesians,
- The Epistle to the Trallians,
- The Epistle to the Romans,
- The Epistle to the Philadelphians,
- The Epistle to the Smyrnaeans,
- The Epistle to Polycarp, a bishop of Smyrna.



St Polycarp of Smyrna

- According to Irenaeus, Polycarp was a companion of Papias, another "hearer of John", and a correspondent of Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius addressed a letter to him and mentions him in his letters to the Ephesians and to the Magnesians. Irenaeus regarded the memory of Polycarp as a link to the apostolic past. In his letter to Florinus, a fellow student of Polycarp who had become a Roman presbyter and later lapsed into heresy, Irenaeus relates how and when he became a Christian.
- In particular, he heard the account of Polycarp's discussion with John and with others who had seen Jesus. Irenaeus reports that Polycarp was converted to Christianity by apostles, was consecrated a presbyter, and communicated with many who had seen Jesus. He writes that he had had the good fortune, when young, to know Polycarp, who was then far advanced in years.
- Polycarp was burned at the stake and pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman emperor.[17] On his farewell, he said: "I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."

