

The Apostolic Fathers

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The apostolic fathers, of course, did not know themselves as the apostolic fathers. We gave them that title in the seventeenth century, and we have a long list of important men who wrote and lived during this time period. The first one that we would like to look at is a fellow named Clement who lived in Rome. He is known as the third successor of Peter in the church in Rome, and he was active in Rome, as pastor, approximately AD 92 to AD 101. We don't know too much about his early life, but it is at least possible that he knew the apostles himself.

There is a large group of literature about the size of an entire book known as the Pseudo-Clementine Literature, the literature that was at least thought of written by him. We now know that it wasn't written by him, but this material is important for us to understand the life and times of the early church immediately after the apostles. Some material that is written by him is the First Letter of Clement, called First Clement, just like we have 1 Corinthians. This is also called the Epistle to the Corinthians. It's written in the last quarter of the first century. It's the earliest piece of Christian literature that we have outside of the New Testament for which the name, the position, and the date of the author are historically attested.

The contents of First Clement consist of an introduction to the work (two main parts) and a conclusion or recapitulation. It's about twenty-three pages long. The work of First Clement describes dissensions within the church. Some of the leaders of the ancient church were repudiated by their younger followers. Clement meant to settle the differences. He pleads for discipline and love within this early Christian community. This work of First Clement is a work of great encouragement for me personally.

As we reflect upon Paul writing to the church in Corinth, we see that there were troubles in that church, and we see that after the time of Paul, after his being with the Lord, the church continued

in Corinth, but yet it also continued to have struggles. And as someone like all of us who are dealing with church problems today, as we know that there is continued dissention and strife in the church, we can look back and be at least comforted in knowing that the lot of our lives as church workers is not significantly different from the early church period as well. And so the advice of Clement of Rome to his friends in Corinth is advice that we should take to heart as well, that we should love and to lead disciplined lives.

A second piece of literature, probably not written by Clement, is called Second Clement, and it was written about AD 150. It's the oldest Christian sermon that we have outside of the New Testament, perhaps written from Corinth. In this sermon we get a glimpse of what was theologically important for the church at that time. We have to at times throughout this course take ourselves from the twentieth century and go back in time, go back to a time when the church did not have the centuries of unfolding doctrine that we have today, and think about the struggles of the ancient church. Who is this Jesus Christ that was preached and proclaimed for whom the martyrs died?

In the sermon of Second Clement we see that Jesus Christ is brought forth to the congregation. His complete humanity is maintained and His complete divinity. In the sermon, Jesus is given the title of Prince of Incorruptibility. Jesus is also mentioned as the one through whom God made manifest to us truth and heavenly life. In the sermon of Second Clement, we also see a picture of the church. The church, according to the sermon, existed before creation. Then at that time, she was spiritual and barren, but now she has become flesh. The church has become the body of Christ. And we also see from this sermon that those who come into this new body come in through the right of baptism, and baptism is called a seal, a seal which is placed upon the Christian which must be kept.

Very briefly, let's take a quick look at the Pseudo-Clementine Literature because it is important for its early writing. It was written some time before AD 150. The Pseudo-Clementine Literature is a series of twenty different homilies or little sermons that don't really have the best Christian theology in them. There are clear statements of the Trinity, but the reason that we're sure that it wasn't written by Clement of Rome is that the theology that we find in that material is not fully developed in terms of Christianity.

Moving on chronologically, the next important leader of the church is a man by the name of Ignatius. Ignatius of the city of Antioch. We know that Ignatius died the death of a martyr during the rule of the emperor Trajan, and Trajan reigned between AD 98 and 117. Ignatius had been ordered to come from the city of Antioch to the city of Rome for his martyrdom, and on the way from Antioch to Rome he wrote seven letters to the different churches. The first of these letters are grouped into three different themes—the three churches that received the first three letters are the churches in Ephesus, the churches in Magnesia, and the churches in Tralles. These three letters were written from the town of Smyrna.

In all of these letters we see some very common themes. He exhorts the communities to be obedient to the teachings of Christianity, and he thanks them for their faithfulness to him. Of course, given that different culture, there were no state-supported prisoners; they didn't receive clothing, or at least the received a very minimal amount from the state, and if a prisoner was to survive in the prison system during that time period, he had to be dependent upon friends and family to provide food and clothing, and apparently these three churches had sent either emissaries or friends to him in Smyrna and provided for certain of his financial needs.

He also writes a letter to Rome, which is considered to be in a second class, a different class from the first three letters, also written from the town of Smyrna. In his letter to Rome, he pleads for the Christians of Rome to not attempt to intervene on his behalf to hinder his martyrdom. This letter is quite interesting. It gives us by what it says and what it doesn't say a good glimpse into the church life in the city of Rome during the time of Trajan. He writes to the Christians there so that they will not exert influence to keep him from dying the death of a martyr, so obviously there were other Christians in Rome who could live without persecution, and somehow they could exert certain influences that could perhaps keep him from becoming martyred.

We also have three others letters, letters to the church in Philadelphia, in Smyrna, and to a fellow named Polycarp, and these were all written from the town of Troas. We get a glimpse at a newspaper writing from this time period in the letter to Philadelphia. Of course there were no newspapers, and news traveled very slowly and oftentimes through letters. And somehow either through letters or through contacts, he (Ignatius) had heard that there was an end of the persecution back in Antioch.

In other words, the persecution came, he was arrested, ordered to death, death in Rome, and as he's making his way to Rome, the persecution in his home town had stopped. He's very thankful to the Lord for the termination of that persecution and asks his brothers and sister in Philadelphia and Smyrna to send delegates to the church in Antioch to encourage them, to congratulate them that they kept the faith during a time of persecution. The letter to Polycarp contains additional information with some pastoral advice to help him to be a good bishop among his flock.

What's the theology of Ignatius as seen in his seven letters? We know that he clearly affirms Christ's divinity and Christ's humanity, and he asserts the unity of all Christians, whether they're living in Philadelphia or Antioch or Ephesus, because they are together in Christ, and being in Christ makes us one.

We just mentioned the letter to a fellow named Polycarp, and Polycarp is the next apostolic father whose life and teaching is important to us. Polycarp lived in Smyrna and died at about AD 156. It's quite possible and tradition is strong concerning the possibility that Polycarp sat at the feet of John the apostle and was instructed by him. Polycarp also wrote a letter, known of course as an epistle, to the Philippians, and this letter is one full of exhortation. There he defends the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ, as well as Christ's death on the cross. In that letter during the time of persecution, he also enjoins upon the Christians some important activity: that they are to pray for the civil authorities.

The next person that we'll look at very briefly is a fellow with a funny name, Papias, Papias of the town of Hierapolis, and he wrote a little commentary of explanation of the saying of the Lord. Poor Papias, we don't know too much about him except that he wrote this work and later church historians have written about Papias. Eusebius, who's known as the father of ecclesiastical history—Eusebius wrote the first church history—calls him a man of very little intelligence. Eusebius preserved part of his works, which contains the best statement for the canonicity of the gospel according to Mark, and that's all we know about poor Papias.

It's not the same, though, with the next piece of literature from this time period called *The Epistle of Barnabas*. We know that it was written between AD 96 and 138, and it really isn't an epistle. It's not a letter, but it's a theological tract, and the author of the epistle was probably not Barnabas but wants to teach a perfect knowledge and faith. And he's writing in the Greek language, as is

all the material that we've examined so far, and in the title to this work for wanting to teach us the perfect knowledge, he uses the word *gnosis*, the Greek word for "knowledge." And I remind you of that introductory lecture when we talked about the importance of philosophical school of Gnosticism.

This *Epistle of Barnabas* has two main parts. The first part, consisting of the first seventeen chapters, is theoretical, and the last part is practical application of the teachings in the first part. What does *The Epistle of Barnabas* teach us? Four things—first of all, we know that the preexistence of Jesus Christ is asserted; that is, that He was fully divine from the very beginning, and baptism is also talked about. Baptism confers adoption to sonship and makes us to be temples of the Holy Spirit. Also, Sunday and the celebration of that being the Christian Sabbath is enjoined and that Saturday should not be the time of Christian worship and celebration. And fourth and fascinating for our own time period, *The Epistle of Barnabas* tells us that we are to protect the lives of infants, even the unborn. Apparently the practice of the Roman community around them was that unwanted children would be born and then taken to the garbage dump, there left exposed to the elements to die. Also abortions were able to be obtained during this time period. And *The Epistle of Barnabas* enjoins the Christian community to speak out against the killing of infants as they are taken to the garbage and even to protect the life of the unborn, and so a modern contemporary problem of abortion was even addressed in this early time period of the Christian church. And I want to underline that the Christian church from the very beginnings has made a strong stand concerning this very, very important teaching. So *The Epistle of Barnabas* in conclusion is not an epistle; it's a tract and it's not written by Barnabas. We don't know the author. We know it's a letter, but it's a good thing to read.

The Shepherd of Hermas is also a piece of literature from this time period. That's also a strange name; it's a book of revelations that are supposedly granted to a shepherd of the place in Hermas. These revelations are given by two heavenly beings—an old woman and a shepherd. We don't know when it was composed, and it was probably written in two different parts somewhere between AD 96 and 140. And that piece of literature has four different visions and then a transition vision and a second section of commandments and parables.

It's confusing to read because it seems that the author believes that the Holy Spirit and Christ are the same persons. Yes, it seems the teaching of *The Shepherd of Hermas* is that there are only two divine persons instead of three. It wasn't a very well-loved piece of Christian literature during this time period, but it does give us a glimpse at the development of theology. This *Shepherd of Hermas* doesn't have a full Trinitarian teaching, and it might seem hard for us to even imagine a time period when the Christian church had to struggle with something as basic as a teaching of the doctrine of the Trinity. But remember, if you place yourself back in their time period, they had the Bible and they had the deep and rich teachings of the Bible, but it wasn't fully worked out by the church, and so we see a time period much different from ours as these important theological doctrines are just beginning to unfold.

The last piece of literature that we'll look at from the apostolic fathers' period is a piece of literature known as *The Didache*, which is just a transliteration of the Greek word which could be understood as "the teaching," and the full title of this work would be "The Lord's Instruction to the Gentiles through the Twelve Apostles." *The Didache* was not written by the apostles, but its intention is to give a brief summary of the doctrine of the apostles, and *The Didache*, which is one of the most important pieces of literature of this time period, had basically been lost to scholars until 1883, and there in a dusty library in Europe, this manuscript was found.

The Didache has two main divisions. The first ten chapters give liturgical instructions to the church; in other words, when the Christians come together to worship on Sunday, what should they do? How should they worship? How should they behave themselves? And the next five chapters, chapters 11 through 15, give regulations concerning discipline—how Christians are to worship and how they are to live. *The Didache* is a compilation of material which isn't as consistent as a unit as it could be, and it is, as a compilation, difficult to determine exactly when it was written, probably between AD 100 and 150, probably written in Syria. But once again, with this piece of information, we can see the life of the Christian church as they struggled with issues so basic to Christianity. Things that we take from granted. How do we live? How do we worship?

This ends our look at the time period known as the period of the apostolic fathers. We have one or two important figures. We think

of Clement of Rome. We think of his literature, First Clement and Second Clement. We see that Clement was on his way to martyrdom. We learn about Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. We learn of poor old Papias, who's only known as not very intelligent, and we learn about some material from the ancient church period that has no author connected with it. We think of *The Didache* or *The Epistle of Barnabas*. There's not much there, but what we have during this time period is a jewel that opens up insights into the life and teaching of our own past, the time period called the apostolic fathers.

Come with me now to the next time period, the time period of the apologists. Let's take a look at that time period in general. It's the second century. We have the Bible written, and the first years after that time period have passed by. We've seen the church coming together as a worshipping community, as a community that lives a special way, but we have something else developing. We have a time of persecution. Christianity was under attack. The state regarded the profession of Christianity as a capital crime. This new religion was also looked down upon by the intelligentsia. It was a difficult time for us. Those who had been well-educated despised us as holding to a crude and actually a rude belief, a philosophical system that was despicable, and not only were we despised by those who were the intelligentsia, but we were officially despised by the state.

Just a quick sideline to give you an example of what life was like for Christians during the time period of the apologists, and we'll be elaborating this in much more detail later on as we talk about the history of persecution. . . . As Christians would come from their time of worship in homes together on Sunday, as they would come to the street, each Roman soldier had the right and privilege of coming up to that person, drawing his sword, placing it to the neck of the Christian, and asking them, . . . Is Jesus the Lord? And the right answer is . . . Caesar is Lord, because in that Roman society there was only one lord, his face was on your coins, his name was worshipped, his statute was found in the marketplace. It was the Caesar, [the emperor]. He was the lord of that society, but not to the Christian community. And as the sword was placed to the throat of the Christians and they professed [Christ], each Roman had the right to thrust that sword and immediately execute the Christian. This was day-to-day reality for those who lived in this time period of the apostolic fathers.

We must remember the cultural context of these writing to see the urgency of establishing Christianity so that it would no longer be an illicit religion of vain and silly philosophy, but it was a belief system held by those who were good, law-abiding citizens, law-abiding, that is, abiding by the laws of God who represented no great threat to the Roman society. They were Christians who also had a system of belief that made sense, given divine revelation.

Certain of the people of the apologetic time period have strange Greek names. The first one is called Quadratus. All we know of him is that he came to the emperor Hadrian in 125 and presented to him an apology or a defense of Christianity. And the little information that we have about him comes from that same person Eusebius, who wrote the great history of the church.

Much more important because we know more about him is Aristides of Athens. Aristides was a great philosopher of that great city of Athens. He left an apology which was written to Hadrian, who was the emperor in AD 140. Let's look at the contents of his apology. Aristides says that there is a divine being. Of course, that would be our God. And that divine being is described in the terms of Stoic philosophy. Aristides says that he came to this knowledge of this divine being through contemplation of the world and the existing harmonies of that world. But as we attempt to understand the Godhead, this divine being, according to Aristides, we can only understand Him by negative attribution. Later on this will be called the *via negativa* in medieval theology. In other words, all we can say about God is what God is not. It's very difficult for us to make positive statements about God.

What Aristides did was to represent Christianity as a competing philosophy with other philosophies. He believed that Christianity is consistent with reason and gives an answer to the questions philosophers ask. Of course we all know that philosophy deals with certain important questions. What is reality? Who are we? How should we live? These are also the questions of Christianity. And Aristides then takes a positive attack against polytheism and reduces the teachings of polytheism to absurdity and shows how polytheism is mutually inconsistent.

How do we analyze Aristides? Is his agenda a good one? Has he approached the defense of Christianity from the way that we would applaud? His speaking of God in negative terms and his advocacy of an unknowability of God is contrary to the Bible's teaching. We know that the Bible teaches us that there are certain positive

things that we can say about God. We know that He is our Father. We know that He sent His Son. We know that He, with the Son, loves His church. We know that He can do miracles. These things were ignored by Aristides as he attempted to present a defense of Christianity. Given the context of the world in which he lived, he knew that to speak intelligently to the intellectuals of his own age, he had to speak in a way that would fit into their mindset. And although we would criticize him for not presenting all of Christianity, as we understand the culture of the ancient church, as we understand that Christianity was struggling to present itself perhaps not as the only religion but at least one religion which could be acceptable given a more pluralistic society.

The next person from this same time period, the apostolic fathers, is Aristotle of Pella. We don't know too much about him; certainly a lot less about him than we know about Aristides. Aristotle defended Christianity against Judaism in a tract that was written at about 140, and the title of that tract is *A Discussion Between Jason and Papiscus Concerning Christ*. Remember, once again, the historical context. Christianity, at least by many, was considered to be a subsection of Judaism, and that makes sense. We came from Judaism, but Aristotle wants to defend Christianity and show how Christianity is different from Judaism.

The most important person of this time period is Justin the Martyr, known as Justin Martyr, as if Martyr were his last name, but he received his last name by what happened to him. He is the most important of the apologists. He was born in Palestine. His parents were not Christians, but they were pagans, and Justin went through all the various philosophical schools that were available to him as he searched for answers to those questions which are the most important of life, the questions with which all of us struggle concerning existence, concerning the nature of reality. He first went to the Stoic school and found their answers to be satisfying for a while, but then as God moved in his life, he became less and less satisfied with them, and so he went to the Aristotelian school. And Aristotle provided a complete philosophy of life, but Aristotle was unsatisfactory too. Then he went to the Pythagorean school, and as they tried to find order in the universe, so Justin too could not find satisfaction there, and finally he went to the Platonist school, and actually there were others in between. But as Justin himself tells us in his narrative of his conversion, one day he was walking on the shore of the beach, and an old man approached him. The old man convinced him to read the Old Testament prophets, and these apostles of

a Jesus who was known as the Christ. As Justin sat and for the first time in his life read these writings, which we know as the Scriptures, but, of course, Justin didn't then, he narrates that as he was reading them his heart suddenly grew warm and he was converted immediately to these teachings of these apostles of Jesus Christ.

Remember, Justin, prior to this conversion, had been a philosopher. He had tasted from all the tables of the various philosophical schools, and the rest of his life he continued as a philosopher. During that time period, the philosophers dressed in a peculiar manner; they had a special cloak that demonstrated to the society around them that they were philosophers and that they had not a normal income like a farmer or a cabinet maker, but rather they were to be fed by their students. And the rest of his life, then, was spent as a philosopher. He goes to the city of Rome and there establishes a school during the time of the reign of Antoninus Pius, who ruled in Rome between 138 and 161. All we know about the rest of his life is that he established this school sometime during the reign of Antoninus and then later in 165 was beheaded with six of his companions and former students.

Justin, known as the Martyr, was a good writer, and we have a number of his works still. His works can be divided into three main parts. The first part is his apology, and then there's a second apology, and his third piece is his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Let's take a look at the first apology. It was addressed to this same Antoninus Pius and was written somewhere between AD 150 and 155. It has an introduction, a body, that consists of two parts. In the body of the literature, we notice that he is attempting to persuade the emperor to stop punishing Christians just because they're Christians. He is convinced that Christianity has not proven itself to be criminal. Christians are being persecuted just because they're Christians, and the charge made against the Christians was that they were atheists. Now doesn't that sound to be about the strangest charge for Christians who believe in Jesus Christ, who believe in a triune God that they were atheists? We'll see in a few minutes why this charge was leveled against them, but important to remember is that given Roman society, atheists were inherently against the ruling of the Roman government and were therefore considered to be worthy of death.

The second part of the body is a justification of Christianity. There its basic doctrines are presented to the ruler, presented in a way that proves that Christianity is not some wild imaginings of some

crazy people, but rather is a teaching based upon divine revelation. His second apology is usually found as an appendix to the first apology but was during that time period a second literary work, and there he writes a protest to a prefect whose name is Urbicus. We don't know about this prefect. He is a lesser governmental official. But Urbicus was having Christians beheaded just because they're Christians, and Justin wants to say to this prefect Urbicus that there is no justification for that action.

His third piece of literature is his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Trypho is a Jew, and this is written after the other apologies. It's dedicated to Marcus Pompeius, and it's a long work. It has 142 different chapters. It is an interesting piece of literature. The format is a discussion between a learned Jew and a Christian. Whether this piece of literature is based upon actual historic circumstances is a question that can't be fully resolved. Perhaps there was actually a discussion between Justin and the Rabbi Tarphon, who's mentioned in the Jewish Mishnah. That's at least certainly possible. The introduction to the *Dialogue with Trypho* consists of the narrative of Justin's conversion, and I referred to that narrative just a few minutes ago, and we've seen how the life of Justin has unfolded as he's gone from the philosophical schools then to Christianity.

After that introduction, we have the main section, which has three subparts. In the first part, he gives us the Christian's understanding of the Old Testament. In the second part, he tells us about how Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human and that Jesus as completely human, nevertheless, is completely divine. Remember, the context here is to a Jewish audience. Section three is that the way in which Christianity should be observed is that Christians are the new Israel. In other words, the Israel of the Old Testament has now become the Israel of God in the Christian church. We have here an important piece of literature that helps us to understand how the early church thought of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and these are questions of perennial interest to the church. So it does seem that there may have been a real discussion between Philo and this Jew and at least parts of that discussion are contained in this letter to Trypho the Jew.

He also has written some other works, a book against all heresies, writing against a fellow named Marcion whom we'll discuss later. He has a discourse against the Greeks and the Greek view of reality. He has a work on the sovereignty of God and a work on the soul.

What about Justin's theology? We'll be looking at his theology in more detail as we investigate certain topics, but a few things can be pointed out now. Concerning his doctrine of God, Justin knows that God is without origin, and he says that He is nameless. And many commentators on Justin's works believe that Justin's conception of God is very similar to Plato's idea. How about his doctrine of Christ? He has the idea of the Logos as being quite important. The Logos is a mediator between God and man, and the Logos is in many ways subordinate to the Father. Jesus in these writings is referred to as a teacher. He's superior to all philosophers because Jesus is the incarnate reason of God. This Logos Christology, which we'll be talking about later, is a point of contact between pagan philosophy and Christianity. Using Stoic terminology, Justin argues that the philosophers only had the Logos or the reason in its seed form, but Christianity has the Logos Himself in Jesus Christ.

What have we learned from the apologists? So far we've learned a lot. We've learned about the difficult time in which they lived. We've learned about how they presented Christianity. We've learned about the fronts on which Christianity was fighting as they attempted to assert their independence from Judaism, as they attempted to assert their legitimacy as a philosophical system worthy of respect in the Greek society, the Greek-speaking society. We've learned a lot about ourselves as well, as they've wrestled with the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. Certainly our look at the apostolic fathers and the apologists has been an interesting look in a time period in some ways remote and in some ways so very near to our own.